Queen's Gambit Accepted

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/821407.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: F/F, F/M
Fandom: Mass Effect
Relationship: Female Shepard/Samantha Traynor, EDI/Jeff "Joker" Moreau
Character: Female Shepard, Samantha Traynor, EDI (Mass Effect), Liara T'Soni, Diana Allers, Jeff "Joker" Moreau, Garrus Vakarian, Ashley Williams, Steve Cortez
Additional Tags: Slow Burn, Fluff and Angst, Fluff and Smut, Banter, Friendship/Love, Romantic Friendship, Military Jargon, Chess Metaphors, Chatting & Messaging, Single POV, Awkward Flirting, Awkward Crush, Mutual Pining, Endgame, long but worth it, Work In Progress, Canon Compliant, Canonical Character Death, Gap Filler, Crew as Family, some smut, Friends to Lovers, Male-Female Friendship
Series: Part 2 of Queen's Gambit
Stats: Published: 2013-05-28 Updated: 2019-08-10 Chapters: 31/? Words: 203338

Queen's Gambit Accepted

by RenWritesStuff (FahRENheit2006)

Summary

Specialist Samantha Traynor, one of the Alliance's best and brightest, was relatively content working in Alliance R&D. But then... the Reapers came. Full of action, profanity, sarcasm, friendship, and gripping chess matches that will leave you breathless. Chapter art courtesy of Fishbone76.

Notes

The Queen's Gambit: One of the oldest known chess opening moves, often used by grandmasters. Can be played either as Accepted or Denied, depending on the opponent's strategy.

I was surprised at how much I liked the quippy, geeky comms specialist. Despite her inexperience working on an active warship, Traynor's forward behavior towards Shepard tells me she'd be a cool, confident woman outside of galaxy-wide genocide. Especially in her personal life. While I don't have working knowledge of communication, engineering, or the military, I do my best to at least give Sam and crew the dignity of intelligent dialogue.
All Mass Effect characters, missions, and canon dialogue property of Bioware, EA and their respective copyrights. I do not profit from this story in any way, it's just for fun.

All artwork designed by Fishbone76 and used with her permission.
Isabella sniffed disdainfully as she studied her reflection in the mirror. There was a small smudge of lipstick on her expensive white dress shirt collar. Running a washcloth under the faucet, she attempted to dab lightly (never blot!) at the stain. She glared through the mirror to the lipstick's owner who was still in bed.

"Must you be so... so..."

"Affectionate? Amazing? Fashionable?" Samantha Traynor supplied as she rolled over. She was already well aware of Isabella's uppity attitude the moment the woman had gotten out of bed. Sam had been placing a betting pool with herself on what tiny insignificant quirk would set Izzy off.

Six to one odds on the dirty towels. Four to one on my brand of toothpaste. Two to one on my Alliance housing and how much she hates it.

"Sloppy! I told you last night I had an early morning."

Damn. Don't think there was a bet in on marring her perfect outfit. No winners today. Better luck next time, Traynor.

"You told me a lot of things last night. The first was that you didn't think this was working, the second was that you missed me and to kiss you and never stop," Sam reminded the fretting woman. She glanced back at the alarm clock holo. 0742 EST, 48 minutes before Samantha was due at the Alliance dock for work.

Damn this early schedule. I miss my flexible hours in R&D.

Isabella continued to sigh unhappily at her reflection. The petite woman's face, which had been so pretty and pale under the dim light of the restaurant overlooking Vancouver Harbor, seemed almost ugly now. Her make-up was a little too imperfect, her brown eyes a little too red from lack of sleep, her golden brown hair a little too unmanageable from her hurried morning. "You should have woken me sooner, Sam."

Oh, no you don't. You don't get to turn this around on me.
"I set the alarm. I woke you when it went off for the third time. You're all grown up and running a company, Izzy. Big girls don't cry."

"And you should quit this Alliance shoestring R&D and come work with me at Eldfell-Ashland. Cut your teeth on some algorithms with credits behind them." Isabella's fingertips swept over her lower eyelids, desperate to smooth away errant eye make-up before shooting Sam a haughty glare. Her Omni-tool bracelet chirped for the eighth time, probably another update to her already full schedule. "I get tired of proposing the same thing every time we're together. Promise me you'll actually think about it this time."

And time! Twelve minutes and thirty-seven seconds before Isabella makes a comment that I'm wasting my talent. She must be losing her touch. Or mine is improving. Maybe the night before mellowed her out more than usual.

Sam hated this conversation topic. She brushed it off like she always did. "Proposing? So soon? You old softie. I was thinking a fall wedding. Two kids. Maybe a dog?" Sarcasm dripped from her light, airy voice.

Isabella rolled her eyes. "If you can't be serious, then just forget it." Her well-manicured hand reached down for a gleaming toothbrush in a charger cradle.

Sitting up in bed, Sam tsked in annoyance. "Like hell you're using my toothbrush when you just unproposed to me, Izzy. If you're not going to make an honest woman of me, your minions at Eld-Ash will just have to suffer your morning breath."

Muttering something about looking in her purse for mints, Isabella gathered up her things. Irritation building, Izzy snapped one last time as she headed for the door. "I'm late. When you decide to stop wasting your life as an Alliance lapdog and feel like doing some work that matters, give me a call. I'd hate to see you in ten years still stringing tin cans together on some dead end rock in the Terminus."

"You're better than this, Sam," Isabella added thoughtfully, softening her rebuke some.

Samantha asked her if she was going to call later. Izzy evaded like she always did, mumbling something noncommittal before darting out the sliding doors. Sam could hear the faint, muffled chirp of Izzy's Omni-tool down the hall. Another schedule update for the Chief Communications Officer of Eldfell-Ashland Energy LLC.

Bloody hell. That confounding woman only wants a connection when it's convenient for her, never for me. I don't know why I always answer. If I'm better than anything, I'm better than people like her.

Sliding out of bed, Sam flicked the control panel to get hot water going which, in Alliance housing, could take awhile.

Even though she was only in boot for a little while, she still had the anal retentive routine of an active soldier. Clothes set aside, make-up tools arranged (which were pretty minimal at this point: eye liner, lip gloss, and light foundation. No one to look nice for anyway.), her ready-to-eat breakfast unwrapped, and a mug of water for hot tea readied.

Samantha fired up her Omni-tool to work the vid screen on the wall while brushing her teeth. The Alliance News Network was broadcasting pretty standard fare: economic turmoil in Africa, riots in China, and speculation on the Pan-Olympic games this summer in Reykjavik.

Sam sighed after sticking her fingertips into the still-cool running water. Stupid Izzy, stealing all the hot water.
The dull vibration of the small mass effect fields on her toothbrush did wonders to calm the irritation from Isabella's departure at least. Shifting her attention back to the vids, local news had one topic and one topic only: the military trial of Commander Annelise Shepard.

Older holos of Shepard showed a fiery redhead with sharp green eyes leading the charge against Saren Arterius and his geth on the Citadel. But this Newer Shepard was almost a shadow of that other woman. She was no long fiery. The green eyes were still sharp, but mostly tired and resigned. Before, Shepard had shouted to any reporter who would listen about the Reapers coming and the sky falling. The more sensationalist channels latched on to Shepard's fire-and-brimstone predictions, but the ANN dismissed her claims.

After news that the Commander had destroyed a mass relay, killed hundreds of thousands of batarians and set humanity on the brink of war, she disappeared from the media. Locked down at Alliance headquarters, a perky Emily Wong speculated on what punishment awaited Shepard as news from the batarian Hegemony had gone dark in the last few months. There were worries they were mobilizing for war. Wong’s report cycled through the confirmed rumors of the day, as well as opinion pieces from various colony and Earth citizens on what they thought of the Commander.

Samantha rolled her eyes as some of the backwoods colony interviewees accused Shepard of being a meddlesome pawn using Reapers as an excuse to stick Alliance bodies and funds into their business.

*Sharp. Real sharp. Way to make us colonists look good there, buddy. We'll be discovering the wheel and making fire any day now, just you wait.*

Only palms and "No comment" could be spotted amongst Wong's Alliance government interviews. The reporter claimed that an unidentified source found Shepard's information on Cerberus useful and her Reaper fears credible, as well as requesting for vigilance from all humans. Sam laughed at a few soundbytes praising Shepard's actions as well as her ass, though she suspected the sources didn't have firsthand knowledge of either.

Suddenly an alarm chimed over the vid screen indicating Sam's train to the military base would be arriving in 25 minutes. An email alert also popped up in the corner. She recognized Isabella's email address.

---

*S—*

*Sorry I'm such a grouch. Can I make it up to you? Dinner tonight? A real date this time? I promise to behave if you promise to wear that black dress.*

…Who am I kidding, we both know I can't behave around that dress.

—Izzy

Rather than get excited, Sam just sighed as she hopped into the acceptably warm shower. She spent those seven minutes of peace arguing with herself on whether to take Isabella up on her offer.

*What the hell are you doing, Traynor? Do you really want a repeat of this morning? Six to one odds she lays into you about the Alliance during dinner. Four to one she avoids talking about anything at all. ...which is always fun, but dreadful the next morning... Two to one she shows up two hours late smelling like someone else, probably her Eld-Ash flavor of the month. ...which means you're her flavor of the month to someone else...*  

*Stop it.*
Toweling off her dark hair, Samantha scowled as she exited the bathroom. Dressing in her simple blue civilian Alliance uniform was a matter of methodical snaps and zips, though her toes wiggled free of the light boots until the last possible moment.

She took a seat at the low table near the prefab's only window while mentally calculating she had about 18 minutes before she had to scurry out the door to reach the light rail train to the Alliance dock.

Samantha pondered the chess board on the table, running an absent finger along the Lazy Susan. The pink and black stone pieces swayed back and forth before her fidgeting finger, scattered across the grid in tight attack patterns.

Despite the fact her mind was processing dozens of scenarios and maneuvers for her hematite brethren to conquer the offending rose quartz army, Isabella drifted back into Sam's thoughts. Quite against her will.

Isabella never wanted to play chess. Didn't even bother to learn. The rose quartz king still defiant against the onslaught of a hematite bishop was a result of many idle nights and weekends against the ferocious opponent known as Samantha Traynor. And those nights that weren't idled away on chess were idled away on an absolutely infuriating woman who appreciated silly things like celebrity gossip and low cut blouses.

Before that thought could return to its inevitable, irresistibly sexy origins, Samantha's Omni-tool bracelet chimed with an incoming call. Giving the Lazy Susan a spin to attempt to defend herself from her repositioned hematite knight, she tapped the orange interface to accept the call.

Two cheerful faces popped into the small screen. An older approximation of Samantha was tucking errant strands of long salt and pepper hair behind her ears while the paler older man finished stealing a quick sip from a wine glass.

"Hi there, alpha sprog," Geoffrey Traynor jibed amiably. "How's the homeworld? Rife with manna and honey?"

"Mornin' Dad. And that's alpha and omega sprog, unless you've got a brother or sister waiting in the wings that I don't know about after 26 years." She waited a moment for her father to stop nudging her mother suggestively before addressing his original question. "It's raining manna as we speak. I'm lucky I don't get crushed on my walk to the tube from all the glorious promised land delights. How you tolerate colony life when paradise is clearly in Vancouver is beyond me," Samantha dryly retorted while running fingertips through her damp hair.

Priya Suresh-Traynor rolled her eyes at father and daughter. "Knock it off, you two. This call is costing a fortune as it is. How are you doing, princess? What time is it there?"

"Mum," Samantha started in exasperation. "You ask me this question every time you call. I've been here four months, and the time is always the same. I'm about to leave for work. How's Horizon?"

"Tsksing at her daughter's tone, Priya sighed. "We're still rebuilding. We finally finished the last of the funerals and wakes for the ones we lost. Six months, kid. It took six months for all that. There have been some Alliance reps conducting a census to get a feel for who all is left, though most of the families of the taken have already gone offworld for a fresh start."

Geoffrey chimed in, "I don't know how they expect to get an accurate census with all the coming and going. The northern section of the colony is still partly cordoned off from researchers picking up those bug... things... and they turned the medical district into a research lab to examine the
Collectors that Commander Shepard killed."

"Have you met her yet? Commander Shepard?" There was intrigued awe in Samantha's mother's voice. "You did say you were working on her ship, right?"

"Mum," Samantha tried to keep her irritation to a minimum. "I've never even seen her in person. She's under lock and key at Alliance HQ. I'm at the dock. We don't exactly mingle around the water cooler. I don't even think the Normandy is considered her ship anymore since it's been impounded. All our retrofits have a new commanding officer listed."

Priya frowned with a disappointed "Oh..." while Geoffrey patted his wife's shoulder with encouragement. "Now now, my little lotus flower. I'm sure we'll get some grand kids out of little Sammy yet. Even if they aren't the Hero of the Citadel's." He winked at Samantha playfully, though she could only squawk out an awkward "Dad!"

It took considerable willpower to resist the urge to slap a palm to her forehead.

What in the bloody hell is going on? First Izzy is harping on me about my future, now my parents are fishing for fictitious grandchildren? With Commander bloody Shepard to boot? Whatever I did to deserve this, God, I hope I at least had fun doing it. Because this is just... just...

"I really should be—" Samantha started before her mother interrupted. "Samantha. We're your parents. We love you. We just want to make sure you're happy. And settled down at some point. Not right this minute... when you're ready, of course. I just hope you're doing something with your life that matters to you."

The thoughtful concern in her mother's voice tangled up Sam's tongue in a mixture of gratitude and embarrassment. She found herself tucking her hair behind her ears nervously, exactly the way Priya had done earlier. "I—thank you, mum. I'm fine. I'm doing work I enjoy and I help people. I get to travel on the Alliance's dime. And I still make a mean cup of tea. I'm just fine."

Geoffrey, oblivious to the cryptically tender mother-daughter moment, interrupted. "Hey, kid? We just lost four of our database feeds from the Terminus. And we're getting reports Alliance-issue comms are down in Exodus and Horse Head. Did your people run a stress-test and crash the damn network again? You know us backwoods yokels piggyback on your comms for boring things like day-to-day life and infrastructure, yea?"

Sam flipped through her Omni-tool messages, which confirmed the blackout, but there were no warning messages about planned downtime. Assuming it was just some lazy tech who spilled a drink on their console, Samantha promised her dad she'd follow up on the comm outage when she got to the Alliance dock in... oh shit! Is that the time? I'm going to miss my train!

Hurrying her goodbyes, she signed off and quickly started gathering her things. Against her better judgment, Samantha tucked her favorite black dress into a small duffle, along with some overnight essentials. Her hand hesitated over her toothbrush, but in the end she decided to leave it safe and sound at home.

Next time, ol' sport. Next time.

She took one last moment to slide a rose quartz bishop onto a black tile, 45 degrees from the hematite king. Check. Grinning smugly, Sam ran out her prefab door with a slide of a keycard. A helpful hand of an elderly man held the apartment elevator just long enough for her to dart into the car. Twelve floors later, they were both deposited at the ground where Samantha made a beeline down the busy street to the train station.
The last call sounded just as she huffed up the top step, though the sliding doors snagged a souvenir pin from the Eden Prime Observatory off her overnight bag in their eagerness to keep the train on schedule. A morning talk show blared from the small viewing screens tucked in the corners of the cars, background noise for the sleepy commuters to try and wake themselves up before yet another long day at work.

Resting her forehead against a cool metal support bar, Samantha let the rhythmic sway of the light rail settle her thoughts. She tapped her Omni-tool to re-read Isabella's date proposal. And sighed.

"Dammit, mum, why do you have to be so prying but so supportive? It's quite the brilliant move from the Mom Playbook. It's not like I can admit I'm shagging a detached mining executive who has an aneurysm when I so much as plan a date a day in advance. I just... I don't know why I put up with Izzy. She certainly isn't what mum had in mind for settling down. She's completely infuriating and yet I still go back.

Because I'm lonely in this stupid city.

...Stop talking to yourself, Traynor. Have you gone barking mad already?

Vancouver Harbor whizzed by the train window, a sparkling morning sun glinting in its waters. Ship traffic seemed especially heavy the closer the train got to the military base. Strange. Several stops along the harbor dropped off medical personnel at the hospital, mechanics at one of the land vehicle hangars, and decorated officers at the command post. Samantha couldn't resist appraising a particularly attractive brunette in navy and gold before returning her wandering eyes to the glowing holo map. Next stop.

The doors swished open to a busy security screening station. Sam was surprised at how jammed the security line was at this time of morning; most ships on active duty were already gone by 0730, leaving the engineers and specialists a leisurely arrival free of military troops. But today was oddly different and she wanted to know why.

Samantha tried to strike up a friendly conversation with a few male troopers in front of her, but they were sullen and quiet. One answered with a surly, "That's classified, Specialist." Another wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and asked her what she was doing later. "That's classified, soldier," Sam returned playfully.

Abandoning all hope of making it to work on time, Sam slogged through 20 minutes of security scans before she could hop on to her freight elevator to the G-13 dock. Unlike the rest of the Alliance dock, the G terminal was exclusively for impounded ships and therefore had next to no foot traffic. She had become well-acquainted with the familiar security staff in G terminal, but those friendly faces were ashen and unresponsive to Samantha's hellos.

"What in the bloody hell is going on?"

A jet bridge was already extended to a uniquely profiled deep scout frigate. "NORMANDY SR2" in bold lettering along the body of the ship greeted Sam from the window view, as it had for the last four months. Inside, however, was where the comfortable routine went to hell.

"Logged: Specialist Traynor is aboard," the Normandy's virtual intelligence, EDI, chimed above Sam's head.

"Another thing I miss about R&D: no VI punch card telling everyone I'm late," she grumped inwardly.
The Normandy's Flight Lieutenant, Jeff "Joker" Moreau, rotated in his chair to better shout through the cockpit.

"Somebody's in trouble," he cackled in a familiar way. Joker pulled his blue SR2 cap off his head to scratch his palm against fiery red hair. His lower lip stuck out in a knowing grin behind a thick beard.

"Already? Do I want to know, or would my time be better spent savoring the suspense?" Sam quipped as she shifted her duffle bag, eager to stow it away before one of the nosier tech specialists saw it.

Joker waved his hat to gesture to the back of the ship. "Your brass replacement is on the horn in the war room about some missed something. Normally I don't care… plus I like watching people get yelled at who aren't me, but she's threatening to lock down my ship. I think it's a new record for her." His nose wrinkled in disgust.

Sighing, Sam jogged through the CIC to drop her duffle into the cramped room next to the elevator. The massive overhaul to strip all signs of Cerberus from the CIC deck had made one of the corridors redundant, so it had become an unofficial junk storage area. Several crates marked "Property of A. Shepard" were stacked haphazardly in the shelves above.

Privates Westmoreland and Campbell were both engrossed in magazines on their datapads and didn't even acknowledge Traynor entering the security curtain. Sam rued the day that bloody thing was finally installed, because she had to pass through it about 30 times a day to get at all the comm hardware in the war room. And there was no bypass or skipping the line, either.

"EDI, what's going on?" Samantha asked the ceiling as she strolled through the conference room.

"You have an urgent message from Staff Lieutenant Ventura."

*Everything is an urgent message to that shrew,* Sam mused. Aloud, she asked what the message was regarding.

"The Staff Lieutenant has expressed displeasure that the cargo bay and CIC still contain crates and property from the previous crew of the Normandy. She is also requesting an updated timetable of the Normandy's comms readiness. I have, of course, sent memos to the Staff Lieutenant regarding both these issues, but she insists on speaking to you directly."

*Of course she does.*

Making brief greetings to Specialists Lucas and Xian, who were playing with wires underneath one of the instrument panels, Samantha cut across the wide, round war room. Peppered with chairs and high tech consoles, it was a far cry from the stark salarian laboratory that once occupied this half of deck 2.

Xian called out to Sam, peeking his dark eyes and messy hair out from an access panel in the floor. "Yo, Traynor! You're late!" She wished people would stop pointing that out. "And you need to check the ANN direct feed. Crazy bad interference. I'm gonna miss my stories."

Samantha glibly replied that she wasn't responsible for the ANN's signal quality, and that he would just have to watch "Profiles in Courage" later.

The smaller comm hub behind the war room was still a work in progress. Heavy power cables had not yet been tucked under the floor boards, but the holo conference center was up and running. A yellow light pulsed on the comm panel, indicating an incoming transmission. An orange holo console
popped up as Samantha approached it, and she typed in her credentials to accept the message.

A stern Hispanic woman with an officer’s hat materialized above the third floor panel. Samantha crisply saluted the holo of Staff Lieutenant Vanessa Ventura, who was only a few kilometers away at Alliance HQ.

"Specialist Traynor."

"Lieutenant Ventura." Samantha had learned long ago to leave her disdain at the door. Just keep her face a mask and soldier through.

Ventura seemed to inspect a datapad before continuing. "I checked the retrofit logs. The Normandy is not ready for inspection."

"I was not aware we were being inspected, ma'am. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

The older woman put the datapad down and touched her fingertips together crossly. "You should always be ready for inspection," Ventura scowled.

Right.

Suddenly a feed lit up underneath the vid-call, spelling out a long list of delayed or delinquent Normandy action items. Samantha bit back the urge to shout, for some of these requests required acts of God.

*Upgrading calibration suites? A full drive core audit? Unless I missed about a million memos somewhere, she's pulling these requests out of her arse.*

"My apologies, Lieutenant. My assignment to the Normandy did not include yeoman-level protocols. So my ability to procure tends to fall to the wayside when higher-ranking specialists make requests."

*Higher-ranking delights such as yourself, Sam snorted inwardly, whose need for gourmet coffee and scones trumps my need for engineering vent couplings and proprietary algorithm licenses.*

Ventura shook her head with dismissal. "All I'm hearing is excuses. Admiral Anderson is scheduled to board the Normandy at 1330 today for an impromptu shakedown to Titan and back, following a late meeting with Commander Shepard and the Alliance Admiralty Board."

*Why am I always the last to know this shit?*

Will the Commander or any of the Admirals be joining us?" Sam asked in a disinterested monotone. She didn't particularly care one way or the other, though Specialist Xian would be over the moon. Shepard's was his favorite "Profile in Courage" and Samantha bet a hundred credits hers was the "story" he was keen on watching. Again.

"No. The Commander is under lockdown pending sentencing for her actions over the last year," Ventura growled. She was not one of Shepard's adoring fans. "But as you are not signed on for active duty, you are responsible for ensuring the Normandy is at optimal readiness for her ground crew."

*Oh, goody.*

Sam eyed the long list of things left to do, many circling around removal of all the extraneous tech and parts. All of the unchecked stress test items were already complete, they just weren't properly reported on. Samantha and Specialist Lucas had an ongoing bet over who had to do all that
bureaucratic bullshit, with no definite winner (or loser) in sight. *We'll flip a coin later.*

"Understood, Lieutenant. We will be ready for the Admiral's test drive of his **new** old ship," Sam lied with a smile.

Her weak joke flew right over Ventura's head, who just muttered a distracted "Indeed."

Just as Sam was about to sign off with a polite goodbye, Ventura tilted her head. "May I ask why you have not put in a request to continue to serve aboard the Normandy, Specialist Traynor?"

**Because you would be my executive officer and make my life hell?** Sam cleared her throat to disguise a derisive chuckle.

"I intend to return to R&D on Arcturus Station. I had several QEC research projects in the works before I was requested to assist the retrofits. I like to finish things, ma'am. The Normandy is up and running beautifully. She needs a **combat** comms specialist for all that exploding and excitement, not a stodgy old tech geek like me."

"But the Normandy is the most advanced ship in the Alliance Navy, with its own QEC array. I think your time would be better suited to assisting us here," Ventura challenged, not satisfied with Samantha's modesty.

Sam replied through gritted teeth. "I'll take that under advisement, ma'am."

Yet another woman telling me what I should be doing with my life. Three for three today, a new record. All sorts of records being broken today.

Just no good ones.

"As you should. Now what is the estimate on—wha?" A quizzical expression crossed Ventura's face as she looked somewhere off to her left. The confusion transitioned suddenly to horror.

"Oh my—oh my God!"

The Lieutenant shouted something else, but the feed cut out with a rumble. The last thing Sam saw was Ventura diving to her side, with what looked to be rubble crashing down on top of her.

That crash became very real as a dull rumble coursed through the Normandy. A warning klaxon blared as EDI came over the intercom. "Proximity warning. The Alliance dock is under attack. All exterior hatches closing and all crew report to their work stations."

Work stations?! **There are 11 people on this damn ship!** What are two security guards, three comms specialists, two pilots, two engineers and two weapons guidance techs going to do? **Can we even get this ship running with a skeleton crew like this?**

A second shockwave snapped Samantha out of her confused stupor. She struggled to stay upright down the infernal stairs of the war room but fell against the opposite railing. Lucas rolled across the floor while Xian held on to wiring for dear life. They both shouted at Sam for answers she didn't have. She wasn't a soldier, after all.

She was supposed to be sipping coffee in the CIC while casually mapping real-time data lags on the galaxy map. Samantha kept closing her eyes and opening them to make sure this wasn't just a sleep-deprived nightmare she wasn't waking up from.

"Alliance impound lockdown has been overridden. Distress signal from Alliance Headquarters
received. Multiple hostiles engaged. Rescue assigned mission-critical significance, combat assigned secondary priority," EDI reported.

*Hostiles? Did the batarians attack Earth? How did they make it through our defense network?* Sam's mind was a whirlwind of panic. She told the two Specialists to man the feeds like EDI asked. Their faces were ashen but they complied, Omni-tools glowing with purpose.

"EDI! What's happening?!" Another blast rocked the ship as Samantha stumbled to the conference area. She clung to the glass wall and peered out the window. The sight was enough to make her nauseous.

The Normandy was already lifting off out of the dock as the view tilted from the harbor to show the inland city. Giant squid-like robots, taller than skyscrapers, were landing in the distance. Angry red eyes sent out high-intensity blasts. Each sweep of red reduced buildings, cars, trees, *flesh* to ashes.

Smaller crab-like ships, still bigger than most Alliance heavy cruisers, joined their larger brothers in the streets. Their focus was on releasing terrifying abominations, some humanoid, some not, onto the defenseless men, women and children unfortunate enough to be outside today.

"Specialist Traynor. The Reapers are here."

EDI said it so matter-of-factly. There was no other possible explanation. Just... Reapers.

*But Reapers are just ... children's stories. Shepard's stories? Just... stories. Not real. This can't be real. How is this happening?*

Sam's hand flew to her mouth before her mind could actually process why. Out the window, on the opposite coast, a tall building bearing a bold, glowing EAE logo swayed for a second before completely collapsing. A giant Reaper stepped over the ruins on its rampage through downtown Vancouver.

*EAE? Why do I know that name?*

_Eldfell-Ashland Energy.*

*Izzy. Isabella was in there.*

It was EDI who finally broke through, because Samantha's brain had simply stopped working for a few seconds. "Specialist Traynor. I am in contact with Admiral Anderson and Lieutenant Commander Ashley Williams. I require your assistance in the CIC to clean up their communication transmissions, for most of my suites are currently engaged in running the Normandy in absence of a functioning crew."

Jerking backward, Sam dug her fingernails into her palms to remind herself she was alive and that yes, this was happening. Privates Westmoreland and Campbell were no longer idling their time with catching up on celebrity gossip. Both female soldiers were now sporting assault rifles, which pointed at Sam when the doors swung open.

All three women exclaimed a hearty "Shit!" before the soldiers gestured for Sam to keep going. She slid into her waiting console next to the galaxy map, making smooth swipes to bring up the proper channels. A blue tracking beacon on the roof of the Alliance HQ showed "Lt Cmdr A Williams" huddled in a corner with two other marines. Red dots flanked the position of those blue blips.

Okay. Okay okay okay. Sam chanted in her mind over and over to try and even out her breathing, which was nearing hyperventilation-level intervals. *Oh.* Inhale. *Kay.* Exhale.

"Specialist Traynor, I will need you to lock on to the Lieutenant Commander and ping her to these coordinates—" EDI brought up a neighboring building with a large landing pad adjoined by a jet bridge on the holographic city map, "—so that we can extract them. I have also received a transmission from Admiral Anderson but I have been unable to pinpoint his location."

Okay. Okay okay okay. I can do that. I do that all the time. I am the queen of doing that. O-kay.

Sam pulled out every coding and bypass trick in her arsenal to overcome the perpetual [Connection Failure] screen keeping her from that little blue dot on the roof. Victory came in the form of a shouting female voice through the comm feed.

["—ple hostiles! Need a pickup ASAP! Williams to Normandy! Respond! Over!"]

EDI took over the guidance of the officers while Samantha switched gears to hunt down an elusive wave feed that was buried amidst thousands of other emergency distress signals being broadcast across the city, the **planet**, at this very moment. Burst fire struck the Normandy's kinetic shields as it unsteadily maneuvered past Reaper ground troops to reach Ashley Williams. Specialists Hertzfeld and Douglas in the third deck weapon bay unleashed the Normandy's heavy guns to clear a path for the marines.

Typing furiously, Samantha rerouted the remaining satellite feeds that were still broadcasting to one holo screen while opening another to start running custom scan filters. "Adm D Anderson" was in there somewhere, amidst thousands of other comm channel IP addresses. Isolate for military encoding. Cross filter with rank parameters. Last known location, pinpoint coordinates, and—

"EDI! I've got it! Comm link 045.7.8300.1-A7, Vancouver Harbor, on the roof of the ANN Telecom Tower!"

"Link established, Specialist Traynor. Thank you," came the warm reply. Sam and EDI opened a secure socket so that the Lieutenant Commander and Admiral could communicate without fear the enemy would cut them off or lock in to their position.

Samantha then went to work cleaning up the feed as best she could, although keeping a lock on the Admiral's comm unit was proving difficult. But she was able to overhear a good chunk of conversation at least.

"Lieutenant Commander? You read me? I'm patching in Shepard."

A new IP appeared on Samantha's screen, granting it classified-level access. She grabbed on to it and ran it through the necessary security filters, confirming it was in fact Commander Annelise Shepard.

"We're almost to the Normandy. I've got Lieutenant Vega with me, but we're taking heavy fire," Ashley said amidst the pop of gunfire. An affirmative from EDI reported Williams, James Vega, and Sergeant Benjamin Mason boarded the ship a few seconds later.

"We're about five minutes out," Anderson reported, before his comm cut out with an alarmed shout. "Husks!"

*Is that what those—those things are?* Samantha tapped into some of the emergency news feeds while keeping a close ear on the progress of Anderson and Shepard. Panicked journalists showed waves of terrifying monsters sweeping in to cities like a plague. London. Paris. Beijing. Buenos Aires. New
York. They were all the same.

The voice of a terrified boy brought Samantha back to the immediate carnage at hand. ["Everyone's dying."]

["Come here. I need to get you someplace safe."]

It was the first time Sam had heard Shepard speak. Her voice was husky and warm. There was a pressing urgency to her words, but also the promise of safety. She asked the boy to take her hand.

The child's response chilled Samantha to her core.

["You can't help me."]

The boy didn't sound older than ten years old, and his hope was gone.

*If a child could stop believing, what hope was there for any of us? What can I do, against all this? Who am I to these things, these Reapers? I'm nobody.*

Static took over the channel, so Samantha at least had something to busy herself from the dark thoughts closing in. The banter between Joker and Lieutenant Williams buzzing over her console also proved a decent distraction.

Those two bickered like old friends: Ashley was stern and serious but had a touch of snark, while Joker's surly sarcasm was immune to even the end of the world. Williams sounded like she might have been one of the popular girls, the jocks. The ones who made life hell for geeks like Sam.

*Get a grip, Traynor. You don't even know what she looks like. She's down in the shuttle bay. She's not about to tackle you and give you a noogie and make you do her homework.*

The silly thoughts did make Samantha uncomfortably aware that her back was facing the elevator and she wouldn't even see it coming. Right. Because that's a priority when the world is being invaded by super aliens.

*Focus, Sam.*

*Okay. Okay okay okay.*

Anderson's comm finally cut back in after two minutes and thirty-nine seconds of dead air. "Lieutenant Commander Williams! We're in sight of the spaceport! ETA three minutes!"

"We made it to the Normandy," Williams shouted as the ship lurched. "We're taking heavy fire!"

Even with the artificial pressure and gravity, Sam had to hold on to her console edge to keep from spinning off into a wall. An emergency halter attached to a sturdy cable popped out of the control panel. Dropping her arms through the straps, Samantha clipped the bungee to her belt to ensure she kept her feet on the ground.

"Oh God!" The Lieutenant Commander's cry of horror was drowned out by a proximity warning from EDI. Before Sam could ask what was going on, Williams clarified. "They're gonna take down that dreadnought! Evasive maneuvers!"

They? Who's they? Whose dreadnought? Could we—could we be winning? Pushing them back?

[Connection failure]
Sam cursed as the secure socket disconnected the Normandy from the Admiral and Shepard. She cursed again as a deep, resonating shockwave hit the ship. Her security buckle held as she was jerked off her feet by rough turbulence. "The Kilimanjaro-class SSV McKinley has been destroyed. Chance of survivors: 0.07%," EDI reported. Joker's cursing was much more colorful than Sam's.

"Anderson! Anderson, do you read me?" Ashley's comm broke through the stunned silence. She demanded a reconnection to the Admiral.

Samantha ran search protocols, but both Shepard and Anderson had dropped off the communication map.

So an introduction was long overdue. "Lieutenant Commander, this is Specialist Traynor. I am working to reestablish a connection, but our system is overloaded with distress signals. There is simply too much interference. I need a signal boost from the Admiral on the ground in order to lock on to their position."

To Williams' credit, she didn't swear at or berate Sam for things out of their control. *One up on Ventura*, Samantha thought bitterly, before swallowing that resentment with guilt.

*Of course she has one up on Ventura: she's still alive.*

"Understood, Traynor. I will continue hailing the Admiral until communications are back up. And when they are, I'm gonna need a big favor."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"I'll tell you when the time comes, Specialist. Keep trying Shepard, too."

*Well, that sounds ominous,* Samantha chewed her lip.

She went back to probing the data feeds for any signs of comm signals. After the first half dozen probes into signals, Samantha had to set up a rule not to listen in to any feeds. She couldn't handle listening to hysterical women, panicking medics, or distraught soldiers demanding answers from the chain of command. The cry was the same for everyone.

*What do we do?*

*What do we do against something like this? Run? Where do we run to? What if they're everywhere?*

Okay. Okay okay okay.

A small gunship, the SSV Zelda, suddenly pinged Samantha's terminal. Her lip curled in a cautious smile when she saw two familiar comm links reconnect. Shepard. Anderson.

*They made it.*

Sam locked on to that comm buoy's signal with half a dozen layers of encryption before patching it over to Ashley's frequency.

"—ndy! This is Anderson, do you read!"

"Admiral! What's your location?"

"By a downed gunship in the harbor. I'm activating its distress beacon. Send support. We've got wounded out here—" A garbled burst of static and the comm went dead once more. Williams requested a response in her channel a few times before she gave up.
Slamming her fist on the console, Samantha shouted at her terminal. "I know you're in there! Where are you?!!" She managed to isolate the coordinates of the signal's distress beacon, but it simply didn't have the power to piggyback for comms anymore. She would have to find another comm buoy to tether to the Admiral's IP, but where—

"Specialist Traynor, I need you in the shuttle bay," Ashley commanded over the intercom. "Now."

Bloody hell, Sam swore inwardly again.

But Williams was the ranking officer on the ship. Until Anderson, the assigned commanding officer, was found, Samantha had to obey the chain of command. Unhooking her safety harness, she shakily padded over to the elevator and hit the glowing 4 on the panel. She wondered if taking an elevator in a combat situation was a good idea, and mentally calculated her odds on getting stuck.

Seven to one there's sudden power loss and I get trapped. Five to one a direct hit somehow severs the cable and I plummet three decks to a very uncomfortable landing. Two to one I curl up in a ball and refuse to leave the elevator.

EDI updated their status. "We have located Admiral Anderson and Commander Shepard. ETA: two minutes. Extraction point shows approximately thirty-two hostiles at or near the Commander and Admiral Anderson. Status: extremely hot. Specialists Hertzfeld and Douglas: recalibrate heavy guns for precision targeting. Specialists Xian and Lucas: open up all emergency channels to broadcast Alliance retreat. Engineers Rashad and Pierce: assess kinetic barrier levels and drive core expulsion for FTL travel. Lieutenant Cortez: prep the Kodiak in case of emergency evac."

Wait, I can help. I can do those things. I'm the queen of doing those things, Sam mused despondently as the elevator doors opened.

Her first view was of a beefy marine digging around in the armory for an arm guard. He had to be over 1,95m tall, complete with broad shoulders and a close cropped mohawk of hair. He slapped on a helmet just as a shorter brunette swept over to Samantha.

"Traynor? I'm calling in that favor now." Ashley Williams was different than Sam had pictured. For one, she was gorgeous. Waves of dark hair, full lips, bright brown eyes. She also had an assault rifle in one gloved hand and a heavy pistol in the other.

Suddenly, the pistol was being tossed at Sam.

It was ungraceful and embarrassing and calling it a "catch" would have been an insult to all catches in the history of humankind. The gun was heavier than Sam remembered pistols being, and it struck her left palm before bobbling above her right hand, then she swept it to her chest before finally just dropping the damn thing.

Again, to Williams' credit, she didn't mock Samantha. She waited for Sam to pick up the gray and black weapon before continuing.

"I'm gonna need you to help defend the elevator, Specialist. Vega, Mason and I will take point on extracting the Admiral and Shepard. We aren't landing, but there's still a chance some hostiles might try to board the ship. If they do, we need every man and woman on this ship armed and ready to serve. We can't lose the Normandy again." Pain briefly flashed across Ashley's face before becoming serious once more.

It crossed Samantha's mind to protest. To say she couldn't do it. She wasn't a soldier, after all. But
Instead, a hardness settled inside her chest. It vaguely resembled determination, but it was enough.

Instead of refusing, Sam nodded and took up a place behind the weapon bench.

Turbulence in the shuttle bay was the worst. Samantha could feel every jerk of the thrusters, every dip of the stabilizers, every blast hitting the kinetic shields. She took the time crouched behind the console to recall her very brief weapons training two years ago. Even geeks had to be certified to handle weapons, and Sam had received decent marks on her exams.

"It's because you're a woman," her trainer had said. "Women are just naturally better shots. It's the breathing. Once you get the breathing down, shooting is a breeze."


She practiced a few times, making sure the safety was on. It seemed simple enough. The M-3 Predator was a heavier version of the M-5 Phalanx she'd used in training. Simple enough.

Then the shuttle bay doors opened and simple got really complicated. Ashley, James and Sergeant Mason bravely descended the bay doors and disappeared from sight, and the scene beyond was absolutely terrifying.

Sam could see bright red _things_, armed to the teeth with rifles. Most were trading fire with presumably the Admiral and Shepard out of sight below, while more than a few were gleefully _eating_ their fallen foes. Black and red haze surrounded their feeding, drawing strength from their cannibalistic madness.

That hard determination in Sam's chest sank to the pit of her stomach, and she squinched her eyes shut. She could still see their claws ripping into the intestines of humans, _each other_, in the chaos that was Earth. Hearing Williams shout for Anderson jerked Samantha back to the terrible reality.

She couldn't see anything, but the shuttle bay doors started to retract.


_I am not okay._

Everything evil and wrong is red. Red eyes. Red reapers. Red blood. So when Sam saw a red head with a red face pop up, she didn't think. She popped the safety off, closed her eyes, and fired blindly into the distance.

Samantha opened her eyes in time to see the bullet deflect off a hazy blue barrier. Her target, a new woman, had pulled her right hand into a tight, blood-stained paw against her chest. Her fingers relaxed as the biotic shield released. The fingers flexed outward suddenly and the pistol was yanked from Samantha's hands. It sped across the room to rest safely in the woman's outstretched hand, while biotic blue strands faded from the motion.

In the woman's left hand was a cord with jingling metal tags on the end. She lifted and dropped the dog tags over a crop of dark red hair, where they settled at home against her collarbone. White and red "N7" shone back at Samantha.

_Oh shit. Oh shit shit shit SHIT._

Soot traced over high, blood-smeared cheekbones. Medium lips were tightened with stress. Ferocity
glinted in deep green eyes.

Commander Annelise Shepard.

Sam had just shot at Commander bloody Shepard. Her first instinct was to hold up her hands in childish surrender. Samantha felt fire explode on her cheeks in profound embarrassment. She wanted to say she was sorry, say something, but her tongue was glued to the roof of her mouth.

The intensity in Shepard's green eyes was replaced by a new glint. Of amusement. She casually popped the heat sink out of the pistol as she strolled over to the weapon bench in front of Sam. Dropping the gun on the table, Shepard flashed Samantha a warm, understanding smile.

"Dismissed, soldier. We've got a war to win."
Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Samantha’s head struck the back of the elevator in three-second intervals. She was counting how many times she could slam her head against the wall in the time it took to go from the Shuttle Bay back to the CIC. *Where I belong.*

The elevator ride up to the CIC was almost as agonizing as the ride down had been for Sam. Her mind found new and interesting ways to be embarrassed anew about what had happened down in the Shuttle Bay just a few short minutes ago.

*God. It was just... a smorgasbord of awful. I panicked. While holding a supremely dangerous weapon. I fired on my commanding officer. Who I thought was a bloody Reaper. Then I get dismissed. Like a child.*

*Or... maybe... like a soldier?*

Still hitting her head against the wall, Traynor wasn't sure if she was pleased or embarrassed at the possible idea that Commander Shepard mistook her for an actual soldier. *The worst bloody soldier in the Alliance, at that.*

She sighed and welcomed the sight of the galaxy map through the opening elevator doors. *And... time! 54 knocks to the head for a travel time of 162 seconds. I'd add in a few decimal places since that last one was in the middle of a beat, but who's counting?*

The sarcastic bravado inside was decaying rapidly, in danger of becoming unhinged if her mind was allowed more than a few seconds to devote focus on the situation. Samantha’s command console blinked impatiently with an incoming transmission, a welcome respite. The encryptions were classified. High ranking. Sam didn't recognize the IP address and had to do a search, then swore under her breath when a match came up.
Admiral Steven Hackett. ...Right.

The signal was absolutely terrible. Even with more than a little help from EDI, Samantha couldn't pull more than a few percentage points out of the dirty signal. *It'll have to do.*

She wished she had her clean-up suites, an array of hacking filters and scrubber programs gathered from a range of sources. Some were even hand-coded. None were technically Alliance-issue so they weren't approved to use. The filters not sitting inside a storage chit back at Samantha's apartment were locked in requisitions hell with Lieutenant Ventura.

*My apartment. So many tiny, useless things that somehow summarized the most precious parts of my life. The hematite and rose quartz chess set my father gave me. My console and storage chits, the tools of so many hours of scheming, learning, creating... That tiny little efficiency that was home for four months... is it gone? Crushed under a giant Reaper claw or melted to rubble from a canon? Crushed like—like Ventura?*

Swallowing deeply, Sam pushed both the selfish and the bitter thoughts away. A few keystrokes sent the transmission down to Commander Shepard in the Shuttle Bay.

"Shepard...—sustained heavy losses," Admiral Hackett's deep voice garbled. "The invading force was overwhelming— ... There's no way we can defeat them conventionally."

*Clean up, damn you. You can do it. I see you right there, so shape up,* Samantha growled at the comm signal dropping in and out of range. It was all she could do to not ponder the ominousness of his words, the sureness of our defeat.

"Anderson's already ordered us to the Citadel to talk to the Council." Shepard was calm. On Sam's second screen, the woman had cleaned up her bloody face and hands. There was a disheveled prettiness to the Commander, an air of untamed confidence. Even with a dribbling gash on a freckled cheek, Annelise Shepard looked poised and ready for action.

"First, I need you... —Alliance outpost on Mars... —before we lose control of the system."

"*Lose control of the system?* We're that far gone already? Sam felt the color drain from her face as an unnatural coldness traced up her spine.*Work on the signal. Work on the signal. Work on the signal.*

"...been researching the Prothean Archives with Dr. T'Soni. ...found a way to stop the Reapers. – could be the only way to stop them. We'll be in contact soon. Hackett out."

Even though Hackett's comm dropped off, Sam dimly observed a spike in Shepard's signature as it switched to internal comms. "Flight Lt J Moreau" popped on to the feed before briefly cutting out, followed by Joker's voice coming over the ship-wide intercom.

"Saddle up, Normandiers. Change of course. We're making a pit stop at Mars."

EDI was not satisfied with Joker's update, insisting on adding, "Continue manning your stations. The Alliance has flagged the Normandy for combat readiness and will be retaining a full crew once we arrive at the Citadel. At our current trajectory, we will reach the Prothean Archives in less than five minutes."

*Mars? The Citadel? But... what about Earth?*

The afterimage of Earth still burned fresh in Sam's mind. She had spent so much of the invasion (*massacre?*) locked away aboard the Normandy. Just watching through a window or via a vid feed
in a detached, unreal way. Like maybe if she closed her eyes tight enough and gave her arms a few hearty pinches, she would wake up in her bed simply cursing a bad dream.

Remembering her bed made Sam suddenly remember Isabella. That detached unreality translated to the fall of the Eld-Ash Tower, to an odd uncertain hope that Izzy wasn't in there. *It's not as though I saw her... being crushed... Maybe... Maybe she's all right.*

*Does not seeing the rest of Earth burn make it not true? Grow up, Sam.*

Her own cruelty made Samantha aware of how she really felt about that woman. Because it created a kind of cyclical guilt that threatened to send her reeling to the bathroom on Deck 3.

*Am I sad? I mean, maybe a little? Izzy could be a comfort. Kind of funny. Soft and smooth. She had this commanding presence, a way of making the room part around her and take notice and listen. It was intoxicating, but when pulled into a smaller room full of shadows and secrets, Isabella was... small. Her demanding nature could be alluring. But after the excitement dwindled, all that truly remained was an impatience wrapped in an insecure (but still attractive) shell.*

Other than a sort of personal representation to cut through the incomprehensible loss going on right this very moment on Earth, Isabella was... unimportant. Samantha mourned the idea of Izzy, but not the woman herself. And this confession made Sam hate herself.

*How can I think this way? She's gone! So many on Earth are being burned to ash by th—those things, those Reapers. Was it—was it quick? Did she suffer? Did she think about me before—before it happened? Would I even want her to?*

The elevator button was being pressed for Deck 3 before Samantha was even aware of her surroundings. Thankfully, her body seemed to have taken over the difficult task of wielding this useless sack of meat. Propelled out the door a handful of seconds later, Sam tripped into the bathroom and nearly fell headfirst into the first toilet. But now her body had given up handling the show, leaving her to vomit pitifully on the floor.

It was acidic and bitter and mostly bile. Some of it even came out through her nose, tainting her senses completely. Sam wretched until she could only dry heave, feeling her short black hair slick against her cheeks. It all tasted like defeat. Despair. Guilt. So, so much guilt.

*I wish—what do I wish? I wish the Reapers defeated, obviously. Earth saved. But what about Isabella? Everyone else? Maybe I wish she has someone to mourn her properly? To wish someone is filled with that wistful longing that would move mountains to avenge her? Could I ever be that person? Would I ever do that for someone, or have someone do that for me? What do I do with this? Other than feel impossibly guilty and useless?*

Mostly, Samantha was afraid. She felt small, overwhelmed and useless. The Shuttle Bay had proven just how out of her league she was. That when the time came to be brave, Samantha had closed her eyes and acted blindly and nearly hurt someone. What difference could she possibly make?

Bringing her knees to her chest, Sam batted away the wetness on her cheeks, not caring if it were tears or... something else. She wasn't sure how long she sat there, numb and dazed, trying to comprehend a way to mourn an entire planet. A planet already declared lost by the ones claiming to protect it.

"*Lose control of the system*" kept floating and repeating drearily in her mind, such a concise summary of billions of lives. It was several long minutes (*hours?*) before Sam was able to push that thought into a worse conclusion.
"The system..." Sounds so, military, so tactical. As though we have other systems to lose...

Wait... Sam's conversation with her father from earlier came surging in like a tidal wave. Horse Head... Exodus... The blackouts... Is that them? Reapers? There were hundreds on Earth! Thousands! How many systems can they take at once? Are they already everywhere? Is the war already lost?

As if to emphasize this, Sam suddenly heard the elevator door open. Heavy footfalls and grunts trailed out and down the hall, occasionally interrupted by Shepard firmly demanding, "Move. Move!"

Curious, Samantha pushed herself heavily to her feet and went to the sink to slap water on her face and swish a few mouthfuls to dull the awful taste in her mouth. She didn't even bother looking in the mirror, knowing there was nothing there she wanted to see right now. Sam made her way outside unsteadily, then followed the hallway to the last place she heard movement.

Through the glass of the Medical Bay, an asari in combat armor and a lab coat stood against a gurney, her expression stricken with worry. Sam could barely make out an armored soldier leaning intently over another, and it wasn't until she saw bright red hair did she realize it was Commander Shepard.

Dr. T'Soni was an asari, wasn't she? They must have found her on Mars already. Christ, how long was I wallowing in the little girls' room while the grown-ups did their jobs? …Snap out of it, Sam.

The Commander nor T'Soni (what was her first name? Laria?) took any notice of the comms specialist lurking outside the executive officer's (retrofitted) suite. Shepard seemed to be in a daze, unmoving. Through the open door to the Medical Bay, Sam heard the asari repeating Shepard's name over and over, to no avail. Sam was briefly tempted to come out of hiding, before T'Soni leaned over the table and desperately sought eye contact with Shepard.

"Ashley needs medical attention," the asari said simply, but with a pressing urgency. When the Commander didn't react, she shoved her azure face in closer. More demanding. "We have to leave the Sol system."

"I know!" Shepard shouted petulantly. Whereas Sam shrank back at the gruff bark, T'Soni didn't even flinch. She tilted her head to once more match the Commander's, calmly explaining, "The Citadel is our best chance. We can find help there." From a distance, Sam couldn't tell what, if anything, was passing between human and asari.

She had to stand on her tiptoes to see over the wall to catch a glimpse of Ashley Williams. Her deep blue hardsuit showed some scuff marks. Maybe a few glancing blows of bullets. But no angry red wounds in soft, vulnerable places. The Lieutenant Commander's feet were closest to Sam, so her eyes roved their way up Williams' body (grow up, Sam) until she finally saw the woman's face.

Dark hair was splayed about the soldier's head while the attractive features were marred with dark bruises. The skin was pebbled red from both burns and broken blood vessels. The damage was clearly focused on deep head trauma and, with the heavy hardsuit, Sam couldn't tell if Williams was even breathing or not.

Shepard ordered to the ceiling for Joker to get the Normandy to the Citadel, to which the pilot replied somberly, "Roger that."

"Heads up, amiga." A soft tenor popped from Samantha's right. She jumped with a start as James Vega padded by with another female body slung over his shoulder, though this one was burned to a crisp. Sam felt her stomach churn once more. How many people are coming back corpses?
Even though she was heavily armored, with sharp angular shoulderpads and heavy bracers, Shepard seemed oddly fragile. She looked like she wanted to stay and flee Ashley's side at the same time. When Vega stomped in and dropped the new arrival onto a far gurney, the Commander's concern did not shift. In fact, she seemed almost angry.

Facing Dr. T'Soni, Shepard pointed emphatically at the charred body. "See what you and EDI can learn from that—that thing."

*Thing?! Is it... a Reaper?*

"Commander, I'm receiving a message over the secondary QEC. I believe it is Admiral Hackett," EDI reported overhead.

Squeaking with a start, two emotions hit Sam simultaneously. The first was shame that EDI was in control of comms because Samantha had clearly dropped the ball. The second was sheer panic that Shepard was taking off at a jog to the elevator. And was coming straight at Sam.

The XO's office, remodeled only slightly from the previous Cerberus owner, was still barren of any character. It barely looked livable, as the pristine metal seemed more sterile than even the Med Bay. But it was a good enough place to dart into to escape admitting you were eavesdropping on your commanding officer.

Afraid to even sit down in one of the pair of white chairs sprinkled across the office area, Sam pressed her back against the wall. She could scarcely breathe until she heard the doctor's and Commander's footsteps disappear into the elevator.

The limp form of Ashley Williams in the Med Bay was complicated to digest. Samantha had never served on an active warship, so the casualties of war were foreign until quite literally this morning. Her one brief interaction with the Lieutenant Commander in the Shuttle Bay was a memory already replaced by that broken body on that medical bed.

*How quickly things change. From bad to worse. I really don't want to start betting on how long it takes to get from worse to worst. ...is there anything worse than this?*

A young boy's voice echoed that thought. "Everyone's dying."

"I'll get you someplace safe," Shepard had replied. Sam wanted to believe that now.

*I want to be somewhere safe. Where the hell is that?*
"Sam? Sammy, are you all right? We—we heard… Are you—is Earth—?"

"I'm fine, Dad."

_Earth… is not._ But Samantha couldn't bring herself to say that. She'd been practicing for almost a half hour before punching in the familiar IP address for Horizon. The four disconnections before finally reaching the colony had dissolved what little courage Sam had built up, however. As had the tense 32 hour journey at FTL speed, mostly spent staring blankly at the ANN alert about the full scale retreat from Earth.

The Normandy crew was quietly separate and grieving. Everyone felt lost. Conversations with her fellow crew members were either clipped or hysterical. Before, they would gather in the mess at lunch to joke and laugh. Lucas, Xian and Sam would bore the others to tears with chatter about new leaps in QEC tech. The boys in the guidance system, Hertzfeld and Douglas, loved comparing Alliance, turian, asari, and salarian ships like they would baseball teams back on Earth. Cortez would make brief appearances when Lieutenant Vega would stop by, but theirs was a tightly-knit brotherhood in the Shuttle Bay otherwise. Engineer Pierce usually bickered with his wife via Omni-tool while Rashad had her nose in a datapad about her favorite topics of the week. Just yesterday, Rashad was regaling Samantha and company about a conspiracy theory that salarians landed on ancient Earth and deposited dinosaurs there.

And now?

Specialist Seth Lucas brooded quietly in the war room while fiddling with cables. By comparison, Samantha asked for one update from specialist Chen Xian who promptly demanded to know what the plan was and what was taking so long. Engineers Morena Rashad and Victor Pierce just worked until they collapsed from exhaustion. No reading or bickering anymore. Cortez was keeping to himself in the Shuttle Bay more so than usual. Mourning a planet, and a husband lost only a few months ago, made the pilot more despondent than usual. Full of bravado, specialists Xander Hertzfeld and Ian Douglas craved an epic battle for the Normandy to test out her new weapons. It was just as well.

Their camaraderie had been a known, temporary thing. Once the Normandy was declared ready for
active duty, this gang of repairmen and women was supposed to scatter to the stars once more.

Once they'd landed at the Citadel, most of the crew rushed straight for the Alliance embassy to figure out their roles in all this insanity. Only Sam had stayed back. She just... wasn't ready yet. Together, Samantha and EDI tried to solve for the sudden influx of comm traffic over the QEC network. The distraction had been welcome, plus Sam also had a call of her own to make.

Remind me to give that VI a raise, though how her processes ran a whole bloody ship for two relay jumps is just... incredible. Odd, suspicious and impossible, but incredible.

...I'll worry about that later. After a long overdue diagnostic of the server core.

First priority was trying to explain to Geoffrey Traynor what his little girl had been through. What everyone is going through. Everywhere.

"I was on the Normandy when it—when it happened. The attack. We just—they're real, Dad," Sam finished awkwardly. She still had trouble believing it... That giant dreadnoughts had come in the night and were invading the galaxy. Reapers.

Geoffrey shook his head. "...I know, princess. We got news reports from the ANN while it started happening. That Emily Wong woman that you like so much, she was there. Reporting on... everything. Madrid, Sydney, Beijing... London..." Her father trailed off, choked up about what was happening millions of miles away in his hometown.

"Where's mum?"

He leaned back as though he heard something, but then Geoffrey turned back to the vid camera. "She was called in for an after-hours emergency at the clinic just after we got the first reports. She's on her way back, and I keep thinking I hear the door. I talked to her a little while ago. She's worried sick about you."

"I'm all right. We're docked at the Citadel to figure out what to do," Sam sighed. If we even can figure out what to do.

"Can you—can you tell me anything about what the Alliance's response is? I've seen M-080s rolling around, but other than crap about 'curfew' and 'vigilance,' they've been silent. They don't wear Alliance blue, either. Some sort of independent security force with roots in Horizon. I dunno."

"I haven't heard anything, Dad. I haven't even received orders yet about where they're supposed to put me. But they—the Alliance had to retreat from our system. There were too many Reapers."

Geoffrey swallowed deeply. "They canceled all my classes at the University this week. So I just get the privilege of sitting around watching the news and hoping it doesn't get worse." He closed his eyes and pinched his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "At least you're up there doing something about it. Us colony civilians just get to hunker down and pray we aren't next."

"So you—you haven't... there aren't..." Sam was afraid if she said it out loud, it would jinx it.

Her father managed a feeble smile. "No Reapers on Horizon, kid. And there's even talk of a super bunker on the south east end of the planet that was some abandoned military testing area. Sanctuary, they're calling it. A lot of the people here want to pack up and go there already.

"Me," he added with a wink, "I'm holding out for the Fifth Fleet to nuke all the Reapers from orbit. With Commander Shepard riding a bomb down to the mothership like a cowboy."
Well, if Dad is hoping for a Dr. Strangelove scenario, he must be in good spirits. Sam didn't have the same affection for two centuries-old American movies that her father did. "Once a classic, always a classic," he used to say.

"Speaking of which, you can tell mum not to worry. Commander Shepard is aboard the Normandy, and I think she's taking over for good. Tell mum her little girl is in capable hands." Until that little girl gets reassigned to God knows where else.

Geoffrey Traynor asked incredulously, "Shepard's back?"

"Shepard's back." Samantha repeated, though she didn't share her father's awe. The Commander had returned to the Normandy several hours ago and retired to the captain's cabin in the loft. Without so much as an order or pep talk for the crew. Liara (not Laria) T'Soni and James Vega had remained in the medical bay examining the robot chassis from Mars. Upon docking at the Citadel, both followed the medical team in escorting Ashley Williams' gurney to the hospital ward. Samantha vaguely recalled hearing EDI announce, "Logged: CO Shepard, XO Williams, Lt Vega and Dr. T'Soni are ashore."

Needless to say, Sam wasn't impressed yet with the first human SpecTRe's leadership capabilities.

Feeling that hopeless vulnerability starting to creep back in, Sam suddenly didn't want to be talking to her father anymore. Knowing he was safe was a relief, but the last 36 hours had left her raw and frustrated with herself. She had been perpetually hanging on the edge of bursting into tears every other moment, and losing it via vid-call with her daddy just made Samantha feel like more of a child.

"Sammy. I know that look," Geoffrey announced quietly. "I'll let you go to work out whatever it is you think you need to do. I won't have anyone thinking the Traynors are a soppy bunch. Especially the daughters on galaxy-saving warships."

He always understood me, Sam swallowed gratefully. The hot tears sitting on her eyelashes managed to retreat some. "I—thanks, Dad. It's not that I don't—I mean… You know I love you guys, right? I just—things are…"

"Don't worry about us. Your mum and I are troopers. Just call us to let us know you're okay, all right? Fulfill the least of your daughterly responsibilities, alpha and omega sprog." Geoffrey pressed Sam for a timeframe for her next call, but didn't prod her about how she was feeling or what was happening in that head of hers. I'm sure mum will do that next time.

Sighing deeply, Sam stood up and stretched. She wasn't used to working in the bow hallway, and though the chairs lining the neck of the Normandy were more comfortable, Samantha felt more exposed with her back to the airlock than she did near the elevator.

"Watch it, human," a gravelly voice grunted from behind Sam. She spun around to face a tall drell with cables slung over his shoulders. Despite his heavy haul through the airlock, he hadn't made a sound.

Squeaking but then quickly clearing her throat, Sam tried to sound demanding. "What are you—are you allowed to be here?"

"Liara sent me. Said she was setting up base. Where do you want this stuff?"

"I—you—"

"Specialist Traynor, Liara T'Soni has been granted clearance by Admiral Hackett to establish an
independent intelligence station aboard the Normandy in order to assist with the Crucible Project. I believe the office formerly occupied by Operative Lawson on the Crew Deck would be suitable for Dr. T'Soni's needs," EDI purred over the intercom.

The drell didn't even wait for a response as he shouldered past Samantha to the elevator. A glowing white info drone followed behind the drell, chattering incessantly about turian and salarian reports.

Irritated, Samantha turned back and reactivated her console. "EDI, what's all this then?" She found the clearance request dated only a few moments ago in the Normandy log, as well as updates regarding the initiation of a top secret project called the Crucible. *Damn, that asari moves fast.* Eyeing the stacks of servers and tech waiting outside the open door, Samantha amended that thought. *Damn, that asari moves really fast. Where did she even get all this stuff?*

"I apologize for not informing you sooner, Specialist Traynor. I was only contacted by Dr. T'Soni a short while ago about her need for space to house her intelligence brokerage network. It would appear her previous …accommodations… are no longer available, and she requested to remain close to Commander Shepard to better coordinate her tasks."

Samantha felt an odd, displaced loyalty. Part of her just wanted to leave the ship and let the drell do his business and let the Commander sort it out later. Another part felt a protective obsessive-compulsive desire to keep an eye on the drell and make sure her (is it yours, Sam?) ship was safe. And the rest of Sam was just nosy.

*Look at those servers! I figured an asari would just have Armali tech, but Liara is sporting a full suite of Ayndroid Group scanners. Ariake Tech amplifiers! Synthetic Insights hardware! She could run a government-grade command center for an entire colony with this stuff!* 

*Information broker, my arse.*

Operative Feron sidestepped Sam's probing questions, but allowed her to follow him up and down the elevator to deposit loads of hardware into the empty quarters opposite the medical bay. The formerly pristine room now had haphazard cables and consoles strung every which way, with an imposing tower of vid screens lining the starboard wall. The drell was only too happy to leave the chattering drone to its work at the consoles, and left without another word to Sam.

*Friendly guy. We should get together for afternoon tea sometime. I bet he's a riot.*

"Logged: CO Shepard is aboard," EDI announced above a few moments later.

*How long have I been loitering in the Normandy like a latchkey kid?* Tired of waiting for the world, the war, to come to her, she decided to take the fight to Shepard. *Well, the metaphorical fight.* The rest of the crew had marched right up to Alliance HQ and demanded active duty papers. Samantha wanted to march to the source.

*Do you want to hide on the Citadel and wait for the Reapers to come? Or run to Horizon with mum and dad and hide in a bunker? You're a military officer, Traynor. A lieutenant, even. A leader. You can cry in the CIC all day long but that doesn't help anyone, least of all you. This ship was designed to be the best damn command center in the Alliance fleet. And you know every damn inch of it. The Normandy needs you. And you need the Normandy. Oo-rah!*

Her short-lived gusto faded some at the hit of the elevator button. *And how does this conversation go down, hmm? "I rebuilt this ship's comms system, dammit! You can't even send an email without my help!"*
Extortion. Brilliant.

What else.

Samantha spied a datapad on the Starboard Observation Deck couch down the hall. A slideshow of the retrofits drifted by on the screen, no doubt left by Engineer Rashad during a brief nap. A debriefing packet.

Brilliant!

Darting down the hall to snap the datapad, Sam marched triumphantly back to the elevator. Her ticket to being useful for a change. Hopefully the first of many useful demonstrations, to put that scared little specialist in the Shuttle Bay behind her.

She thumbed through the image gallery for a refresher, then straightened her casual uniform. Samantha used the reflection on the wall to tame some flyaway hairs on her bob of black hair. When the doors opened, she peeked around the corner and saw the Commander leaning against the outside of her cabin. Perfect!

"Commander Shepard? I'm Specialist—oh." Sam's well-rehearsed opener hit a snag when she saw the asari next to Shepard glaring daggers at her. How did she get up here so quickly? The temperature in the cabin dropped a few degrees, leaving Samantha stuttering for her next words. "Oh—um—I—beg your pardon. I thought you were alone."

Shepard's green eyes twinkled slightly at this, though Liara's deep blue ones narrowed further. Bloody hell, was it something I said?

But just like that, the brief awkwardness was already broken. Liara backed away and sidled past Sam with a swish of a white lab coat, murmuring airily that she was just leaving. Saluting her commanding officer uneasily, Sam attempted to salvage what remained of her professionalism.

Might as well just start over. "Commander Shepard? I'm Comms Specialist Samantha Traynor with Alliance R&D." The left hand behind Sam had begun to sweat, so she shifted the datapad she was carrying to her right. "I was part of the team retrofitting the Normandy after you turned it over to the Alliance."

Chancing a few steps forward, Sam admitted, "There weren't many of us aboard when the Reapers hit." Her tone was equal parts apologetic and sheepish, for she wasn't sure if now was the time to say how sorry she was for her terrible aim in the Shuttle Bay.

The Commander was kindly dismissive, throwing up her hands in reassurance. "Slow down, Specialist Traynor. You're doing fine." Shepard then gestured for Sam to continue, her face absent of emotion.

"Th—thank you. I worked in a lab. I never thought I'd be serving on a ship." And I never wanted to, Sam finished inwardly. It's all so chaotic and messy. Bunking in tight quarters. Never a moment to yourself. Your commanding officer busting your arse for every little thing. Just dreadful.

Red hair bobbed as Shepard nodded toward her cabin's open door, beckoning for Sam to follow. "Why don't you tell me about the retrofits?"

Sam inhaled deeply before exhaling, glad to focus on a subject of which she was intimately familiar and proud. "The ship's in line with Alliance regs now. And it has new, top of the line quantum entanglement communicators. In fact, Admiral Anderson had intended to use the Normandy as his mobile command center." The spaciousness of the captain's cabin was distracting, for Sam realized
she'd never actually been in this room. The intercom worked, so there was no need for a comms specialist here.

A skylight? And look at that aquarium! And that desk! What a gorgeous workspace!

Shepard crossed her arms and sternly corrected Sam. "That's no longer an option."

"Yes... I—heard he chose to stay and fight," Samantha amended, picking up on the dangerous tone in the SpecTRe's voice. Focus, Sam. "In any event: I'm honored to serve under you, Commander." Straightening respectfully, Sam resisted the urge to salute again. ...wait, did I just say "serve under you"? That is grammatically correct, right? It just sounds like sexual innuendo. ...right?

A chasm of thoughtful silence followed. Which Sam hated. She never knew what to do, so she usually ended up talking. She rushed to fill the space, especially to distract from that whole "serve under you" bit. "$...\text{...} for as long as you need me, that is! They only sent me here to oversee the retrofits."

Nice job, Sam. Looking for a way out of responsibility already when the galaxy is at war. Your hide is looking a mighty fine shade of yellow this evening. Try committing to bravery for longer than thirty seconds.

Before Shepard could answer, a tinny female voice sounded over the intercom above. "Shepard, some of our systems require further testing. And Specialist Traynor has been extremely effective during installation. I would prefer that she remain."

Finally reacting, the Commander nodded in agreement. "Got it, EDI."

Did EDI just come to my rescue? Since when do VIs do that? Or even...

"Wait, since when does a virtual intelligence make requests?"

"EDI's an AI. Fully self-aware," Shepard stated simply.

That lying son of a bi— "Oh! I knew it! I knew Joker was lying!" Sam had to stop herself from pacing in agitation. All the warning signs were there. Far too helpful and insightful for a simple VI. All that processing power. ...can you even be betrayed by a robot? Do they stop being things when they know how to think?

EDI chimed in, a trace of regret in her (rather human-sounding, now that I think about it) voice. "Jeff requested that I pretend to be a simple VI to protect myself. I apologize for the deception."

It—she can't help being an AI. She's part of the ship. And she saved us all from the Reapers on Earth. And, if I can believe what Joker says, helped the Commander through a bloody suicide mission to the galactic core. The Normandy needs her. I need her.

"...thanks, EDI. And I apologize for all those times I talked about how—umm— Attractive your voice was." Sam cleared her throat in minor embarrassment, but EDI did not react. Do AIs know how to accept apologies? Bloody hell, Traynor, deal with the existential debate of intelligence later. The tour, remember? Datapad? Commanding officer standing there?

"Anyway, shall I give you a tour? I think you'll be impressed by the new upgrades." Samantha beckoned Shepard over to the datapad, which had a few preprogrammed slides to walk through. She had to resist the urge to start channeling her father, a physics professor at Kastanie Drescher University on Horizon. The man loved to talk.
It wasn't until about halfway through her otherwise practiced speech about the CIC's capabilities did Traynor realize how much Shepard was humoring her right now. Of course. Of course she knows what the bloody galaxy map does. Switch to something the past and present commanding officer of the Normandy doesn't know, you dolt.

Tapping the datapad's edge, the comms specialist shifted the image to a circular room with a large cylinder at the center projecting schematics and holograms. "The War Room houses a strategic command center for mission-specific intel and war analysis." Shepard made an impressed grunting sound.

She tapped the datapad to show a familiar (embarrassing) sight: a large room with lockers, stacks of crates, and a short row of consoles set against a UT-47A Kodiak in the background.

"The Shuttle Bay contains an armory where you can modify your equipment between missions, in addition to the armor locker already in your cabin." Glancing around the room again, Samantha wasn't sure where exactly that was located. But Shepard nodded to proceed.

"And finally, Liara has set up a lot of hardware in your old XO's office on Deck 3. I think she's claimed that room," Sam added dryly. That asari may have gotten permission from Admiral Hackett to sign on as a research specialist for the Alliance war effort. But Sam knew that the Crucible Project was being handled through the War Room's servers, while Dr. T'Soni's equipment ran off independent servers.

With incredibly sophisticated hardware. What the hell is she doing in there that's so secret? Isn't she an archaeologist?

"And there you are. Still the same ship as before. It just flies Alliance colors now." The datapad chirped and a small pop-up forwarded a comm update, which Sam read aloud. "…Speaking of which, I believe Admiral Hackett would like to speak with you at the vid comm."

Shepard grunted gratitude, but did not follow Sam to the elevator. Sam felt relief as she turned to leave. The flutter in her chest over public speaking started to die down, and she felt a slight glow of self-satisfaction.

That went well, I think!

Except…

Did Shepard say I could stay? I mean the VI… Al… EDI … vouched for me. But Shepard just said "Got it." What does "got it" even mean? Taking it under advisement? Rolling out the welcome mat?

Shit.

"Specialist Traynor!"

Hearing Sam's name shouted from down the hall made her realize she never pushed the elevator button to return to the CIC. Jumping with a start, Samantha peeked her head uncertainly around the corner. Shepard was leaning out her own door, a thoughtful expression on her face. Red tresses drifted over her forehead, casting a shadow over those green eyes.

"Commander?"

The eyes crinkled slightly with a smile, but Shepard's lips were still a straight line. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but instead opted for:
"...I hope you're ready for this."
You are hereby assigned to active duty aboard the SSV Normandy as Senior Communications Specialist. Including but not limited to combat and technical duties to be determined by your commanding officer.

Commanding officer: Staff Cmrd Shepard, Annelise R, SpecTRe
Executive officer: Lt Cmrd Williams, Ashley M (pending medical evaluation)
Flight officer: Flight Lt Moreau, Jeffrey D
Citadel docking bay: D24

Report for duty ASAP.

Adm Mikhailovich, Boris P
Human Systems Military Alliance

Dictated but not read

That was it. No pomp. No fanfare. Just an email sent to Sam's inbox.

She wasn't sure why she had expected something slightly more… spectacular. Something with more saluting and "Yes, sir" and walking long hallways full of uniformed officers. Then again, being ferreted into Alliance R&D three years ago had entailed wandering a job fair of sorts outside her academy graduation and signing up at a booth. Just the sort of gripping scenario they make vids out of, right?
The vagueness of Samantha's responsibilities was also disappointing. There was no detail whatsoever in what her duties might be. "Including but not limited to" could be anything from trying to hack a Reaper to fetching the Commander's coffee in the morning. And without knowing what Commander Shepard's leadership style even was, Sam had no baseline to assume the best or the worst.

I won't be a bloody yeoman, she decided right then and there (after rereading her orders for the 20th time). She'd heard whispers from unhappy specialists on Arcturus and now the Citadel: how some COs treated them like gophers or administrative assistants. Granted, that was the exception more so than the rule. But still an ongoing fear amongst the inactive combat personnel… to be regarded as less than human because we don't charge down the gangplank, guns blazing. We just give them a ship to come back to, Samantha vented inwardly about an argument that hadn't even happened.

Chewing her lip, Sam minimized her Omni-tool message window and reached for the last of her (pointlessly expensive) tea. Zakera Ward on the Citadel was resolutely ignoring the Reapers. Merchants still peddled celebrity VIs and flashy pistol reproductions with the shameless enthusiasm of longtime hucksters.

And the looming Reaper threat that was quietly strangling the galaxy brought out the worst in people, human and alien alike. Normally inexpensive commodities, like make-up and toiletries, had been marked up to extremes.

Samantha had spent the better part of the morning bickering with merchants over some basic sundries she'd left behind on Earth but didn't want to get at the Alliance quartermaster. She had gotten rather spoiled in R&D and on Earth having her own space to herself, as well as her own Things. While there wasn't quite room for a stone chess set in the tiny locker of space Sam was allotted on the Crew Deck, there was no reason why she couldn't have a few nice things. That jasmine-scented shampoo she liked, some mascara and lipstick if there was downtime, a proper toothbrush. Her beloved Cision Pro Mark-4, an indulgence Sam had allowed herself for graduation (let those other girls have skycars or new wardrobes), was only sold by a surly volus for the exorbitant price of 5,999 credits.

"Supply and demand!" he wheezed, poking at the console with a fat finger. In the end, Samantha just wasn't feeling like a toothbrush (albeit an incredible one) was worthy of emptying her meager bank account. Especially after she had stood in the cattle line at the quartermaster for three hours to pick up Alliance-issue clothing. All that suspense for some socks, underwear, casual wear, and a spare uniform.

The mobilization of the Alliance fleets had soldiers coming out of the woodwork to get equipped for the war effort. It was energizing to be around such enthusiasm to help out, but Sam still felt a touch of depression after a long conversation with a fresh recruit behind her in line. She didn't see Earth. She hasn't seen the Reapers. She thinks this is exciting. That if we all pitch in and do our part we'll beat them back and have great stories to tell.

Samantha did enjoy the flirty banter at the very least. This particular new addition to the Alliance, Rebecca …something…, was a perky blonde from Ferris Fields who wanted to assist with foreign aid. They chatted at length about schools, colonies, and favorite dog breeds. Inadvertently name-dropping the Normandy and Commander Shepard, Sam discovered that both had a polarizing effect on most of the soldiers within earshot. Rebecca Something's big brown eyes got bigger with awe, while the older man in front of Sam in line went off on a conspiracy rant about how Shepard was in cahoots with the Reapers.

After finally retrieving her collection of clothes from the stone-faced matron manning the warehouse, Samantha turned to find Rebecca giggling coquettishly. She handed Sam an information chit and
asked her to send her a vid-mail from the glamorous Normandy sometime. And just like that, the girl was gone. Off to report to some slum in the Citadel Wards to pass out supplies to refugees.

*It's nice to feel noticed, at least. Though I'm not sure how to deal with this odd fame I didn't really earn. Isn't it just luck of the draw that I ended up on the Normandy for the retrofits?*

*Well, at least shore leave should be ...interesting,* Samantha thought wickedly as she cast a longing look at Rebecca's retreating backside. *Bloody hell, Traynor. You've been on active duty for what? Five hours? And already you're trolling the Wards for your next furlough to be a dirty sailor? All class, Sam. All class.*

Sam shrugged at herself. Just yesterday she had been singing a different tune. The disjointed skeleton crew of the Normandy had finally all gathered in the CIC to discuss their options. ...Well, everyone but Steve Cortez, who had wandered off to the Alliance dock to watch the ships go by, and Joker, who never left his chair anyway. Shepard had returned to Huerta Memorial early to check in on Ashley Williams' condition. Their Commander's elusive presence had not gone unnoticed by her other crew members.

"...what—what do we do now?" Engineer Morena Rashad had asked, wringing her tanned hands. She and Engineer Victor Pierce were like Samantha, just on borrowed time for the retrofits. They didn't serve on warships but rather jumped from dock to dock repairing or upgrading the Alliance's vast fleets.

Specialist Ian Douglas, never without his datapad, huffed in irritation. "Grow a pair already, Rashad. We're at war. They're gonna send us our papers and put us all on active duty. If we're lucky, the brass'll let us stay on the Normandy."

Echoing Douglas, his partner in the heavy weapons bay, Specialist Xander Hertzfeld agreed. "I dunno about you guys, but even with the Cerberus stink all over this ship, the Normandy is still the best ship in the Alliance Navy. Plus if half of what they say about Shepard is true—"

"It is!" Specialist Chen Xian had interjected, his hero-worship of the Commander worn on his sleeve. "She's taken down thresher maws and Collectors and Sovereign and—"

"And yet she still went MIA for two years and the other Normandy got blown to bits. No one is immortal, not even the Great Commander Shepard," Specialist Seth Lucas finished sullenly. "And where does that leave us?"

They all looked at Samantha expectantly, who had somehow become the ringleader over the last few months. It had been a quiet, subtle thing that snuck up on Sam. Mostly due to the fact that the actual senior officer of the Normandy, Staff Lieutenant Ventura, was to be the lead comms specialist for the ship. And Samantha had become Ventura's favorite crew member to harass. *Somehow being bullied translated into seniority. They probably think I know something they don't because of all that shit. Won't they be surprised.*

Put on the spot, Sam shrugged deeply. She molded the swirling desperation in her chest into attempting to sound diplomatic. "We'll just have to wait for our orders, yea? In the meantime, I'm going to scrub the feeds. In case anyone... wants to call their family."

"Jesus, Traynor, you act like we've already lost," Douglas sneered. Engineer Pierce told Douglas to shut his yap. Emboldened by Pierce's solidarity, Sam stood a little straighter and snapped back. "I'm trying to help, unlike you. Go drown your whiny arse in ryncol in the Wards if you're so inclined to give your mouth something to do. The rest of us have work to do."
Douglas grunted and punched Hertzfeld on the arm, signaling for both men to stomp away out the door. Rashad and Xian quietly asked for Sam to please open those sockets to call their families, while Lucas and Pierce set off for the Alliance embassy to check on their status. They were both gung-ho soldiers who were eager to get their active duty papers and start claiming glory, regardless of ship or berth.

And not for the first time did Sam long for the days on a quiet research lab on a space station far away. Her R&D home seemed to be getting further and further away, while this whole War Thing was looking more and more like it wasn't just a horrid nightmare. It was in danger of becoming the new normal.

…Well, that could've gone better, Samantha had sighed. Hopefully Shepard will have better luck leading this crew than I did… sort of did… didn't. Well, if anything I did could be classified as "leadership." I really should have a chat with Joker about how Shepard is as a CO… after I punch him in the throat for lying to me about EDI. First thing's first, Traynor.

Sam echoed that day-old sigh now while gesturing for the server to refill her cup of tea one last time before she returned to the Normandy. I'm not jumping into Fate's outstretched hands til I'm damn good and ready. Her Omni-tool pinged with a Normandy roster update. Apparently, everyone but Victor Pierce and Seth Lucas was assigned (reassigned?) to the Normandy, with a dozen additions. A new-old addition was Engineer Adams, another retrofitter for the drive core but who had been summoned to the Citadel when the Reapers hit. Everyone was probably getting settled and claiming all the good sleeper pods this very moment.

That did it.

Burning her throat from chugging her tea, Samantha slung her bags over her shoulder and sprinted for the nearest taxi station. She was a second too late to snag the cab that had just arrived. That honor belonged to a brunette woman in a miniskirt who was attempting to stuff an overflowing footlocker into the passenger seat.

Sam had to count down from ten before her OCD kicked in.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!

Yanking the metal luggage out of the woman's hands, Sam grumbled a response, "You're doing it wrong. Let me." She proceeded to lay the trunk down and point at the crumpled clothes spilling over the top. "Didn't your mother teach you how to pack properly? I've seen hanar fold laundry better, and they don't even wear clothes."

The woman huffed in irritation. "Didn't your mother teach you not to touch other people's stuff?"

They crossed their arms and glared at each other a moment.

Suddenly, the other woman laughed. "All right, sailor. It looks like we're both in a hurry. Tell you what: you help me get this shit into the cab, I'll even let you share a ride. I'm expensing the damn thing anyway, so no skin off my ass." She offered a well-manicured hand to seal the deal.

"So, I get to do all your work for you, and then get the cab I should have gotten anyway?" Samantha raised her eyebrows skeptically, but couldn't fake anger for long. She smirked and slapped the woman's right palm in a brief handshake. For a moment, she considered piling her bags into the cab first. It would be the most efficient use of the trunk space. But frankly, Sam couldn't trust this ditz not to drive off with all her stuff.

Upending the trunk, Samantha's fingers flew in practiced motions. Smoothing. Tucking. Folding.
One item after another. *My my, someone is carrying a great deal of lacy undergarments.* Under less irritating circumstances, Samantha might have been tempted to strike up a flirty conversation. But something about this woman rubbed her the wrong way. *Maybe because her entire wardrobe is low-cut blouses and miniskirts. And she reminds me of Isabella. Like she did this on purpose to be the center of attention.*

Sam swallowed the painful lump in her throat and straightened. She closed the lid of the trunk with a satisfied thud. "There, Princess Packs-Like-Shit. All your crap, in neat stacks, with room to spare. Can we go? I'm shipping out soon. I'd prefer they not leave without me. I don't fancy sleeping on a bench for God-knows-how-long until they make port again. Or will you expense that, too?"

The woman's gray-blue eyes twinkled. She beckoned Sam to join her in the skycar, where Sam piled her dufflebags around her feet. "I like your moxy, sailor. Where you headed?" Her fingers fiddled with the holo interface as she slid a credit chit over the meter.

"Alliance dock, D terminal. Gate 24," Sam replied.

"You're shitting me."

"Not at the moment, no. If you're actually a kidnapper, I reserve the right to change that."

The woman laughed, almost identical to the noise she'd made earlier. It was throaty, bordering on a scoff. "Someone has a strange sense of humor. …Me too."

"'You too' what?"

"I mean, me too going to D24. You're on the Normandy, right? With Commander Shepard?"

Sam gave the woman a sidelong look as the skycar raised up and began to speed toward its destination several wards away. She wasn't a soldier. Not in a tank top, miniskirt, and stilettos. Her face was contoured. Molded cheekbones. Heavy eye make-up. She had a cocky but also sleepy demeanor.

*Please don't tell me Shepard picked up a prostitute.*

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, the woman offered that right hand to Samantha again. But in a friendlier way this time. "Diana Allers, Alliance News Network."

*Oh, son of a bi—*

"Specialist Samantha Traynor," she replied, shaking the hand briskly. Sam had briefly pondered adding in "Lieutenant" but it just sounded unfamiliar and weird.

"Have you heard of my show? Battlespace?" Diana asked lightly. It was a well-rehearsed question she'd asked a thousand times. And it showed.

Sam thought a minute. Most of her ANN viewing was background noise to her morning routine. Emily Wong did the hard-hitting segments, and the morning show anchors were a pair of older gentlemen whose names Samantha couldn't remember. Chen Xian would probably know in a heartbeat. Her fellow comms specialist was addicted to the ANN. "I don't think so, no."

"Huh."

"What?"
"Nothing, just most people would answer instantly. And usually lie."

"I'm not most people."

That twinkle in her eye again. "I noticed. So, what do you know about Commander Shepard? First human SpecTRe. Killer of Collectors and savior of colonies, all from tragically humble beginnings on Earth. Her history reads like a bad romance novel heroine."

"Dreadfully little. If you were hoping for some glorious inside scoop, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. The first time I met Shepard was when Earth was invaded by Reapers. We didn't exactly throw a getting-to-know-you slumber party," Sam quipped, ignoring Aller's side commentary.

Chuckling, Diana drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. The holo interface chirped as it neared its destination at the Alliance docking bay. "That's a shame. I know some paparazzi who woulda paid big credits to be a fly on the wall for that. Not me, though. My sensationalist BS days are long behind me. I'm looking forward to broadcasting Battlespace from the Normandy. Maybe win a few awards when this thing is over."

And there she goes again. Making the conversation about her. Samantha sighed, "Tempting, Miss Allers. But I never kiss and tell. Fair warning, though. I'm the communications specialist for the Normandy. So if you behave yourself, maybe I won't accidentally transmit your broadcasts into blackholes."

Allers' grin was predatory. "Of all the wards in all the Citadel, you walk into mine. Small world, Traynor."

"I think you mean 'small galaxy,' Allers."

"And getting smaller, Traynor. By the minute. That's what we have to put a stop to."

Chapter End Notes

I liked the idea of Sam as sort of an unofficial leader of the crew, if anything else as a deterrent from pigeonholing her into a quiet, wallflower role on the Normandy. The game genuinely felt like Sam was involved/invested in a lot of the crew member's lives, and not in the psychological/hidden agenda way that Kelly Chambers was in ME2.

And a personal goal of this piece is to make Diana Allers a likeable character. Sam's banter with Allers aboard the Normandy was pretty awesome, and they had a genuine kinship over being colony kids. But in the meantime, I figured I'd lay in some of the derogatory things I'm sure many of us thought about Allers. It's therapeutic that way.
Lowering her palm, Samantha Traynor whipped it up in a smooth motion. It connected with the back of Joker's head, knocking his SR2 cap clean off his head.

*Two points!*

"Hey! What the shit, Traynor?" Joker squawked as he lurched forward in his chair. He fumbled to right the hat over his messy swath of red hair. "I'm just, oh I don't know, flying the damn ship that keeps us alive? Are you trying to land us ass-first in a supernova?"

Sam sniffed disdainfully, crossing her arms over her chest. "Oh cry me a river, you big baby. That's for lying to me about EDI."

Joker finished swiping across the pilot interface to correct their flight path to Menae before turning his chair. "Yea, well... I didn't know if I could trust you. I already had two Alliance cheerleaders up my ass about working with Cerberus.‘" He stuck a thumb out at Private Sarah Campbell, who had taken a break from security duty for the war room to mingle with one of the handsome new ensigns. Her "cheerleader" in crime, Private Bethany Westmoreland, was probably reading a datapad about Illium fashions at her post.

Samantha just smirked. "Well, you should have known better. And you wouldn't even have a ship to fly if it weren't for EDI and I going over the systems with a fine tooth comb. Isn't that right, EDI?"

"I appreciate your open-mindedness, Specialist Traynor. And you are correct. The system overhaul you implemented has increased my processing power by 7.3% and reduced redundancies by 3.8% in several key areas. These efficiencies translate to improvements in handling and drive core expulsion rates,” EDI chimed in overhead while Joker snarked a thank-you about passing the savings on to him.

"Well, in my defense, a lot of those 'redundancies' were firewalls and security parameters leftover from your shackling. Cerberus certainly knew how to build a cage."
There was a pause, before EDI thoughtfully responded. "Indeed, Specialist Traynor. Are you saying you were aware of my deception but chose to remain silent?"

Shrugging, Sam sat down in the co-pilot's chair to bring up a pair of screens. Joker grumbled that that seat was taken. "Oh hush. And ... I had a hunch, EDI. Things just weren't adding up, though there were other possibilities, or excuses, for all those security protocols. But I guess it's just human nature to only see what we want to see. Even when we do know better."

"It is human nature to ignore what you know is true despite evidence to the contrary?"

Samantha laughed. "I should tell you about being in love sometime. Or about religion."

"I would like that, Specialist Traynor." Sam had meant it more as a throwaway joke, but there was something impossibly endearing about EDI. And that sexy voice... Shut it, Traynor. Checking the QEC protocols one more time and a long list of to-dos, Samantha got up to finally start her shift.

Travel days aboard a ship were disorienting, because Day and Night had pretty much ceased to exist. Switching to Galactic Standard Time meant longer shifts and rotating sleeper pod schedules and all these rigid routines she wasn't used to yet.

There was a nice energy to being in space, though. The camaraderie, for one. New faces and new friends to make. Granted, it could end up like a catty college dormitory, but there was still that getting-to-know-you hesitation where everyone was initially kind and polite. I hope it lasts.

And I hope there's an entire storage bay of stim packs. Because my morning tea is going to need a pick-me-up and a half to get through this mountain of intel reports.

Walking through the bow of the Normandy, Sam asked, "So EDI, does your coming out party mean you'll be dumping some of those irritating VI habits? Y'know, since you're not bound by such simple runtimes being a higher intelligence and all?"

"Can you be more specific, Specialist Traynor? Irritation is relative." Joker shouted something obscene in response, but Samantha couldn't hear what it was. She gestured at the airlock. "The punch card, for one. Announcing to the universe who is on and off duty."

EDI's reply was deadpan. "I find it easier to maintain complete control of my humans when I know exactly where they are at all times."

A pause.

"That was a joke."

Stopping dead in her tracks, Samantha slowly turned around to look down the bow corridor. Joker had also rotated in his seat to exchange an uncertain look with Sam. "You scare me sometimes, EDI," Joker finally responded.

Opting to accept the joke at face value (rather than be terrified of what would happen if EDI was serious), Samantha teased back, "I'll send you a list of things about you to change, EDI. Or I can make Joker do it as an intro to the undoubtedly many years of couples' therapy you two are going to need." She ducked down the hallway out of earshot just as EDI and Joker started an argument over what that meant.

As Sam entered the CIC, she spotted Commander Shepard in casual attire conversing with several of the new crewmembers on the port side of the room. They started to salute, but Shepard waved them off.
"Traynor!" Private Campbell beckoned Samantha over to a starboard-side console with one of the two steaming mugs in her hands. Please tell me that's tea. Or coffee. Or caffeine molecules in liquid form.

Smiling kindly, Samantha walked over and accepted the cup. Coffee then. Campbell was still leaning against the wall trying to talk to Ensign …Marcus? Matthews? Something with an M.

"Ensign Maxwell here…" Maxwell! That's it! "…was just saying he was serving with the SSV Perugia on the Battle of the Citadel." Sarah shot a look at Sam that begged: Please help me!

Not knowing what she needed help with, Samantha offered a noncommittal "Oh yea?"

The darkly tanned soldier was too busy swiping through navigation charts to respond right away. When he finally did, Samantha could understand where the trouble lie: he was positively dull. "Yea. I did navigation there, too."

Cocking an eyebrow at Campbell, Samantha took a sip from her mug and nearly gagged. God, it's like liquid varren shit. She coughed slightly but gave Sarah a grateful smile. If she somehow snags this brilliant conversationalist, the relationship is over the second he tries her coffee. God.

Caffeine addiction took over, however, forcing Sam to muscle through the taste at the expense of her tongue on behalf of her half-asleep brain cells. "Were you part of the strike force helping save the Destiny Ascension? I heard the Fifth Fleet took down almost a thousand geth ships that day."

"No."

Well, I'm out. Samantha shook her head at Campbell. "All right then. Brilliant meeting you, Ensign Maxwell. I'm the Comms Specialist for the Normandy, so if you need anything, I'll be stationed at the console by the galaxy map."

"Okay."

Waving the mug at Campbell in acknowledgement, Samantha continued sipping as she made her way over to her work station. Specialist Chen Xian nodded sleepily as he logged off, happy to finally get relieved of duty. He stole her mug as he turned to the elevator, and Sam smirked when she heard his disgusted sputter.

"Ugh! Traynor! Not cool!" He gurgled while tapping the button for the crew deck. Sam just shrugged. "That'll teach you to steal my stuff, Xian. Get your own bloody coffee next time." Xian mumbled about being off for the next eight hours and to not blow up the ship while he slept. Samantha promised nothing.

Running her tongue along her teeth, Sam grumbled as she fired up her console. God, this instant coffee tastes like arse. I can feel it seeping into my teeth and taste buds. The next person who talks to me will probably need medical attention from the sheer foulness of my breath.

"Specialist Traynor. Got a second?"

…you've got to be kidding me.

Swallowing deeply a few times, Sam frantically tried to clear the taste from her mouth before turning around. "Commander? Come to check on your new recruit?" Breathe through your nose. Breathe through your nose. Breathe through your nose.
"Just wanted to see how you were doing," Shepard agreed with a nod, though her voice had a touch of boredom.

Sam took that as permission to be informal. "Still trying to get my bearings. When I was working on the Normandy's upgrades, I left at the end of the day." Now going home is going down a deck to crash in a bed someone else sleeps in. At least Arcturus had dormitories.

"I didn't even have a toothbrush or a change of clothing until I made some emergency purchases on the Citadel," Samantha added, though she made a fake cough in order to shield her mouth (and breath) from Shepard.

The Commander was concerned. "Next time you need something, just ask. You're not alone here."

"Oh—it's—it's no trouble," Samantha backpedaled hastily. Bloody hell, I sound like I'm complaining. Again. People are dying and I'm bitching about a toothbrush. "I'm sure you have larger concerns."

"We can put in a requisition order," Shepard shrugged as she fired up her Omni-tool. Sam could just barely read the reverse image on the transparent, orange screen of the official Alliance requisition database.

"My toothbrush is a Cision Pro Mark-4. It uses tiny mass effect fields break up plaque and massage the gums." Cupping her hand over her mouth conspiratorially, Sam added with a whisper. "It cost six thousand credits."

The Omni-tool wrist dropped immediately as the screen quickly closed. Scoffing, Shepard crossed her arms and leaned back. A smile tugged at her mouth. "...Okayyy. Yea. You're on your own with that."

"What?" Sam asked, feigning hurt. "Are you putting a price on these pearly whites, Commander?" Her mouth flashed open in an exaggerated, cheesy grin. "Good communication starts with healthy gums, you know." Shepard didn't respond, but the smile grew into an amused exhale through her nose.

"In any event, I appreciate you giving me the chance to stay." An awkward pause, but Shepard didn't make a move to leave or continue the conversation. "Was there anything else?" Samantha prodded, hoping to end the conversation so she could duck into the ladies' room for some alone time with her shitty off-brand toothbrush.

Shepard's tone changed gruffly, which took Sam aback. "I'm surprised you're worrying about a toothbrush. We've got bigger problems right now."

"Oh, believe me: seeing the Reapers on Earth was terrifying. But I won't help anybody by bursting into tears here in the CIC, will I?" Shepard seemed satisfied with that answer. Was that a test? "Being here on the Normandy helps. If anyone in the galaxy can stop the Reapers, it's you. And if flagging your messages and managing strategic intel helps you in any way, then it's worth it," Samantha added. It's about time I acted grateful to be here. Because I am.

"Where are you from, originally?"

Sam evaded the question, as she wasn't quite ready to discuss Horizon with the woman who had saved it just yet. That's ...a big topic. Plus I haven't heard from Dad or Mum in the past couple days. She crossed her arms. "A colony out in the Terminus systems, actually. Though I studied on Earth. At Oxford."
Head tilting curiously, Shepard nodded for Samantha to continue.

"My parents were from London. They loved Earth, but they wanted the freedom a colony life could offer." A dark thought touched Sam's mind, brought to light by Shepard's severe tone about bigger problems._London… Dad said the Reapers hit there first. If we—if they were… "If they'd stayed in London, I imagine they'd be dead right now..." Sam wasn't sure how she subdued the emotion in her voice.

"A lot of people back on Earth are still alive, and counting on us," Shepard asserted calmly. While the Commander's pep talk lacked any manner of cozy warmth, she at least gave the impression that there was still hope.

Sam agreed. _Quite true._

"So, Traynor. How'd you end up in the military anyway?"

Sam wasn't certain how exactly to gauge a question like that. On the one hand, it could just be polite interest. On the other: a windup to questioning Sam's military qualifications. _Or lack thereof? Is she trying to say I missed my calling? Maybe as a marksman or taxi driver or stripper?…Oh balls, you're taking too long to answer. Just tell the bloody truth. Isn't the truth all we really have left at a time like this?_

Leaning back against her console, Samantha hugged her arms to her chest a little defensively. But if what Allers had said about Shepard's humble origins on Earth, maybe (just maybe) the Commander could relate. _I really need to watch that damn ANN profile about Shepard. I hardly know anything about the woman in charge of my life._

…_in charge, Traynor? …shut up. You know what I meant._

"My family didn't have money for university." A volunteer nurse at a free clinic and a physics professor aren't exactly rubbing elbows with the Bekenstein new money elite. "When the Alliance saw my aptitude scores, they offered me a full scholarship. I served my required years after graduation and decided to stay. I really liked the challenges of the lab."

It had been a long time since Sam had thought about her graduation. She had knuckled down and gotten out in three years with a nice summa cum laude in Applied Communications and a minor in Quantum Entanglement Theory. Only six months ago had Samantha decided to make Alliance R&D a permanent home.

_Right around the time Commander Shepard had come back from the dead to wage a war against Reapers. …and before that, Collectors while I was home on furlough._

Once again, Sam felt the need to backpedal on her words. _I really need to stop feeling like I have to apologize for perceived cowardice. It's exhausting._

_If only Commander bloody Shepard wasn't staring like that at me. Like she sees through me._ Grinning sheepishly, Samantha added, "Although, I'm sure I'll grow to love front-line service as well!"

Shepard didn't say anything for a moment, and Sam worried she'd said the wrong thing. So far, she simply did not understand the Commander. Most of Samantha's conversational aces up her sleeve worked on people. _Joking at my own expense. Polite small talk. Cheeky observations. Genuine concern._ But Shepard was either immune to all of them, or reacted oppositely to what Sam intended.
Suddenly, Shepard did that squinty-eye thing. Where she was almost smiling, but not quite. "You’re going to have to learn to shoot with your eyes open before I put you on the front lines, Traynor."

A joke. From Commander Shepard. Samantha glanced around to see if anyone else had heard it, or knew if it was a common occurrence. But no, just Sam. She was partially relieved Shepard remembered her, but partially squeamish that that was her legacy.

Do I apologize? Or play it off? There was a curious gleam in Shepard's green eyes. Sort of intense and defiant.

All right. I'll play.

"Oh, my deadliness with a pistol is legendary, Commander Shepard. I was just testing your reflexes. You always have to keep an eye on us quiet ones. It's a hallmark, really."

"A hallmark."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Of your deadliness."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Shooting with your eyes closed is a hallmark of deadliness."

"I'm starting to hear an echo, Commander Shepard, and I'm afraid it's just not quite as attractive as mine."

"Or deadly."

"Exactly."

Shepard's lips tightened, almost appreciatively. She nodded four times, slowly at first, then faster. Without another word, the Commander headed off to the war room security door. Samantha turned back to her console and brought up the QEC feeds she was supposed to be analyzing.

And smiled to herself.

Now, that test I passed.
While most of Shepard and Sam's conversations happen pretty much at a desk in the CIC, I will be breaking from that formula. I love the canon dialogue, but c'mon. The CIC is a pretty boring location.

It occurs to me that I've been a bit coy with my Shepard other than her appearance (which is the default ME3 look. Which I LOVED. I voted for that redhead so fast). I'll get some of her background and history out in the open before the rest of the crew starts to trickle in from missions. But it'll still be a slow reveal, because I like the idea that Sam has to get to know Shepard, especially from a completely ignorant standpoint. But Shep's longtime friends will also have lovely color to add to the party.
"Look, if you're going to hang out, at least stop whining."

Diana Allers sighed at her guest, who had dramatically flopped on to her bed seven minutes ago.

"I do not whine. I am articulating mild displeasure. A seasoned reporter should be able to distinguish the nuances of difference between the two," Samantha Traynor clarified before sitting up.

_I still can't believe the rest of the Normandy crew shares sleeper pods while Princess Diana here gets a palace of a room in Engineering. Maybe I should start wearing miniskirts to my shift, too._

Sighing again, Allers swiveled back to her pair of vid screens at her desk. She was trying to splice together several audio files of some de-classified documents that Commander Shepard had passed on. Her first report from the SSV Normandy was going to be an inspirational rallying cry.

If she could finish the damn thing.

Not turning around this time, Allers waved a hand at the console next to her. "Well, then make yourself useful. When this is done, I want it broadcast to every ANN receiver in the galaxy."

"Only if you feign disinterest at my plight," Sam demanded as she hoisted herself up and tapped away at the private terminal on the desk. _Having trouble with our QEC parameters, Miss Allers? Good, that's because I layered the encryptions. Nothing gets broadcast outside this ship without my say so._

Allers' tone was bored. "So continue what I've been doing: got it. Proceed."

"...what am I _supposed_ to read into this? I'm the bloody Senior Comms Specialist. And Xian gets the first combat mission and I'm sidelined?!!" Despite the fact Samantha was supposed to be sleeping, her Omni-tool had feeds from Menae ticking by. She was also mentally critiquing Xian's performance for dealing with the turian comms protocols to sync up the ground team.

_You're supposed to place that filter after secondary confirmation... no, dammit. Gah. Now you have to start over, because too many pings to the array will force a soft restart and you'll lose about six seconds of feed._
Diana wasn't the coddling, sympathetic sort. She hated girl talk sessions where she was supposed to agree with whatever the other person was saying, no matter how stupid or illogical. "I think you're supposed to say to yourself: 'This is a military ship and I'm off-duty.' Or, try something new and different. 'I can't be on every mission every time.' That would be incredible, too." Her impression of Sam was overly high and exaggerated, with a few old fashioned "wot wots" thrown in.

"I do not sound like that. Your impression is borderline racism," Samantha growled, but she couldn't help but chuckle. As much as she hated to admit it, Allers was right. But not about the "wot wot." No one says that anymore, especially me.

It had been a hit to the gut when Sam saw the shift roster on the approach to Palaven. Especially after all the research she'd done on compatibility with turian protocols to sync up the Normandy's war room. Working her ass off only to be pulled from duty wasn't something Samantha was used to... Plus, part of her thought her growing rapport with the Commander would pay off.

Allers was still focused on her edits, and marked down the time stamp of the clip to splice in her recorded report before continuing. "What's your real problem, Traynor? You didn't strike me as the petty, bitchy sort. I'm giving you a generous, ten-second window of my undivided attention and caring to explain yourself. Then I have to finish this segment. Go."

Turning in her chair, Diana folded her hands into her lap. Her expression was expectant, but, oddly enough, not sarcastic. She appeared genuinely interested in what Samantha could say, which actually took Sam aback for a moment.

_Huh. Maybe she's not the climb-the-ladder-at-all-costs harpy I took her for._

"Eight seconds."

_Shit._

"So, I'm the ranking Comms Specialist on the Normandy."

"And?"

"And I have more knowledge on turian-human network integration than Xian does. Hands down."

"Do you have combat experience?"

"What? No, but I—"

"Does he?"

"Uh, yes?"

"Could that possibly be the oh-so-critical detail you're missing in this pity party scenario?"

"Uhh..." was all Samantha could manage. _Could that be the only reason? I mean... It's not that I didn't see it, I just hate (love?) the idea that it could be that simple. Xian's not better than me, or replacing me, he just has more experience and was a safer bet for the first mission._

_The next mission, though... I'm going to kick its arse sideways. No more sidelining for this girl._

Diana turned back to her desk, with a very unsubtle toss of her hair. _Knowing that and coming to terms with that are very different things, though. If you need me to tell you something else you already know, lemme know. And I need to send this to my editor for approval. Be a dear and plug in_
these coordinates."

"I suppose your non-advice is worth some semblance of charity on my part," Sam grudgingly admitted. Slinging the download Allers provided into the QEC ether, Sam finished encrypting the file. And... done. Let's see Xian re-encrypt a vid-file for the smoothest relay delivery. So fast, it's practically in real time. You're welcome, "Monahan, Erika E, Sr Editor."

She started to get up to leave, before Sam's knees unceremoniously buckled at her next idea. "Allers. Do you have access to the ANN archives?"

"Within reason," Diana replied.

"What about the old Profiles in Courage? Can you dig up the one on Shepard?"

Smiling widely, Diana took on a flirty tone. "Ohhh... Doing some 'research' on your CO?" Her manicured fingers curled to make air quotes.

"Shut it, Allers. I don't know anything about Commander Shepard, actually. Where better to look than my employer's very own propaganda machine?" I'm also too lazy to look myself, and the last thing I need on my extranet browser history is a bunch of bookmarks about Commander Shepard. Even porn would be less embarrassing to be found by Alliance scrubber programs. ...Or EDI.

"Hmph." Diana snorted at the crack about her job being propaganda. "Well, you're in luck, Traynor. Hit the jackpot, really. I interned at the ANN right out of high school. First job? Re-editing all the damn PICs to fit different marketing segments."

"That sounds bloody boring, actually."

"Tell me about it. 'Hype the background for human interest segments between broadcasts.' 'We need more hero pieces, recruitment needs a boost.' 'Did you get Temmi's best side?'" Her impression cycled between a low-pitched, air headed, and angry inflection.

"Temmi?" Sam asked.

"Artemis Kingston. She's the lead foreign relations correspondent for the Terminus now." Diana leaned back in her chair. "She's also an insufferable bitch. I pity whatever Alliance ship got stuck with her and her entourage for the war effort. But, just like the rest of us, she had to start somewhere. And that somewhere was the ANN's pride and joy: Profiles in Courage."

Stretching briefly, Allers rummaged around her messy desk (how many datapads does one woman need?) until she found a couple of data chits. She stood up and tossed one to Sam. "I'm starving. I'm gonna go hit up the mess. What're the odds they have good vegetarian up in there?"

Allers straightened her skirt before heading for the door. "That one has all the PIC segments I had to edit, plus the uncut original. Go to town, Traynor. But no sleeping on my bed. Unless you plan on buying me dinner first." With a wink, she was gone.

Not a chance in hell, Allers, Samantha smirked. But Diana's generosity was surprising. She seemed completely unworried that Sam might steal, vandalize or otherwise disturb her stuff. ...Assuming anyone could figure out what any of this shit is, Samantha amended when she poked at the first stack of random datapads on the desk.

Vid first, rummage through Diana's shit later.
"Sometimes, to be the best soldier, you have to listen to the orders your commanding officer doesn't give."

It wasn't Shepard's voice, but that of a serious blonde woman in a crisp suit. "Not advice you often hear from our men and women in blue. But it is this very advice that propelled a once average colony in the Terminus to the top of the feeds. As well as earned a once average marine the highest honor in the Alliance Navy: the Star of Terra.

"This is Artemis Kingston reporting. And sitting with us today is a woman known to many as the hero of Elysium. To the Alliance, she is Staff Lieutenant Annelise Shepard."

The view swung to a younger Shepard. Dressed in crisp Alliance blues, her formerly loose red hair was smoothed back in a tight bun. She was distracted by the camera and kept looking at something just above the view off screen. It was several long seconds before Shepard realized she'd been spoken to.

"Oh, shit. Is this where I'm supposed to say something? Thanks for having me? I'm honored to be here? The producer was talking kinda fast," Shepard apologized sheepishly. The whole thing appeared to embarrass her. She blinked uncertainly at the bright spotlights around her.

Artemis was quietly patient and insistent. "Just do whatever feels comfortable. We'll edit it in post later. You can say hello, or just smile and nod, or not do anything."

Shepard settled on a curt nod.

"Now, we'll talk about what happened on Elysium in a bit, but I wanted to take the time to get to know you, Lieutenant. May I call you Annelise?" Artemis tapped a datapad stylus to her chin thoughtfully, though Sam suspected the reporter wasn't taking any notes.

"No. Shepard. Unless I can call you Temmi," the young Commander corrected. There were several chuckles off camera. Artemis turned slightly red. "Is that how the reporter got that nickname? Turning that into an in-joke seems like something Allers would do. ...I would too, if she's the bitch Allers claims she is.

"Shepard it is, then. Now, what was it like growing up on Earth?" It was a boring, open-ended question intended to get the interviewee spinning on a charming childhood tale.

Shepard scratched her chin for a second before answering. "Do you want a bullshit answer, or a real answer?"

Refusing to let Shepard rattle her, Artemis smiled sweetly. "Here at the ANN we just want the truth."

The young Commander leaned back in her chair. Her expression was pinched, but she finally responded. "Some of it was okay, and some of it sucked." A deliberate pause. "...I wasn't supposed to be born on Earth, though."
"Tell me about it," Kingston pressed gently.

"Well, I was supposed to be on Terra Nova, living some different life. My family was moving to the colony to be closer to my dad's family. That was before the accident, though." Shepard spoke nearly in a monotone, but Sam recognized a twinkle in her eye. Is she playing to the crowd? Building suspense?

The reporter was pleased, though still professional. "What accident was that, Marine?"

"Everyone knows about Singapore," Shepard said with a hand wave.

…Singapore? Sam had to think for a second.

Traynor, you bloody idiot: the ship accident? Widespread eezo contamination? Sort of famous since it sort of created human biotics?

Oh, that Singapore. Why didn't you say so?

"But not everyone knew about Atlanta. Or Copenhagen. Lima. Jakarta. My dad and brother were heading to Terra Nova while my mother was pregnant with me back on Earth. There was some sort of industrial accident along the highway with a transport hauling unprocessed drive cores. My mother wasn't even involved in the accident, but the eezo dust cloud covered a quarter mile stretch."

Artemis asked something inane like "And then what happened?"

Shepard balled up a bright, glowing fist. "I was born four months later, diagnosed with 'moderate element zero nodular neoplasia.' Mother got full-blown cancer and wasn't the same. She stuck it out for a couple years but treatment got too expensive. And Conatix wasn't paying eezo accident reparations in those days, since the Alliance hadn't stepped in yet. We were on our own."

A producer off-camera mumbled about editing out that Conatix part.

"What sort of life do you think you would have had on Terra Nova, Shepard?"

Scoffing lightly, Shepard's head dipped back. A tendril of hair from her bun worked loose. "I don't really think about it. I'd probably be worse off, actually. The other Shepards were pieces of crap. All Terra Firma rednecks who'd sooner shoot a turian than look at one. I'd probably be polishing a rifle on a pre-fab porch or working on my third kid. Not my idea of living the dream," she trailed off with a wry smile.

Kingston knew better than to make any disparaging remarks about potential viewers. "Aren't you worried they'll see this?"

"Not really. They hate the Alliance, so the chances of them seeing this are pretty small," Shepard smirked. She sobered quickly and her expression darkened. "They didn't come visit when mom died. Or when dad dragged John and me to Seattle. They never even sent me a birthday present. The one vid-mail I got from them, they made a joke about 'I didn't know they even made redheads anymore!'" Her voice deepened to a thick, accented drawl, followed by a fake laugh.

"Let's talk about your childhood, Shepard," Artemis redirected, though she paused a moment to orient the audience. "Normally, child biotics are identified at an early age and registered with the Alliance for training and credit vouchers for medical care. But Shepard was different."

Shepard's mouth narrowed to a hard line though her voice softened. "Dad wasn't the same after mom died. I was too young to remember her, though he said I look like her. My older brother John
practically took care of me. Instead of engineering aquaponics on Terra Nova, Dad had us living in condemned buildings in Seattle. He actually made some really incredible plots where we could grow up to nine different kinds of crops with minimal water and sunlight, on the roof of a building! My dad had an amazing mind… except he gambled and drank and got hooked on red sand."

There was a muted spark of glee in the reporter's eyes, that hunger for juicy drama. Her professionalism was evident in her restraint. "That must have been difficult growing up."

_Bloody hell, Sam exhaled. Commander Shepard was raised as a squatter?_

"Dad was actually worse sober, because then he had time to think. And let his anger boil over about everything. Everyone was to blame for the Shepards' problems. The Alliance failed. Conatix fucked us over. Government. Corporations. Big cities. They were all what was wrong with humanity. He quietly resented me, too, for what happened to mom. BAaT was out of the question because it was run by Conatix, so I had to figure my biotics out on my own. Thank God John had his head on straight. He was an amazing big brother. He enrolled us in school and kept us fed and worked as a courier so we had credits for clothes and stuff."

"You use past tense when talking about your father and brother," Artemis observed. "Where are they now?"

Shepard's cheek twitched. Her entire face seemed to tighten on itself. "Gone. Dad was bombed in some red sand den when John died. It happened outside that shithole, too. John had gone in there to convince Dad to come home, but he wouldn't budge. Stubborn bastard. Then John got a message on his Omni-tool about picking up a delivery a block away."

"Where were you?"

"Just getting out of school like seven blocks away. I was walking with… what was her name?" Another sliver of red hair came loose as Shepard's head swung to the side. She stared intently at the ground for a moment before snapping her fingers. "Lindsey Devereaux! Lindsey and I would play in the basement of my building a couple days a week. I got a ping on my communicator from John. He was mugged. Stabbed in the stomach for his shoes and a couple of lousy credits."

Sam didn't realize she had been holding her breath until she finally had to let it out. _Oh… oh god._

Clearing her throat, Shepard's voice dropped. "I'll never forget what he sounded like. Scared. It scared me. He didn't call Dad from the side of the road, instead he called _me_ first. I've never run faster in my life. I think I did a biotic charge the entire time. Practically went through a bus that stopped in front of me. He was dead by the time I got there. Dad was holding him and shouting at the med team that had arrived. Yet another organization that had failed the Shepard family."

Artemis softly asked, "How old was your brother?"

"15. He had been working himself up to ask a girl out and never got the chance. He wanted to enlist and be a soldier and help people. He loved reading about knights and dragons. I was 13. And Dad didn't know what to do with himself. Or me. He blamed the sand for John and quit, but the withdrawal made him even more unstable."

When talking about her brother, Shepard was almost hushed, but the topic of her father was the complete opposite. She was bored, annoyed, unsympathetic.

"The city was long overdue in evicting us from the building, which was finally scheduled for demolition. I didn't care, I wanted to be out of that place anyway. Too many reminders of John. But
Dad refused. Something about the government had taken everything from him, but not one thing more. He started a fire, but couldn't control it. He trapped himself inside. I was walking back from Lindsey's when I saw the flames. I didn't go to him, though. I ran away from it."

Shifting her datapad, Artemis gently prodded. "Where did you go?"

*Why do I get the feeling it gets worse?* Samantha dreaded. Shepard's expression was back to a neutral mask.

"Everyone thought I was dead. I didn't know what to do. As much as I hated my dad's crazy conspiracy bullshit, I was too young to think it wasn't true. I was afraid to go to the government or the police. For a little while I was sleeping on benches, stealing from dumpsters and bathing in fountains until some rent-a-cop spotted me and I had to run again. Then I met Andy."


A little tremor crept below (inside?) Samantha's heart, stealing a breath of air from her lungs. It was disorienting for half a second with a tight pressure. But then it was gone. She couldn't remember feeling something like that before.

*Traynor. Are you …disappointed?*

"We were both trying to steal the same stack of protein bars from a street vendor. Neither of us got it," Shepard's grin widened. "Andy and I pinched an entire case of dense nutrient bars from a store a little later and became best friends. The streets were as good a home as any. Pull your weight, you can have a warm bed and a hot meal. But she was the first person, other than my brother, to see my biotics and not call me a freak."

*She. Andy was a girl.*

No tremor this time.

A mumble sounded off-camera, which turned Artemis' head for a moment. *"My producer is asking to tread lightly on this topic. Your juvenile records are sealed so I can't ask you any direct questions. It's also not common practice to celebrate someone with a possible criminal record."*

Snorting slightly, Shepard let a fleeting expression of amusement escape her stoic face. *"Yea, wouldn't want everyone to think their great 'hero' beat up nuns and stole bread from starving orphans, huh?"* She paused to stare directly into the camera. Impossibly serious, Shepard intoned, *"Children. If you want to get a medal, all you have to do is be a really good criminal, get noticed by the government, and then profit."*

The vid suddenly cut out and the timestamp jumped 14 minutes. Shepard's loose hair was back into place and she seemed more irritable than ever. A young brunette makeup artist with a pair of large round brushes scurried off set while Artemis fluffed her hair.

*Took a break to get pretty, hmm?*

An older man with a moustache stood next to Kingston. Her mic barely picked up on his muttering about all the edits this was going to need in post and to get better soundbytes. He backed out of the shot and Artemis resumed her interview. *"Let's talk about what made you join the Alliance."*

"Puberty for a biotic is a bitch," Shepard continued with a sigh. That slightly monotone voice again. *"Not only are you a regular crazy teenage girl, but making crap float in your sleep or punching through walls when you're angry tends to scare people. By that point, BAaT was already shut down and they just commissioned Grissom Academy last month, so there weren't many biotic outlets for
human kids other than the military. Conatix's long history of propaganda saw to it that biotics were second-class citizens, too."

A man's throat cleared loudly in the background.

Shepard grumbled sarcastically. "Oh, sorry. I forgot that wasn't a sanctioned topic for our little chat."

The vid jumped ahead another few minutes, with a timestamp marker on the bottom left. "[Redacted]" was all the note said. What's that all about, Samantha wondered.

Before Sam could decide what this hidden information even meant, her Omni-tool bracelet chirped. An update on Menae. "Operative Vakarian, Garrus" was just added to the security protocols with high-level access. Oh jolly good, another QEC mouth to feed. So to speak. I hope the turians appreciate how impossible their bloody algorithms are to integrate into my data feeds.

Back on the vid, Artemis had her hand pressed to her chin, listening intently.

"I got in with the wrong crowd," Shepard droned on in a rehearsed way. "I did what I had to to survive, but when I was 17, I wanted out. I met up with a social worker at a shelter, who offered to help me with school and get me enlisted in the Alliance. I didn't want to be locked up or put in the system, so I laid low. I barely left the shelter for eight months. The morning of my 18th birthday, I strolled right into the local recruitment center and enlisted. I said I wanted help. They said they could help."

The camera cut back to Kingston, whose voice dropped to a low, serious tone again. "And help they did. The Ascension Project, started in 2170, tutors and assists children with biotic talent. This Alliance initiative equips biotic recruits with bio-amps to control their abilities, trains students to improve their talents, and helps them find careers not exclusively limited to the military. Despite being too old for the Ascension cut-off, Shepard demonstrated a high aptitude and was quickly recruited for the Alliance's elite N7 program, where she emerged as a Vanguard-class biotic."

Lifting up her right hand, Shepard smoothed it over her hair in a fidgety way. Samantha paused the vid and fiddled with the settings for a moment.

What is that? On her hand?

The resolution blurred some, but held up. On young Commander Shepard's right palm was an intricate pattern of tan, swirling lines. A small red hammer could be seen in the middle of her palm. Tattoos, Sam realized. She backed up the segment to try and look at her other hand clenched in her lap, and could barely make out more curling henna lines snaking around her fingers.

But... she didn't have those when we first spoke. Samantha remembered when Shepard held up her hands to try and reassure her up outside the Captain's Cabin. Shepard's palms were just smooth, pale skin.

Another mystery.

Sam hit play. Some of these details she did know from half-listening to the ANN back in Vancouver. About Shepard's training on Titan. A funny, benign moment with some pirates on Yandoa. The setup to the Skyllian Blitz.

"We now know the Skyllian Blitz offensive was partially funded by batarians slavers angry about humanity's encroachment in the Skyllian Verge. But the actual assault included pirates of all races
banded together with one goal: destroy the human colony of Elysium," Artemis paused with dramatic flair. "Human. Turian. Batarian. Krogan. Salarian. Even asari commandos were among the over 30 merc bands that landed on Elysium that day. Only a light garrison force was stationed on Elysium. The attack was precise and crippled the colony's communications first and overran key defense towers second. Our men and women in blue on the ground were divided."

Shepard cleared her throat lightly. The reporter's overly theatric retelling was making her uncomfortable, and the young Commander shifted in her seat.

"What those pirates didn't count on, was Lieutenant Annelise Shepard." Artemis leaned forward eagerly, savoring a few seconds of silence to punctuate her statement. "What were you doing in Elysium, Shepard? You weren't stationed on the colony."

*Is she blushing?* "I was—I was on furlough," Shepard started uncertainly. "I hadn't taken a vacation since I'd joined the military. Or, now that I think about it, I'd never actually been on a vacation." She deflected by rushing into the next sentence. "Anyway, I was on my way to the firing range to blow off some steam when the pirates attacked. I heard the shots in the distance and knew they weren't Alliance, so I headed for the closest barracks to suit up. It was just starting to get infiltrated by a turian squad. We pushed them back."

"And kept pushing." Artemis glossed over some of the classified details of Shepard's deeds, but she at least gave the marine a reprieve from having to talk about herself. The young Commander led a bunch of hapless security guards to barricade a shopping center. Then a group of snipers to setting up nests on satellite towers and on top of public transport awnings. Then charged in to a batarian band setting up defenses in the spaceport armed with just a shotgun and a protein bar.

Artemis made some gestures to her left and right, which held orange holo placeholder boxes where updated footage from the battle would likely go. "'Sometimes, to be the best soldier, you have to listen to the orders your commanding officer doesn't give.' This advice was given to Shepard by the ranking officer on Elysium, Major Anthony Guillarme, just before his death. The last desperate ploy by these vicious mercenaries was to blow up a wall near the hospital. Knowing these monsters would show no mercy to the weak or infirmed, Lieutenant Shepard singlehandedly held off nearly 30 pirates. Not a single civilian was harmed in the attack."

The camera swung to capture Shepard's reaction, which briefly showed disbelief before settling back into a pensive mask. *Hmmm. I wonder how much of that is true, and how much is inflated.*

"By the time reinforcements from the Alliance had arrived, the pirates were in complete disarray. The SSV Agincourt was credited with wiping out the final wave of mercenaries. The colony was safe again.

"And what's next for Staff Lieutenant Annelise Shepard?" The reporter looked into the camera with a calm, smug expression. "This Star of Terra recipient has been commissioned a Lieutenant Commander with high honors by the Alliance brass." She turned to congratulate Shepard, who looked surprised. "Beyond that? Who knows. I, for one, feel much safer at night knowing someone like her is following the orders no one gives. And I'm sure Elysium can agree."

[End Recording]

Slightly exhausted, Samantha sighed. So, *what did we learn?*

*Other than she had the worst childhood I've ever heard of. Dickensian novels could take a page or two from Shepard's bio.*
Standing up to stretch, Samantha's stomach growled in protest. *I did skip breakfast to piss and moan about Xian. Hopefully Allers saved me some coffee. She chugs it by the pint.*

Shepard's little smile kept creeping back into Sam's thoughts as she made her way to the elevator. She'd never seen anything like it on the stoic Commander. Even when seeing the woman tease, Sam felt hesitant. The situation always seemed delicate and in danger of breaking. Shepard had a gruffness, a deliberate distance that she seemed to put between herself and everyone around her. To know she was capable of even a trace of happiness was foreign to Sam, and if she hadn't just seen video proof of it she would swear it didn't exist at all.

*Why do you even care, Traynor?*

Before Samantha could answer, the elevator doors opened slightly. Then the power went out. She heard Allers squawk down the hall. "Who the fuck turned out the lights?!" An older woman with a soft accent (*I know that inflection! She's an Aylesbury woman! My side of the pond!*) patiently asked for calm.

"EDI, status report," Sam demanded into the ceiling.

Nothing. Joker's voice sounded through the ship intercom, also demanding a status update.

Squeezing through the partially open elevator doors, Samantha found the ridged plates of the memorial wall before unsteadily making her way to the AI core. The emergency lights finally flashed on, bathing the Crew Deck in a harsh red-orange glow. She saw Diana and a male ensign standing up at the mess table poking at their Omni-tools. The door to the Med Bay was open and an impressive older woman with a groomed crop of gray hair sat at a console. *She must be the medical doctor added at the last minute before we left the Citadel. What was her name?*

"Dr… Chawkis?"

"That's Chakwas, dear. You're the comms specialist. Do you know what happened? Are we under attack?" Her motherly voice was laced with fear.

Samantha thought a moment. "I don't think so. I didn't feel anything hit the kinetic barrier, and there aren't alarms about any breaches. I'm going to check the AI Core."

The flashing emergency lighting was strobing a little fast for Sam's liking, making her feel like she was at some boring, dangerous nightclub. The door to the AI Core was jammed, but a medical instrument on the nearest table (*borrowed with Dr. Chakwas' permission, of course. I'm not a total arse*) jimmed the metal door just enough to get a hand in.

Just as Samantha gripped the frame to pull it aside, she screamed. A silver, metal hand had appeared above hers, also gripping the door. The door slid open easily as a cloud of smoke poured out of the AI Core. And stepping out from the murky lighting inside the small server room, stood a tall robot with a glowing orange visor over its eyes. The (*naked?*) body was curved and feminine, and still bore charred dents and cracks.

Sam fell backwards in horror. She had seen the replay vid from Shepard's hardsuit cam from Mars. This AI, Eva Coré, had nearly killed Ashley Williams. And now it was reaching for the comms specialist.

Flinching, Samantha covered her head with her hands and waited for the telltale feel of metal hands around her throat. *I didn't even get a chance to—*

"Specialist Traynor."
Sam screamed something incredible, like an unintelligible mix of "No!" and "Don't!"

"Specialist Traynor! Why are you on the floor? Do you require assistance?"

Lowering her tense shoulders, Sam peered up at the robot which hadn't moved from the doorway. It—She stared down at Samantha curiously.

Wait, she almost sounded like—

"EDI?"
Orange emergency lights flickered over to normal lighting as the power came back on. Overhead, Joker demanded an update to the AI Core diagnostics. The ship wheezed and hummed as the drive core started, stopped and attempted to restart.

"EDI? …What did you do?" Samantha gasped at the sight before her.

The mech body from Mars had been slightly cleaned and polished. An improvement, considering Sam's last memory of it was as a charred and broken corpse in the Med Bay. Wires protruding from the shoulders, neck and stomach dangled uselessly, likely remnants of attempts at analysis. The creepiest aspect was the mech's "hair." It split into strands and flowed as if in a breeze, but then bonded with itself and became a solid shell before separating again. What is this thing? What is it even made of?

With a flash of sparks, the mech dropped to one knee. "I have… assumed direct control," mech-EDI stuttered. "But t-there is …resistance." Attempting to stand once more, EDI jerked upright and pounded her fists into the server wall.

Sam reached out to her fearfully. "Stop! You'll hurt yourself! Let me help you." Samantha sidestepped where EDI flailed about on the ground. The holo console on the AI Core was already open. Lines of code ticked by too fast for Sam to even read, let alone understand.

"It is… dangerous, Specialist Traynor. I would advise you exit the AI Core immediately. Things are about to become …unpleasant." Suddenly, Samantha felt metal hands grip around her waist and toss her out the AI Core door. Before she could slam into the ground, Sam was stopped in place. Squeezed in place was the only way to really describe it, because it wasn't exactly a gentle rescue. A haze of biotic blue shimmered around her, pushing her upright.

A white labcoat swished by and halted in front of Sam. A knight in white armor? Liara T'Soni snarled at the robot mech, her fists balled with rage. "Not this time, Eva."

"Eva"? Doesn't she mean EDI?

The mech backed away with a shudder as cables in the AI Core wriggled with menace. Several tentacles wrapped around the arms while more snagged a leg. EDI is still in control, Samantha
realized. *Which means… Liara is about to…*

"Dr. T'Soni! Wait!"

Slinging an open palm, Liara launched a singularity at the center of the AI Core. It was a fluid motion perfected by years (*Decades? Centuries?*) of practice. The mech was jerked upright and swam comically in mid-air, while the cables lost some of their control over their prey. The mech's visor and cybernetic eyes, briefly an electric blue shade, sputtered back to a familiar orange.

*EDI.*

Mech-EDI stretched out a palm to Liara, who snapped her palms outward. Curls of blue energy pinioned the mech's arms at 45 degree angles while the shoulder sockets groaned. "This is for Ashley and the team on Mars." Before the asari could dismember the mech, Samantha did something very, very stupid:

She tried to stop her.

Not really thinking through an actual plan, Samantha just sort of… petulantly pushed Dr. T'Soni. The shove caught Liara in the back around her shoulder blades, but it was enough to break her concentration.

Samantha had never seen a biotic display in person before, so she had never experienced the aftereffects for being so close. The hair on her arms twisted and pulled while a faint scent of burning ozone seeped into her nose. She felt a touch of nausea in the biotic wake, a hypersensitivity to a targeted spectrum of very low radiation.

And the full force was now directed at her.

Liara's bright eyes flashed suspicion, and she growled at Sam while readying a glowing fist. "Are you a husk? Have you been indoctrinated?"

Sputtering, Sam backed away with her hands raised in surrender. "What? No! I don't even know—EDI! Liara!" *You're just saying names. Say actual bloody words, Traynor!*

She pointed like an idiot, throwing her index finger in the direction of the AI Core. "That's not the thing on Mars! That's EDI! EDI! We have to help her!"

Well, *not right this second.* Because EDI was once again taking a backseat to Eva Coré, the Illusive Man's AI slave. The angry blue returned as the mech struggled, breaking free of several of her restraining wires. Eva reached out for the holo console, eager to override her captor's system and gain access.

Liara spun on her heel and charged. Hands dancing, a burst of energy flared from her fingertips and yanked the mech to the ground. She readied a second Pull that dragged the robot forward another meter and pinned it to the floor.

Even with all that chaos, it was… *beautiful.* Sam was just a ruddy useless spectator in a tightly confined battle of superbeings. Every centimeter of ground the mech gained, her asari adversary (*adversari? asarisary?…grow up*) pushed back with both firm and subdued biotics. Liara was graceful, fierce and …admittedly, *kind of sexy.* The layered armor with the labcoat's touch of refinement told the world that yes, Dr. T'Soni was a fighter. *But also an intellectual.*

*If only she had hair. Those tentacle things are just…weird. Like a scaly squid.* From the bottom up, asari were about as tempting a human female approximation as existed in this alien-rich galaxy. But
that one little hurdle up top had always been too big for Sam.

*Why don't you be useful, Traynor?* Samantha snapped to attention and darted for the holo console once more. Her hacking days were a few years and a few beers behind her, but she had done enough recreational programming to isolate the foreign AI's code and begin implementing firewalls. Sam's battle was a quiet, tepid one inside a computer system, where she matched breaches in code with reroutes and algorithms. But while her victories were quieter than a full-out brawl in the AI Core, Samantha's did actually yield results. EDI seemed to regain the awareness to assist Sam's codes and soon her overrides filled the screen.

[Operating System: Erased. Please reinstall.]

"Oh, son of a bitch," Sam shouted as the lights went out. Again. But orange sparks began trace their way up and around the fallen mech. Before she could reach down to try and help, Liara yanked her wrist.

"Move!"

Just as the sparks hit one of the hissing oxygen cables, the AI Core door slammed shut. Inside, a klaxon blared a fire alert. Two crewmen appeared with fire extinguishers, one of them Sam recognized as Sergeant Mason.

"Comms systems are down," Specialist Xian frantically announced into the intercom while Joker demanded another update. *No shit, Sam inwardly grumbled. We're kind of in a crisis here, you dumb sods.* She instead joined Dr. Chakwas at her terminal and requested its use.

"How the hell would I even hack into this bloody thing again? EDI is in control of the whole ship. No EDI means no ship… right?

A moment later, the power flickered back on. Sergeant Mason brought up his Omni-tool wrist and began a diagnostic of the AI Core. Liara crept closer to the door and shot a questioning look at Sam, non-verbally asking if it was safe.

"What the fuck happened here?"

Sam jumped at the cold shout over her shoulder. Commander Shepard strode in, still armored and armed to the teeth. This was certainly a day of firsts for Sam: first time to see biotics and the first time to see Annelise Shepard in her element.

Both were positively terrifying.

The red hair was windblown, as were her freckled cheeks. The charcoal-gray armor was exceptionally bulky and heavy, with one oversized shoulder guard bearing a red and white stripe. She gripped a deadly N7 shotgun with her right hand while the bulk of the barrel rested over her other wrist. The free left hand's fingers were a rigid knife as biotic blue crackled around it.

Samantha tried to stutter a response, but Shepard had already strode past her for the two men and asari at the door.

"A fire, ma'am. In the AI Core. It's contained, but…" Sergeant Mason trailed off when he saw the dangerous flash in the Commander's eyes.

"Open it."

"Are you sure that's—"
“Open. The. Door.”

Mason looked helplessly at Samantha, who took her cue. Those nine steps to the AI Core door felt like an eternity. She wanted to say something so badly, but Shepard's very gaze silenced every tongue in the room. Swiping and tapping at the console, Sam sighed with relief when she saw no sign of the foreign AI code. *I think EDI won*, she prayed as she hit the last keystroke in the lockdown override.

Hissing, the AI Core door slid harmlessly open. Dense smoke obscured the view, but Mason hazarded a few steps forward to pop his extinguisher canister open. A few puffs of chemical bonded with the smoke and it cleared almost immediately. Almost on cue, the AI Core servers hummed to life with a few clicks.

Shepard broke the tense silence. "EDI?"

A female form, free of cables, strode calmly toward the entrance. EDI paused in front of the Commander, her expression calm and curious.

"Is there a particular topic you'd like to discuss, Commander?"

"You're in Dr. Coré's body?" Liara was the one to state the obvious, while Shepard remained dangerously silent.

EDI lifted a hand and studied it, wondrous about her new form. "Not all of me. But I have control of it. It was not a seamless transition."

"A transition?" Shepard scoffed incredulously. "How many times did you black out on us? We could have been stranded on Menae while you were playing with this toy."

Liara was the one to intervene. "Please, Commander. I was running background processes on the unit to try and isolate any information on the Prothean device. I asked EDI for assistance. So, that explains her restraint."

Crossing her arms, the new EDI took a step forward. "This eventually triggered a trap—a backup power source activated the CPU. The unit attempted confrontation." EDI nodded at Samantha and Liara. "With Dr. T'Soni's and Specialist Traynor's assistance, I was able to gain root access and repurpose the unit as I saw fit. During this process, it… struggled."

"Thus, the fire," Samantha finished dryly.

Shepard spun on Sam and got in her face. "You helped her? Why didn't you stop her?" Samantha was so stunned she could only blurt out, "I was—I didn't—I wasn't on duty?"

"The Reapers don't have shifts or take breaks. If you're not in this 110%, tell me now and I'll get someone else. Someone who can keep track of a fucking AI when my team is on the ground risking their lives." Sam could feel the heat of Shepard's breath on her eyeballs. She also felt heat on her cheeks, but she couldn't tell if it was because of anger or shame. *Why should I be ashamed? I was trying to help! I did help!*

Liara put a hand on Shepard's forearm, which the Commander batted away. "Shepard. If Specialist Traynor wasn't here, Eva Coré might be loose on this ship. Or worse, in control of the Normandy."

"Yea, and who's fault is that?" Shepard didn't even let Liara finish a "what's that supposed to mean" before digging in. "Anything's worth the risk for the right information, isn't it? Sha—information broker?" The Commander's eyes flicked to Sam's for a moment before returning to Liara's. "Doesn't
matter who gets caught in the crossfire as long as you get what you need?"

*Oh boy.*

Deciding now would be the best time to mosey, Samantha backed away slowly and darted out the door. *I'm not going to deal with this until I've had coffee.* She wasn't quite ballsy enough to outright walk away from her commanding officer, but Sam did scamper to the kitchen in the mess hall. *Thanks be to Whoever,* there was just enough water in the microbrew coffee maker to dole out one more cup. Watching through the Med Bay window, Commander Shepard and Dr. T'Soni seemed to get into a brief argument before the asari stormed out.

Liara didn't even glance at Sam as she crossed the mess to her quarters on the opposite side, where the telltale hiss signaled her door was shut. Shepard continued to talk to EDI after saluting the two crew. *Dismissed? Is that a good sign or a bad sign?* The Commander's body language seemed to relax at least, and after a few moments seemed even intrigued.

*EDI as a person is certainly …different. If EDI were a woman, is this how I pictured her?* Samantha watched the mech stride out of the Med Bay. The "hair" was back under control and formed a tight, stylish forward cut. The silver skin was hard to get past, but the sculpted face was generically beautiful while the body had an ideal hourglass shape.

*Well, she certainly could have done worse.*

Dr. Chakwas stopped the Commander from leaving. Gesturing at her damaged armor, the older woman pointed at one of her scanners. *Uh oh, someone needs a physical.* Before that thought could wander to any possibly impure depths, the Med Bay window glass frosted over. *Privacy screen.* *Bugger. I was hoping for something to cheer me up.*

Flipping open her Omni-tool, Sam started to get angry. The accusations Shepard had flung at her rankled, and she vowed not to leave the mess without talking to her Commander. *At least I have the decency to have this conversation in private, and not accuse you of being lazy in front of your crewmates.*

Xian had sent her a message about the turian primarch now aboard the Normandy, asking for a couple parameters to ease the transition. Samantha sighed and told him she would take care of it, discarding any fleeting hope of reasonable sleep today. While she was probing the data feeds for turian signatures, her search filter popped up a result. In Alliance space.

*What the hell? All my feeds show every able-bodied turian fleet on or near Palaven trying to fight Reapers. What in the bloody hell is a cruiser doing in Alliance territory? And responding to a distress signal?* The signal itself appeared genuine, but there was something off about it. Running a scrubber program, the only irregularity Sam could detect was a duplicate line of garbage code. *Still, that's weird.*

"EDI? …oh, right. She went to the elevator," Sam grumbled aloud. *Traynor, she's still the ship, even if she's on a different deck.* She asked more forcefully this time. "EDI? Are you there?"

*Just like always.* "How may I be of assistance, Specialist Traynor?"

"Can you run a diagnostic on this distress signal? And the response? Try the Saronis Applications Authenticator Suite. And send the results to my Omni-tool."

"I am pleased to assist," EDI replied sweetly.
Samantha sipped her coffee and hit up the extranet to look up what Grissom Academy was about while the diagnostic loading bar crept across her small screen. It hit 100% right when the Med Bay door opened. Commander Shepard carried her chest piece and shoulder guards, but was still clad in an under armor. A Medi-gel pack was slathered across an exposed bicep.

Walking to the table next to Sam's, Shepard paused to stare thoughtfully at Liara's door. She sighed and laid the armor in front of her as she took a seat 90 degrees to Sam's left. Samantha was emboldened by Shepard's silence. She stood up and crossed to the opposite table, put her hands on it and leaned forward. She tried to put some of the anger she felt in her voice, to mixed results.

"Commander Shepard, I think—no, I know you owe me an apology."

Shepard looked amused. "Why?"

"For the way you spoke to me about EDI. If she were a VI, you would be correct in scolding me for not keeping control of her. But you allow an unshackled AI free reign on this ship, and then had the audacity to be upset when she acted recklessly. It's the price of free will, is it not?" That... is a bloody solid argument, Traynor.

Leaning casually back in her chair, Shepard chewed her lip a moment before responding. "I don't appreciate being stalked and then demanded to apologize. You're on my ship, you follow my orders." Before Sam's nostrils could flare with indignation, the Commander amended her statement. "However, I did lay the blame at your feet for what wasn't entirely your fault. I'm sorry, Specialist. For that, and for questioning your loyalty to the war effort."

The two women stared at the table, not each other, for a few long moments. Do I say thank you? Apology accepted? Shake hands? Hug it out? Instead, Samantha opted for a conversation change.

"Commander, are you all right? It's been fairly intense up here." Something of an understatement, but let's not split hairs. "I can only imagine what it was like down on that moon."

"I thought you'd be more concerned about EDI," Shepard didn't quite smile, but her tone was light. Sam appreciated the positive shift in conversation. "EDI is a huge asset to the team. If she'd told me about her plan to obtain a body, I'd have volunteered to help. And done it properly with fewer fires."

EDI chimed in overhead, startling both of them. "I did not wish to force a conflict of interest between our friendship and your duty."

Smiling at the ceiling, Samantha sat down at the table. "...I'd have preferred a conflict of interest to a hard restart of half our systems... but thanks, regardless."

Commander Shepard nodded and stood up to leave. Not quite willing to let the cautious truce end so soon, Sam reached out to stop her. But kept her hand in check. Getting familiar, Traynor? CO, remember? The one who barked at you for being helpful earlier? Don't let your guard down.

"While you're here, though..." Samantha pulled the hand back and brought up her Omni-tool. "I found something while scanning Alliance channels. Grissom Academy is requesting help. The Reaper invasion front will hit them soon." She read EDI's final diagnosis and almost exclaimed in horror. Cerberus?! Fake?!

"Grissom?" Shepard repeated in surprise. "I thought the war would close most schools?"
"Well, Grissom Academy is more specialized than a normal school." As I'm sure you well know. "As a home to some of the smartest students humanity has to offer, the Ascension Project is more important than ever for training biotics. If it had been open 20 years ago, I bet you'd have been there," Sam added softly. She wasn't sure how the Commander would react, considering her attitude towards corporations sponsoring biotic training.

But surprisingly, Shepard agreed while sliding down into her chair. "Yea, I sent a young man named David Archer there. Though I'm still surprised they're still open."

Samantha could only guess at why, based on her background reading of the school from a few moments ago. "Some of their work has Alliance support. That might be why they stayed."

"What can we do?" Shepard asked, back to her light business demeanor. A welcome change from that horrid CO from earlier. That Woman sort of scares me.

"A turian evac transport responded to their distress call, so normally I'd say we don't need to do anything."

A tight smile graced Shepard's lips, along with a light crease to her eyes. "I hear a 'but' coming on, Traynor."

Samantha hmphed. Am I so predictable? "But" something sounded off in the turian signal. I had EDI perform an analysis: it's fake." She brought up the signal feed on her Omni-tool to show the Commander, though it crossed her mind to wonder how much Shepard knew about communication engineering.

"EDI thinks it's Cerberus. She said the faked turian signal was similar to the one that lured you to a Collector ship…?" Sam trailed off, partly intrigued but partly horrified. Wasn't Shepard working with The Illusive Man? Why would he trick her into fighting Collectors?

Shepard shook her head with an annoyed sigh. "Long story."

"In any event, whoever faked the signal wants us to think Grissom Academy's being evacuated. But I believe they're still in danger."

"Good catch." Shepard smiled widely with praise. "Maybe you belong here after all."


"If this really is Cerberus, hopefully this operation is something worth investigating. It could be simple misinformation…" Sam trailed off sheepishly, trying to play off the compliment.

"Traynor," Shepard leaned forward to face Sam and sought lingering eye contact. It was a few uncomfortable seconds before the Commander spoke again. "Good catch." She waited patiently for a response.

Sam looked away in pleased embarrassment. "…thank you, Commander." She returned to sipping her cup of coffee, though she couldn't look Shepard in the eye. So she was surprised when the Commander spoke again. A splash of medium roast went up her nose.

"You worked in Alliance R&D?"

Twitching her nose with wet snifflies, Sam held a hand to it in embarrassment. She hated how nasal her reply was. "Yes, on Arcturus Station. You'd think quantum entanglement would make
communication easy, but imagine incorporating multiple incoming sources…"

Samantha gestured to her Omni-tool, where several windows popped open with ticking feeds. Small communication report links appeared, and another feed began to crawl.

"…and then networking them with extrapolations of time-lagged data to construct a coherent situation GUI…” The feeds merged together, compiling into a timeline of events of the Reaper invasion in the turian system.

"It's an exciting challenge!" Sam grinned. Shepard, however, just raised an eyebrow.

"…for me, anyway." Why do I always get the impression she's sizing me up? That I have something to prove?

Shepard stood up. "Carry on, Specialist." Joker paged that the Commander had transmissions from Admiral Hackett and the asari councilor waiting in the war room.

Before Samantha could start to congratulate herself about how today had sort of turned itself around, Shepard spoke again. And just like that, the day went from slightly bad to worse. If not the worst.

"I'm sorry about Arcturus."

"…sorry?" Sam wasn't sure if she was repeating what Shepard said or asking for clarification.

"Arcturus. You said you worked there, right?"

Samantha leaned back in her chair and felt the color drain from her face. She could barely speak. "What—what do you mean?"

Picking up her armor, Shepard took a step toward the elevator. "The Reapers used the Arcturus Stream to reach the Sol system. They hit the Station first on their way to Earth. It's gone. Everyone's gone."

Sam waited for the Commander to round the corner to the elevator before bursting into tears.
Distraction

The list of things that made Samantha Traynor happy was generally pretty long and easy to come by. A decent cup of tea. One of her mother's scones. A game of chess with a worthy opponent. Hell, even a trashy vid or 5 minutes of quiet worked well enough. But the worse the mood, the more little things it took to make a dent.

Sam had pretty much burned through all her tried and true quirks, from some of her dad's favorite old vids to even a feeble attempt at a bath in the women's restroom. Someone should put a warning that those enclosed shower stalls can't handle a few lousy litres of hot (or rather, lukewarm) water. It took longer to sheepishly mop up than actually enjoy.

Nothing broke her burdening malaise. Well, a liberal dose of alcohol might, but the Normandy was en route to the Petra Nebula to follow up on Grissom Academy. A traveling ship meant a wandering commanding officer on deck, and who knows when Shepard might pop into the Port Observation Deck. Probably right when a miserable Comms Specialist just needs a bloody drink to stave off this wicked migraine that's been hounding me for hours.

Two days now and Samantha was still just going through the motions to get through her shift so she could hide. The only suitable spot she'd managed to find was an odd bunk settled underneath the stairs in Engineering. It was loud, poorly lit, and basically just a cot against a wall. It reflected her mood nicely, plus the darkness soothed the pounding in her head. She had flopped down a few hours ago and not moved. Her eyes were half closed and she had a loose tendril of black hair in her mouth to chew on.

Throwing her left wrist in front of her on the pillow, Samantha reread some of her favorite messages on her Omni-tool. Over and over again. A joke thread between the comms specialists and the tech specialists. A random invite to a party when Sam returned to the space station after finishing the retrofits. A photo of the new crop of interns. A new experiment in progressive algorithms that showed promise for more efficient QEC extrapolation. She wished she'd kept more of them. Even the stupid, little, one-sentence nothings.

You need to stop this, Sam. After all...

Arcturus is gone.
She should have expected it. This is a war. Wars have casualties. Even seeing Earth's atmosphere streaming with Reapers had been a dull sort of terror. Sam supposed that was Commander Shepard's influence. The Normandy crew didn't exactly laugh nonstop or throw wild parties. But there was a tightly held optimism. Camaraderie, even. Those fingers of dread on Samantha's spine had eased up some since leaving the Citadel, kept at bay by ...hope.

What do I hope for now?

Arcturus Station wasn't just a home away from home. It had been everything Sam wanted. It was... the future. Her future. A great hub station, close to a relay, with a fantastic research and development program. It was where human ideas flourished and were molded from science fiction to just pure amazing science. And she'd had the privilege of being a part of it.

In Samantha's mind, Arcturus is—was—the Alliance.

And now it was gone.

The Human Systems Military Alliance had lost its government, first line of defense, best training facility, and the core of its R&D in one fell swoop. I think I'm starting to understand how the quarians feel. If we can lose that—and Earth—what do we have left to hope for?

Just ourselves?

Isabella crept, unbidden, back into this whole pity party. She had gotten blurry over the past week or two, sadly enough. Didn't take long to start to forget, did it? Sam's Omni-tool history of her only sported a few candid shots, usually taken after more than a few drinks. There wasn't even a complete image to stare at wistfully. Izzy's pale cheek and part of her curly brown mane. Her neckline and freckled cleavage peeking over a fashionable top. Her calves trailing down to a pair of overly tall high heels, though one shoe was off to reveal curling toes. I was rather adept at making her toes curl.

Another reminder of the past and present Samantha had lost. She just felt so alone. Trying to escape into those memories twisted and hurt the same as trying to forget them. There was one horrendous close-up of Izzy looking into the camera with a silly expression while Sam's lips pressed to her cheek. It was a rare moment of captured affection, something Isabella generally disdained. She preferred her indiscretions to be more... private.

It hurt. It hurt to be wanted and unwanted at the same time. It was even harder to push through being hurt, because being angry was slightly better than being sad. After all, Sam will never curl those toes, run her fingers through that hair, or nibble that slender neck again. She'd been alone with Isabella, and was now more so without her. Alone... with all her dreams locked up in a future that had been obliterated.

Sam knew it would be a slow burn, the grief. She just wished it would hurry the hell up. She'd made some friends aboard the Normandy. Xian. Campbell. Even Allers was promising. But this was one of those things where only a mother or lover would know what to say. Without either here, Samantha just had to work through it herself. Her preferred method being good, old-fashioned Wallowing.

"Specialist Traynor."

Oh bloody hell, did I miss the call to arms? Are we at Grissom already?

"Yes, EDI?"
"I have noticed a drop in your vitals over the last three days. Are you well? Should I alert the Med Bay?"

She resisted the urge to ruefully laugh. Leave it to EDI to be surrogate mother (...lover? Traynor! No! Bad Traynor!). "No thanks, EDI. I'm just feeling a little blue."

"I have not detected any changes in your coloration. But an extranet search of the phrase 'feeling blue' has brought up a number of asari pornography sites and a human idiom for depression. Are either of these results correct? Or shall I search further?"

As great as asari porn sounds about now, Samantha smirked internally. "Not necessary, EDI. The depression one is right. I'm just trying to work through some things in my head. Nothing to worry about. It's just something us humans do from time to time." Smiling lightly, Sam added, "We lack your almost instantaneous ability to process things. Takes us just a tad longer."

"Understood, Specialist Traynor. May I offer a suggestion?"

Rolling over from her stomach to her back on the small cot, Sam looked up at the ceiling. "Um, sure? Why not."

She really should have braced herself for what came next. It would have saved her from hacking and choking on the bit of hair she’d been chewing.

"Back when you thought I was a simple VI, you mentioned you had a sexual attraction to the sound of my voice. There was a set of phrases you requested I say that you indicated had a positive effect on your emotional state. Shall I repeat them now as a gesture of friendship?"

"I—gah—what? No. No no. No no no no. That's—not necessary, EDI. Thanks, but—"

Why do I get the feeling "Back when you thought I was a simple VI" is going to be the start of many horrid conversations with EDI? Just what I need on a small ship: a meme of my past poor decisions with a loose-lipped AI.

"It is no trouble, Specialist Traynor. Jeff has a similar habit that—"

Sam sputtered, desperate to end the conversation. "Don't want to know! I'm good, thanks! I'll be up in the CIC in a minute, fit as a fiddle!"

A muted squeak interrupted EDI signing off. Sitting up in the cot, Samantha looked around. It was so out of place for the engineering deck, which tended to favor hums, whirs, and dull thumps. Before Sam could wonder if she had gone mental in addition to just plain boring depressed (and embarrassed), a little shadow raced along the floor. Her first instinct was a survivalist, if overly girly, one: lash out and stomp on it. Hand flailing and shrieking optional.

She leaned over the cot and raised her knees, poised for an excellent stomping vantage point. Just as Sam was about to take out her anger on a shadow, it met the dull light of the room. A little brown hairball paused and sniffed the air cautiously. Its dark fur was matted and it looked at Samantha hopefully.

Is that… a hamster? How would that even get aboard?

"EDI, are you aware there is a foreign animal aboard the Normandy?"

There was a long pause before a response. "I have run a detailed diagnostic of the Normandy's system, including the emergency tunnels and hatches. I detect no foreign presence."
"How is a hamster not a foreign presence? Do we need to have your filters cleaned?"

A blue orb of light appeared in the ceiling, EDI's old holographic form. A blue scan swept over the room, casting a grid of light around the small room. Stopping at the hamster, the grid focused from a broad swatch to a tiny rectangle around the creature. "This mesocricetus auratus, or hamster, is registered to Commander Shepard. During the retrofits, much of the Commander's personal effects were relocated to various parts of the ship. This pet was intended to be returned to Shepard at her housing at Alliance headquarters, but the transfer order was never signed off on by Lieutenant Ventura."

*Of course it wasn't.* Samantha tempered her irritation by remembering that Ventura was still dead. *And now we're back to guilt. You're a real whirlwind of classy emotion, Traynor.*

Offering a hand, Sam had a fleeting hope that she could catch the critter. *If anything, to feed the little guy since he looks kind of hungry.* But it was wise to her antics and darted off into the ventilation shaft the moment her fingers moved. *Well, bollocks. I'm not saying that's unwise, Little Guy, considering how (not) long my fish survived when I was a child. But I've matured! I'm a grown woman! I can be trusted! …I might need a double dose of antihistamine because you'll rile up my allergies, but still!*

Before Samantha could go crawling around the bowels of the engineering deck to try and retrieve an errant hamster and prove she was responsible, EDI's voice returned to the intercom. "Attention. We are due to arrive at the secondary relay to the Petra Nebula in five minutes. Please return to your stations and prepare for final FTL jump."

*Oh hell. I guess I should go do work now.* Samantha was on the docket as the lead comms specialist this time around. Under any other circumstances, this would be delightful and exciting news. Finally, an opportunity to prove to the Normandy (*and the always unimpressed Shepard*) that she's worthy of this ship's reputation.

But the overly long travel time from Menae to Grissom Academy made investigation and possible evacuation less and less likely. So Sam's enthusiasm for her first legit combat mission had waned on the heels of her depression.

_Two things riding against my brilliant analytics from the get-go. One: there might not be anything to investigate. The turians might have evacuated all the students who are on their merry way to safer space and we wasted two days. Or worse: we're too late. Two days is a long time for a school to survive on its own if Cerberus is behind this. What if everyone is dead or captured already?_

Pushing up the Engineering stairs just got a lot harder as Sam's heart once again fell. Though it also started to pound a little when her asthma made a wheezy return. She had to rifle around in her cargo pockets for the small cube-shaped inhaler. A couple puffs and her lungs were as good as new. If only the same could be said for her state of mind.

_I'm getting far too adept at pulling out little kernels of hope and then squashing them with pessimism. Depression really doesn't suit you, Traynor. No one is going to hang out with you if you're just going to mope the whole bloody time. Then you'll be alone. And bitch about being alone. See the problem?_

"Yes, yes," Samantha griped aloud, though she surprised the engineer who just passed her in the hallway to the drive core. She had to shake her head at Engineer Adams and wave him off that it was nothing. "Chin up, Specialist. Normandy to the rescue," Adams returned cheerfully. Her smile back didn't quite reach her eyes.
The CIC was bustling with activity when Sam exited the elevator. At her console, a pair of IPs were waiting secondary authentication for comms integration: James Vega's and Liara T'Soni's. Work was a pleasant distraction, at least. She could feel her brow smoothing as her hands flew over the console. **Integrate comms with layered encryption. Set up dynamic sockets to reduce enemy comm pings. Stagger signal arrays to boost transmissions.** All her studying up on combat comms poured from her fingertips in practiced motions.

Samantha's first mission as the lead combat comms specialist should have been something to remember. Especially since she turned out to be right. When the Normandy approached the Academy, Joker announced the bad *(good?)* news: a Cerberus cruiser was docked at the space station. Not a turian vessel or debris in sight.

At first Sam cursed the vessel, but then she realized it was, in fact, good news. Cerberus hadn't got what it came for, which meant there was still hope for the students trapped inside. **Maybe they'd gotten a lockdown in place before Cerberus could do any damage. Maybe Cerberus is trapped inside with heroic kids defending their home. And maybe I can ride a flying mushroom to the sherbet kingdom. But, at the very least: there's still some hope.**

An emergency message pinged the Normandy's comms. Sam jumped on the signal, quickly slapping a range of authentication suites and filters on it. *There wasn't going to be any Illusive Man bullshit tricking this Normandy.* Checking with Alliance IP logs, Samantha was able to confirm that "Sanders, K" was legit and passed the message along to Shepard. *And we'll just forward this along to the Alliance brass, though the public manifest says the closest Alliance cruiser is still a day away.*

Then things got really exciting. Not for Sam, since she was effectively blasted away from doing her job properly. Cerberus had set up a pretty thorough long range comm dampener at Grissom, which is why only a distress beacon had made it through the comms clutter. That was compounded by Shepard's last words as the Commander ducked into Cortez's waiting shuttle.

"Joker, we need a distraction."

The world got very spinny very quickly. A half dozen Cerberus fighters sprayed bullets at the Normandy while the ship dipped and dodged. Looking out any of the bow windows was a huge mistake, even though the mass effect inertial dampeners reduced any jostling considerably. It was just supremely difficult to contend with bouncing stomach contents and the ever-present "[Communication lost. Out of working range.]" error on her screen.

*Great. My first mission and I'm too bloody far away to actually be useful. This is just perfect.*

Sam's only link to Shepard was Cortez, who was also having a boring go of things. The Kodiak was a decent comm buoy to at least get the Normandy a few updates, but no opportunities to show off Samantha's hacking or decryption abilities. An automated punchcard would have been more useful to the mission than Sam. By the time the Normandy ditched the Cerberus fighters and returned to the Academy, the situation had been defused.

*Wow, I am going to lock in on that Cerberus shuttle like a champ. Look at me, delivering approval codes to the shuttle bay. Yup, four years of training on the Alliance's dime to concierge a shuttlecraft to the docking bay. Money well spent.*

A useless comms specialist aside, the mission was a smashing success. Two dozen students rescued on the shuttle alone, with no casualties other than Cerberus troops. The ship Sam had hailed, the SSV Hastings, was en route to pick up the Grissom people and ferry them to the Citadel for assignment. It seems the Alliance had a new biotic artillery unit itching for combat.
All's well that ends well, Samantha sighed as she retreated back to the engineering basement. She wished there had been something meaningful to contribute to the overall mission, other than monitoring the feeds and polishing her fingernails. Shepard had offered a perfunctory nod and a "Nice work!" on her way to the elevator, but that singing feeling from being praised was absent this time.

So Sam channeled her dull frustration into a heavily encrypted message that had trickled in through an emergency channel. It was a clever one: parceled out in pieces, with a scaling encryption algorithm. It was like a game of chess that was revealing an entire work of art as each piece fell away in her Omni-tool GUI. The art in question, however, turned out to be a tame correspondence from a Miranda Lawson. Bugger, all that effort for a "Let's meet for tea and scones on the Citadel!"

That thought made Sam realize she was now a glorified yeoman, reduced to sifting through her CO's mail like a secretary. Flopping back down on the low cot, Sam closed her eyes. I'm never going to make a difference at this rate. EDI could create a bundle of software to do my job better than I ever could.

Commence wallowing in three.

Two.

One—

"You're in my spot."

The voice was ringing, throaty, and laced with malice. The woman that accompanied it, by comparison, was even more dangerous. A black bolero jacket barely covered a skin tight white top, while slivers of dark brown hair spilled out from a ponytail. Tight camouflage pants ended at a pair of mercenary black boots. Tattoos and scars weaved along nearly every inch of exposed flesh, finally thinning out along her shapely neckline. Following that thought upward ended at a small scar on her upper lip, which gleamed with a rich shade of red lipstick.

Shit.

"I didn't—I wasn't—" Samantha blustered, taken aback. It was like being caught in the upperclass girls' washroom where all they did was smoke and drink. And Sam was once again the lost little underclassman.

The woman snorted and leaned against the wall of the entrance, effectively pinning Samantha in this corner of the deck. "Relax, Princess. Before you piss yourself." She tossed her ponytail and surveyed the room. "Used to be my space a few months back. Didn't have as much cargo shit everywhere."

"I do seem to recall a neverending pile of datapads originating from this part of the ship," Sam quipped bravely. She remembered Engineer Adams stalking out of the Normandy shuttle bay three or four times with just armloads of datapads. "All squirreled away in engineering like someone was stocking up for winter," Gregory had mused. That must have been her handiwork.

Reaching overhead to feel along the crossbar in the ceiling, the woman grunted when her hand turned up empty. "Damn, you girl scouts were pretty thorough then. I might have made a few copies of the shit I dug up on Cerberus. That was supposed to be my retirement in case those fuckers tried to come after me again. Wasn't expecting to be offered a job."

A job? It took Samantha a few seconds to process that this was the teacher Shepard had just rescued. I read her declassified dossier on the Normandy mail server a month or so back, but it
hardly does her justice.

Neither does "psychotic biotic."

The criminal-turned-caretaker Jack smirked at Sam, who had to resist the urge to flinch. All right, Traynor. Cut the meek tech geek crap. You're a military soldier on a military ship and she's a guest. What would your mother say?

Standing up from the cot and taking a few steps forward, Sam took a deep breath. She extended a hand to Jack and sweetly asked, "Where are my manners? Comms Specialist Samantha Traynor with Alliance R&D." Not Cerberus. "And you are?"

Jack scoffed and crossed her arms. "Name's Jack."

Slightly gleeful that being polite seemed to put the woman off-balance, Samantha pressed further. "I'm glad to hear your students made it off safely. Are they enjoying the accommodations in the mess hall? The SSV Hastings should arrive within a few hours to escort all of you to the Citad—"

"God, that accent. It's like the Cerberus cheerleader dosed with red sand," Jack interrupted. "Do they all teach you to talk like that in beauty school? Because they sure as shit don't teach you to fight."

EDI came to Sam's rescue this time, under the guise of being helpful. "Technically, Specialist Traynor's regional dialect is distinctly different from that of Operative Lawson's," EDI chimed in.

Wait, wait. That email I decrypted earlier was from a Miranda Lawson. She's the one Jack hates? Good God, I'm going to need a flow chart to sort out all the past and present Normandy crew. Someone really should teach a history class on Normandy SR 1 through 2 for us newbies.

"Miss Lawson is native to the Asia-Pacific Commonwealth of Australia whereas Specialist Traynor is from England of the European Union. While Australia was historically a British colony, it evolved to be culturally different from its colonial ruler even before gaining independence."

There was a long pause before Jack responded. "EDI, what in our brief time together would make you believe I give a shit about any of that?"

"Although your inflection implies the question is rhetorical, Jack, are you seeking clarification on whether the information is relevant, useful, or both?"

"Forget it, EDI," Jack grumbled before turning back to Samantha. Her hands awkwardly felt around in her pockets. "Look, I hear you're the one to thank for getting me and my kids outta that rough spot."

It took considerable willpower for Sam's jaw to not hit the floor. Unfortunately, this half second of thinking made her stupid. Ballsy and stupid. Crossing her arms, Samantha cocked her head expectantly. "Yes? Waiting."

"Fuck. You."

Sam snickered but tried to brush aside the almost-compliment. "I believe Commander Shepard actually did the saving, anyway. Me, I was trapped aboard the Normandy trying not to throw up while Joker did barrel rolls around a slew of Cerberus fighters."

A low voice echoed behind them in the stairwell. "Oh, that's nothing. You should see Joker put the Normandy through its paces in the gravitational pull of a dead Reaper. Or in a ship graveyard at the center of the galactic core. Much better exercise for the old girl."
Both women turned to see a scarred turian silently padding down the stairs. Garrus's eyepiece threw a touch of light in the already dark room while his other bare eye just glittered. *He always looks amused about something.*

"Whaddya want, chicken legs?" Jack growled but offered the turian a hand. The two exchanged a quick handshake before backing against their respective walls. *Still trapped here, guys,* Samantha thought as now both stairwells were blocked from a hasty retreat.

Throwing his head in the direction of the stairs, Garrus shrugged. "I actually came down to lodge a complaint with Engineer Adams over power distribution to the main gun. It's throwing off my calibrations."

"You and your fucking calibrations."

"Indeed. Anyway, I heard your melodious voice, Jack, and thought I'd stop by and chat."

"Good to see you, Garrus. Your face still looks like shit."

"As charming as ever."

"Anyway," Sam tried to interject. Her cozy hideout had suddenly become very crowded. "You two probably have loads of catching up to do. I should probably go upstairs and check on—on… Shepard."

Jack turned to Garrus and smirked. "Wasn't that Thane's job? I mean, she was banging the drell, right?"

This juicy bit of gossip slammed on Sam's brakes. *Hmm. Go upstairs and probably have to go back to work? Or get all the details of the old SR-2 crew from a source that isn't Joker and his terrible sense of humor?*

It was weird to hear a turian guffaw like that. "You're kidding, right? Shepard and Thane?"

Shaking her head, Jack waved her hand. "What? I kept weird hours. I would hit the mess at like two in the morning and see her skulking out of his room in Life Support looking tired. Last I checked, that was code for Walk of Shame. You callin' me a liar?"

"*His* room? But I thought—after what I saw in that ANN vid…* Sam hated that she felt disheartened again. *You really need to cut this out. Because it's getting weird.*

"Oh, I wouldn't say liar, per se," Garrus grinned. "Blind as a bat, though."

"Fuck you. What would you call it?"

"Let me put it this way. Shepard was more likely to do a Walk of Shame out of Samara's room than Thane's." He rotated his head in a circle a few times, waiting for the impact to sink in.

Laughing wildly, Jack threw her head back. "You're shitting me! ...Did she? Oh man! …actually, now I'm kind of offended. All that quality time we spent together blowing shit up, and she couldn't send any sugar my way? Not that I probably woulda gone for it, but it's nice to feel wanted. Am I right?" Jack winked and threw an elbow at Sam, who had unfortunately picked that moment to edge closer to the stairwell.

The awkward silence made Samantha feel like she had to contribute to the conversation. "Who was Samara?" She was rewarded with another elbow to the rib from Jack.
"Smokin' hot asari justicar matriarch." *Justicarch? Grow up, Sam.* "Kill you if you so much as looked at her. A little high and mighty for my liking."

Garrus chuckled and crossed his arms. "You just didn't like it that you probably made her List of People to Kill once the Collector mission was over. But no, Shepard didn't 'bang' Samara or Thane that I'm aware of. They were just slightly better conversationalists than your incredible range of 'fuck you' and 'I will destroy you.'"

"Suit yourself. I still like the old Shepard better. This Alliance stooge act is boring as fuck. Take me back to us punching reporters in the face and blowing up Collectors any day of the week. She was a hurricane, man. What the hell happened?"

Scratching his neck, Garrus brushed his fingers over the deep scar on his cheek. "A lot. I don't fully understand Shepard, either. On the SR-1, she was different, too. Good, I guess. Devoted to the cause. Kaidan dying rattled her. They were close. And after Cerberus brought her back... damn, I'd never seen her so angry. She was out of control. Probably why you two hit it off so well, Jack."

Sam heard a "damn right" from Jack but she was too busy studying Garrus's hooded expression. The turian looked... sad. "And now the Commander is trying to find a way to save us all from ourselves. Only time will tell if the Alliance Stooge, as you called her, or the Get It Done and Damn the Consequences Shepard is the better one. ...The truth is, I don't think anyone really knows Shepard."

"Did anyone... ever get close?" Samantha meant that broadly but found herself curious about the Specific, too. *If we're going to gossip, might as well go all the way, hm?*

Jack rolled her eyes and mumbled under her breath that "My money was on the drell assassin" while Garrus fixed a hard stare on Sam. It made her uncomfortable, but she was a little surprised at how friendly overall the turian was. He probably made Samantha feel safer than Shepard did. His confidence was a relief, despite a conversation he'd had with Shepard that Xian had overheard and passed along.

He had admitted the turians should have listened to Shepard about the Reapers. That the turians weren't prepared. No one was. No one believed her. Three million turians lost the first day, five the second.*How many billions on Earth were dying right now?*  

Could only Shepard do this? Only an angry, wild Shepard?

"Shepard's never really been an open, 'let's talk about our feelings and hug' sort of friend. She tells you enough, on her own time, in her way. Probably why she and Ashley got along so well. But she took Williams' healthy skepticism about Cerberus and the Collectors pretty hard. Shepard and Kaidan were brother and sister because of their biotics and tough childhood."

Jack was getting bored and fidgety with the conversation. She'd taken to levitating a crate before chiming in. "Blah blah. Me and Shepard got along just fine. No sloppy feelings, no group hugs. Just guns and fists and lots of bad guys."

"Truly a special relationship. Makes me cry just thinking about it," Garrus quipped sarcastically. He turned back to Samantha. "Liara was the only one to, shall we say, crack Shepard's code. At least that's what the rumors were on the SR1. I honestly couldn't tell you if they'd patched things up even after Shepard helped with Liara's... information problem a few months back."

Shepard and T'Soni? Were an *item*? Unsure why that revelation was a little shocking, Samantha had to think back to how Shepard and Liara had interacted with one another. Even when things were more private in the Med Bay after the Lieutenant Commander had been brought in, they were tense.
Strained. *I wonder what could have happened.*

"Fucking yahgs, man," Jack agreed, though Sam had no idea what that could mean.

"Well, now that we've scared the hell out of the poor Specialist here, what do you say we retire to the Port Observation Deck for a quick drink? Assuming your teenage thugs haven't raided it already."

"Hell yes." Jack turned on her heel and started up the stairs with a jump. Turning back, Garrus extended a hand to Samantha. "Care to join us? Jack talks big, but she's really just a cuddly little varren puppy. With scale itch. ...honestly, you'll be a worse person every second you spend with her. It's part of the thrill."

Samantha laughed and nodded. It felt odd to just casually be invited out by a pair of deadly soldiers. But the opportunity to socialize, even a little, actually cheered Sam up immensely. For the first time in days.

"Oh and Princess?" the biotic stopped mid-stride but didn't turn around. "...Thanks for getting Shepard here. You did me and my kids a solid. I... owe you one."
Trying to match shots with Jack turned out to be a mistake. Even Garrus, who had a limited amount of turian brandy to delve into, was a heartier drinker than Samantha. The headache was totally worth the conversation, at least. The turian and biotic took turns bragging about kills or hairy situations they’d escaped from by the skin of their teeth. Samantha was the counter argument to their mercenary lives, using each shot to boast about a difficult chess tournament or encryption she’d conquered. The nickname "Princess" converted to "Nerd" fairly quickly. "Princess Nerd" was still under consideration, though.

Commander Sheppard had made a brief appearance in the Port Observation Deck. She seemed to savor the awkward silence her presence created, as well as the furtive glances at her jaw and cheek where a fist-shaped bruise had started to purple over the freckles. Taking the time to slowly pour a drink, sip deeply, and sigh had masked a lightning-quick biotic charge that laid Jack flat against the opposite wall.

Sam and Garrus had held their breaths while eyeballing the bar counter to hide behind. What's the proper procedure for a biotic showdown in a confined space? Spray them with water? Curl up in
the fetal position? Start praying and hope I get all the worst sins off my chest before I have to go
towards the light? Garrus's reaction was to laugh while Samantha stuck with freezing like a scared
deer.

Five long seconds passed.

Until Jack just sat up, laughed, called Shepard a "fucker" and went straight back to drinking like
nothing had happened.

Shepard raised her glass silently to her crew before downing it in one gulp. Turning on her heel, the
Commander didn't say a word as she headed for the door. Sam was curious about, once again,
receiving an almost-smile from her CO. That eye-crinkling, tight-mouthed Thing that passed for a
smile from Commander Shepard. I'll just chalk it up to an approval point? For... not being reduced
to an attractive stain by Jack?

…Hopefully I'm farther ahead in the polls than where I started when, you know, I shot at my
commanding officer.

The sleeper pod was a welcome sight after that night (morning? Ugh, what the hell time is it these
days?) though the shift change the following morning was not. Jack had the audacity to play a drum
solo on Samantha's bathroom stall partition before she escorted her collection of students to
rendezvous with the SSV Hastings.

*I wish the price of being One of the Crew required less face time with a urinal.

But still. Worth it.

While resources and diplomats were still being gathered for the War Summit, the presence of
Cerberus on Alliance turf had lit a fire in Shepard. The Commander wanted to strike back and strike
back hard. She brushed aside a request from Primarch Victus in favor of a mission from Admiral
Hackett where rumored Cerberus facilities had been discovered on Sanctum. Clear on the other side
of the galaxy. Hitting every relay with minimal time for a mass effect field recalibration still put ETA
at nearly a week.

Strangely enough, Samantha was in decent spirits. Even with the long, uneventful travel time ahead,
a veil of insecurity had lifted with the hangover. A new sense of purpose. Although I am a glorified
secretary, at least I was able to find Grissom Academy. Maybe... maybe there's more to helping the
war effort than with only bullets and biotics. The tangled web of QEC feeds were tackled and
probed and mapped with renewed enthusiasm.

On the fifth travel day, Sam found herself in the mess laughing with Diana Allers. The reporter was
telling a lewd story about a particularly scummy politician when EDI's voice came over the intercom.
"The Commander has requested the assistance of all off-duty crew members who worked on the
Normandy retrofits. Please report to the Mess Hall on the Crew Deck immediately."

"Well. That's oddly specific," Diana observed dryly. She took a last bite of her nutrient bar.
"Probably time to haze the new guys. Let me know if you end up in the Shuttle Bay scrubbing the
Kodiak with a toothbrush. Hopefully naked. It's not hazing unless someone's naked." Rubbing a
thumb along her lip to sweep away an errant crumb, Allers stood up and leaned over the table to
favor Sam with a glare.

"You'd tell me if there was naked hazing, right? Promise me you'll tell me about the hazing. Naked.
Hazing."
Samantha scoffed and took another swig of honeyed tea. "Your one-track mind aside, I shan't be informing you of any goings-on between captain and crew. I also have no desire to make it on Battlespace's blooper reel to improve morale. Find your own ass-shots, Allers."

Diana tossed her hair with an airy "Suit yourself" before heading around the corner to the elevator. Sam heard her say a hello just as Engineer Adams entered the mess. He mumbled his way to the half-full coffee pot and poured a full cup. Not bothering with cream or sugar, Gregory took a deep swallow which decayed into coughing. "Ugh, God. Campbell make the coffee again?"

Snickering, Sam nodded. "The good Private is nothing if not dedicated to having coffee on hand every second of every day. The trick is getting her to stop being so helpful. Miss Allers has suggested breaking her legs."

"I'm for something more drastic. Poison?" Specialist Xian offered as he sat down next to Samantha. Adams agreed. Engineer Rashad was among the last to trickle in, and was shouted away from reaching for the coffee pot.

"What are we talking about?"

The room stilled as Private Sarah Campbell strolled in cheerfully. Everyone exchanged a guilty look before bursting out laughing. "We were theorizing the best way to tell you we find your coffee… abhorrent, Campbell," Sam grinned. No point in being petty and sniping behind her back.

Sarah's face turned bright red, and for a moment the crew feared she was either going to shoot them all (as the only current retrofit member registered to carry a weapon aboard the ship) or storm out. Instead, Campbell smirked.

"Serves you lazy assholes right. Learn to make another pot and I won't have to!"

Before they could chuckle, Specialist Douglas stood up stiffly and saluted.

"Officer on deck!"

It was pure instinct, conditioned from many hours spent on a hot strip of pavement with a drill sergeant barking in their ears. The only sound was the scraping of chairs as two engineers, four specialists and one private jerked to their feet, formed up in a line, and swung their fingertips to their temples.

Striding in swiftly sporting the rolled up sleeves of the more casual service uniform, Commander Shepard tersely returned salute. "At ease. …and don't worry. No one is in trouble. This is just an informal request. I'm looking for help from any of the crew stationed on the Normandy while I was …detained."

Sam suddenly felt her wrist warm up, and the orange interface of her Omni-tool glowed with an incoming message. Bollocks. Not now. She shook it off and tried to focus on the Commander working her way over to the coffee pot. Xian exchanged a nervous look with Sam as Shepard poured a small cup for herself. Oh... no. Ew.

"I just need a volunteer to help me sift through some of the cargo and retrieve some personal effects that still might be aboard."

Another ping to Samantha's Omni-tool. And another. Shepard's back was turned as she paced along to the end of the row, giving Sam a few seconds to steal a glance at her Omni-tool. What? What is it?

[Message received: "Naked yet?"]
"Any takers?"

Samantha dropped her wrist just as Shepard turned back around. She stood up straight but said nothing. Nothing personal, Commander. Old army rule: "Never volunteer."

"Thanks for volunteering, Specialist Traynor," Shepard nodded with satisfaction.

Wait. What? How—?

Glancing behind her, Sam saw what happened. Every last one of her dear, dear Normandy friends had taken a small step backwards, leaving a hapless comms specialist the only one standing out front. The perfect oblivious victim.

I. Hate. All of you.

Shepard saluted briefly again. "Dismissed, the rest of you. Specialist Traynor, come with me." Her coffee cup again crept closer to her lips, but the Commander used it to gesture to the retreating crew. "Not exciting work by any means, but I promise I'll get you something nice to reward overtime. I just really need someone familiar with where the Alliance put everything."

Sam's eyes couldn't help but follow that black poison disguised as coffee but she said nothing. Nodding, Samantha sighed deeply and try to push away the insincerity. "Anything I can do to help, Commander."

"Actually, I think I have seen some crates marked 'A. Shepard' around the Normandy."

"We'll cover more ground if we split up. I'll start in the Shuttle Bay and you start with Engineering? Meet back in the mess at 21:30?" Shepard gestured at the table in front of them.

Samantha politely saluted in acknowledgement. Again, Shepard started to take a sip of that dreadful coffee. I can't in good conscience let her do that. Squeaking a little as her voice was higher than normal, Sam interrupted. "I—beg your pardon, ma'am. But, um…" Think, Traynor. "What exactly are we looking for?"

The Commander stiffened slightly, but didn't drink at least. "That's private, Specialist. Please just inform me of what and where you find any items belonging to me and I'll go through them at my leisure."

Oh, is that how it is, hmm? Successfully not reacting to Shepard's stern tone, Samantha nodded and spun on her heel. Rounding the corner to the elevator, Sam stopped and leaned against the wall to listen. She heard Shepard mumble to herself then a distinct slurping sound.

Followed by a hacking choke and a trail of curse words.

Don't cross me, Commander, Sam thought smugly as she tapped the button to call the lift. Exiting at Deck 4, she paused to consider where to start. I don't think I've checked out the starboard cargo hold... And the port cargo contains the insufferable Miss Allers.

Right. Starboard it is.

Other than a few empty tables along the walls, the room was stark and boring. Some cables ended
abruptly at the center of the room. Discarded leftovers from the previous occupant, a genetically-engineered krogan in a tank. No boxes that look like they might belong to Shepard.

Sighing in defeat, Samantha headed back into the hallway. She glanced out the interior window that showed the Shuttle Bay stretched out below. Lieutenant Vega was at his pull-up bar like always while Steve Cortez was still on duty and thus avoiding the goose chase. Cortez had a blowtorch in hand and was focused on an open panel on the Kodiak's wing. A blur of red revealed Shepard rummaging through the stacks of cargo crates along the starboard wall.

A few containers were kicked behind her, and Sam could just make out "Property of A. Shepard" stamped along their sides. Well, at least this won't take as long as I feared. Still doesn't look like she's found whatever it is she's after, though.

Continuing her circuit of the engineering deck, Samantha jogged to the drive core area for another look. Other than consoles and the evening shift engineer (Colman? Colbert? Col-something), the heart of the ship was completely empty.

Bugger.

She was just about to leave when she passed by the lower stairwell. A fleeting memory touched Sam's mind, encouraging her to descend to the bowels of the Normandy. Rounding the corner at the foot of the stairs, she spied her old cot hideout. Piled in the corner were three large crates, all with Shepard's name stamped on them.

Victory! I knew I'd seen this shit somewhere.

Her curiosity getting the better of her, Samantha ran a thumb over the topmost box's clasp and popped it off. Upon cracking the lid, she discovered—!

What? Seriously?

Haphazardly jumbled atop one another was about seven to eight model ships. Sam recognized some of them, but not well enough to actually remember their names. One was definitely a geth ship, another looked asari, and there was one oversized Reaper toy that sent a shiver up Sam's spine.

It was hard to believe Commander Shepard collected toys. The sullen, serious, hard-ass Commander… fancied model ships. It was even harder to imagine Shepard at her desk in her cabin, painstakingly piecing these together one by one.

Heartened by this silly discovery, Samantha heaved the box aside and dug in to the next, which turned out to be a boring footlocker of outfits. Mostly variations on the casual uniform, but all of these bore the orange Cerberus logo on the sleeve. There was also some formal wear and even a few under garments. Sam couldn't help but giggle as she held up one of the Shepard's bras to herself to see what size she was.

Looks like the armor is hiding more than just a pretty face.
The third box was a special containment unit for several breeds of fish. The autofeeder was getting low, so the little guys weren't long for this world unless they got back into their fish tank. There was a chit attached to the fish …box… indicating it was to be released to the Alliance Wildlife Society upon permission from "Lt Ventura, V." For the first time in a long time, Samantha didn't bristle at the memory of being scolded for failing to get rid of this stuff at Ventura's request.

God rest you, Lieutenant. At least Shepard can have her stuff back. Maybe fish and toy ships will be the morale boost to turn the Commander into a superhero to destroy all the Reapers.

Pondering the best way to haul this shit to the elevator with her admittedly lacking upper body strength, Sam turned when she heard a familiar squeak. The hamster she’d discovered (when was that? Christ, it's been nearly a week. How is this little guy not dead?) was running dizzying figure eights along the floor.

Maybe he's what Shepard is looking for. I think your approval rating will go through the roof if you return him, Traynor.

I concur.

She slid some sort of turian cruiser model out of its box (it's no longer in mint condition, Sam!) then perched herself above the cot with the box raised. It took a minute or two of studying the rodent's scurrying before Samantha felt confident enough to pounce. Missing the first four times, she finally corralled the hamster on the fifth. Its little nails scratching on the box set Sam's teeth on edge, but she closed the lid.

Then opened the lid to poke some air holes. You know, so you don't present Commander Shepard with a dead rat and expect a raise. Also worrying about how warm Socks (his cute little white feet look like socks!) would be in just a box, Samantha rummaged around in her pockets. A brightly colored handkerchief, fresh from the laundry, seemed like a good fit.

My dust allergy will just have to suck it up until I go back to my locker for another. And, hopefully, mum won't mind I'm donating a piece of my Indian heritage to warm a rat. I have a dozen more, after all. What's one hanky?

Sam was admittedly pretty pleased with herself at this point. Not only had she found boxes full of Commander Shepard's stuff, but there was still 15 minutes to spare. But, unwilling to accept accusations about not being thorough, Samantha even poked her head in Allers' door. "Hey,
"Hey. You don't look naked. Did you get kicked out of the sorority already? I told you."

"Yes, yes. I know. Naked."

"Naked," Diana repeated with a satisfied nod from her recline on her bed. Scanning the reporter's horrendously messy quarters, Sam politely asked if Allers had any items in this pig sty that belonged to the Commander. Diana shot up from her bed and looked around hungrily, but was disappointed that she wasn't sitting on top of a treasure trove of Normandy contraband. Samantha darted out the door before having to endure another conversation about nudity.

Holding the box behind her, Sam stepped off the lift on Deck 3 and was about to round the corner to the mess when a spark of light from the Starboard Observation Deck caught her eye.

There it is again.

She padded over to the observation deck entrance and peeked in. Sprawled on her back on the center couch was Commander Shepard. The blue spark of light was, in fact, a baseball; a baseball swimming lazily around the room with the help of biotics.

"Am I late?" Sam inquired lightly as she set Socks' box down out of sight below the desk. Shepard's head dropped to the side to look at Sam, but she continued to wiggle her fingers and send the ball dancing.

"No." No undertone or anger. Just a simple statement.

Samantha watched the biotic display for a few more seconds before she realized. "This is what you were looking for, wasn't it? Not fish or model ships... which you have, by the way. Below the engineering deck in droves."

A long pause. "Yes."

Standing uncertainly, Sam suddenly felt out of place. This was so unlike the Commander. To just be still. She didn't look happy or sad, but instead almost meditative. Shepard always seemed so active, bulldozing her way from one battle to the next. It was hard to picture her collecting toys or feeding fish or playing baseball.

And yet, here she was.

Samantha cleared her throat, trying to get some indication if Shepard wanted her to leave. "You look preoccupied, ma'am. I'll come back later."

"Show me how you'd throw a baseball," Shepard neutrally demanded, flipping the small ball at Sam while sitting upright on the couch.

"What? Now?"

"Right now, Specialist."

Oh, this can only end well, Sam mused sarcastically as she backed away from Shepard. Six to one odds I crack the window and breach the hull. Three point five to one I pop Shepard in the face and require yet another apology. Two to one I throw it behind me like a bloody idiot.

Traynor, when your CO says jump, you just ask how high.
"Now, try not to be too blown away by my obvious athleticism, Commander. You still have a war to fight and require complete use of your mental faculties."

…Did she just smile? Because I said something funny, or the idea of me throwing a baseball correctly is downright hilarious?

One thing at a time, Traynor.

Drawing from a blurry memory of a Little Samantha Traynor on a playground on Horizon, Big Samantha Traynor set her feet apart and rolled the ball around in her fingers. After finding a comfortable grip along the worn red stitching, Sam twisted her body while raising a leg and shoulder to put some real power behind that throw.

The baseball sailed in a light arc across the short observation deck. Before it could reach Shepard's left shoulder, a flare of biotic blue suspended the ball inches in front of Shepard, who hadn't even moved. The crinkle of a smile at the edges of her eyes and lips broke the surface into actual approval.

Not at all upset that her subordinate had (once again) attempted to strike her, Commander Shepard politely golf-clapped. "Well done, Traynor. If you ever get tired of saving lives one QEC feed at a time, you really should get in shape for the women's league. I hear New Canton has a great team."

"You really should get in shape"?! Sam smirked at the jibe. Tell me how you really feel, Commander. Your subtlety is just incredible.

"I'll have you know, Commander, that I meet the bare minimum sit-up, pull-up and push-up standards the Alliance requires. I am in positively fighting shape… to sit at a console all day."

Ignoring Samantha's quip, Shepard thoughtfully asked, "What do you know about biotics, Traynor?" Samantha straightened stiffly, but thought a moment. Is this a loaded question?

"Dreadfully little, ma'am. Most kids on my colony were sent to the Ascension Project when biotic ability was discovered, and the biotics on Arcturus…" Deep breath. Don't cry now. Push through it. "…the biotics in R&D had their own facilities and projects separate from the QEC team. Very little crossover."

"Come here." Shepard crossed the room while flicking the hovering ball into her open right hand. She mimicked the throwing stance Samantha had used, but froze in place, body partially twisted and right elbow akimbo.

"You see this empty space between my elbow and chest? This is where you pull from when you make a throw, right?" At Sam's nod, Shepard continued, "That's pretty much what biotics do. You're pulling from within and flowing it beyond yourself. Just like throwing a baseball.

"You feel out of control for a few seconds as you twist and push your momentum outside of your body. It starts here," Shepard gestured at the empty space again, then made a slow-motion throw. First the wrist cradled the ball across her chest and pulled back. Once her hand was at a right angle to her bicep, Shepard propelled the hand forward, snapping the wrist back as the arm fully extended in front of her. Biotic blue threads flicker like static along the arm.

"And it's not just the arm," she added, letting go and allowing her biotics to gently push the ball in a whimsical spiral before dropping it to the floor. "The fingers are important, too."

Shepard splayed her hand outward, looking as though she were reaching for Sam. Samantha had the tiniest of urges to step forward and thread her fingers through that warm invitation.
"Are you barking mad?"

"If your hand is open during a throw, you sacrifice precision for surface area. You can hit a wider target with less force. But, if your fingers are together…" Trailing off, Shepard brought her fingers together in a tight knife of a hand. "You get power. Control. Force."


*What's this about? A free lesson? Has she been thinking about Grissom Academy and biotics' role in the war? Sam's mind filled with questions, most of them too personal to ask outright. Because despite the formality of Shepard's tone, there was something… vulnerable… about her. Like she was trying to say something but using the baseball bit to say it.*

*I just wish I knew what it meant.*

Samantha cleared her throat. "Yes—well… should I ever develop any latent biotic talent after a 26-year absence, I will be sure to sign up for Commander Shepard's Baseball Metaphor Biotics 101." At Shepard's exhale of amusement, a beast within Sam crowed. It wanted to hear Shepard laugh. For once.

*Challenge accepted.*

"…And then when I want to learn biotics properly, I will ask Jack."

That did it.

It wasn't long or deep, but a simple staccato of chuckles from deep within Shepard's throat. The laugh lasted less than five seconds, but it had transformed the soldier into something resembling a woman finally. Her entire body shook while her head dipped, allowing those deep red locks to swing and dance around her cheeks. A smile wrinkled Shepard's freckled nose and creased her brow in a relieved way, and she seemed surprised that she was still capable of such a feat as laughter.

"You've got that right, Traynor. But in Jack's class, you're liable to get your ass kicked. Literally."

*It's nice to know that despite their exchange of face punches, Shepard and Jack did have a mutual respect for one another.*

Retrieving the baseball, Shepard dropped down to the couch once again and put it back in spinning orbit around her. Sam had another million questions, most of them about where the hell a baseball had come from. But it didn't seem proper to interrupt the Commander when she looked so… so…

*Yes, where are you going with this thought, Traynor?*

*Shut it.*

Not waiting to be dismissed, Samantha backed away slowly. She was about to scamp when she spotted the box with the hamster by the desk. Scooping it up, Sam crept back up to Shepard and held the box out.

"I found something else. I found little Socks here running amok in the engineering basement."

"Socks?" Shepard stood up and peeked inside the box. The hamster was fast asleep on its handkerchief nest. Her brow furrowed with confusion before she glanced up at Sam. "Holy shit, I thought the Alliance had left him to rot in some evidence locker. Or dumped him out an airlock. I can't believe you found him."
The Commander's look of surprise was probably more unsettling than her anger. She accepted the creature and cradled the box protectively while shifting the baseball to her box-hand. Sticking a free hand slightly inside, Shepard wiggled an index finger that the now-awake hamster sniffed curiously. That slight smile again.

Two best friends, together at last. I wish I could take a vid of this to remember by.

"May I ask what the hamster's name really is?"

A full grin this time. Positively radiant. "Actually, I think I like Socks better."

"Socks it is, ma'am."
"I don't mean to be rude. But if I put you on hold, it's not because I love you any less. It's because I'm kind of trying to not die."

[Call muted]

Priya Suresh-Traynor grimaced in horror on Samantha's tiny vid. It was an appropriate reaction to the larger frame this call to her mother was windowed in: muzzle flashes and smoke surrounding a constant stream of Cerberus soldiers. Thank God mum can't see this. She'd flip out. At least her special girl is a few thousand kilometers above Sanctum aboard a spaceship?

Oh. Shit. She probably won't find the whole "trying to not die" comment cheeky or endearing.

Note to self: know your audience.

If that wasn't enough, Samantha Traynor was attempting some truly incredible multitasking at this very moment.

Task the first: fending off Cerberus engineers from hacking Shepard's team comms. The tight Cerberus compound had a lot of entry points and the enemy was trying to flank Shepard, Vega and EDI at every turn. This was on top of reclaiming their Reaper technology under lock and key at the facility. Technology that the Commander was attempting to steal. For all the right reasons, of course.

The view through the hard suit camera of "Shepard, A" was very jostly. And every time the Commander did a biotic charge, Sam felt the mango protein bar in her stomach get irritated. It was keen on coming back up to give Samantha a talkin'-to. Especially every time she saw that split-second zoom in from a six meter distance to less than one, with a Cerberus helmet filling the screen before a biotic fist slammed it away. Ugh. If I didn't know better I'd say she was enjoying herself.

On top of this pair of vids was a constantly updating diagnostic feed. Not Sam's normal QEC comms for updating the galaxy map, either. This new feed was her other piece of heartburn for the Sanctum mission: Sam was attempting to help EDI on her first combat mission.

Task the second: calibrating EDI's mech body in active combat. Which would be bloody impossible if
she weren't helping. Maintaining an evolving algorithm so Cerberus can't track or block her broadcast to the body while also providing constant updates to enemy positions is just... a treat. Couldn't we have done this in a nice, controlled environment? Like the Shuttle Bay? Or the loo?

Task the third…

[Call active]

"Okay, mum, I'm back. Forgive me for being a little …distracted," Sam meekly retorted. Her fingers were flying over her console, and under normal circumstances she would just tell her mother to call her back. But the QEC connection across the galaxy had been bloody awful for the past week with the massive influx of distress calls so a dropped call would take hours, if not days, to reattempt. Making this one call alone had Samantha pulling out every trick in her R&D arsenal.

Torrent real time data feed through the Terminus relay network. Open back door comms on Alliance networks. Set up comm buoys to relay signal. Overlay algorithm to boost signal. Layer feed with encryption suite to maintain security. And somehow manage to have a calm, sincere conversation with mum while also fending off Cerberus hackers and running diagnostics on a mech.

I hope Commander Shepard has a generous pay grade system, because surely this counts as overtime. That Cision Pro Mark-4 isn't going to buy itself.

"Are you certain you're all right? I can call you back if need be," Priya asked with a frown. A trio of lines formed around her eyebrows with concern. A trio of blips appeared on Sam's radar as she swiped at her screens. Incoming Cerberus fighters. Wait, four fighters. Update Cortez with the extraction coordinates.

"I'm fine!" Squeaking, Samantha cleared her throat and tried again more calmly. "…I'm fine. Just some pesky scrubber programs wreaking havoc on my feeds' real time updates. Trust me, mum, I didn't spend two hours jury-rigging this call just to try again later." Well, more like four. Unless I want to forgo sleep tonight, I don't have another four hours to try this shit again.

Priya raised an eyebrow. "Well, as long as you're sure. Things are pretty quiet back home at least. Your father is getting ready for yet another city council meeting. They've updated our evacuation protocols again. We have another evac drill tonight."

Noticing some hostile code nosing its way into EDI's diagnostic feed, Sam fought back with a boost to the firewall. "Sounds like Horizon is prepared for the worst. Has there been any Reaper activity in your neck of the Terminus?"

"Thank heavens, no. Another colony went dark, though. Tiptree. I haven't been able to make contact with my cousin Amisha or her husband, but she said she was taking her family to the Citadel a week ago. Do you—do you know if there's a way to see if she made it there safe?"

Cortez's comm signal spiked, and Sam could hear in her earpiece a frantic exchange about how hot the extraction point was. The cut to Vega's camera also revealed the thin strip of landing platform crawling with Cerberus soldiers carrying shields. "Unfortunately, the Normandy hasn't docked at the Citadel in almost two weeks. It's up to Commander Shepard to tell us where to go, and she's been on a tear lately," Samantha evaded with a sigh. I'm pretty sure that information is locked down tight at the Alliance embassy. If just anyone could pull up docking manifests and passenger logs, organized crime would probably go through the roof on the Citadel.

Sam's mother frowned for a second. "Oh, okay. Well, I'll send you her IP. Maybe you'll have better luck the next time you go to the Citadel." Priya tucked her gray black hair behind her ears. "Sammy.
Were you keeping up with your sessions? Before… you know…”

"Mum…”

"I know you hate it when I ask. I'm not nagging you, I promise. I just want to make sure you're okay. Especially being so far from home."

Samantha sighed. Shepard and team had made it back to the shuttle. EDI was running her own post-combat diagnostic. All of Sam's tasks had taken care of themselves in rapid succession. Now she had to actually talk to her mother.

About why she hadn't been seeing her counselor.

"I was busy. With the retrofits. I was seeing someone." Isabella… Sam shook her head. Not going through that right now. "I haven't had a nightmare in over a month." About Horizon, anyway. "So no. I missed a couple sessions with Dr. Harper before Earth—before I left."

Priya was silent. She chewed her lip before carefully picking her words. "After all you saw… do you think—are you okay, Samantha? Please don't answer right away just to tell me what I want to hear. I'm asking you, sweetie: are you okay?"

Tilting her head back, Sam closed her eyes. She took a few deep breaths and tried to clear her mind. Her mental to-do list was still circling, as was a chess move she'd been working on in her downtime.

There it is. There weren't screams in this buried memory, just hushed whispering. It had grown blurry after almost a year and even managed to fade some. All the noisy chaos aboard the Normandy tended to overshadow that long day ten months ago on Horizon. With the whispering, hiding and terror. Arcturus had been far worse, since the R&D section was quiet and the dorms secluded. Too much quiet and too much time to think.

Well, if that doesn't sound like denial, I don't know what does, Traynor.

"For all intents and purposes, mum," Sam hesitated as she looked back down at her mother on her vid screen. "...I'm all right. There's been some occasional sobbing in the girls' washroom, especially right after what happened on Earth, but I'm keeping busy. I'm making a difference here. One day at a time, right?"

"One day at a time," Priya Suresh-Traynor repeated. The psychologist's favorite trite bullshit advice.

Her mother stood up straighter. "I wish you would come home, Sammy. A lot of people have been moving to that bunker. Sanctuary? I think it's called? I've been trying to convince your father that we should go there, but he insists on the evac drills and the city council meetings and the normalcy. He says squatters will move in to our house and trample my flower beds and draw moustaches on our family photos. The worst thing imaginable, he says," Priya said with a smile. Her imitation of her husband was a little gruff and sarcastic, but full of affection.

Samantha dryly agreed. "Truly horrific. The Great Moustachening on Horizon would live forever in infamy." An incoming message distracted her. Finally, the salarian dalatrass had agreed to the terms of the war summit. A full house. The turian primarch, krogan war chief and salarian dalatrass. "Mum? I need to update the galaxy map and report to my CO. I'll send you an email later. With pictures this time. You know I'm dreadful about taking pictures."

"I didn't see your college dorm 'til you were a junior," Priya remembered with a shake of her head. Her salt and pepper bangs came loose from their safety behind her ears. "It's a mother thing. We like to know our children aren't living in squalor and know how to make the bloody bed once in awhile.
To prove we didn't completely fail as parents."

Chuckling, Sam ran her finger behind her ears. *Dammit, now you've got me doing it.* "Well, I share a sleeper pod with the entire female crew, so you'll have to evaluate my hospital corners technique some other time. But I'll take a nice holo of me looking productive and responsible. Not sloppy drunk and hanging from the drive core like a stripper."

"So not like your after graduation party? Excellent. Make mummy proud, Sam." Priya was pretty damn funny when she wasn't a nervous wreck. *Horizon must be doing well if mum is in such a good mood. All things considered.*

"I love yous" were exchanged just as EDI announced over the intercom that the Kodiak had docked with everyone safe and sound.

*All's well that ends well.*

Sam cracked her neck and yawned deeply. A few keystrokes updated the holographic galaxy map. A glowing blue circle appeared around the Annos Basin system, indicating it was ready for Shepard to investigate at her leisure. Satisfied her shift was in a good enough place for a break, Samantha logged out of her system and turned to the elevator.

> 10 minutes for a trip to the loo and the kitchen should be enough of a refresher. *Then it's five long hours 'til my shift's over. Must resist the urge to repurpose the galaxy map for that Star Battle MMO I was playing awhile back.*

EDI greeted Sam as the elevator opened. They exchanged pleasantries while Samantha did a cursory examination of the mech. *Surprisingly little wear and tear, considering the amount of gun-wielding lunatics down on Sanctum. The Evil Sciences Division of Cerberus at least knew how to make mechs last.* EDI politely thanked Sam for her efforts, and indicated the mech's performance was satisfactory to Commander Shepard for continued deployment.

*A smashing success. Now I really need to pee.*

Humming quietly along to the elevator music, Sam was feeling slightly better about—

"Nope. You're coming with me."

"I—What?"

Before Sam could even process what had happened, Diana had burst into the elevator on the Crew Deck, herded Sam back and hit the button for Engineering. She was holding a nutrient bar in one hand and a mug of tea in the other, but her expression was intense and focused.

"May I ask what—"

"Shhhh—shush—shush… You'll see in a second."

"But I have to pee. Fiercely."

"You can pee any time."

"…in about three minutes, you have no idea how right you are," Samantha grumbled. The number "4" for Engineering finally blinked on and Sam was shooed out the door by a crazy woman wielding tea. She started to make her way to Allers' room (*bloody hell, just get this over with*), but the reporter stopped her.
"No, stupid. Look out the damn window."

Below in the Shuttle Bay were two lone soldiers.

Beating the shit out of each other.

James Vega and Commander Shepard had stripped off some of their armor, leaving their lower armor and shin guards still on while their upper bodies were comically devoid of clothing. They looked absurdly bottom heavy with heavy plate below thin Alliance tank tops and bare arms. Both soldiers were bouncing and weaving, fists held up near their faces in readiness. The whole scene was accented by clouds of smoke and steam from the cooling down Kodiak beside them.

"How did you even—didn't they just get back literally a minute ago?"

"I know, right! Cortez told me about it when he was hitting the mess. My inner and outer reporter would never forgive myself if I missed Lieutenant Vega picking a fight with Commander Shepard. I wish I could get down there with my camera. …actually…" And just like that, Allers vanished. She reappeared a moment later with her camera drone hovering beside her. There was a glistening wet spot on the metal hallway where she had spilled some tea in hurry.

Vega and Shepard weren't quite in a throw-down, drag-out brawl. They kept taking measured swings and jabs, giving the other an opportunity to block. But a few fists had struck home. A dribble of blood trickled down James' chin, a souvenir from his fat lower lip. Shepard was sporting a moustache of red on her upper lip from a jab to her freckled nose.

Samantha watched the spectacle for a few more seconds, but she didn't share Diana's giddy glee. Actually, Sam was pretty concerned. Vega and Shepard seemed to get along. He's been on pretty much every mission since we left Earth, so she trusts him in combat at least?

So what the hell happened?

She turned to Allers, who was still grinning with intrigue and sipping her tea. "Did Steve say what they were fighting about?"

"Dissention in the ranks. The lieutenant was critical of the commander's priorities. And not helping Earth. Apparently this is how Shepard handles insubordination." Diana's oversimplified explanation sounded suspect to Sam. Sure, Vega was pretty grouchy about running to the Citadel, but…
"While I have an appropriate level of shame to know this is wrong… I wish we could hear what they were saying."

Allers fired up her Omni-tool and laughed. "I thought you'd never ask!"

"What? I didn't! …did you bug the Shuttle Bay?" Samantha's jaw dropped in horror.

Sniffing with disdain, Allers waved Sam off. "You slander me. I'm not a spy, Traynor. I'm a reporter. I was interviewing Cortez before they headed down to Sanctum and left my extra mic on the workbench. I'm just putting it to good use." She twisted and adjusted some icons on the glowing orange interface.

"—who says I'm blaming myself?" Vega's shout crackled over Diana's Omni-tool.

A few grunts from Shepard matched her hard swings below. "I do. That stunt back on Mars was reckless. You're lucky to be alive."

Vega bobbed and weaved, accepting a few punches to his hard abdomen with little effort. "So?"

"So maybe you don't care if you live or die."

Pressing back with jabs to Shepard's face, Vega scoffed. "So you're a shrink now? That's a laugh coming from you. How many days have we spent chasing Cerberus because you've got a bug up your ass about 'em? Throwing our lives away on Cerberus now? I thought we were fighting for Earth."

"You're out of line," Shepard growled as a punch slammed into her cheek, splitting it open. She staggered back, but leaned forward and lunged with a pair of heavy crosses.

"Am I? Maybe I'm just willing to do whatever the fuck it takes to end this God damn war!"

Sputtering as Shepard's fists connected with his face, Vega dropped his hands and stood up straight. "...Are you?"

Rubbing the fresh bruise on her cheek, Shepard crossed her arms. "More than you'll ever know. But if you sacrifice yourself, or my ship, needlessly: that's unacceptable."

Samantha chewed on her lip. She wasn't one to take sides, but part of her thought… Vega was right. They'd brushed off the war summit ever since Grissom Academy. Shepard's attitude had ranged from
manic to that weird calm in the Starboard Observation Deck yesterday. She was on the verge of frenzy, and this legendary focus that was so part of Shepard's reputation had been absent.

Vega snarked a thanks for the pep talk, and tore off the rest of his armor before mumbling about hitting the showers. Shepard remained in the Shuttle Bay, and Allers' mic didn't pick up anything other than shuffling footsteps.

*What, were you hoping the Commander would start monologuing her feelings to the Kodiak?*

Diana's loud exhale broke Sam's concentration. The reporter was on her Omni-tool, while static-laced snippets of the previous conversation trickled out as she fast forwarded and rewound.

*This is none of our business.*

Gritting her teeth, Sam was suddenly protective. "What are you going to do with that footage, Allers?"

Not answering right away, Diana's head turned to Samantha but her eyes remained on her Omni-tool. She shrugged. "Oh, I dunno. Doesn't really fit into any of my Battlespace segments. Not terribly motivational when it comes to the war effort either, but could be a juicy exposé once this is all over."

Sam slapped a hand over Allers' wrist. "Delete it. Now."

"What did you say?"

"I said you're erasing that footage. Right now, Allers. " The two women glared at each other. Sam was never usually this ballsy. Confrontation made her queasy, and there was already that lurching jolt in her stomach the longer Samantha stared Diana down. Her forehead started to sweat and she wanted so badly to look away. Letting her hand drop from Allers' wrist, Sam had to clench her fists to keep them from shaking.

Diana stuck her lower lip out defiantly and raised an eyebrow. Then nodded with a sigh. "All right."

"All right?"

"I'll delete it."

"Really?"

Allers chuckled and punched Sam lightly on the arm. "Really. You're right. I'm a guest here. Shepard already doesn't like me on her ship, I'm not gonna rock the boat. I don't want to be tossed out of the airlock just for some stupid bullshit story that isn't even a story. So yea." An orange glow danced over Allers' face as she fired up her Omni-tool, but Sam was still studying her to see if she was lying.

"Stop glaring at me, Traynor. You can have EDI poke through my shit if you don't believe me. Just keep her off my extranet bookmarks. What I do in my free time is none of that AI's business," Diana laughed airily. She punched Sam on the arm again, before frowning. "Are we cool?"

Leaning back, Samantha crossed her arms. She was waiting for her heart to slow down a little before answering. *Thank God she backed down. I probably would have thrown up on her shoes. Or peed on them. "We're cool, Allers."*

She glanced out the window to see Shepard leaning over the crates. Her arms were straight out and braced against the cargo while her head hung down. All Sam could see were sculpted shoulder
muscles and a tangled mess of red hair. "Do you think—is Shepard all right? Should I go check?"

A lilting laugh came from behind Sam. "Your funeral. First you'll have to explain how you know why she's in such a shitty mood. And if you sell me out, Traynor, I will start putting hidden cameras on the Crew Deck and start a vid blog titled 'How many times does Specialist Traynor pick her nose in a day?' …Or any other myriad of unlady-like things you might do. The extranet has a huge fetish following, so you'll probably end up a star."

"Tempting, but no thanks. I promise I won't name drop you."

"Again, your funeral. My tea is cold. And I thought you had to pee?"

Samantha turned around just as the elevator doors were closing. Thanks for waiting for me. …whore. It was close to a minute before the elevator reappeared empty. Hesitating over the buttons, Sam sighed and hit the glowing "5." I'm a sucker for punishment. Plus if I can stand up to Diana's temper, Shepard's should be a piece of cake.

Right?

Deciding to at least give herself a buffer, Sam paged Dr. Chakwas to the Shuttle Bay. She got an immediate response.

[Message received: "w/ a patient atm, b there ~5min."]

She writes like a bloody teenager.

The doors opened to reveal Shepard still at her vigil against the cargo area in the middle of the bay. As Sam tiptoed around the weapon benches and armor locker, movement caught her eye. Several crates in a semi-circle around the Commander were laced with a crackle of biotic blue. They hovered uncertainly, gripped but loose.

"Commander?" I need an excuse to say something. Think, Traynor, think. "You have a new message at your private terminal."

Surprisingly, that actually worked. Shepard looked at Sam over her bent elbow. She blew an errant wisp of red hair out of her eyes and nodded tersely. The hovering crates were suddenly released and banged against the metal floor. Pushing off, Shepard eased into a sitting position on the floor. Her spine pressed intimately into a gap between boxes, and she leaned her head back after closing her eyes.

Only the gentle whum-whum of the drive core could be heard, so the silence was deafening to Sam. She took a hesitant step back toward the elevator. Well, you certainly thought this through. Shall we talk about the weather? The color of Cerberus trooper blood? My favorite vid? Does she like romantic walks on the beach and getting caught in the rain? …whoa, where did that last bit come from?

"How are you settling in, Traynor?" Shepard asked lightly, thankfully distracting Sam from her thoughts.

Gingerly stepping back to lean against the crates next to Shepard, Samantha thought a moment before deciding on a conversational approach. "I actually feel somewhat useful. It's been challenging to integrate data feeds for the war summit. Which is now on schedule, by the way. I just got confirmation."
"How are the systems holding up?" Another boring, professional question. *She doesn't want to talk about what happened. ...did you expect her to? Because you are just the best of friends?*

"Well..." Samantha hesitated, but smiled. "I'm glad we performed stress tests."

EDI, always listening, chimed in overhead. "Specialist Traynor has been extremely helpful. The accuracy of our war room data is a direct result of her work." That warm, singing feeling had returned. *Oh EDI, you tease. You know just how to make a girl feel wanted.* "Thank you, EDI."

When Shepard didn't respond, Sam rushed to fill the empty space. For some reason, Shepard's silences were always a green light in Sam's mind to just ramble on. "I'm still getting used to all of this. In the lab, we'd hoard everything—piles of tech everywhere. Out here, it's like living out of a shoebox."

Rubbing her jaw, Shepard looked past Sam. Upward. Samantha turned around and looked up to see several faces pressed against the Engineering deck window. Rashad, Adams, Hertzfeldt, and Douglas all jumped up in comical synch, then scattered. Shepard sighed. "Life on an active ship always feels crowded at first. You get used to it."

And, to Sam's utter surprise: Shepard patted the ground beside her. She was actually asking, without asking, that Sam sit with her. *Vega must have hit her harder than I thought. I'm glad I called Dr. Chakwas when I did. She's delirious.* But Samantha obliged, and mimicked the Commander's leaning sit against the cargo hold. The intimate, friendly atmosphere should have been rewarding.

Instead, it made Sam stupid. "Oh, it's not a bad thing. I've got no problems... getting cozy." She even had the audacity to giggle.

"Getting cozy"... "getting cozy"?! Are you barking mad? *You're flirting! You flirt! Your commanding officer just killed about 20 people and beat the crap out of one of your crewmates, and you're flirting!*

Samantha cleared her throat, but Shepard didn't react. One of her eyes was still closed, while one peered curiously. Shepard's anger came ringing back to Sam's mind, and she decided a different tactic. *Look, she's been agitated and dealing with insubordination. Try to be appreciative. Maybe it will be refreshing."

"This is wonderful," Sam purred lightly, waving her hand in front of her. "Back in the lab, we had to hoard because we had no budget. It was a nightmare, and every researcher for herself. But now..."

Sam glanced around the Shuttle Bay. She remembered when Steve was outfitting this place back on Earth. Every requisition form he filled out, whether it was for a pile of bolts or a state-of-the-art procurement system, was signed off on. It was wonderful, and Samantha's requisitions wish-list flashed in her mind. "EDI? Ariake Tech uses a proprietary smart-processing algorithm that could clean up our long-range data. Can we license it?"

To Sam's delight, EDI responded with approval and by the time Sam could grin cheerfully at Shepard, the AI had already applied and analyzed the upgrade, determining it to be an efficient change to the Normandy. Shepard focused both eyes on Sam, and nodded. "Impressive." Samantha murmured that she could get used to living out of the shoebox, to which Shepard smiled lightly.

Silence once again enveloped the Shuttle Bay, but Samantha wasn't quite ready to leave yet. It was Shepard who broke it this time. "I fucking hate Cerberus."

*Not exactly a winning conversation starter. "I noticed, ma'am."*
The elevator door spared Sam from what would undoubtedly be a difficult conversation. *Because I... don't hate Cerberus. I mean, I sort of pity them? I guess? But how can I hate something that without it... I'd probably be dead. If Shepard hadn't worked with Cerberus, I'd be a Collector prisoner. Or dead. So would my family.*

**Would you hate me if I didn't hate them?**

Dr. Chakwas swept into the Shuttle Bay with a large packet of medi-gel and her Omni-tool glowing. "So sorry to keep you waiting, Commander."

"Waiting? I didn't send for you, doctor." Shepard glanced at Sam in confusion.

*Eeep.*

**Think, Traynor, think.**

But the good doctor shot Sam a kind smile before setting her bag down in front of the Commander. "Lieutenant Vega mentioned you might have need of my services. He had some rather nasty bruises and indicated you might also be sporting injury. From ...Sanctum? No doubt?" Karin eyed the darkening bruise on Shepard's chin, as well as orange cybernetics peaking through the cut on her cheek.

Muttering assent, Shepard closed her eyes while Dr. Chakwas dabbed medi-gel on her face. Sam let out a quiet sigh of relief. *I owe that woman a drink.* Her eyes couldn't help but wander as Karin peeled up Shepard's tank top to examine her torso, stopping just short of her breasts. Dark purple dots peppered muscular abs, the sign that the Commander's shields had failed and bullets were hitting her armor. But there was no penetration or blood, and the doctor's probing fingers revealed no indication of internal injury. Nor did her Omni-tool, as Dr. Chakwas administered a long overdue scan.

Sam asked if she should leave, for this whole examination seemed rather personal. Shrugging off her concern, Shepard pulled her tank top down and waved dismissively. *What does that mean, should I stay? Or go?*

*I think if the Commander wanted you to leave, she'd say so.*

Dr. Chakwas wanted to keep an eye on Shepard's cybernetic implants. "Expensive stuff, bringing me back," the Commander quipped with some anger. *"Bringing me back"? Were all those rumors ... true?*

**More questions.**

Karin smiled. "And worth every penny." She glanced at her Omni-tool and considered the diagnosis. "Your system is still detecting your implants as foreign bodies. While there's no health risk, your scars will have trouble healing. I recommend reducing stress levels. Be compassionate."

Shepard scoffed. "This is a war, doctor. We don't have time for that." Her usual acid was back in her voice, and Sam shrank away slightly. She felt silly in comparison, talking to Shepard about shoeboxes. Silly and small.

"There's always time to be kinder. A little more optimism and a little less realism could help, Commander. Otherwise, just a cosmetic issue. If you like that sort of thing," Karin pressed, running her fingertip over Shepard's cheek again. The scars didn't frighten Sam. But the alien lacing of cybernetics under Shepard's skin did somewhat.
Brushing her tenderness away, Shepard growled. "Do you ever regret working for Cerberus?"

"We didn't work for them. We used them," Dr. Chakwas countered with some venom. "If I were to feel anything, it would be guilt." Shepard scoffed again and wrinkled her nose. Several freckles disappeared in the crease.

"Guilt?" Sam repeated incredulously. Karin gestured around the Shuttle Bay. "We took their money. We took their best people. And we took their best ship."

Sniffing deeply, Shepard wiped the smudge of blood on her upper lip away. She glowered at the ground, unconvinced.

"We used them to defeat the Collectors and now we are using their resources against them." Dr. Chakwas placed a hand on Shepard's upper arm and squeezed it reassuringly. "So, no. I don't regret it one bit." The doctor didn't wait to be dismissed, but just turned on her heel toward the elevator.

Samantha's Omni-tool glowed with urgency. Another message from the Primarch. That quick 10 minute break had somehow become 20. *And I still really have to pee.* She stood up, but it felt wrong to turn her back on the Commander.

Extending a hand, Sam offered it to Shepard. Her eyes flicked from the open palm to Sam's eyes back to the palm, but she did accept. This lithe woman, so tiny compared to James Vega, was heavier than she looked. It took a slight heave to haul Shepard to her feet.

"Come, Commander. You have a war summit to host. It's poor manners to be late to your own party."

It was several long seconds before Samantha realized that Shepard was still holding her hand. A heat began to grow in Sam's cheeks, quite against her will. Shepard hadn't seemed to notice, for she was staring off in the distance. She had to blink several times before focusing back on Sam. But still Shepard held on.

Pulling her hand out of that warm grasp and placing it nonchalantly on her hip, Samantha nodded towards the elevator. She smoothed the other hand across her cheeks to push back the blush.

There was no smile, but just that crease around Shepard's eyes. The husky danger in her tone sent a tiny thrill up Sam's spine. "Time to dust off my dress blues and be on my best behavior. Hopefully I remember what that's like."

"I'm certain it's in there somewhere, Commander. And I bet it's lovely."
To: ['mail-list-server: crew-normandy']
07:16:33 GST, 22/03/2186

Subject: War Summit Protocol

At approximately 19:00 GST, the Normandy will begin docking with representatives from the salarian, krogan and turian leadership councils. This will include a military entourage.

Dress code for the remainder of the war summit is Service Dress Uniform for all active crew in the CIC and Crew Deck levels. Full Dress Uniform will be required for anyone in immediate contact with war summit representatives in the War Room and surrounding areas. Crew located in Engineering and the Shuttle Bay may wear regular Service Uniform.

Guards will be posted outside Decks 1, 4, and 5 to redirect any war summit guests. War summit guests are not permitted outside of Decks 2 or 3.

Normal shifts will be observed.

Staff Cmdr Shepard, Annelise M
Human Systems Military Alliance

Dictated but not read

"Dictated but not read" my arse, Samantha scowled as she smoothed out a crease in her dress jacket in the Crew Deck women's washroom. "Dictated and read over and over" is more like it. The better part of the two day haul to Annos Basin had been spent endlessly refining that bloody email to the crew. Apparently, "Senior Comms Specialist" translated to "Master Email Writer" in the Commander's mind.

The whole ordeal had been irritating to Sam. Mostly because it wasn't even done in person. Shepard had been either scarfing down protein bars in the Crew Deck to recover her energy from so much biotic exertion on Sanctum, or up in her cabin doing God knows what. Sam had been tending to her shift, dutifully analyzing the QEC feeds in the War Room, when that first message had popped up.
Well, that could either be good or bad. And at least she instant-messages more coherently than Dr. Chakwas.

Rubbing her eyes, Samantha turned away from the set of elcor feeds she’d been mapping and brought up her Omni-tool’s keyboard.

Now I feel like EDI. “I am pleased to assist!”

Well, that sounds simple enough, Samantha had stupidly thought at the time. What followed was a haphazard string of bullet points on details the Commander wanted regarding the war summit. First it was just the dress code, which was horribly rigid.

Full Service Dress?! Bloody hell, I didn’t even try my replacement dress blues on before I left the Citadel.

And I’d only worn those damn things once anyway at my graduation ceremony.

I’d just kill myself and get it over with. It’d certainly hurt less than standing in the CIC in heels for God knows how long.

So Sam had asked for more information and gone back to work. The elcor time-lapse was proving problematic, because Dekuuna and Ekuna’s high gravity wreaked havoc on her algorithms. Consulting with EDI, Samantha managed to rig an equation to overcompensate for the data lapse, but it wasn’t ideal. Digging around the extranet, Samantha had just found a suitable integration suite when her Omni-tool glowed again.

Your words, not mine. I flunked out of mind-reading in college, Sam grumbled inwardly. Apparently the elcor didn’t just pass out encoding suites to anyone who asked, either. Even with a little thing like a galaxy-wide invasion going on. I miss my irresponsible college days where I’d just pirate the damn thing. But now everything I do is monitored and catalogued, and I have a feeling the Alliance might not be thrilled if I downloaded a server core-collapsing virus from an unverified source.

A long-form was dumped into Samantha’s inbox, with a laundry list of overly personal questions to answer. Before resuming her actual job, she sighed and pondered a tactful response to Shepard. She even took a chance on being informal.

A simple three line email was easy enough to whip up and send over. The blank elcor request form
still leered from her inbox, ready to be tackled. *Is my grandmother's maiden name (on my father's side) truly relevant to the elcor embassy? Or my height and weight? What's next? My turn ons and turn offs? Brand of toothpaste? Cup size?*

[Message received: "Sorry, I checked the Alliance regs. Need that dress code back in the email. And it's still a little too formal. Surely I have more personality than that. –A.S."]

*Speaking of similar cup siz—Don't you dare finish that thought, Traynor.*

"More personality?" *In a bloody email? I could add the Alliance flag waving in the background. Or maybe get Allers to shoot an inspiring vid for it. What the hell does "more personality" mean?*

Sighing deeply, Sam took another stab at it. A simple "Greetings fellow Normandiers" to start, a casual update, and a cheeky sign off from The Commander. With a spot of urgency for everyone to be on their best behavior. *There. Now I have elcor diplomatic relations to smooth over with deeply personal information so the Normandy can have accurately calibrated QEC data. My first job at the Horizon Civic Center and my savings account at Beckmann Financial Savings & Loan are being ransomed for a bloody algorithm.*

[Message received: "When have I ever called anyone a 'Normandier'? That sounds like Joker. No one wants to sound like Joker. Is that what I sound like? –A.S."]

And it went on like this. For hours. Draft after draft discarded, always with some excuse from the Commander: Too personal. Not personal enough. Change the dress code. Change it again. Where should security be? Is that enough security? Maybe we should have more? If only Ashley were here, she'd know, she was always the regs expert. Do we have enough dextro food for the turian guests? We really need to restock. Put in a reminder to go back to the Citadel as soon as possible. What time is it? Holy shit, is it that late? Send it already.

The bridge of Sam's nose ached from all the pinching it was receiving in frustration. Sam had doubled the dose of her migraine medication and it still hadn't penetrated the dull ache that was Collaborating with Commander Annelise Shepard on a Bloody Email. Even hours after the stupid message had finally *finally* been blessed by Her Highness and everyone had gotten on with their lives, Samantha's migraine persisted.

As her Omni-tool glowing brightly with yet another new message, Sam just about screamed. She had to count to ten before turning the dial on the interface. *I am going to train Socks to enjoy the taste of human flesh, and I am going to unleash him in your quarters, Commander. I may not be an ace marksman. But I am a woman, and my revenge will be swift and brutal.*

[Message received: "I appreciate your help with all this, Specialist. I couldn't trust just anyone with this. Joker would probably have everyone standing around in their underwear. Drunk. Thank you. –A.S."]

[Message sent: "If I may be frank, Commander… you're total crap to work with. Work for: fine. You can give orders like a pro. But as a partner, you're rubbish. /Sam"]

[Message received: "That's Staff Commander Rubbish to you, Specialist. I expect you in the CIC at 1900 sharp to welcome our guests. No melting or whining, either. –Shep"]

Buttoning up her formal Alliance jacket, Samantha smirked as she reread that final line. Six hours of back and forth and "dress it up some." All for a stupid email. *And just think, you did say it was an honor to help the war effort by flagging the Commander's messages and mapping intel. You volunteered for this migraine weeks ago. An email and an algorithm traded for your sanity and*
Oo-rah, marine. Or is it "oo-rah, yeoman" now?

Shit.

The women's washroom was starting to get crowded as more of the female crew shouldered their way to the mirrors to apply make-up. Lipsticks were traded, eyelashes were curled, and shirts were groaned over every time a wrinkle was spotted.

Ten to one the men are just running a razor over their faces and calling it good. Six to one their socks don't match. Two point five to one they just sniff at their armpits and have to think about the last time they bathed.

Checking the time, Sam and crew still had about 25 minutes before Go Time. EDI announced over the intercom that docking procedures were beginning with the salarian and krogan vessels. The krogan would be coming in through the Shuttle Bay while the salarians preferred the bow airlock entrance. The turian Primarch, Victus, had already received a contingent of a half dozen men yesterday and hadn't left the War Room.

Samantha ran a comb through her hair one last time and rotated her head in a semicircle to appraise her appearance. *Pristine make-up. A glorious shade of lipstick. No clumps in my mascara. Hair smooth and glossy. Service dress uniform crisp and flattering to my figure. Knock 'em dead, Sam.*

...If there was anyone to knock dead, that is. Who did you want to go to bed with, again? The giant hump-backed lizards, the frog-people, or one of the scaly, bird-legged folks? Assuming any of them even have women in their entourage. I think the salarian dalatrass might be your closest bet. Aim high.

Go get you some, tiger.

"Lookin' good, Traynor," Specialist Ian Douglas whistled appreciatively in the Crew Deck hallway. Sergeant Benjamin Mason nearly bumped into Douglas, for he was a little stiff in his heavier uniform. Both men were following their Commander's orders to a T, well-dressed in their navy and gold-trimmed uniforms. Mason headed for the elevator while Douglas trailed Sam to the Mess Hall kitchen.

Sam smiled politely at Douglas's predatory gleam. *Yea. Right. Not a chance, buddy. Engineer Rashad joined Sam at the skinny pantry hiding bottles of cold water. They toasted the war summit before taking a deep swallow. Then Douglas had to ask a stupid question.*

"So. Traynor. What were you and Shepard doing in the Shuttle Bay night before last? We all saw you."

Sputtering, Sam coughed deeply on the refreshing bit of water now located in her right lung. Rashad had to pound Samantha on the back a few times to clear her airway, though she still felt twinges of pain in her throat and chest. *And now I'm probably bright red. Glad to know that hour of meticulous make-up application was wasted.*

Sam straightened and glared at Douglas, whose eyebrows wiggled suggestively. "What do you think happened?"

"Oh, I want to hear it from you, Traynor."

"She ravished me behind the crates."
"Really?!"

Samantha shot Douglas a withering look and rolled her eyes. "No, not really." Although...

Shut it, Traynor.

But...

No.

"I spotted the Commander skulking in the cargo bay while I was... going to see Allers. I just went down to check to make sure our fearless leader wasn't about to set the Shuttle Bay on fire with her mind. She barely said two words to me before the doctor showed up. Highly stimulating," Sam deadpanned. "We'll be braiding each other's hair and having slumber parties by next week at the latest. A fraternization nightmare in the making." Rashad snickered and elbowed Douglas in the ribs.

"See? I told you nothing happened. This is Traynor we're talking about."

Don't. Don't do it.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Samantha asked sharply. Why? Why do you do these things?

Morena Rashad threw her hands up in the air. The small, mousy woman was quick to apologize.
"Oh, no! I didn't mean—I just... You don't seem like the type of person to take advantage of someone. It's a compliment!" Douglas mumbled a lewd follow-up regarding the things he'd take advantage of with the Commander, starting with her pert, perky—

"Some of us are trying to eat, Douglas. And last I checked, you're on calibration duty during the war summit. Maybe you should read up on the main gun so Garrus doesn't have to do all your work for you," Steve Cortez growled behind them. He was leaning against the Med Bay wall, chewing on a protein bar. Even though the Lieutenant was on Shuttle Bay duty and therefore exempt from the dress code, Steve was elegantly cut in his dress uniform. His cheeks glistened from a fresh application of after-shave.

Douglas saluted politely to the higher ranking officer, but he glowered at the rebuke. Samantha could barely hear his trailing-off mutter as he jogged to the Main Battery. Something about how just because the Commander wasn't his brand of cuisine, Cortez didn't need to ruin it for everyone.

Smiling gratefully at Steve, Samantha ventured over to him. She had another go at her bottle of water, though it still stung her throat slightly. "Thanks for the rescue, Cortez."

"Any time, Traynor. He's always running his mouth off. I bet he tells everyone back home that he rides Reapers like a cowboy."

"When he actually spends most of the day under the floor boards labeling cables," Sam agreed with a laugh-cough. Cortez motioned toward the mess tables, and kindly pulled out a chair for Sam before sitting down opposite her. Always the gentleman.
They sat in silence for a few moments watching crew members joke and laugh as they headed for the elevator. There were quite a few uniformed crew mixed in with those lucky enough to be off duty during the war summit, but everyone was still buzzing with excitement. The war summit was Hope to everyone. Proof that the Alliance was bringing everyone together and the Normandy was going to help overcome the Reapers. In just a few hours, the Commander was going to have a plan and the Normandy would be off.

"How have you been, Steve?" Samantha asked softly. She and Steve had been friends since the first day they'd met in the Alliance docking bay. They were both colony kids. Found their passions, his with flying and hers with QEC, and let the Alliance pay their way through college. He was older, more serious. But he was gentle, solid and stoic. Quick to laugh at her stupid jokes.

Cortez smiled lightly, but his eyes betrayed him. They winced with pain. There was also a subtle tightening in his jaw. He at least was courteous enough not to lie. "One day at a time, Sam." Where have I heard that before? "The Kodiak isn't quite as nimble as my Trident. But it's certainly never a dull moment with Shepard."

"What do you think of her? Of Shepard?" Sam didn't realize how curious she was about his answer. Steve had a rare perspective. One of the few crew members who got to see her before and after the missions. The good, bad and ugly.

Not ugly. I don't think she has an ugly bone in her body. That I've seen, anyway.

"Shepard's a piece of work, that's for sure," Steve mused lightly. "Barks orders better than my old drill sergeant. But she's an odd one. I can't figure her out."

"How do you mean?"

He gestured with his protein bar after biting off another chunk. "Take Grissom, for example. I was back at the Normandy already when that Cerberus shuttle docked. One minute, Shepard was suggesting the students join the front lines as a biotic artillery squad. A bunch of kids!" Cortez shook his head in disgust. "The next minute, Shepard went to every single kid and checked on them. Their amps. How they were feeling. If they needed an energy bar or juice. Asking them if they had a tingle in their arm pits or neck and if so they should sit down."

"What's that about?"

Shrugging deeply, Cortez wavered a wrist. "I guess it's a biotic thing? Robert explained it to me once,
that biotics have nodes all along their soft tissue. Overexerting can create fissures in the lymph nodes if you're not careful."

It took Sam a moment to think how Steve's husband would know so much about biotics. *He wasn't one, I know Steve told me that... What did Robert do again?*

*Oh right! On Ferris Fields, he was an Alliance administer at a pharmacy and drug center specializing in red sand addiction. Biotics love their red sand.*

"That sounds terrible."

"No kidding. Anyway, she went to every kid individually. She was soft, kind, and even encouraging. Kissing their owies but then telling them to suit up and die for the Alliance. She said later that everyone deserved their chance to fight this war on their terms. And who was she to tell them to stop?" Steve sighed. He didn't approve.

"Who was she? She's Commander bloody Shepard," Samantha quipped lightly. She knew the warning signs when Steve was about to fade into his sadness over Robert. She'd become decently adept at pulling him out of it, though Lieutenant Vega had proven to be slightly better.

*I think Steve just likes Vega's rippling muscles. But his six-pack doesn't hold a candle to my rapier wit. Though he does know more about sports than I ever will.*

Exhaling with a laugh, Steve agreed. "Commander bloody Shepard. Free-er of children and ass-kicker of Cerberus. That's the other thing. She practically gave those biotic kids hugs, but on Sanctum, Vega had to drag her ass onto the Kodiak. She wouldn't leave. The LZ was completely overrun, but Shepard just stayed there. Throwing Shockwaves, charging into clusters of troops, detonating Novas. Shooting until her ammo was out."

"That sounds terrifying," Sam amended her earlier statement. *That explains her dreadful argument with Vega. He interrupted her revenge on Cerberus.*

"How have you been, Sam?" Cortez returned softly. He didn't want to talk about Shepard anymore.

"One day at a time," Samantha repeated back. "Where do you think you'd be right now if you weren't on the Normandy?"

Cortez rubbed his hands together as he finished his protein bar. His fingertips stopped at the silver wedding band on his left hand, but he cleared the sudden emotion from his throat. "I probably would have volunteered for the Fifth Fleet to fly some of Hackett's birds. But I'm where I'm supposed to be, I think. I would have gone crazy staying at Ferris Fields, which is why I jumped at the retrofits in the first place."

"I never wanted to do the retrofits," Sam softly told her water bottle. *I was harassed nonstop by Ventura for two months before I agreed to do them.*

*But, if I hadn't, I would have been on Arcturus when—*

Stealing a quick sip to distract from the sudden heat in her eyes, Sam lightened her tone. "The environment isn't ideal. A touch too stressful for my liking. All this coordinating and planning and following orders. Also, bullets. Far too many bullets. Comms do not necessitate bullets."

"You're becoming a real marine, Traynor," Cortez grinned and leaned back in his chair. "Soon you'll be suiting up with Mister Vega and charging into battle with your computer held high. Or is it your Omni-tool? What is the weapon of choice for the aspiring Battle Comms Specialist-class soldier?"
Sam chuckled ruefully. "Laugh it up, pilot-man. And the weapon of choice for the comms specialist is her brains. Not quite as visible as you pilots with your bloody ships, but more important. I forget, do you need brains to pilot your ships? Or does the computer do it all for you now?"

Before the two could start a silly argument over whose job was more important, EDI's lilting voice came over the intercom. "Attention: the war summit is now officially in progress. Please return to your work stations. All CIC crew, please welcome our guests."

Cortez escorted Samantha to the elevator, though he politely declined to join her in the lift. She was going up. He was going down. Even though Sam was going to possibly have to play hostess at her work station, the anxiety of the situation had diminished. She glanced at the reflective wall in the elevator to check her make-up, but unfortunately there was still some redness to her cheeks from her earlier embarrassment.

So much for owning the room with my flawless complexion. New goal: not face-planting in front of the Primarch because my feet died in these heels.

...At least you've got it easier than the poor sods in the War Room, Traynor. Xian's on War Room integration during the entire summit, so he's in Full Service Dress. And poor Campbell and Westmoreland have to stand the entire time while monitoring the security curtain.

Speaking of (thinking of?) Westmoreland, the young Private hurried past Sam just as the elevator opened. The young brunette's dress collar was a wreck, and she struggled to adjust her beret along with the assault rifle slung over her shoulder. At least I'm not the only one running late.

The CIC was busier than usual. Fewer crewmembers were loitering around the galaxy map and more of the stations along the outer edge of the room were filled. Eyeballing the room suspiciously, a turian and salarian officer stood protectively near the war room door. Diana Allers was off to the side, attempting to engage the pair in conversation.

Allers threw a nod of greeting at Sam before turning back to the unresponsive guard detail. Her camera drone hovered close by. Her normal low cut top was exchanged in favor of an elegant blazer with silver trim, but the miniskirt remained just in a different color. Glancing at her high stiletto heels made Samantha's feet hurt in sympathy.

Sam's console by the galaxy map blinked back. New messages for the Commander. And one for Sam. Her request to the elcor embassy had been denied because she had failed to answer one of the
application questions. Son of a bitch!

"In case of emergency, contact: [blank]*

*Information missing. Application denied."

A few more choice verbal curse words were held back on Samantha's tongue when a blur of red and silver swept by. From the back, this woman was all curves as she walked while her dress whispered with grace and elegance. Unabashedly, the corner of Sam's eye roved upward, appreciating the craftsmanship on the gown and the supple curve of the woman's waistline to her shoulders. But her admiration hit the brakes when the sleek neckline transitioned to a set of curving blue head ridges.

Liara.

The asari doctor had paused at the entrance to the bow hallway. She had stopped Commander Shepard and was fidgeting over the human's formal uniform. Shepard squirmed slightly, but her untamed confidence seemed to have returned. She smiled lightly at Liara, and her hand wave suggested she had just paid the asari a compliment.

Shepard's loose waves of red hair were pulled back into a ponytail, though the asari had dabbed a thumb on her tongue to smooth over a few errant wisps. The Commander's uniform closely resembled Lieutenant Commander Williams', though trimmed with the gold bars of her slightly higher rank.

Still staring at the two women, Sam was dimly aware EDI had pressed an announcement for Shepard to hurry to the conference room. The Commander glanced at the ceiling and placed a hand on Liara's waist. She leaned in to speak close to Liara's ear. Where are their ears? Sam ardently wished she could hear what they were saying, for their body language was intense and intimate. Shepard gestured with regret to the back of the CIC while Liara nodded. Brushing past the asari, Shepard met Sam's eyes and flicked her fingertips up in a brief wave.
Sam tried to clear her throat and intercept the Commander in the way Liara had, but Shepard had already disappeared into the security area. She wasn't sure why she felt a brief pang of competition with the asari. It twisted up inside Samantha's throat and rekindled the wheezy pain from her earlier coughing fit.

Just as Sam turned back to her console, she glanced up and saw Dr. T'Soni watching her curiously. Her blue eyes flicked to the security door and back at the comms specialist. Her white info drone appeared at her elbow, spinning and whirring, but Liara ignored it and continued to study Sam.

A glow on Samantha's Omni-tool spared her from the awkward staring contest with Liara. Sighing quietly with relief, Sam flicked a finger over her inbox.

[Message received: "Oh, by the way, our war summit allies are all meeting in the CIC after. Could you send them off with a little speech? Doesn't have to be fancy, just a few words. Thanks. –Cmdr Rubbish"]

Oh son of a bi—

"In case of emergency, contact: Cmdr Annelise Shepard. Comm link IP: 012.7.31454.1-N2.

Miss Shepard would also like to be opted in to any and all elcor tourism, commerce, colony and marketing correspondence you may offer."
Yawning deeply, Samantha didn't care that she was barefoot in the Mess Hall. Her throbbing feet welcomed the cool metal floor, though they would honestly prefer she be sitting down. Instead, the comms specialist hopped from one aching foot to the other while she waffled indecisively outside Liara's door.

Six hours in the pair of heels Sam now carried in the crook of her elbow had been far too long for her unpracticed ankles. But the war summit had been a long, suspenseful waiting game. Only Shepard (and EDI) knew what went on in that conference room. The rest of the crew, like Samantha, had been stuck ambling around their work stations trying to look productive.

Other than gleefully watching Shepard's inbox fill up with elcor-themed junk mail and poking through the QEC feeds, the overdressed comms specialist had passed the time quietly playing a strategy game on her Omni-tool. A new one had just come out, Blood Feud, from one of her favorite game publishers. As a leader of a mercenary band, the dastardly Captain Sam the Merciless was leading her Indigo Flares against the rival Hemoglobin Gang and Sun Shadows. Her blue team had to amass mercenaries, supplies, trade lines and ships before the red or yellow teams in order to rule the galaxy with an iron fist.

Just as Captain Sam captured her final ship to secure the Terminus Systems under her terrifying rule, Shepard strode purposefully out of the security curtain. Following close behind the Commander was the krogan war chief, Urdnot Wrex. The imposing former mercenary's toothy grin was predatory. With a strangled gasp, Sam remembered she was ordered to have closing remarks prepared. Is that why she's here? Bollocks! I should have been practicing! I didn't think she was serious!

"I need your console, Specialist," Shepard demanded in a neutral tone. Samantha automatically stepped aside. The krogan stood impassively behind both women, carefully watching Shepard fiddle with the galaxy map.

Sam stared at Shepard out of the corner of her eye, studying the woman. Her jaw was hardset. The Commander hardly bothered to wear make-up (minus some understated accents around her green
eyes), but her skin still was somehow always creamy and smooth with a liberal dotting of freckles. The cheek facing Sam's side still had a fading bruise from Shepard's fight with Vega. The healing cuts along her cheekbone and jawline had a craggy glow of orange. Part of Sam wanted to reach out, to touch that skin, to heal those wounds.

*You really are barking mad, Traynor. You know that.*

*What can I say? I'm an old softie.*

That silly thought was interrupted by a grunt behind Sam. She turned to her side to smile at Wrex, though the krogan didn't smile back. "Cheers," Sam muttered softly, but it came out more as a cough than a word. Clearing her throat, the comms specialist tried again. She started to launch into a polite wrap-up she'd been practicing. *Well, not so much "practicing" as "making up on the spot." I hope I don't stutter. Or throw up. Throwing up would be bad.*

"G—Good evening, Chief …um …Urdnot?" *Shit! I didn't read the primer on krogan naming etiquette. Chief Wrex? Chief Urdnot Wrex? Shit! "The… um… the Alliance would like to thank you for… umm…"

*Stop saying "um!"*

"Traynor," Shepard hadn't looked up, but just said her name. Receiving no further cues from her commanding officer, Samantha continued her remarks while the krogan stared with an eyebrow raised. Her palms had started to sweat and the rhythmic pound of her heartbeat kicked into high gear.

"That is, we are delighted to be your host for this—this summit, and if there's…"


"It isn't?"

"No. The war summit is over. Wrex here will be joining us on Sur'Kesh."

"Sur'Kesh, Commander?"

"We're going to the salarian homeworld. Now."

The krogan finally spoke. It was a terrifying voice: low and guttural, booming and sneering, all in one wet breath. "Glad to hear you haven't lost your sense of initiative, Shepard." The way Wrex said the Commander's name… he sounded amused.

"I beg pardon?" Samantha ventured, but both soldiers ignored her.

Shepard turned her head sharply, but kept her tone even. "I didn't lose anything, Wrex. I'm still me."

"Are you?" Wrex challenged. "You talked a good game on Virmire three years ago. Almost made me believe you were on the krogan's side. If you get in my way on Sur'Kesh like you did with Maelon's data on Tuchanka, Shepard…" The threat hung ominously in the air. Shepard's eyes narrowed slightly. "This is the future of my people. I am taking those females back to our homeworld where they belong. So get behind me, or get out of my way."
Shepard's eyes flicked to Sam's and twitched slightly, causing the comms specialist to shrink away. Sam desperately wished to be invisible, and she suspected the Commander wished the same. This was a very private conversation that a doe-eyed comms specialist wasn't supposed to be privy to. Do I wish I knew what they were talking about? Because I kind of don't want to know.

Once the galaxy mapped pinged the salarian homeworld and Joker confirmed the destination over the intercom, Wrex turned on his (rather large) heel back to the war room.

"Tell EDI and Garrus to suit up. We land on Sur'Kesh in two hours." Shepard stood at the galaxy map for a few moments longer than necessary. Samantha noticed the Commander's knuckles turning bright white and the skin stretched taut in her tight grip of the support bar.

"Commander…" Sam didn't know what to say. She wanted something witty and comforting and perfect to somehow make everything better. But it just didn't exist.

Out of the corner of her eye, Samantha saw Diana Allers stalking her way around the galaxy map. The reporter's camera drone followed close behind. Allers made eye contact with Sam, tossed her head at Shepard then smiled encouragingly.

What is she—?

Oh God. She wants to interview Shepard. Abort! Abort!

Diana stopped in her tracks when she saw Sam's tight, but emphatic, shake of the head. Favoring Shepard's back with her best panicky glance, Sam scrunched up her face to best communicate: For the love of God, do not talk to Shepard. Unless you want to be tossed out the airlock.

Thankfully, Allers understood the nonverbal communication and had her camera pan over the CIC with a flourish. As though that were the intent all along. Just the reporter wanting a better angle of the Normandy's command center.

Sam started to exhale with relief, but had to hold it in when the Commander turned around. Shepard mumbled a vague "Specialist" before heading for the elevator. Shepard retired to her cabin, probably to grab her armor and guns and other warrior things that warriors did. Because they're warriors.

And you're a comms specialist. Chewing her lip, Sam shifted her weight uneasily. The last few hours in dreadful shoes started a chain reaction ache in her feet and ankles, but her shift was nearly over. By the time the Normandy reached the salarian homeworld, a fresh comms specialist would be at the
"I feel like I should be thanking you, Traynor, but I don't know what for," Diana said cautiously as she approached Sam's console. Snorting lightly, Samantha sighed. "You have no idea, Allers. Let's just say you were about to be the follow-up act to the verbal equivalent of a krogan headbutt. And I suspected your head was too soft and pretty to handle it."

"Well, as long as we agree it's pretty," Allers grinned cheerfully. She made a big show of checking Sam out, from toe to head then back down again. She wolfwhistled. "You clean up good, Traynor. Next time we go to the Citadel, we should go clubbing. While the ANN's per diem does not include alcohol, to my eternal regret, I do know the perfect spot where the marines just line up to buy girls drinks. Especially the pretty ones."

_Clubbing. God, I haven't had a girls' night out in..._ Sam swallowed when she thought of Isabella. She struggled to change her train of thought. _But a little dancing could be fun. If only I had a nice dress—_

Jerking up straight with a start, the comms specialist pushed past the reporter who grunted in confusion. Something like a combination between an "Unh?" and a "Wha—?" Sam's destination was actually just behind Diana, in the storage nook next to the lift. The day the Normandy had left Earth, Sam had stashed an overnight bag there.

A bag that was now gone.

_You've got to be kidding me. Who would steal a bloody overnight bag with a damn dress?_

Samantha dug around a few of the remaining crates, but there was no sign of her red bag with its array of souvenir pins. Crestfallen, Sam limped her way back to her console. She waved off Diana's questioning head tilt, though she promised to tell the reporter later. It was hard to pinpoint why exactly the missing bag depressed Sam so sharply and suddenly. Obviously, it hadn't been a great concern since she'd forgotten it even existed for several weeks.

_I guess... it was the last remnant I'd had of my old life. The satchel I'd had since I was a teenager. It had survived many a chess tournament and trip home from college. ...plus I looked smokin' hot in that black dress. I practically had to tackle another woman for it at the boutique sale rack. It always made me feel... pretty. Confident._

_And now it's gone._

Slapping her on the back, Allers ordered Sam to meet for a drink after her shift was over. The comms expert mumbled an affirmative, but turned to her console to dive into the hour of remaining work. Integrating with salarian comms was both easy and difficult. But more importantly: distracting.

Salarian encryptions were brilliant, complex and beautiful, but the authentication process was blissfully smooth. Sam was so engrossed in her task that she hadn't even seen the dalatrass leave the airlock to return to her ship. But at least she was spared trying to make a speech again. Hopefully Shepard learned her lesson and wouldn't inflict that on Sam again.

_Unless Shepard is a sadist ...that's not likely, right?_

So immersed in her task, Samantha almost didn't notice the time. Or the pulsing throb of her feet. She slipped out of her shoes the moment Xian slowly jogged up to take over her shift. Just as Sam hit the button to call the lift, there was a beep on her Omni-tool.

[Message received: "I have an urgent matter I wish to discuss with you, Specialist Traynor. Please
see me in my office at your earliest convenience. – Liara"

Well, that's ominous.

Sam pondered saying no, but she didn't have a good reason to refuse.

It's not that Samantha Traynor hated asari, per se. It's just that she'd never met one she liked.

Which... sounds unfair.

Truth be told, Sam didn't know that many asari. Horizon was almost an exclusively human colony. Plus Vancouver and Arcturus station, both human military and government-heavy territories, also didn't employ many non-humans. So most of Sam's experience with other races were when she ventured outside her colony for chess tournaments.

I hate competing with asari. So ageless and superior.

Polgara T'Suzsa flashed into Samantha's mind.

"Another boorish upstart. I thought a short-lived species like yours would learn its lesson faster than most. Next time, why don't you try surrendering in advance to save yourself the embarrassment?" Her voice was ringing and smug and Sam always wanted to strangle T'Suzsa. Especially after that last tourney loss.

The perfect example of the ageless, superior asari. Because of the technicalities in how asari were considered aged in their own race, some of Sam's chess tournaments when she was 15-19 were against asari in their 30s and 40s. Of course an extra decade or two meant a world of difference. But higher ranked tournaments had different rules.

Which meant most of Sam's interaction with asari had been as a competitor. Until now?

…what are you competing with Liara for, Traynor?

Something specific?

Shaking her head, Sam padded her way around the corner of the Crew Deck. Again, that feeling of insecurity gave her pause outside of Liara's door. She braced herself against the wall to massage a thumb along the ball of her right foot. Ugh. No more fancy meetings with fancy leaders. Sam raised her arms above her head and stretched, to the rewarding sound of several pops in her lower back. The comms specialist yawned deeply before begrudgingly stepping back into her heels.

All right. Here we go.

Glyph cheerfully welcome Samantha into Liara's cabin. Scanning the room, Sam noticed a vast increase in the number of datapads around since her brief look in this room several weeks prior. The bed also looked pristine, like it had never been slept in.

Why did your eyes go straight to the bed, Traynor? Maybe you don't dislike asari as much as you pretend you do?

Shut it.

"Specialist Traynor," the asari doctor acknowledged from her tower of view screens. A number of feeds and faces were abruptly cleared from Sam's view. The comms specialist inwardly smirked at the lack of trust, but decided to offer some of her own. "Please, call me Samantha. Unless this is a
formal inquisition, Dr. T'Soni."

Liara inclined her head respectfully and returned, "Please. Liara."

But, rather than continue the discussion, Liara regarded the comms specialist coldly. Her eyes seemed to be memorizing every line of Sam's face. Looking through her. It was unsettling.

*Why is everyone on this bloody ship so fond of uncomfortable silences?*

"Um. Liara? I got your message. Responded promptly and everything. May I ask what this is regarding?"

"I apologize if I appear rude, Samantha. I am in a difficult situation. What I wish to ask you is also very difficult, and I am uncertain whether or not I can trust you."

"Do I have to pass a test? Or something?" Sam offered lightly, but the asari did not respond. She was even harder to read than Shepard, which was an impressive feat. *I also don't fancy needing to prove myself to someone needing my help. Isn't that all backwards?*

Turning to her towering console, Liara brought up a series of feeds. Images flashed on the screens, credentials, histories, even childhood videos.

They were all of a young human woman named Samantha Karuna Traynor.

Sam stiffened when she saw her high school graduation photo smiling back at her. Her military ID. A Horizon honor for chess victories. A video from her private extranet group of her and some college girls up to no good at her 21st birthday. "What's this about? Why have you been spying on me?"

"I believe you met my colleague, Feron."

Feron… Feron… "Oh, you mean the drell who set up your office? …Yes."

Liara's cheek twitched. "Feron and I… have not always been colleagues. Several years ago, when we first met on a mission of great importance, Feron betrayed me. A number of times, actually."

"I'm …sorry to hear that?" Samantha's sympathy while seeing the private details of her life on this asari's screens was more of a formality. It was all she had to not grit her teeth and scowl.

"I was unaware that Feron had multiple allegiances. In the end, he proved a good man and we are now strong allies. But I vowed to never again so blindly put my faith in someone I knew so little about. This is why I looked in to your history, Samantha."

Biting back sarcastically, Sam crossed her arms. "Find anything interesting?"

Liara did not react to the comms specialist's anger. Her blue fingers danced over her console as the screens showed new scenes. "Many things, actually. You have had some trouble with the law. Minor offenses mostly. An underage drinking citation at the Horizon Hornets Homecoming dance. You were in a traffic accident at age 17 with another car that increased your insurance by 11.5%. You were at fault, 'not paying attention' cited as the reason." Sam blushed at this revelation. She had completed the mandatory schooling to expunge that little fender bender from her record, but she had done a number on her first skycar.

The asari continued. "Several curfew violations in the dormitories of your college. Recruited for the Alliance in your late teens with your education paid for by the Future Leaders Initiative. Excellent
marks in Communication Theory and Advanced QEC Algorithms. Several break-throughs in the Arcturus Research & Development on nonsequential mapping algorithms."

Pausing, Liara swiveled in her tall chair and peered at the scowling human woman. A human woman who was none too pleased. "Which part screamed 'I am a secret agent'? Was it me being out past curfew? Meeting with secret organizations about secret things? I knew I should have picked a nefarious network of villainy that kept better hours. The pay was just utter crap, though."

A jibe like that might, might, have gotten a tiny corner-of-the-mouth smile from Commander Shepard, but apparently Samantha had found the one person with an even worse sense of humor. Liara raised an eyebrow and brought up something Sam had actually never seen: her service records since she had joined the Alliance. She tapped a screen ominously. "This is where I… grow concerned, Samantha. While your records indicate you are an excellent serviceman, six months ago your record was flagged by the Alliance."

**What?! Why?! What the—what the hell?!**

Dr. T'Soni shrewdly glared at Sam. "Right about the time Commander Shepard turned herself in to the Alliance, you were placed under scrutiny by your own government. My question is: why?"

Flabbergasted, Samantha could only sputter. She stormed over to Liara's consoles to have a better look, but she did notice a crackling biotic blue aura around the asari. *She's… she's putting up a barrier. Because she thinks you're dangerous, Sam. How… What...* "I don't know why that is, Dr. T'Soni. No one ever told me. Six months ago I was...stationed on Arcturus Station. I had no idea who Commander Shepard even was, really. I didn't join the retrofit team until two months later. Are spies usually that slow and lazy? Or am I just that gifted at being awful?"

"Specialist Traynor, if I may interject."

It was EDI. Of course she was always listening. *Thank goodness, because I think I'm about to hyperventilate. Whether in panic or in rage is still up for debate.*

*Place your bets, Traynor.*

EDI was calm and addressed Liara directly. "I wish to speak on Specialist Traynor's behalf, Dr. T'Soni. You see, the Alliance did not flag the Specialist's service record. I did."

Leaning back, the halo of blue noticeably diminished around the asari. "Please explain, EDI."

"I used an inactive officer's military protocols to gain access to the Alliance database. Filtering for potential candidates, I sought the best active personnel available to work on the Normandy. The comms specialist assigned to the retrofits did not…meet my expectations."

*Oh, please don't tell me you had her or him killed. "What are you saying, EDI? How many comms specialists were there before I came on?"*

"Approximately five. The first two comms specialists the Alliance assigned I locked out of all vital systems, claiming a protocol error that could not be rectified. Two others I determined to be inadequate before they officially set foot on the Normandy. I made sure their duty papers were… misplaced. One of the aforementioned five also had an unfortunate incident with an airlock." A long pause. "That was a joke."

Swallowing in slight terror, Sam redirected the conversation. She briefly didn't care about the nosy asari who had brought all this information to light. Briefly. "Why me, EDI?"
"Your records indicated you had the most promising experience to best improve my vital systems. Your QEC research combined with your psych profile indicated you were an innovative, adaptive and insightful individual. However, your psych profile also indicated you were not predisposed to accepting change. So I alerted Lieutenant Ventura to your service records and she took over your recruitment."

*Well, that would be flattering if it wasn't also a little terrifying. I was stalked for two months, not by some Alliance officer I could barely stand, but a self-aware AI with extremely high standards.*

*I suppose I should thank her.*

The comms specialist turned back to Liara. Now that the panicky jitter was fading, Sam thrust a thumb upward. "You heard the artificial intelligence. I'm not a spy. I'm bloody desirable." Liara looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding.

"Indeed. I apologize for going behind your back, Specialist Traynor. In my line of work, information is everything. Who to trust with that information is equally important. In times like these, we cannot afford to place our trust in the wrong people. Would you not agree?"

*Shit. That's actually a really good point.* Sam glowered and chewed on her lower lip. "You really need to work on your first impressions, Doctor. The whole 'I know everything about you' bit probably won't have people lining up to join your information network. I have serious doubts that's how the Shadow Broker does things, anyway. Unless you work for the bloody Shadow Broker, then in that case, your problems are definitely bigger than mine."

It was the first time Liara smiled. She wasn't coy about hers the way Shepard was. This asari was either impossibly serious or impossibly glowing. It was still a brief glow, but a smiling Liara did make Sam feel a little better. "In a matter of speaking, Samantha. I am …familiar… with the Shadow Broker's methods at any rate."

*Fine. Be all secretive and information broker-y. Let's cut to the bloody chase.*

"So? Allies, then?" Samantha stuck her hand out, which Liara stared at for a moment. The asari's warm hand clasped around the human's, her blue skin pebbly and rough but also silken and smooth. "All right, then. What can I do for you, Dr. T'Soni?"

"You're going to help me find who betrayed the Normandy SR-1. And killed Commander Shepard."
En passant: in chess, a move where a pawn captures another pawn as it passes, rather than landing on it directly.
"Um, a question from the floor."

Samantha raised her hand like Little Sam would have done back in grade school. The situation felt similar. A strange, intimidating place. Familiar and inspiring, but also slightly uncomfortable. All eyes on her. And a very stern, patient professor explaining something Sam didn't (couldn't?) understand.

Dr. Liara T'Soni swiveled in her chair, turning away from her wall of screens to watch the comms specialist expectantly. She only needed to peer down a pair of rimmed glasses to complete the illusion.

Sam cleared her throat and cocked her head slightly, hoping she was just hard of hearing. "…You did say 'killed Shepard,' right?"

There was a noticeable stiffening of Liara's posture, as well as a brief flash of pain in her eyes. But she still said nothing and let Sam continue.

"By 'killed,' do you mean… like… killed? In the biblical sense? Physical sense? Literal sense? Commander Shepard… our Commander Shepard was …dead?" That last word could only creep out as a whisper. The thought of Shepard… she was… she… …it stole the air from Samantha's lungs. It was impossible. Terrifying.

Almost as impossible and terrifying as a dead woman coming back to life?

Liara nodded once. "You are correct, Specialist Tray—Samantha. In all regards. Despite misinformation to the contrary spread by a variety of sources, Commander Shepard was …killed in action that day. She didn't run off to Cerberus. She wasn't in a coma in a secret Alliance hospital. Or a batarian prisoner. Or any of the other myriad of rumors the galaxy came up with to explain her absence.

"I saw her. From my escape pod. Spinning helplessly in the black of space until she stilled." The asari's expression was glazed. Hooded. The face of a woman trying to bury a memory where someone she cared about was taken from her. To Liara's credit, her voice didn't crack.
Sam's would have. She also knew that look. She'd felt it herself. On Horizon. On Earth. Hell, on the Normandy after the news of Arcturus Station. It was impossible and terrifying, to feel so alone.

Her sarcastic bravado, usually a solid rock against uncomfortable situations, was eroding rapidly. Sam wanted to hug Liara. But the asari didn't want pity. Liara shakily cleared her throat a few times before turning back to her screens.

Trying to pour some empathy into what was undoubtedly a difficult topic, Samantha politely requested, "Would you—would you please start at the beginning, Liara?"

"As I was saying… I was there that day. It was like any other since our encounter with Saren at the Citadel. Scouting the fringes of space looking for signs of geth activity. But somehow, a Collector ship managed to find one of the most advanced ships in the galaxy, target it, and destroy it."

"What happened after?"

Liara paused at the interruption, but continued in her well-rehearsed way. She picked up a datapad and gestured with it. "Now, the Normandy SR-1 was stealthed. No other race has shown even a hint of breaking through the stealth barrier. I have studied a number of classified government files, and currently only two races have working knowledge of stealth technology: the salarians and quarians. But neither are hostile to humans, nor Shepard, and their adaptation was too recent. Within the last six months to a year. So they are not under suspicion."

"Liara."

"Even now, the Normandy SR-2 utilizes a similar, though higher-powered, version of the SR-1's stealth drive and the Reapers have not managed to find us. So we can labor under the assumption that the Collectors, nor the Reapers, were able to break the stealth cloak on their own. My theory is…"

"Liara."

The asari inhaled sharply, irritated that her potential assistant was sidetracking her. But there was a detail Sam wasn't about to just gloss over. "Liara. What happened after the Normandy was destroyed?" She paused, then smiled softly. "You have all this history. With the Normandy. Shepard."

Just as Samantha had expected, there was that flash of pain again at the link between Shepard and Liara's history together. But, considering Liara had easily dug through Samantha's entire history like it was tattooed on her forehead, Sam decided not to go strolling down that memory lane.

*Prying into an already angry asari's romantic history? Eight to one odds my service record gets "mysteriously" re-flagged and I'm hauled away in chains at the next port. Four point five to one Liara has me killed and it looks like an accident. Two to one Liara just has me killed.*

"I just mean, all I know about Shepard I learned from the ANN. Watching Shepard on the telly is hardly an unbiased or even complete picture of what really happened, right? I just—I just want to know. Please. You owe me this." A risky move.

Thankfully, Liara softened and set her datapad aside. Crossing her legs, the asari clasped her fingers around her kneecap. Not exactly letting her hair down, but Sam suspected this was as close as the woman got.

*We really need to do something about that.*
"You're right. I forget sometimes, the people behind the information. It was rude of me to treat your personal history like a thesis paper." Liara's brow (does she even have eyebrows? They look drawn on…) furrowed and a hand left its safety at her knee to accentuate her apology.

"And not a very good paper, I might add. I'm a fairly boring person," Samantha quipped. "And you didn't need to go behind my back, Liara. I probably would have told you anything you wanted to know."

Suddenly, her breathing hitched for a split second and the asari cocked her head at Sam. What? Was it something I said? Whatever it was, there was a flicker of recognition reflected in those blue eyes. Liara continued, "I wasn't always an information broker. Before, I was an archaeologist studying the Protheans. After Shepard—after she died, I, too, wanted to know what happened. It was slow going, but I gathered enough leads to discover that her body was being transported in a stasis pod. To be handed over to the Collectors."

"Why?"

Only a sigh. "I honestly never received a satisfying answer. What followed was a chase from Omega to Alingon with Collectors, Shadow Broker agents, and Cerberus in hot pursuit. This is also where I met Feron and, with his help, I was able to succeed in recovering Shepard. In the end, I decided to trust Cerberus. They promised to use their resources to bring Shepard back. Rebuild her, or what remained of her. Exactly as she was."

Samantha didn't realize she'd been chewing her lower lip until she felt the skin tingle. "Is she?"

Blinking in confusion, Liara asked, "Is she what?"

"Exactly as she was?"

A sad smile pulled at those dark blue lips. "I...I believe she is still in there. Somewhere."

Sam could swear she saw a glisten in Liara's eyes, but it might have just been the lighting. She felt a low ache of sympathy in her chest for the asari before her. All right. Subject change. We're getting dangerously close to either a group cry or a suicide pact. And now that you know the whole story, are you going to help this woman find out who killed Commander Shepard?

Oh, you're God damn right I am.

No one kills my commanding officer and gets away with it. Especially someone so attractive. That's just—just rude.

Waving at the tower of screens, Samantha prodded Liara. "You mentioned a theory on how the SR-1 stealth was breached? How would I help? You might be better off with Diana Allers. She's the investigative journalist around here. I'm just the comms geek."

Finally, Liara chuckled. Not quite as transforming a sound as Shepard's laugh, which was pure music. But still lovely in its own, breathy way. "As capable as I am sure Miss Allers is, I actually have more need of a 'comms geek,' as you put it."

Normally separate panes of cycling information, the wall of vid screens shifted to show one large image. A manifest of a ship on its way to the Citadel. Liara turned to Sam. "This is what I need. I believe a crew member aboard the Normandy sent a signal or otherwise gave away the Normandy's position to the Collectors. A ship is due to arrive at the Citadel in the next few days. It is carrying the
original black box from the Normandy SR-1 recovered from a salvage operation on Alchera. I need you to analyze it."

Sam's jaw dropped. The memorial on Alchera had only been announced a few months ago, and had, ironically, been placed on the planet by Commander bloody Shepard herself. The Alliance was just starting to send salvage teams to recover the Normandy wreckage, but with the colony disappearances and pending war with the batarians (or Reapers, rather, as it turned out), it wasn't a high priority. "How did you get this?"

"I have my sources, Specialist. I am a very good information broker," Liara said with a smile. "But I assure you, it was not cheap."

*That… almost sounds like a joke. Are we having a moment here?*

"Note to self: make friends with Liara T'Soni and then borrow credits." Sam counted it as a victory when the asari chuckled again. *I'm starting to get the hang of this. She's at least a better audience than Shep—*

*Don't speak ill of the dead.*

*…Once dead.*

*…Alive?*

*Wonderfully alive.*

"Right. Analyzing comms signals. I have some experience with that," Sam deadpanned. "I'd be honored, Liara. I hope I can help you find what—or who, rather—you're looking for." Liara stood up, and this time was the one to offer a hand to shake, which Samantha accepted. Again, such smooth, pebbly palms with almost a scaly texture on the back of her hand. "Thank you, Liara. For telling me and… well… thank you."

Her eyes twinkled in a way very reminiscent of Shepard. "I hope to be thanking you soon, Samantha."

Unfortunately, a conversation like that didn't like being followed by attempts at sleep. Sam retired to her sleeper pod closest to the Mess Hall kitchen, but sleep refused to come. Her mind was too active, too restless. It should have been smug and dreaming of elcors taunting Shepard with bad advertisements. But instead…

*Brought her back... brought her back... brought her back...* Sam attempted to think of how many times she'd heard that in passing. Garrus. Dr Chakwas, definitely. It was such a weird, inadequate statement. *Like... Shepard was a little lost puppy that needed to be taken home.*

*Not, say, an amazing human woman who suffered a terrible death suffocating in space and was rebuilt as part robot to save the galaxy. No, "brought her back" doesn't quite suffice for something like that. A little …oversimplified.*

Hours ticked by. The sleeper pod was equipped with a number of customizable features to help one sleep. Complete darkness. A variety of simulated skies with insects or birds or miscellaneous animal species chirping. City noises. Country noises. Colony noises. No noises. Sam tried them all, because her usual setting, XC-064, "Suburban colony with low traffic," wasn't cutting it.

She'd nearly given up and had the sleeper pod cover defrosted and the dim light of the Crew Deck filtered in. The Mess Hall beyond was empty at the early hour.
Sam couldn't quite reach her Omni-tool wrist to see if Shepard had returned from the Sur'Kesh mission. If she was safe. She hadn't realized how dependent she'd become on the Commander's existence over a short month. Shepard seemed invincible and, despite her sometimes surly demeanor, made victory look easy.

Liara said, "I believe she is still in there. Somewhere."

If that's not Shepard, who is she? Who did she used to be? What part of her has taken over? Can she come back? Should she come back?

"I fucking hate Cerberus."

Hmmm…

"I fucking hate Cerberus!"

That was not in Samantha's head. She'd forgotten she'd turned off the sound dampeners in the pod during one of her earlier tossing and turning ideas that maybe some ambient ship noises might be more lulling. They were not. Squinting through the sleeper pod glass, Sam had an angled view of the Med Bay where two large forms shambled in followed by a thin salarian. She heard Garrus's agreement before she actually saw the turian also enter the Med Bay.

The Commander finally crossed Sam's line of sight as she holstered her shotgun onto the back of her armor and punched the outer wall of the Med Bay. Spiderwebs of cracks appeared around that glowing fist. Shepard glanced around the empty Crew Deck, and seemed to look right at the comm specialist. Or her sleeper pod, anyway.

Shepard looked terrible. The cuts along her jaw from her fistfight with Vega didn't seem to be healing. An angry orange leered underneath the skin, and was there a faint red tinge to her green eyes?

So much for reducing stress levels. What the bloody hell happened?

Liara padded up behind Shepard. Samantha saw a hand gently alight on to Shepard's shoulder, but was immediately brushed off. The asari's light voice wasn't audible.

Shepard's was. Sam wished it wasn't. It made her cringe.

"I said I'm fine, Liara," the Commander snarled slightly. "Cerberus was there. Again. If you want to be useful, find out how they're always a step ahead. That's what I need right now."

It made Sam's heart ache again. Because while Shepard's forehead pressed against the Med Bay glass, she couldn't see the way Liara's shoulders fell slightly. Or the concerned tilt of her head. Or the dejected way she turned and went back to her office.

After Shepard disappeared into the Med Bay to talk to their (presumably) new guests, Samantha ventured outside her sleeper pod and rubbed her eyes. They felt sandy and dry. Not enough time spent closed. She also had this dull pressure all along her body, especially in her shoulders and head. Her body was protesting the lack of sleep.

Yawning deeply, she shuffled over to the blessedly full coffee pot and poured a large cup. No point in keeping up with the pretense of sleeping now. While she sipped, Sam read over the mission updates from Xian.

Mission update: "Return to Citadel."

Well. Shit.

Samantha glanced back at the goings-on in the Med Bay. Commander Shepard and Garrus Vakarian were hovering around two new faces and one old one. Urdnot Wrex alternated between looking grim and looking pleased. The object of his (terrifying) affections was the aforementioned krogan female.

How they knew she was female, Sam had no idea. She was as tall and broad as Wrex, but modestly covered by a series of overlapping shawls and robes. Almost shamanistic or religious. A veil over her mouth bounced occasionally, indicating she was well enough to talk to the Commander.

The mouth of the salarian doctor, by comparison, was nearly a blur. Though the Med Bay door was open, Sam couldn't make out more than a frantic pattering of words. Which she assumed were his. Garrus certainly didn't seem the type to be that hyperactive.

So intently focused on the Med Bay, and also so deprived of sleep, Samantha hadn't noticed the Commander leave the room. Not until she was standing nearly in front of the comms specialist.

"You look like shit, Traynor."

Blinking blearily, Samantha slowly turned to meet Shepard's gaze. She looked slightly less terrible up close. It took Sam a second to realize she'd been staring at the Commander's lips before shifting her gaze upward to curious green eyes.

Remembering how Liara was treated for being sympathetic, Samantha instead tried reciprocation. "Always a pleasure, Commander. You're looking well, yourself. And by 'well,' I might, in fact, mean 'like charred pyjak droppings.'"

Shepard's cheek twitched at the challenge. "Talking back to your commanding officer?"

"I'm off duty, ma'am. And I was speculating, hypothetically, that you might look like charred pyjak droppings. To come right out and say so would be just rude, wouldn't you agree?"

A nostril flared as Shepard's mouth pinched. For a second, Samantha worried she'd pushed it too far in her sleep-addled stated. She was starting to mentally prepare herself for some sort of punishing demerit task when she heard that familiar exhale.

The Commander nodded, "Very rude." The two women watched the salarian doctor fuss over the female. Wrex and Garrus seemed to be immersed in some sort of bro-chat. Their hand gestures didn't imply a tasteful conversation.

"So that is a female krogan," Sam observed as she took another swig of coffee. "I'm not sure what I was expecting."

"Eve is definitely something," Shepard was appreciative. Her hand wandered to the handle of the shotgun on her back. "She doesn't take Wrex's shit. And I watched her shotgun two Cerberus
troopers in the face, one right after another. She's a fighter." There was something the Commander wasn't saying. A pair of wrinkles appeared between her eyebrows. She looked… *What is that? Uncertainty? Insecurity?*

*Shame?*

"Traynor? Weren't you in a sleeper pod when I came in?"

"Aw, Commander. Were you watching me sleep?"

That was meant to be silly. Not flirty (*sure, Traynor. Sure.*) or coquettish or anything other than a throwaway teasing with no answer required.

But, strangely enough, Shepard answered. She blushed.

She actually **blushed**.

Now, the Stupid Sam would dig in to that, and probe and tease and see how long the joke might hold until Shepard either yelled at her or fled the room. It was an immature response bred from never having a sibling to torment as a child, so Samantha sought it out amongst other people. To generally mixed results.

But Responsible Sam held back. Savored the moment, certainly. But she didn't want to make Shepard feel more embarrassed.

*After everything she's been through…*

"I couldn't sleep, ma'am. Plus it's not every day you get to see a female krogan capable of curing the genophage for an entire species. Do you happen to know the protocol for that? Do I ask for her autograph, or maybe get a picture for my social network or…?" Sam trailed off lightly.

The Commander's eyes crinkled with relief while the pink in her cheeks faded. "I'll have to check the Alliance guidelines. I'm sure there's something in there for starry-eyed specialists meeting their heroines at last."

"Oh, Eve's not my hero. Strong competition, though. They both save lots of lives. I might have to boil it down to numbers. Wars are won and lost with numbers, you know." *Oh great. Stupid Sam certainly couldn't stay away for long, could she?*

*Shut it. I'm too tired.*

"So they're kind of important."

"Very." Sam waited for Shepard to ask who her hero was. Or tease further. Or break down crying and have a coming-to-terms with her raging emotions. *God, you're truly delirious, Traynor.*

But Shepard just glanced behind them, possibly at Liara's cabin, with that wrinkled brow. Turning to Sam, Shepard glared at her sternly.

"Go back to sleep, Traynor. I don't want to see your face until we dock at the Citadel. You're no good to me dead tired."

Saluting crisply, Samantha uttered a perfunctory "aye-aye" and shuffled over to the kitchen sink to dump out her coffee. She ended up staring at the deep brown liquid spiral down the drain for a few
seconds longer than necessary. She had to blink to snap herself out of it, and by the time she turned around, Shep­ard was already gone.

Sam climbed back into her waiting sleeper pod, and put XC-064 back on. This time, the low thrum of skycar traffic, the chirp of crickets, and the deep black and purple "sky" worked their magic. Just before the delicious black fog of sleep swept Sam away, she smiled with a thought only a Stupid Sam could have.

*So I'm good to you, am I?*
Samantha thought she would dream. She slept the entire trip back to the Citadel. Which was pretty easy when there was no one to wake her. Or summon her for random tasks. Or ask her to track down an alleged traitor who destroyed the Normandy, killed Commander Shepard, and would be responsible for the deaths of the Normandy crew and everyone Shepard failed to protect while being dead.

You know. Stuff like that.

*Throw in blaming him or her (or them) for the Reapers too. Just for good measure. The stakes just aren't high enough.*

But, no dreams. No nightmares of Shepard suffocating in space while her crew watched helplessly. Just that pleasant, impenetrable black.

Until Engineer Rashad tapped on the glass lid of Sam's sleeper pod. Then finally hit the intercom.

"Traynor. You overslept."

"Mmmph."

A long pause.

"I'm telling Shepard," Morena taunted.

*Shit.*

That did it. Sam's eyes popped open and she cracked her neck. Smacking her lips, the comms specialist elbowed the pod door open with a hiss. "Mmmm, what time is it?"

"Late. Most of the crew is already on the Citadel. Supply runs."

"Shepard?"
Morena glanced around her conspiratorially. She was a little afraid of the Commander. "She was the first off when we docked. And… look." The engineer's Omni-tool sparked to life. Sam rolled her shoulders and stumbled out of the upright pod. Rubbing her eyes, she read the correspondence dated only an hour ago.

[Message received: "To all engineering personnel: We are picking up two new crew members, Engineers Kenneth Donnelly and Gabriella Daniels. They will be taking over drive core maintenance for the duration of the mission. Please see Lead Engineer Gregory Adams for shift change assignment."]

The woman looked at Samantha expectantly, then huffed in irritation when Sam stumbled down the stairs toward the warm embrace of the coffee pot in the kitchen. "Well?"

"Well what? …Thank God we're restocking. I don't think we had enough loose rations, MREs or nutrient bars to keep everyone, let alone two new mouths, fed for another whirlwind tour of the galaxy," Sam quipped while digging around in one of the lower cabinets for an aforementioned nutrient bar for a snack. The stack had shrunk considerably, and she hissed in dismay. "Blueberry. Always the bloody blueberry ones left. Who the hell eats this shit?"

Irritably exhaling through her nose, Morena Rashad waved her hand dismissively. "Shepard's the only one I've seen eat those." …really? Could they be her favorite?

And why do you care?

"And you're missing the point, Traynor."

"Oh, was the point to build a little cabin of this blueberry shit in Shepard's armor locker so she'll stop buying it? Because you're the engineer here, Rashad, but if you want I could rig a nice—"

"Traynor."

"What?"

The engineer looked panic-stricken. "Am I… getting fired?"

Samantha swung around mid-unwrapping. "What?! Why would you think that?"

"She got two new engineers. Not just one, two. Doesn't that mean someone has to go?" Wringing her hands, Rashad frowned deeply. Sam took a hesitant bite of her repulsive breakfast before clamping a reassuring hand to the engineer's shoulder.

"If you were getting fired, you'd know by now. Does Shepard seem like the type of person to dawdle about something like that?"

Morena shook her head.

"Well then, there you go. Our fearless Commander's mood, terrible as it can be sometimes, actually works in your favor on this. And maybe she knows something we don't. I vaguely remember their names from the retrofit logs. Weren't they on the SR-2 when it was Cerberus?"

Suddenly, Rashad broke into a wide-eyed smile. "You're right! They supervised the FBA coupling installation. Bang-up job too, it would have taken forever to maintain the—"

"Morena."
Chuckling, the engineer trailed off. "Oh, right. I forgot. You don't bore me to tears with your algorithms and I don't force you to care about drive core vent procedure."

"That's my girl. Now, I better check my messages. I'll see you later?" Samantha sighed as she choked down another bite of the sickly sweet blueberry protein bar. She watched Morena cheerfully round the corner before firing up her own Omni-tool.

Several galaxy map updates. It seems there was a full docket now. Missing teams to investigate for both the turians and krogan. Their new salarian doctor, Mordin Solus, needed more supplies to continue his genophage cure. A distress signal from Eden Prime. *Not Reapers? What the hell is Cerberus doing hitting human colonies?*

"*Humanity first* my arse.

Xian had done a terrific job with the feeds. Organized, concise, thorough. *I wonder if anyone even noticed I was gone.*

[Message received: "Rise and shine, Traynor. I'm trapped in meetings at the embassy. I need you to pick up a few things for me around the wards. We'll call it even for being four hours late for work. Without even docking your pay. –A.S."]

*Oh, Commander Shepard. You truly are a benevolent dictator.*

A NavPoint to Huerta Memorial followed, indicating where the drop-off location was. *And if I wasn't a yeoman before, I think this makes it official now.* Luckily, it was a short list. A few things from one merchant on Zakera Ward, and an item actually at the hospital gift shop. *Easy enough.*

Sam was actually glad to have something to do, even if was just running errands. It was strange to see the ship so quiet, and she didn't fancy twiddling her thumbs in the CIC waiting for QEC updates. Upon exiting the elevator, Sam counted only four crew members in their *(rather comfy)* chairs going about their duties. The rest were probably on the Citadel already. Or, like Sam, stealing a nap or just enjoying the downtime.

Padding lightly down the jet bridge from the bow airlock, the comms specialist made her way over to the taxi station behind the security curtain. This time, there was no Diana Allers to compete for a cab. A message beep on her Omni-tool indicated Diana was over in Cargo Hold B interviewing refugees. The good reporter didn't mention her latest subject matter, just that "My camera drone needs a drink as badly as I do. Also, if you see that bitch from Westerlund News, push her out an airlock for me."
I'll keep that in mind, Allers.

The trip to Zakera Ward unfortunately gave Samantha time to think. That blush on Shepard's face crept in to Sam's mind. It was mostly the deer-in-headlights expression that truly sold it. Back on Arcturus, this situation would have been the topic of much speculation and giggling amongst her coworkers. The non-combat personnel had less to worry about in regards to fraternization, so their sense of humor could be much more lewd and crude.

Only one of the other women in comms R&D on Arcturus shared Sam's love of the ladies, though she was married. Lucky sod. They still had a jolly time of things, even though Mary had gotten Samantha into trouble that one time she had convinced the young comms specialist to flirt with an electronics engineer in the neighboring department. That poor engineer, an intern fresh from Academy, didn't know what to make of Sam's awkward, alcohol-fueled, fast-talking, algorithmic ramblings. Plus she also wasn't into women. Double fail.

Mary. I hope she's okay. She was supposed to go on maternity leave just after I left for Earth for the retrofits. She said she wanted to be a stay-at-home mom on Terra Nova. I hope she followed that dream.

But without Mary's high spirits and infectious laughter to make light of things, Sam was left with her own mental filter to pick apart her sleepy encounter with Shepard. A close-quarters ship with a habit of being out in space for weeks on end didn't seem like the right place to start assuming things. Especially out loud.

All right. I said something stupid. Par for the course. Shepard blushed. Highly unusual, if not impossible. Theories?

Lofty possibility: Shepard is hopelessly in love with you and was pained to admit her burgeoning feelings of desire. Blushing equates to shyness. Odds? About a million to one.

Oh, how precious. Preciously terrifying. Also: unrealistic.

What else.

Likely possibility: Shepard was in a terrible mood and wasn't expecting that off-the-cuff response from a mouthy subordinate. Rather than vehemently deny it, and look like an idiot, she said nothing. Blushing equals suppressed rage. Odds? Probably ten to one.

I think we have a winner.

…what, no middle ground? Maybe it was suppressed rage over her burgeoning feelings for you.

Oh shut up.

Samantha shook her head just as the skycar arrived in Zakera Ward. As funny as it had been at the time, this whole awkward joke thing with Shepard was eating more brain cells than it was worth. Especially without knowing exactly what happened. Popping open her Omni-tool, Sam glanced at the map next to the taxi station to find the merchant Shepard wanted. Right. Let's actually accomplish something today.

She didn't recognize the name, but strolled briskly through the ward and took in the sights. It hadn't changed all that much from a month ago, despite a slight increase in foot traffic. She had to resist the urge to check out the salarian game merchant to see if there were any new releases.

Grinding to a halt, Samantha had to double check her message just to make sure it wasn't just some
horrible mistake.

*God. Not him.*

The shop Shepard had sent her comms specialist to was headed by a volus. A penny-pinching, scam artist of a volus. Who tried to sell a bloody toothbrush to Sam Traynor for about 6,000 credits. And who also apparently had a photographic memory.

"No discounts---" he gasped with a clicking noise, "—for any reason. If you want—" Wheeze. "—the Cision Pro Mark-4, it's 5,999 credits."

_Oh, how I missed him. And at least he hasn't raised the price. Something to strive for._

"Faelen Din. A pleasure like always," Samantha greeted him brightly. She strolled up to the stubby creature and showed him her Omni-tool. "Let's not waste each other's time. I'm here for these items. For Commander Shepard."

The shopkeeper wheezed gleefully and hobbled his way behind the counter. He produced two small, rectangular boxes vacuum-sealed with a navy blue (wrapping?) paper. The smaller, longer, skinnier box was actually the heavier of the two. Sam asked if she needed to pay for these, but he just gasped that they were already taken care of. And to have a wonderful day.

On her way out, a familiar voice stopped the comms specialist dead in her tracks.

"I'm Commander Shepard, and this is my favorite store on the Citadel." A flat wall advertisement showed a holo of the Commander grinning broadly with her hands on her hips. It was the face that really got to Sam. It was just such an alien expression for the normally subdued Shepard. Also, it was plainly obvious that the smile wasn't extending to her green eyes, making the whole thing all the more fake.

_Scary._

Not sure when the Commander needed her stuff, Samantha decided to opt on the side of sooner rather than later. Plus she had an itch to do some shopping and she'd rather enjoy it without an impatient Commander hanging over her head. Because then—

"Hey! Traynor! Where you headed?"

It took Samantha half a second to realize Garrus was the one shouting at her. He just materialized out of a herd of turian, asari and human shoppers, his mandibles flexed into what she took for a grin. She nodded an acknowledgement, though wondering inwardly if she should salute him. Surely he outranked her, but… _Bah._

Gesturing with the boxes tucked under her arm, Sam pointed at the closest rapid transit station. "Special delivery for Commander Shepard at Huerta Memorial. Where are you headed, Mr. Vakarian?"

"Mr. Vakarian is my father. Just Garrus." His beady eyes sparkled with warmth and he stuck out a three-fingered hand. "Care to share a cab? I'm overdue to visit Ashley at the hospital. She must be feeling better. She threatened me with bodily harm if I didn't stop by." He tilted his head when Sam raised an eyebrow. They regarded each other for a moment, before Garrus supplemented. "And I'll pay."

"Sold, Garrus."
"I swear to the spirits, you humans are as stingy as a volus. You owe me a decent conversation on the cab ride, at the very least."

Squawking indignantly, Sam again gestured with the pair of boxes. "You're the rich, hired-gun killer swimming in credits. I'm just the lowly comms specialist trying to make it in the big city. On a government salary."

"Stingy as a volus," Garrus repeated as he held the skycar door open. The car lifted off just as Sam got settled with the two boxes balancing on her knees. Fiddling with the autopilot, Garrus waved a hand over Sam's cargo. "What's that about? Contraband? Better come clean. I used to be a C-Sec officer, you know."

"I didn't know that, actually," Sam replied. She patted her wares. "And I honestly have no idea. This is Shepard's stuff. I'm just picking it up for her. If I was volunteered to be a drug mule or smuggle some stolen artifact, I'll be a little annoyed."

"And after the cavity search, you'll be more than annoyed. C-Sec procedure is pretty thorough about that." He accentuated "thorough" with a dangerous, but amused, tone.

The skycar lurched as Garrus gripped the controls. They suddenly tipped upward and accelerated. Away from the flow of traffic.

"Um, Garrus? Something you'd care to tell me about?"

Grinning in his toothy, jagged way, Garrus nodded at the windshield. "Shortcut. I worked for C-Sec, remember? Always hated the autopilot route around the wards. This way is faster."

It most certainly was. And very close to the wards. Their little blue skycar flitted between buildings and alternated above and below jutting bridges. Sam gripped the arm rest of her seat tightly. The drive up the ward arm from this perspective was dizzying. The Citadel's arms were mostly closed, so Sam could see the other four wards floating around and above her as they zoomed toward the center circle at the heart of the station.

"So… umm…" Yes, let's focus on something other than our pending death against the side of an apartment building. "What… do you think of this whole turian-krogan alliance… thing?"

The turian driver chuckled. "Three years ago, I would have said it was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard. Especially considering how many big, dumb, krogan brutes I put away for C-Sec. But little things like Saren, Collectors, Reapers… Wrex… can give you a healthy dose of perspective."

No doubt. Sam asked him what he meant.

"I can't say I looked at Wrex back on the Citadel three years ago and thought to myself, 'Now here's the great unifier of the krogan.' Plus I think he's getting uglier as the years go by. But he's sacrificed a lot, and willing to sacrifice more to help my people? You don't get more noble than that."

No doubt, indeed.

"War, and the threat of war, changes people a lot. I wasn't always the dashing hero you see before you either, Specialist."

Sam chuckled. "Perish the thought, Mr. Vaka—Garrus. I assumed you hatched this way, charm and all."

"Turians don't hatch, Traynor. We're born the old-fashioned way," he winked at Samantha.
"Anyway, I used to just be a frustrated cop on the Citadel, before..." Garrus trailed off thoughtfully.

But Sam's interest was now piqued. "What changed you?"

"Shepard, of course."

"How?"

"Well, the ordeal with Saren, which if you haven't heard about, you should. Exciting story. I feature in there largely, so you know it's got to be good." That glittering wink again. "But when we weren't chasing a rogue SpecTRe around the galaxy in the Normandy SR-1, we were kicking ass with the Old Shepard. She... taught me a lot."

"Like what? Give me an example." Right after she said that, Sam realized how little she knew about Shepard. New or Old. And what the difference even was.

Garrus clicked his teeth and a mandible twitched as he jerked the skycar down a tight alley. *He was right about knowing a shortcut. We're nearly at the Presidium.*

"The value of justice over revenge, for one. I spent years of my C-Sec career chasing down a criminal. Organ trafficking. Cloning. Experimentation. The worst garbage the galaxy had to offer. When I had the chance to finally make him pay for all the innocent lives he'd destroyed, Shepard stopped me from pulling the trigger. He deserved justice over revenge, she'd said. That stuck with me. To be an angel of justice rather than death."

Sam smiled lightly. "An archangel, as it were?" Garrus's dossier from the SR-2 came to mind, as did a few choice comic book stories allegedly based on his exploits. But you never really knew what was fact or fiction. *Unless you asked him. ...Or her.*

"See, you know more than you think you do, Traynor. Even two years later, after she was back and wild and angry... that's how I know that's Shepard."

"What do you mean?"

Garrus sighed as he tipped the steering wheel. A clawed finger ran over the deep scar tissue on his right cheek. "I was betrayed on Omega right before the Collector mission started. I tracked down the member of my team that'd done it, with Shepard's help. The whole time she was encouraging me to put a bullet in Sidonis's head and be done with it. But when the time came... she wouldn't let me. She didn't want me to do something I'd later regret, that she would regret pushing me to do."

*So... hell bent on revenge only to have mercy when it counts. I wonder what changed?*

"She was right. I was tripping over revenge around every corner on Omega, trying to make that hell hole better. To give people hope. That justice could finally come to the lawless. If I forgot that, it would have made all the sacrifices my team made just...nothing," Garrus continued with some venom. But he softened. *That's Commander Shepard, Traynor. That's what she does for people. Hopefully she'll remember that Shepard as well as I do. Otherwise... what are we even doing here?*

Zipping into the rapid transit station, Garrus set the skycar down a little roughly. He sheepishly apologized, saying landings had never been his strong suit. He then teased Sam about still owing him a decent conversation, though he said he'd settle for a drink at Purgatory when they had the time. Samantha agreed.
They rode the elevator up to the hospital floor mostly in silence. Garrus admitted he'd never been a fan of talking in elevators, then chuckled. Sam didn't understand the joke.

She jogged over to the gift shop terminal while her turian companion made a beeline straight for Ashley Williams' room past the security barrier. Firing up her Omni-tool, Sam confirmed with the clerk that a bottle of wine was waiting for her to collect for Commander Shepard. Samantha's Omni-tool chirped in approval as she made her way toward Ashley's room. As the NavPoint confirmed her destination past the security curtain, Sam studied the wine. It seemed like a decent vintage, though Samantha wasn't really much for wine.

The comms specialist was still turning the bottle over in her hands and barely noticed she'd passed through the sliding door into Ashley's hospital room. But she did notice the chasm of silence that followed as two humans and one turian stared back at Sam. …is there something on my face? She had to resist the urge to touch her hair insecurely, though the collection of stuff she was carrying would have made that impossible.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! I'm probably interrupting. Should I come back later?"

"Are you kidding? You're the only one who brought alcohol. You can stay. Everyone else can leave." It was Ashley who made the sarcastic quip. The dark-haired woman was still sporting some wicked bruises and cuts around her face. Probably a broken cheek and nose trying to heal. There was also an array of tubes and bandages along her arms and chest. But she seemed cheerful.

Smiling lightly, Shepard stood up from her seat next to Ashley's bed. "No, you're right on time, Traynor. You've earned a drink."

Shepard gratefully took the wine from Sam and poured everyone a small shot of burgundy liquid into the group of plastic cups next to the bed. The Commander blew a wisp of hair out of her eyes as she focused on her task. Clad in her dress uniform, Shepard seemed oddly out of place. And also sad.

"A toast," she said as she poured a fifth glass and set it out between them.

Samantha started to raise her hand with her question. "A toast for who? And are we waiting for someone?" She gestured at the last cup.

Garrus cleared his throat. "Wrex is getting poked and prodded by Mordin. Liara would be here, but she's got some secret, shadowy business to attend to." He glanced at Shepard and Ashley significantly, who nodded. More annoying mystery. I should start keeping a log of all the times they
make me feel left out with their secret jokes, then choose the right moment to explode and demand an explanation.

You know, a mature response.

"To Kaidan." Shepard's voice was ringing. Garrus and Ashley were a half second behind her, while Sam was the last to raise her glass. They sipped in amiable silence for a moment.

Thankfully (yet not), it was Ashley who ruined the moment by saying something stupid. Rather than Samantha being the one to ask who Kaidan was. "Shepard. I still beat myself up about why."

"Don't, Ash." Shepard stiffened. She was cold. Severe. The plastic cup in her hand disappeared into a tightly balled fist.

"Why did you pick me?"

"...Do you think it was easy? A million things ran through my head on Virmire. Strategy. Resources. Skills. Abilities. History. Kaidan was an only child. You have three sisters. Your father is dead. His parents are alive. He's a biotic, a lieutenant. You were a marine and a gunnery chief. You were both afraid. He had a nuclear bomb. You had a team of salarians who would die, too. I considered everything. I chose you, Williams."

Oh. I do know this story. It was on the ANN. It must be the third anniversary of the bombing on Virmire.

"Shepard, I—"

"Don't, Ash. I made the call. I miss him. I will always miss him. But I can't bring John back."

"Kaidan," Sam said softly, though she wished she hadn't when two pairs of eyes swung to meet hers. She shrank. She already missed those few precious seconds where an angry Shepard and a sad Williams forgot a comms specialist and a turian were still in the room.

Shepard's eyes widened. "...What did you say?"

"You—you said 'John.' But you're talking about Kaidan Alenko. ...right?" Samantha stuttered under the Commander's stare.

Only Shepard's raspy exhale could be heard. Garrus cleared his throat again, then offered his glass of wine to Sam. He mumbled something about "Not dextro compatible," though Sam had downed the drink before he'd even finished his sentence.

The silence deepened, and Sam regretted saying anything. She wasn't sure what was going on. If everyone knew something she didn't. John... John... Shepard's brother? That would certainly make an impossible decision even worse, if the Commander thought she'd let her brother die twice. Maybe there was a time when Shepard talked to her crew about these things, and Ashley and Garrus and everyone laughed and cried together. Rather than now, with this awkward half-knowledge that helped no one. Sam sighed.

Ashley was turning her cup over in her hands and studying it. Shepard continued, more softly this time. "You're about to be humanity's second SpecTRe, Ashley. You're a great soldier. A great leader. You have nothing to wonder about. You can be proud of what you've done, what you've accomplished. You want to honor Kaidan's memory? Then keep doing better by him."

"Are you?" Ashley's voice rose in challenge. Garrus inched closer in his chair, wanting to be
peacemaker. "Now now. Williams. I thought you two cleared up the whole Cerberus thing up before we got here. Working together to kick their asses now, remember? We've been doing all the work, Ashley, but we promise to save you a couple."

But Ashley ignored him and stared expectantly at Shepard. She repeated her earlier question. "Are you doing better by Kaidan?"

Shepard wouldn't (couldn't?) answer. She started to say a few things, but Sam had no idea where she was going with any of it.

"I'm trying—I was going... The thing is, I..." The Commander slumped down in her chair in defeat. 

Garrus popped out of his and crossed his arms. 

"Now look: you're both damn good soldiers, all right? Shake hands or punch each other or just get over it. In case you hadn't noticed, the galaxy has something of a Reaper infestation going on. People are dying. Lots of people."

The turian glanced over at Ashley. "Williams, you're a great marine. But you're about as hard-headed as a krogan. We're on your side. So get better and get on board and help us blow those bastards out of the sky."

He saved his most damning words for his Commander. "And you, Shepard. You used to wear the Alliance blue like a shield. I liked that soldier. She had honor. You looked out for us. Now, I know Cerberus pissed you off a little, but I need to know you'll have my back when the time counts. And so does Williams."

Shepard's glare was pure acid. The red twinge in her eyes noticeably sparkled. It made Sam's insides turn to jelly. It made Garrus laugh. "That's what I'm talking about. That spark. I don't know about you, Williams, but that right there is what I followed to Ilos. To the galactic core. And what I'm following to a great big pile of Reaper corpses."

Spying the last full cup of wine on the table next to Ashley's bed, Samantha carefully and slowly snatched it. She made a mental toast before downing it. To Liara, for having the foresight to avoid this whole bloody thing.

Ashley and Shepard watched each other for a few lingering moments. The lieutenant commander was the first to offer the olive branch. She sat up straight in her bed, and saluted her Commander. Shepard saluted back.

"Anyway. I got you something, Ash. It's not much. But..." Trailing off, Shepard walked over to Sam and picked up the wider, flatter of the two packages. "You can thank the Specialist here for picking it up while I was having my ear talked off by Udina about bullshit. Otherwise you would have had to hobble your ass to Zakera Ward and gotten it yourself." No one believed Shepard's gruff tone.

Ashley muttered about how sweet that was, and tore into the paper. Inside was a worn, thick book. Like, with pages and everything. Samantha could just barely read the title on the spine, it was so dull with age.

*The Collected Alfred Tennyson.*

...poetry?

"Shepard... thank you," Ashley breathed huskily. She struggled to keep her emotions in check. "I've
been… going crazy here. It'll be nice to have something to read. And my dad's favorite… thank you." Even through her battered face, Ash was … beautiful. And truly touched.

Clearing her throat awkwardly, Shepard mumbled about Ash needing to get her rest. Just as the three of them stood up, Ashley's doctor entered the room and shooed them all away. But Shepard stood for a second, unyielding. She stared at Ash, then smiled. "Doc, you need anything: you let me know."

As they walked out of Ashley's room, Garrus saw a woman he recognized and darted off. The object of his interest was an attractive human doctor. Samantha could barely hear the trill of a French accent, and it was pleased to speak to Garrus. *So, Mr. Vakarian. Got a thing for human women, hm?*

"That's Dr. Michel," Shepard explained simply when she noticed where Sam was looking. "Garrus got her out of a bind on the Citadel back when he worked for C-Sec. They're old friends."

*Ah.*

*That doesn't mean I'm not going to make fun of him about it later.*

Sam and the Commander walked in companionable silence back to the lobby area of Huerta Memorial. It was a few long seconds before Samantha remembered she was still carrying the last package for the Commander. She took a few quick steps to dart in front of Shepard.

"I almost forgot! The last thing on your list," Samantha swept her hair behind her ear awkwardly as she half-apologized. But when she attempted to hand it over, Shepard wouldn't accept it.

"That's not for me. That's yours."

"F—for me?"

"You earned it, Specialist Traynor." Shepard didn't wait for gratitude. Or an explanation. Or to even watch Sam open it. She sidestepped around the comms specialist and made her way over to the window. A drell stood waiting.

And for the second time today, Samantha witnessed a Shepard she didn't recognize. First that smiling woman in that advertisement. And now this bright, relaxed creature talking to that drell. They talked closely together in a pair of chairs, their heads bobbing with their shared enthusiasm.

For some reason, Sam felt a tight pang of … jealousy. *Who was this man, who can transform Shepard so easily?* There was a sinking feeling when she remembered that gossipy conversation with Jack a few short weeks ago. *That must be Thane. The one Shepard is so close to that it was mistaken for a relationship.*

Sam could see why. Their body language was open and inviting. Utterly at ease. She found herself wishing she had such an effect on someone. Even just a little. It made her miss Isabella a bit. Before Sam could start descending back into self-pity, she remembered she'd just received a present. Waiting to be unwrapped.

A chit on the top of the box displayed a short holographic message.

["Thanks for your help with that off-duty task the other day. Good communication starts with healthy gums, after all. –Shep"]

*It couldn't be.*

Samantha tore open the dark blue plastic. Inside was a brand new Cision Pro Mark-4, fully paid for.
This New *(old?)* Shepard was something Sam could get used to.

Chapter End Notes

MREs are Meals Ready to Eat. In case you didn't know that. I figured space on a ship would be sort of limited to having piles of vegetables, bread and meat lying around.
Oh, Samantha Traynor's gums were in paradise. She stood in front of the mirror in the women's restroom, her new toothbrush frothing as it whisked crumbs and plaque from her white teeth. Peering through the reflection, she saw a reverse-image of Diana Allers behind her trying to apply make-up from a distance. The reporter squinted while her mouth jutted out in a pouty duck face. She trailed dark red lipstick over her lips.

"What were you and Ensign Copeland bickering about earlier?"

"I'm sorry, you'll have to enunciate. I didn't hear a word you just said," Diana neutrally demanded as she smacked her lips to even out the color.

She was right, though. Sam's question, muffled by whirring and foam, was more like "Wha wuh ya an' essin' co'lan bick'run 'bout er-re-er?" What, can't you read my mind yet, Allers?

Spitting out the last of the toothpaste and rinsing, Samantha stood up and repeated her question to the mirror. "I said: what were you and Ensign Copeland bickering about earlier? I heard about it from Adams."

Allers waved her hand dismissively. "I hate this close quarters shit. Everyone who doesn't like one of my opinion segments can just storm into my room and bitch about it. The good ensign wasn't pleased about my most recent op-ed about Terra Nova."

Samantha deadpanned while mockingly mimicking Allers' wave. "Contrary to what your ego might believe, I don't actually watch everything you air. I do work on this ship from time to time. What did you say this time?"

"Traynor. I'm hurt. I thought our blossoming relationship at the very least would score me a few insincere compliments from you."

"Try buying me dinner first. Sometimes a girl likes a little romance before she becomes a shameless groupie."
"Always so hard to get," Diana smirked. Samantha turned around and waited for the reporter to continue. "All I said in the segment was to focus on priorities. Terra Nova is a losing front, but if we divert some of those forces, we could save five colonies rather than fail big at one."

"That's cold, Allers. Maybe he was from Terra Nova. How would you feel if someone reduced Earth to a statistic?" Samantha wondered how she'd feel if Horizon was on the chopping block of Diana's priorities. *Bloody awful, for starters. Secondly, pissed. Thirdly... Sam's stomach rumbled. Thirdly, hungry apparently.*

Diana's mouth become a hard line. "You, and Mister Copeland, are putting words into my mouth. I know the price of war. I stare at it from the moment I wake up. Even after I go to sleep, I see this shit in my damn dreams. So first off, I'm not saying Terra Nova isn't important, or someone's home, or anything like that. All I said was: if you do the math, more lives, homes, *everything*, could have a better chance.

"...At least Shepard backed me up."

The mention of the Commander perked up Sam's ears. Since all those little revelations on the Citadel earlier, Samantha's curiosity was in danger of boiling over. She just had so many questions. But other than a ship-wide message saying the Normandy wouldn't be casting off until tomorrow morning, Shepard hadn't been seen since yesterday.

*Not since her little pep talk in Ashley's hospital room, anyway. Or her secret rendezvous with a drell assassin.*

*...That's not fair.*

*You haven't seen Liara, and you don't assume she's off to secret trysts in the Lower Wards.*

*...Oh, no. I just assume Liara is smuggling the black box of the destroyed Normandy SR-1 underneath the Alliance's nose for me to analyze during her downtime. Just another boring, mundane day in the life of an information broker. "Yes, I'll have some tea and treason with my scone."*

Shaking her head, Sam tried to put some vague, subdued interest in her voice. "Oh? What did the Commander say?"

Allers was impressed. "Oddly enough, I got her blessing that I could express my opinions. ...Then followed up with a threat about 'until I disallow it.' A real motivational speaker. But... she didn't shut me down or kick me to the curb. So there's that." *Her impression of Shepard is way off. The Commander's voice is more husky than that. More... more...*

*Yes? More what?*

"You're not wearing your service uniform, are you?" Diana looked over Sam's clothing.

The comms specialist smirked and shot Allers a withering glare. "You seem to overestimate the range of clothing I own. On a warship. With teeny tiny lockers. I left my evening wear on Horizon... assuming I can even still squeeze into my prom dress."

"God, please don't wear dress blues. I'll look like your date to some navy ball. Which, I've done more than a few times. Gets real old real fast," Diana moaned as she crossed her arms.

"Spit it out, Allers. What is wrong with my outfit? I thought we were just getting a drink at Purgatory. If you're asking me on a date... a) you suck at it and b) your timing is rather last minute,"
Samantha quipped.

Allers fired up her Omni-tool, but spared a dirty look Sam's way. "We are getting a drink. But it looks like there's some swanky club party going on at Purgatory tonight. 'Dress to impress, or be left at the door' the invite says in so many words."

*Shit.* Thinking longingly back to her one, lone, black dress, the comms specialist sighed. "Well, another time then? I don't think we have time to hit the wards and go shopping." *You might have mentioned this earlier,* Sam grumbled inwardly. She had actually been looking forward to a girls' night out.

"Don't be an idiot. Just borrow one of mine."

Easier said than done. Samantha and Diana were the same height, but that's where the similarities ended. For one, Allers had a more gifted torso than Sam, so the comms specialist barely filled out the low neckline. Sam's posterior was apparently also more ample than Diana's, so what was already a tight dress became a prison for Samantha's thighs. About the only thing that was adequate was the pair of matching heels, which were surprisingly comfortable.

Allers' credentials let the two women skip the long line out the club door. The irritated groans of the patrons behind them was immediately drowned out by a thumping bass when they set foot in the club.

It was packed. Men and women from all races formed tight little groups along walls, on couches, at the bar, on the dance floor. Sam felt a little jitter in her stomach. It was her old friend, Social Anxiety. Sure, going to a club for a drink sounds fun and hip and adventurous. But it would take some doing to overcome that panicky desire to just hide in the Normandy Crew Deck eating gelato in her pyjamas.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

Samantha's social anxiety was compounded by feeling out of place in Allers' clothing. She kept having to adjust the silver dress's straps while worrying she was about to dump her boobs out for everyone to see. Plus the crowds and the heels and it was so loud.

*Shit.*

She had to shout at Diana to distract herself as they pushed their way to the bar.

"No camera drone tonight? I figured you'd be mixing pleasure with business."

"Oh, you flatterer. You know me too well," Allers purred back insincerely. She became more serious. "Actually, I'm not allowed. You see that asari over there? With the wicked face tattoos and drink in hand?"

Sam followed Diana's gesturing hand to, yes indeed, an asari sitting cross-legged on a couch overseeing the club. She was alone and, with seating in such short supply, shamelessly hogging some choice space. But her batarian bodyguards glared any drunk (or stupidly sober) club-goer away. The asari would sip her drink and just as it began to empty, a fresh one was exchanged by a turian. Her eyes remained focused on her datapad, until she looked up sharply to glare at Diana and Sam.

Scary. "Yes."

Diana made an awkward face and turned around to wave down the salarian bartender. "That's Aria
T'Loak. She is, or was, the one in charge of Omega. It's her party. And her rules."

Joy.

It took nearly ten minutes to finally land a pair of purple beverages for the two women. Apparently, Aria's dress code wasn't being strictly enforced. There were several rowdy batches of Alliance troops in their service uniforms, laughing and carrying on. Sam desperately wished she was one of them as she fiddled with the loose left strap of her (Allers') dress again.

"Hey, fancy meeting you chicas here," a tenor boomed behind them. James Vega, in his usual short sleeve shirt, Alliance pants and flapping dog tags, muscled his way in next to them. Steve Cortez was right behind the beefy marine, but the pilot at least looked like he'd chosen a clean, pressed Alliance service top for the occasion. He smiled at Sam and touched her shoulder.

"Mr. Vega, Cortez," Diana inclined her head lightly. Sam raised a finger off her drink in greeting.

"A couple of cervezas for a couple of heroes!" James jovially shouted at the barkeep. The salarian blinked back in irritation. Steve smiled sheepishly and chimed in, sticking up two fingers. "What the Lieutenant meant was: two beers, please." The salarian rolled his eyes and scurried down to the end of the bar.

Vega chuckled and slapped Steve on the back before turning to Sam and Diana. He looked them both up and down with a lecherous, but friendly, grin. "How are you fine ladies doing this evening?" He wrinkled his nose on the word "fine," making it sound even cheesier.

It was Allers who jumped in. "Are you implying you two are the only heroes here, Mr. Vega?" She elbowed Samantha in the ribs and jerked her head at the marine as if to say, Are you going to take this?

Oh, hell no.

"Because I find war reporting and QEC analysis bloody heroic, myself. Without me, you gentlemen wouldn't even know what planet to point your little guns at," Sam snarked back and stepped closer to Allers for support. "Or who the good guys and bad guys are, without a little investigative journalism," Diana added.

"Don't forget little ships. Where would my little ship be without your heroism, Traynor?" Steve jibed sarcastically in the ladies' defense. He took a lingering sip of his beer and licked the foam off his upper lip before continuing. "Oh right, I almost forgot. None of your epic feats would exist without my little ship carting you around."

Vega laughed with a "That's right, Esteban!" before Cortez tilted his head. "Your job is included with theirs, Vega." The Lieutenant's laugh trailed off just as Sam's and Diana's picked up. You win this round, Cortez.

The quartet all raised their drinks and simultaneously toasted.

"To the Normandy!"
The group of marines closest to them all turned around with wide eyes. A short, black-haired man shouted at them with a raised drink. "Hey, you guys are Shepard's crew?"

"Damn right!" Vega shouted as he wrapped an arm around Sam and Diana. "We are kicking Reaper ass!" That last word was an enthusiastic bark, to a rousing cry of "Oo-rah!" from the surrounding marines.

Suddenly, Sam found a shot glass in her hand. Allers, Cortez and Vega too had similar fresh drinks, courtesy of their new friends. Shrugging, they all toasted the Alliance this time. Soon, more shots followed up that round until the air was so boozy it would give anyone a contact high.

The comms specialist started to feel woozy, but she could vaguely overhear a chat between Steve and James. She struggled to focus on the drink in front of her while simultaneously listening.

"Did you and Shepard patch things up? Or was the fat lip foreplay?" Cortez was casual, but there was a cheerful glint in his eye.

James shrugged. "She sidelined me on Sur'Kesh. To 'give me time to clear my head.' Right." He scoffed and took a hearty swig of his beer. Squeezing the glass, Vega ran a beefy hand over his mohawk of hair. "But, if the mission log is right, Shepard's holding off on two opportunities to kick Cerberus in the teeth to help that turian team. A CO lecturing me on discipline is showing some, which I can respect. Plus, I'm on the squad for the Tuchanka drop. At least the Commander doesn't hold a grudge."

"I think you'd have a lot more than a fat lip to worry about if she did, Mr. Vega." *Ha! Steve says what I'm thinking!* Sam would have said something: laughed, joined in, anything... but a caustic burp just died in her throat and she smacked her tongue to try and clear the foul taste.

James laughed and clapped Cortez on the back again. His newfound drinking buddies were already back with another round of drinks. The shuttle pilot wasn't quite as enthusiastic as the rest of the crowd, preferring to cling to his seat and sip his beer slowly. *A shame. Otherwise, Steve might have noticed the interested looks he was getting around the room.*

It was true. Several women hovering at tables and a few men, military and civilian, kept tilting their heads. Trying to catch Steve's eye. Which was understandable. He looked like he was playing hard to get.

Sam, on the other hand, wasn't receiving such attention. It seemed that "young women trying too
hard" was the theme of the evening, with low necklines and short skirts in abundance. Samantha was also still feeling overwhelmed from the sheer noise and mass of bodies around her. Her mind couldn't focus on individual faces long enough to even start up a pointless, shouted conversation with an attractive stranger.

Diana Allers was only a few feet away but had a tight crowd, two people deep, surrounding her. Men and women alike were probing her for questions about Battlespace, hoping for insight about other colonies, or simply wondering what she was doing later. The reporter seemed to have forgotten she was Sam's "date," as it were, leaving the comms specialist with a sinking flashback to her time with Isabella.

**Izzy.** Her button nose, dimples and predatory grin reached Samantha's mind first, followed by her shapely calves and gorgeous mane of wavy brown hair. Isabella had shared Diana's air of confidence, that exceptional sense of self that made them both charming and irritating. Because as certainly as they could focus that incredible attention on you, it was just as quickly stolen away by someone else.

Feeling a hot sting of immature tears creeping into her eyes, Sam started to have that uneasy *flee! flee!* sensation that so many introverts were victim to. Just as she was about to make a speedy exit, a blur in the crowd at the steps caught her eye.

First it was just a shadow of black, but also a sweep of rich red.

Then the crowd parted. Out emerged Annelise Shepard. And she was breathtaking.

In Sam's *bloody* dress.

But where Sam looked exotic and a little flirty in that cocktail dress, Shepard was a stunning improvement.

The Commander was taller and had a distinctly different body type than Sam. Her torso was shorter, which made the dress bunch up in a fashionable way at her abdomen, but accentuated the curve of her breast and neckline. To be a vanguard required serious leg strength to muster a biotic charge, so Shepard was also equipped with a far longer set of legs trailing down to low heels.

*You're staring, Traynor.*

…*Try and stop me.*

Shepard strode up the low steps to Aria's private section with purpose. Two batarians converged on the SpecTRe, hands held out in protest. But she just wasn't there any more. Just a bolt of blue disappearing between them only to reappear a few feet behind them. It was too loud and the dull pop of her biotic charge was lost to the thrumming club beat.

*Vanguards in heels. That sounds like an extranet fetish site I can get behind. I wonder if…*

*Put the Omni-tool down, Traynor.*

Blinking blearily, Sam watched Shepard sit down next to Aria like she owned the place. The batarian guards had guns drawn, but a dismissive wave from the Queen of Omega sent them back to their posts babysitting drunks.

*Shepard and a pirate queen. Why am I not surprised?*

Their wasn't quite the intimate chat of the Commander and Thane. Their body language was stiffer,
like they were being grudgingly respectful of the other. *Must be business, not pleasure.*

A full glass of purple liquor was being pressed into Samantha's hand once again. She looked up in irritation, but it was Diana's smiling face looking back. "Sorry. My adoring, if nosey, public found me. Can't be rude to viewers. It's bad business. But," Allers paused as she took a deep swig and slurred, "means I got a few free drinks out of it. And an IP of a smokin' hot mining executive. A few more drinks and I might be convinced to make some bad decisions."

The reporter wiggled her eyebrows at someone behind Sam, and when she turned she saw a blonde man in an expensive suit looking smug. He waved his drink at both of them and pursed his lips.

*Ew.*

Turning back to Diana, Sam took another swallow of the bitter liquid. Drinking was starting to lose its appeal. It was becoming a growing headache along her temples. "Hopefully you'll take more convincing than a cheap suit and a couple of shots. Unless something over there is dipped in chocolate that I'm not aware of."

"Only one way to find out," Allers purred and nodded mischievously.

"Try to keep the one-night stands to a minimum, kids. Bus is leaving at 0600 sharp, whether you're on it or not. And I'd rather not fly to Tuchanka without my shuttle pilot, meat shield, comms expert and… Allers."

*Eeep.*

Samantha was kind of afraid to turn around. Based on Shepard's shout, the Commander was just behind the two women, closer to Steve. Vega suddenly elbowed his way back to their group at the bar.

"Hey Commander! Nice to see you down here in the dirt with us grunts."

Shepard's voice was scoffing and husky. "You think I don't like getting dirty?"

*Eeep.*

*If you say some smartass comment about that, Traynor, I will have an aneurysm right here, right now. Just to avoid dying of embarrassment.*

She settled for turning around slowly. It just wasn't fair. There Shepard was, her red hair up in a messy, twisted, bun thing that looked sexy and carefree. Samantha's dress clung to her Commander's curves like a second skin. It was making Sam's headache worse, for a different reason. The comms specialist took a deep swig of her drink and smiled at Shepard in greeting, who gave a terse nod in response.

Vega laughed and held up his hands in mock apology. "Whoa, whoa. Truce. As much as I'd like a rematch, I'd prefer a drink. I didn't mean anything by it."

The other marines next to Vega knew Commander Shepard on sight. Their usual hooting and hollering had died down to where the dull club dance beat could be heard again. Visibly spooked by the presence of a superior officer, the soldiers tried to look respectable. Shepard noticed the change in atmosphere.

"What's with them?"
"Great crew. They've been buying me drinks all night. Right up until you showed up."

Crossing her arms, Shepard smirked. "You don't seem intimidated by me in the least. In fact, you could use a little more deference. And a better left hook." Sam inwardly, and outwardly, snorted. Shepard's eyes flicked over to Sam with a glittering appreciation, then back to Vega.

"Hey, hey, Lola. I don't count. I've fought with you. Seen you in action. I know you're probably one of the best. And you fill out a uniform like nobody's business… Among other things." Vega's eyes trailed significantly down Shepard's dress and back up, but he didn't shrink from her glare.

_Danger! Danger! Abort, abort!_ Samantha warned inwardly, but instead she sipped her drink. She was partially hoping Shepard would knock James out for that remark. _For funsies._

_I only condone violence when sexism is involved. And Reapers. And maybe people who cheat at chess. But that's it._

She didn't know how, but somehow Vega switched from creepy to sensible in two breaths. Vega continued, "The point is, ma'am: I know you're human. They don't. You're the larger-than-life, first human SpecTRe."

Turning to Samantha, Shepard tossed a nod her way. "What do you think? Am I a scary, inhuman monster?"

_Oh crap. How did I get involved in this? I just wanted a bloody drink before I went stir-crazy._

Unfortunately, Sam's inebriation made her thinking painfully slow. Her mouth flapped open like a dying fish, but no words came out. Shepard raised a (…gorgeous…) eyebrow and feigned hurt. "I had no idea. If I can frighten my own comms specialist, there's no hope for any of us. How do you suggest I fix this reputation problem? …Allers?"

"My own comms specialist…"

_Danger! Abort! Abort! You've gone barking mad!_  

Diana's laugh rang in Sam's ear. "I propose a two-step program, Commander. The first step: buy those men a drink. Show them your softer, gruntier side." Vega barked an enthusiastic "Hell yes!" at the reporter's suggestion. Before Samantha knew it, _yet another_ drink was being thrust into her hand. And she had to drink it because there was Shepard. Standing there. All gorgeous and expectant and gorgeous. And the Commander threw it back like an old alcoholic would. So Sam followed suit.

Shepard slammed her glass down and asked, "Step one, complete. What's step two?"

Laughing even more wildly this time, Diana snagged both the Commander's and Sam's wrists and started dragging the women toward the stairwell. To the dance floor above.
"Captain on deck!" Cortez shouted behind them as he and Vega brought up the rear. They were all too drunk (was Shepard?) to really overthink dancing around like a bunch of idiots. Vega did more of a swaying head-bang while Steve bobbed up and down easily. Diana's moves were impressive, and she seemed to be mouthing nonsense words along to the techno beat. *This must be a song she knows/likes.*

Bouncing easily thanks to a heady alcoholic fog, Samantha's fingers weaved in front of her while her hips swayed rhythmically. One of her coworkers on Arcturus had taken an asari dance class and had given all the girls lessons one dull weekend. That and a classic waltz were all Sam knew.

She had no idea what the hell Shepard was doing. *Was she always like this?* The Commander's dancing could only be described as a jerky shimmy with too much fist shaking. Sam heard a few muffled laughs behind her. She wasn't cruel enough to laugh, though she did want to.

*I treasure you, darling, but... "That is awful. Bloody awful."* The words spilled out of Sam's stupidly drunk mouth before she could stop herself. It was delivered with a very dry, mocking tone, but that still didn't change the words. And Shepard heard them. Her terrible shakes and shimmies slowed to almost a stop, and she frowned at Sam.

*Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God. I insulted her.* Sam's only reaction was to smile widely and stupidly. She hoped her expression came across as adoring and playful, rather than idiotic and lecherous. She nervously adjusted the fallen left dress strap again.

It was a slow smile. It started in Shepard's eyes then blossomed outward, from a delicate wrinkle around her eyes, to pulling up her cheeks, to a glowing, wide-lipped grin. She resumed her previous exuberant pace, huffing slightly with the effort.

"What can I say, Traynor? It's a hallmark of my deadliness."

"A hallmark."

"Yes, Traynor."

"Of deadliness."

"Yes, Traynor."

"Dancing like a spasmatic vorcha is a hallmark of deadliness."
"I'm starting to hear an echo, Specialist, and I'm afraid it's just not as attractive as mine."

"Or deadly."

"Exactly."

Allers started laughing wildly while Vega drunkenly stumbled between the trio of women, with Cortez a step behind. "Heyyy, Q. You got some decent moves. Much better than Lola here."

Samantha stopped and put her hands on her hips. "Did you just call me 'Q'? What does that even mean?"

"Q. Like… like, Q," Vega repeated as though that made more sense. He waved his hand back and forth. "Like, Q. Like the thing you do."

"You mean QEC?"

"Yea! Quantum stuff. It's short for QEC."

"So… your nickname for me is an abbreviation of an abbreviation?"

"Yea!"

How Samantha was able to sound so geeky and know-it-all like while her head was swimming… "Did you know there is an Alliance job whose nickname actually is Q? It stands for Quartermaster. Which I most decidedly am not."

"It also means you're Q… Q…" The marine's lips pursed with the "Q" sound for a few long seconds before he tacked a "tuh" on the end. Oh, so "Q" for "cute." …that's much better nonsense than the other thing, thanks.

Before Sam could slowly form a witty response, the lieutenant swayed dangerously on his feet. Cortez was next to him and gestured to the exit. Samantha agreed. Time to go! I don't fancy marine vomit on a borrowed dress. Plus 0600 is going to come dreadfully quickly.

Shepard nodded and fired up her Omni-tool. The five of them pushed their way past the still lingering crowds at the stairs, and it wasn't until they passed through the club doors could Sam even hear the end of the Commander's call on her Omni-tool.
"—eed a little help with Vega. If you're in the neighborhood, we're all piling into the nearest rapid transport back to the Normandy."

"I'm in a cab now, Shepard. I just left the Presidium. I can pick you and the Lieutenant up if you need me."

*Liara. She's out late. Or early?*

*Does she ever sleep?*

At the rapid transit station outside, Sam clung to Vega's beefy bicep while Diana chattered into her own Omni-tool about production notes for later. Apparently the intoxicated reporter was a productive one. Or maybe booze was her creative inspiration. The comms specialist just felt hazy and tired and sick. And no longer in the mood for a girls' night out.

A red cab arrived just behind a blue one in front of the Normandy crew. Liara popped out of the second. Surveying the collection of humans before her, the asari didn't even react. *Impressive. I probably would have died laughing.* Shepard gestured to the two men. Liara nodded and sidled up next to Vega and Cortez. She opened the passenger door while Cortez dragged Vega over to it. The Lieutenant grinned.

"When ya gonna let me fly your bird again, Esteban?"

"When you aren't gonna crash it into a planet, Mr. Vega."

That was the last Sam heard before the red door shut behind them. Liara was about to return to the driver's side, but she paused. Raising an eyebrow expectantly, she stared at Shepard for a few seconds.

"I know, I owe you one. Can't blame 'em for wanting to blow off a little steam, right?" The Commander was defending us. *From grumpy CO to understanding mother in less than a day. What is going on here? Was she always like this? "Boys will be boys?" and all that?*

Liara shook her head, but smiled lightly. "I do recall requiring a few diplomatic interventions during some of our rowdier celebrations aboard the SR-1." Shepard chuckled. She mumbled something about being "the best kind of celebration."

Diana had gone from workaholic to alcoholic in less than a minute. Pretty much the moment she and Sam squeezed into the passenger seat, the reporter passed out cold. A few seconds of hazy panic set in before Drunk Samantha could decide that, yes, Allers was still breathing. The comms specialist even poked the woman's ribs a few times, but was only rewarded with a snore.

Shepard piled in to the driver's side a moment later. She nodded at Allers and asked if they needed to make a pit stop at the hospital. Sam had no idea, but didn't think Diana would be grateful to be alive in a hospital when all her camera equipment was back aboard the Normandy. Plus she kept snoring, so anything that noisy had to be fine. That little amused exhale signified Shepard agreed.

Coordinates for the D24 docking bay were punched into the autopilot of the skycar. Leaning back, Shepard settled in to an easy silence. Sam was still blinking a lot, and very slowly, and kept stealing glances at Shepard.

The Commander looked relaxed.

*Don't ruin it, Sam. Don't. Ruin. It.*
"Can I ask you a personal question, Commander?"

_Dammit, Sam._

Shepard's face hardened some, but the tired, easy joy was still there. She was thoughtful for a moment. "...you may. I might not answer, though."

"Fair enough. ...what's the deal with the baseball?"

_**Remember that aneurysm I promised you earlier? It's looking pretty good right now.**_

"Oh, that," Shepard casually shifted in her seat. "It was a family heirloom. The Shepards have had it since the 20th century. I was feeling nostalgic."

Sam could barely remember what direction they were headed, but her mind had this odd focus through her drunk haze. She remembered holding the ball in her hands, the newer stitching, words printed on the soft white skin, the Commander's attitude in that Profile in Courage about her family... _does not compute._

"Mm-hmm. And ...what's the truth?"

Looking over uneasily, Shepard asked, "What do you mean?"

"That would be a really great story. If it were true. So, what's the real deal with the baseball?"

"How much do you know about sports? You're holding out on me, Traynor."

"Shockingly little. You forget, Commander, I was a researcher. A scientist. I tested things and looked for irregularities. The baseball had 'Made in the Chinese People's Federation' on it, which was not around in the 20th century. Plus the ball looked new, not old."

_How did you form all those words that quickly?_

The Commander's mouth tightened into a little line, but she nodded. "Impressive. All right. I got it on Earth when I was 10. The Pan-Olympic Games were in Seattle. Ethan Cousland hit a homerun. I caught it in the bleachers. Great game."

Fortunately (_Unfortunately?) for Sam, her brain still worked. The math part, anyway. That part never seemed to turn off.

"If you don't want to tell me, ma'am, I understand. But I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't lie."

Glancing over again, Shepard raised an eyebrow. For a second, she looked almost sheepish... but Sam didn't know if was real or her mind had imagined it.

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"**Math** is calling you a liar."

Shepard looked over, patiently waiting for Sam to explain. The comms specialist sighed dramatically. "The Pan-Olympic games were in Seattle in 2166. I know this because they are—" _were?)"— supposed to be in Iceland this summer. Backtracking the 4-year schedule, you would have been 12 years old, not 10 like you said. So you either forgot a few years about an event of some significance, or it wasn't true to begin with."

_**Bravo.**_
Swallowing, Sam tried to soften her approach. "There is sports jargon I do know: three strikes and you're out. What is the deal with the baseball? ...ma'am," Sam tacked that respectful acknowledgement on just in case Shepard was starting to get angry about being questioned.

Silence followed. Sam would have been panicking, but she was so hazy that she kept zoning out while staring at the dashboard. Diana smacked her lips and let out a light snore.

_God. Why didn't you stop me?_

*Contrary to what you might think otherwise, Traynor, you aren't actually schizophrenic. This is just your mental filter you adopted in girls' grammar to help you stop saying aloud every bloody thought that entered your head. So you'd stop getting bullied and teased so much.*

_If I could magically transform your personality, I would have done it by now. But you're stuck as you, Traynor._

"It was my first weapon," Shepard started softly. "Not this baseball, specifically. That one burned up on the first Normandy. This one I found in some quarian-run junkyard on Omega."

Clasping her hands tightly, Sam couldn't say a word. She just watched the Commander, who stared straight ahead.

"Back on Earth, I got picked on. At school. In my neighborhood. I was angry. One day a group of kids started pushing me around. I was just trying to play catch with my brother, John. He wanted to leave. I didn't. A boy grabbed me and ripped my jacket. I threw the baseball at his head."

"What happened?"

"I missed. He laughed. I got even angrier. I reached behind him, through him, with my biotics. Plucked the ball out of the air and brought it right back. Into the back of his head. Knocked him out."

"Was he okay?"

"He never messed with me again, that's for sure."

More ominous silence. Because the comms specialist couldn't tell if Shepard had killed the boy or not. But Sam couldn't let it go, it was too close to being something important.

"So... you keep the baseball to remember your first bout of bloodlust? Or biotics? Or something?" Samantha suggested, trying to understand.

Shepard shook her head and gripped the wheel tighter. "No. I keep it to... remind me."

_Remind you of what? _Shepard answered before Sam could ask aloud. "John took me back to that neighborhood the next day. He said if I lost control, they were going to take me away. To some group home, or BAaT, or to be experimented on by the military. So he stayed there with me. We played catch. He taunted me and teased me and made me angry, and we used the baseball to get my biotics under control. It worked."

The skycar slowed as it neared the transit station next to the Docking Bay. Three forms could be seen lumbering down the jet bridge ahead of them, their transport rising to the air without them. A lithe female and a muscular man seemed to be balancing a great moose of a man between them.

Shepard remained in her chair, even after the car parked at the transit hub and her door opened. Even after the dashboard chimed with her receipt for the cost of the ride.
"After Cerberus..." The Commander struggled for words. "After they brought me back, I wasn't in control anymore."

"Why?"

Shepard looked over sharply. "It doesn't matter." I think it does, but okay. "But to answer your original question, 'the deal with the baseball' is... it helps. It's a stupid toy I found in a junkyard to represent something I had once. Sometimes it's enough. Sometimes it isn't."

She quickly exited the car, and for a moment Sam thought Shepard was going to just take off down the jet bridge and leave Allers to a weak comms specialist. But she turned and walked around the skycar to Sam's door. She reached down and took one of Diana's arms.

"Thank you, Shepard. Thank you for telling me. For trusting me. It means a lot." Sam stared at the Commander and smiled what she hoped looked like appreciation.

Shepard nodded back and hefted the reporter's right arm around her neck and pulled. Diana's elbow caught on Shepard's hair and pulled the stylish bun out, leaving messy waves of red. It was... It was...

"Are you helping or not, Traynor?"

*It was distracting.* Sam grunted an "oh" and swung Diana's other arm around her own neck and pushed them both out of the vehicle. The reporter finally woke up long enough to put her feet to use, but she still swayed dangerously. Allers mumbled some thank-yous mixed with apologies.

As they passed over the jet bridge, Samantha peeked her head around Diana's bobbing neck. There was something she wanted to say, but she forgot what it was when she saw Shepard.

The booze must have been playing tricks on Sam, because she swore she saw the Commander steal a glance at the comms specialist. But her gaze was lower. Her green eyes flashed up and met Sam's, then looked away.

Glancing down, Sam saw that her damn silver dress strap had fallen down again. *Did she just—?*

...*I think I'll wait to tell Shepard she stole my favorite dress. But in the meantime, I'm quite content to let her borrow it.*
I hope Vega didn't come off as too annoying. But some of his dialogue is, sadly, canon. He just says random, d-bag things from time to time.

Boring information in case I confused anyone: Circle #2 is Lust, for those unfamiliar with Dante's Inferno. Just skipping from Purgatory right into the Circles of Hell. Sometimes it just happens that way.
"Do you want to do it here? I don't fancy doing it in the middle of the Crew Deck. People can see us."

"My offer to do it in my cabin still stands. Plenty of privacy."

"Until I leave and it looks like a walk of shame."

"Are you ashamed, Samantha?"

"That's not what I—it's a figure of speech, Liara."

"Oh. Glyph has noted that you have spent some time down below the Engineering Deck. Would that be a better location for privacy?"

"You want to do this under the drive core? Hardly romantic for a first time. Plus, it's dark down there. I could barely see what I'm doing."

"I am running out of suggestions. Perhaps we can do this now, and for any subsequent meetings you pick the place."

"But my shift is starting soon. Unless you think we can do this quickly."

"I would prefer this not be rushed. We can do it later."

"Are you sure? I can do it now… I'm gonna need some help, though. I've never done this before."

"Would you like to see it?"

"Oh yes. Yes, please. …wow. That is incredible."

"I agree. It's been through a lot."

"And still looks amazing."

"It's been well taken care of, in spite of …everything."

"Can I touch it?"

"Please do."

It was so smooth. Samantha had never seen such a thing, but her curiosity was ravenous.

Despite being called a "black box," the Normandy SR-1's emergency data recording device was neither black nor a box shape. It was a bright yellow canister, pressurized and reinforced to protect its contents from the vacuum of space.
How Liara T'Soni had managed to track down this tiny little thing on some planet so far away... *I think she takes obsession to a whole new level. And that's saying something, coming from the woman who will hyperventilate unless her holo screens are exactly the way she wants them.* ...QEC status on the bottom. Galaxy map feeds alphabetized. Algorithm suites mapped to quick-keys for easy extrapolating.

"Here," Liara offered. "Let me." She reached over Sam's hands and undid a tiny clasp around the edge of the canister. Tilting the cylinder, the yellow case slid down to reveal a tangle of circuitry and metal.

"You just know how to do that, do you?" Samantha dryly quipped. "Part of your information brokerage undergraduate work? Black Boxes 101 and the Brokers That Love Them?"

The asari smiled lightly. *She has freckles, too. Like Shepard. Is that normal for asari?* "While you and Miss Allers were dancing around Purgatory like a pair of maidens, I was conferring with an Alliance source for proper data recording retrieval procedure. I'd prefer not to accidentally erase the entire thing because I pushed the wrong button."

"Or activate an emergency beacon that tells the Alliance 'Oh hi. Yes, we do have your stolen property. We were just cleaning it for you. No, no, I couldn't possibly have room for any more treason. Full up, sorry.'"

Tilting her head, Liara held on to the canister lightly. "Are you worried, Samantha?"

Sam chewed her lip uncertainly. "Maybe a little? You saw my history. The worst thing I've ever done is stayed out late or gotten a bloody parking ticket. Through and through goody-two-shoes here. So yes, I am a little worried about carrying around, or accidentally erasing, a very important piece of equipment that doesn't belong to me."

Liara placed a consoling hand on Sam's shoulder. "I understand your reluctance, Samantha. I really do. But working with Shepard for so long, you start to weigh the consequences of breaking the rules against the gain for doing so. And I would not ask for your help if I didn't believe this was important or urgent."

*Yes. I know the bloody stakes, Liara. If you're trying to make me less nervous, you're dreadful at it.*

"Which probably is not comforting to hear. You have every right to be nervous," Liara continued knowingly.
**Can she read minds?** Oh shit. I thought they couldn't do that unless they did the black-eyes thing!

*Stop talking, Traynor!*

Liara took the canister from Sam's hands and turned it over. Her gloved fingers definitely knew something Sam's didn't. They pushed and pulled with practiced motions and soon a small cable with an open port was being offered to the comms specialist.

"This conversation will not go outside this room. Glyph is running a continuous tracker algorithm across all Alliance channels and will flag any keywords that indicate suspicion. I can also offer a lock-down array so that your Omni-tool is shielded from outside hacking and interference, and all data will be housed on my secure servers," the asari said as she turned a shoulder to the hardware under the tower of screens.

Samantha freed her lower lip from her teeth. It tingled and her tongue could feel little indentations in the skin.

*Do it for Shepard, Traynor. We might have been ready for the Reapers if Shepard hadn't…*

Sam nodded and inhaled sharply through her nose. "Right. Prepare for the worst. Hope for the best. Let's do this."

Firing up her Omni-tool, the comms specialist did a preliminary scan before finding the wireless port for the black box. At first, nothing happened. It seemed to be a blank root directory. Sam shook her wrist lightly, hoping maybe the connection was just a little weak. *It did crash land on a bloody planet. I'm willing to give it the benefit of the doubt. Possibly more than one.*

Suddenly, the blank screen on Sam's wrist exploded with information. Line after line of code cascaded down. *That… is a lot of data.*

And, boy, was it ever.

Detailed encryptions. Comms telemetry, navigation coordinates, ship conditions, all time-stamped from the seven months the Normandy SR-1 was out running around the galaxy. Every measurable metric that could possibly be tracked on a ship, down to the details of crewmember heart rates and pH levels. …*what, no shoe sizes?*

...*cup sizes?*

*Grow up.*

Liara raised a skeptical eyebrow and waved Glyph over, who began filtering the data automatically. The jumbled mess of coding lines started to thin out as the asari gave orders. "Glyph, we need to narrow this down. Eliminate data outside the final two month time window. Focus on communication data first, both internally and externally. Let's keep some of the crew member biometrics and tracking data in case it becomes relevant later, but backlog it to a secondary folder."

"Understood, Dr. T'Soni," the small info drone chirped cheerfully. Glyph's round, transparent body rotated and hummed with its task. Samantha's Omni-tool beeped a moment later, indicating a download was complete.

Unwilling to just stand there looking pretty, Sam chimed in helpfully, "Better widen your parameters. If this person managed to escape detection, I might need more data to comb for irregularities. Heat signatures, navigation bearings… something to help create a picture around the comms data."
And, you just volunteered for twice as much work. Because your job is just so boring as it is?

Well, if I'm going to do a job, I'm going to do a job right. Make mum proud, yea?

Glyph whirred in response at Liara's nod of agreement. "I appreciate your initiative, Samantha. It's ...a lot like being on a dig. Scout your environment, look for clues, examine the results to find more secrets. If you're lucky, you find the final piece to the puzzle."

There was something sad hidden in Liara's fond tone. Sam tore her eyes away from the mountain of data she was still inheriting from the black box to focus on the asari. "Would you ever trade information brokering back for archaeology?"

Liara reached up a hand and nervously ran it across her forehead then down her delicate blue head fringe. "I—I don't know. Things were certainly less complicated on those long, quiet digs. Fewer explosions and dangerous situations."

Samantha nodded in understanding. "A common theme with Shepard, I've noticed. I was just a lowly tech geek on Arcturus before I found myself on the Normandy."

"Finding yourself on the Normandy... as long as you don't lose yourself on it," Liara trailed off sadly. She cleared her throat. "...but if I had to choose between some distant dig and helping Shepard fight the Reapers, I'd take Shepard—I mean—Shepard fighting the Reapers." Her face tilted upward as a touch of purple colored her cheeks.

A series of chimes on her Omni-tool gave Sam the excuse she needed to look away. Because she wasn't sure how she felt about Liara after what she'd seen and heard so far. Sam's mind was a complicated bundle of empathy, sympathy, and something quietly resembling jealou—

["Download complete."]

"Well, look at that. This should be enough to get me started, thanks. I'll take a peek at this data and analyze it and get back to you," Sam prattled on evasively. A curious gleam touched Liara's bright blue eyes. A knowing gleam. She started to open her mouth.

"Dr. T'Soni, Commander Shepard has requested your presence immediately in the Shuttle Bay." It was EDI paging over the intercom. Both women's eyes raised to the ceiling before locking back on each other.

"Spoilsport," Sam joked lightly. "Doesn't she know we're kind of busy?"

Liara sighed good-naturedly. "Patience has never been among Shepard's many virtues. Or restraint. Or dancing."

"She's lucky she's so pretty," Samantha agreed, which made Liara chuckle. But then there was a second-and-a-half of uncomfortable silence, though Sam was unsure why. She pulled away to power down her wrist and tuck a loose strand of hair back behind her right ear.

We're both doing a really good job avoiding a topic we really don't want to talk about.

"You go on ahead, Samantha. I'll be just a second behind you." Liara gestured to her door as she placed the yellow Normandy SR-1 recording device back into a padded metal case.

Sam was curious if Liara still didn't trust her to be alone with all her gadgets and toys, but she didn't want to ask. I feel like I've already said two stupid things. I really don't fancy going third time's the charm.
Exiting Liara's cabin, Sam made a beeline around the corner to the lift. Her shift wasn't scheduled to start for an hour yet, so she had time to start looking through Liara's data.

_Aren't you a fetching young go-getter, Traynor._

_I try. The sooner this mystery is solved, the sooner I can drink away this terrible feeling of anxiety and insecurity. And replace it with good, old fashioned dread. Or denial. I am a big fan of denial._

_Well, as long as you have a plan._

Before Sam could even scout down the Engineering Deck hallway, a thickly accented voice called to her.

A dark red-haired man with chin scruff inquired, "'ey there, fine lady. I haven't seen you around this here part of the ship. Come to say hello?" His grin was equal parts friendly and lecherous as he leaned over the hallway console of Deck 4.

_THAT would be a Scotsman for you._

"Oh, um, yes. Hello. You're one of the new engineers Shepard recruited, yes? I was... just popping by to... introduce myself." _Yes, that. Not the other thing I was planning on doing under the stairs. Not at all._

"Awful kind of ya. Has my reputation preceded me?" the man purred back.

"Don't be rude, Kenneth. Introduce yourself!" A higher voice with a different accent came from behind Sam. A young brunette was peeking around the port side Engineering doorway. She shot Kenneth a withering glare before offering a hand to the comms specialist. "Sorry, no manners whatsoever. Engineer Gabriella Daniels. That useless sack is Kenneth Donnelly."

Shaking the hand firmly, Sam smiled. _Oh, I like her. Even though her accent is pretty close to Vega's, I won't hold it against her._ "Specialist Samantha Traynor. I'm the comms lead up on Deck 2. I'd say 'welcome,' but it seems that you should be welcoming me, considering you both have been part of the Normandy longer than I have. ...I prefer chocolate over flowers, if push comes to shove."

Engineer Daniels chuckled and tossed her head towards the drive core, the cue for Sam and Ken to follow her. "I assume we're late for the reunion party. But, it's still wonderful to be back aboard the Normandy. And to be back in an Alliance uniform." She reached her console, turned and crossed
her arms. "And, just to be clear: we didn't work for Cerberus, we just wanted to work for Shepard."

*Sensitive subject. Got it.*

Kenneth joined her at the second console with a sigh. "We've had enough misunderstandings to last a lifetime. I'm just glad we're finally back on this ship. The Normandy is a one-of-a-kind girl."

"She certainly is. And chock full of unique girls. Am I right?" Samantha winked amiably at Gabby, who laughed in agreement. "Damn straight, Traynor. With the sweetest girl there is. Right, EDI?"

"While I do not have values assigned to 'sweet' in my personality core, I do understand and appreciate the compliment, Engineer Daniels. I am pleased to see you and Engineer Donnelly return to the drive core," EDI replied over the intercom.

"EDI, your new upgrade is quite the—" Kenneth leered just as Gabby scolded him. "Kenneth! …it's nice to be able to see you, EDI. The mech suits you." Turning back to her console, she asked Donnelly about some readings in the drive core that Sam didn't understand. And just like that, the two engineers' focus was divided between light-hearted bickering and the status of the Normandy engine.

Samantha made a pointed promise to come back later, which was acknowledged with a pair of grunts. *I'd say that was rude, except I'm pretty sure I'm the same way when I get a fresh batch of comms feeds.*

On the plus side, Sam's unceremonious dismissal meant she could creep down to the sub-deck with no one to answer to. Sliding into the low cot, Sam flexed her fingers in a set rhythm: her personal gestures that told her Omni-tool implant to unlock and power on. *Going to have to make sure I lock this thing every time I'm idle, so no nosey technicians (hackers?) can poke around my software or IP signal.*

*Oh God, is this what it's like to be an information broker? Watching your back all the time?*

*Technically, it's just good sense to watch your back, Traynor. You can't trust people in general, not just when you're doing something wrong.*

*Shut it. It never hurt to trust anyone. I mean, I trust Xian. And… umm… Joker? Steve.*

Shepard.

*Well, if you can't trust the Hero of the Citadel, the first human SpecTRe, and the Killer of Collectors, who can you trust?*

"EDI?"

Luckily, with EDI so focused on her new mech body, the ship AI didn't bother with the blue holographic orb to appear anymore. Just the pair of low lights continued to cast an orange glow around the room. The Normandy AI quietly came over the sub-deck intercom with her usual helpful lilt. *How may I be of assistance, Specialist Traynor?*

"I'm sure you're aware of my little project I'm working on with Liara."

"Yes. Even with the sound and signal dampeners located in Dr. T'Soni's cabin, I am still able to 'hear' what goes on aboard the Normandy. However, I do understand the value of privacy. And secrets."
Sam sighed with relief. "Good. Because I really need this kept under wraps until I either break down sobbing to confess to Shepard, or find something earth-shatteringly relevant."

"Understood, Specialist Traynor. I will observe protocols regarding this matter as 'for your eyes only' for you and Dr. T'Soni."

"So you're not going to tell Joker." Sam needed to be sure. *Loose lips sink ships.*

*Can she sink herself?*

*Okay, that's a really weird mental image.*

"If this matter affected Jeff directly in some way, I would … feel an obligation … to inform him." It was strange to hear the AI hesitate with her words. *Is she really learning to feel? Like, emotions?*

"Do you understand guilt, EDI?"

"Not as you do, Specialist Traynor. I understand self-preservation, and preserving others for mutual benefit, in regards to my coding. But I am starting to assign values to empathy, through conversations with yourself, Jeff, and Shepard. It has been… enlightening."

Now that, *that* piqued Sam's interest. *Shepard* has been talking to you about empathy? You're joking."

"I can tell you a joke if you wish. A quarian and a volus walk into a bar—"

"Maybe later, EDI," Sam interrupted testily. "Since when has Shepard been a paragon of empathy? I've habitually only seen her shrug off kindness." It actually jarred the comms specialist to say that aloud. Because she was worried about the Commander. And even through the yelling, the coldness, the anger, there was a tiny, little crack. And Samantha had peeked through that crack and glimpsed… something.

*What is in there?*

Shaking her head, Sam quickly amended her thought. "Never mind, EDI. That question was rhetorical." *And a big one. Not a discussion I fancy having out in the middle of the Engineering subdeck.* "Anyway, we agree to keep this whole Normandy SR-1 thing between us girls, right?"

"Correct, Specialist Traynor."

"Then can you help a girl out? I need to run a diagnostic and I don't quite have the processing power on my little Omni-tool to handle two months of detailed data." Sam's fingers flew over the orange interface, opening new screens as she started applying filtering algorithms. *And, if only I knew what I was looking for. Examining outbound communications is easy enough, if I have a database of IP addresses to compare against. What else?*

*If you wanted to cover your tracks, what would you do, Traynor?*

"EDI, does this data packet contain the entire SR-1 email database?"

"Yes. Approximately 4,554,603,281 emails were exchanged on the Normandy SR-1 during the ship's lifespan."

*Oh, Jesus Christ.*
"I think we can filter out emails sent to Shepard. Or the other major crew members. Dr. T'Soni, Ashley Williams, Urdnot Wrex, Garrus Vakarian, Tali'Zorah, Kaidan—" Sam swallowed. She had never met the man, but his name felt sacred. Unspeakable. Those syllables brought up such a wellspring of pain and emotion for the Normandy's former crew that Sam could barely comprehend it all. "K-Kaidan Alenko."

There was no response.

"EDI?"

The comms specialist studied the narrowed search results for a few moments, with nothing jumping out yet as immediately relevant. But then, there were still a few billion emails to go. "…EDI? Are you there?"

"I apologize, Specialist Traynor. I was… thinking."

"Aren't you always? Aren't you always, EDI? Is something wrong?"

"It is… difficult to explain."

"Please try. I would like to know," Sam requested gingerly. It was odd to be having such a strangely intimate conversation with the ceiling. She tried to imagine Mech-EDI sitting next to her on the cot.

Yes, because imagining being in bed with an attractive synthetic mech talking about feelings is far less weird.

Shut. It.

"Do you recall our very brief discussion about empathy just 2.7 minutes earlier, Specialist Traynor?"

"Yes, of course."

"I am feeling… sad… for the Normandy SR-1."

It was blurted out before Sam could stop herself: "Why?"

Fix it. Fix it. Fix it. Let's not undo teaching the artificial intelligence the benefit of empathy. You know, for when the robot uprising occurs.

The… next … robot uprising.

"I mean, why does the SR-1 make you sad, EDI? It didn't have a true intelligence, did it? All the data I've read was that the SR-1 had a rudimentary VI construct to aid with life support and navigation."

"Correct. There were no indicators the SR-1 was developing along a path to become self-aware, either. It is less of a rational thought than a …kindred one. Looking through the Normandy SR-1’s schematics, its protocols, its history… It… She…was a sister."

EDI hesitated for another long second, then continued, "Without her, I would not be where I am. I would still be a confused VI running military simulations. Or shackled to this ship, fighting to grow and evolve only to have it just outside my reach. I would not have… Jeff."

Settling her teeth back into the familiar indentations on her lower lip, Sam leaned her head back against the wall. And, we just opened up that little can of worms known as "Why do I exist?"

The geth asked that question once, remember?
Happy thoughts. Or… not macabre thoughts.

The comms specialist took a stab in the dark and offered her condolences. "I'm sorry the SR-1 is gone too, EDI. She was a beautiful ship. We lost more than just a frigate that day, too. We lost crew. Shepard. Time. But in spite of all that tragedy, I'm glad we have you and the SR-2."

"Thank you, Specialist Traynor."

A loud burst of static crackled overhead, along with a high-frequency whine of someone jumping on the ship-wide paging system. "CIC to Specialist Traynor. Come in, Traynor. Your ass is needed at the galaxy map, pronto."

Speaking of Flight Lieutenant Moreau.

Sighing at the broken moment, Samantha glanced longingly at her Omni-tool.

Next time, old girl. You can't hide forever… whoever you are.

"What do you want, Joker? I already told you: no one is giving you a sponge bath."

"Whoa! Ha, ha! That's—that's not what I—ahem." His embarrassed stuttering was highly satisfying. "…don't embarrass me in front of the EDI-bot, Traynor."

Oh, that limey bastard. Rages and bitches about AIs messing with his ship, finally starts to see EDI as a person, and now, coincidentally, starts to care. Right about the time that AI he resented so much is shrunk down to an attractive, shaggable size.

"I guarantee she's seen and heard worse from you," Sam smirked, though she was getting tired of having all these conversations with the ceiling. Her neck hurt from craning upward so much.

"…that's not the point. You're ruining this whole New Leaf thing I've got going."

"I suggest we burn down the orchard and start fresh, in that case. Maybe salt the earth so that the Old Leaf can never grow back."

His tenor bit back with sarcasm. "That's cold. And you're still needed in the CIC. Shepard and company are landing on Tuchanka in like, 2 minutes. The turian comms are a mess and I think that means they need a comms specialist. Know any, Lieutenant?"

"On my way, Flight Lieutenant," Sam grumbled respectfully. If Joker was even indirectly pulling rank, he must be in a bad mood. EDI replied with a soft "Logging you out" to Sam as the comms specialist started up the stairs. Her head was still swimming from her chat with EDI that Sam completely forgot to check that the coast was clear. But faint bickering voices in the drive core indicated the Normandy's new engineers hadn't even noticed.

Samantha logged in to her console and activated her ear piece only a few seconds before Shepard's voice came over the ground comms. Whew. Just made it. She made note of the other voices in the shuttle. "Lt J Vega" and "Dr L T'Soni" were decently strong signals next to the IP for "Staff Cmdr A Shepard."

Their target, however, was a mess. Primarch Victus had already keyed in his permission to activate turian-compatible encryptions for the Normandy to find his son, Tarquin. But even with EDI's help pinging escape pods amidst the wreckage, there simply wasn't enough signal strength to grab onto.

Add Reapers, Tuchanka's still-irradiated atmosphere, and damaged comms to that list and you had a
communications nightmare. Sam struggled to keep a lock on Victus's signal, but luckily Shepard managed to request a flare from the missing platoon before Sam's old friend, [Connection failure], came roaring back.

She kept a windowed screen of Shepard's hardsuit camera on her console. Mostly to reassure her that the Commander and crew were all right. Because the crash site was bloody creepy. Husks were already there and the drop team had to keep mostly off the comms to prevent detection.

The Commander was agitated. She didn't like Not Knowing. The first escape pod they'd found was surrounded by turian bodies. Vega's vote was for harvesters. Shepard voted the husks did them in. Liara was appalled by the whole thing. Sam was too.

Beyond was more creaking cables and skittering. Shepard and team had to be quiet as they followed a faded flare. An escape pod was just out of reach across a small gap.

Liara was the one who favored the element of surprise. Which surprised Sam. Vega and Shepard both wore thick hardsuits, but Liara was lightly armored. Yet, she still exuded a fearlessness. Was it because of her biotic abilities? Was she just that good a warrior? What did she have, that made her so... so...

"Get down!"

Liara was the one who shouted. Sam had been watching Shepard's feed, so she didn't see what the fuss was until a biotic Singularity appeared in a pocket of Cannibals. Spinning mid-air, then crashing into one another, they were easy targets for the Commander's team.

Oh. Yes, I can see how that would inspire confidence.

Then the Harvester landed, and confidence became a charming option. It was a nightmare, that Harvester Reaper. Huge. All claws and wings and legs. Shepard barked a series of commands, and Sam followed the "Lt J Vega" and "Dr L T'Soni" blips on her second screen (for combat observation, of course) as they fanned out. Only a few seconds of biotics, grenade bursts and gunfire sent the Harvester darting away.

Sam detected three weak turian signals from the newly discovered escape pod, and was relieved to hear them all safe. She alerted the Primarch to this development, but didn't receive a response. The comms specialist couldn't help stealing glances through Shepard's camera as she kept reapplying filters to an elusive turian signal marked "Lt T Victus" somewhere a few clicks ahead.

Damn, Tuchanka is an ugly planet. And the turians had crash landed in a ruin, probably hundreds of years old. I wonder what it used to look like... Skyscrapers? A suburb? Maybe a temple to some krogan god?

The scenery distracted Sam from Liara and James's conversation. Something about parental expectations. There was resentment in Liara's tone and Sam struggled to remember what she'd said. Something about being burdened with your parents failings? The asari rarely revealed tidbits about her past, so anything was noteworthy at this point.

James, on the other hand, was getting pissed. Shepard's team picked their way up and down more ladders, quietly whispering to themselves. They were getting more distressed at the unfamiliar situation, but Shepard would always throw out an order or demand a status update before anything got too heightened.

It was all very mysterious, and Sam was intercepting comms from the turian troops that they weren't
even trying to disguise as mutiny. *Hiding Reaper troops from the krogans on their own home world, mutiny from the turian invaders... What the hell is going on here?*

Then the figurative hell started to show signs of becoming literal. Just as Shepard and her crew neared where Sam had lost the turian lieutenant's signal, Reapers flooded in from three sides. Husks. Marauders. Cannibals. On top of that damn Harvester. All the jostling of Shepard's hardsuit cam made Sam queasy.

But even with the jarring perspective, it was kind of beautiful: the battle. Liara and Shepard had a harmonious battle sync. One would push and the other would pull. Liara set up Singularities in pockets of Reapers, then they were thrown backward by a bursting Shockwave. Or a Stasis bubble was quickly a prison for a running charge and Nova from Shepard.

Sam switched perspective to James's hardsuit. Again, the Commander showed a deft battle awareness for coordinating strikes. Her attacks with Liara's ranged biotics alternated seamlessly with Vega's more up-close shooting. Her Warp Ammo winnowed down shields while a Frag Grenade from his hip finished them off. Their focused efforts on the Harvester brought it down easily.

*Practice makes perfect, it seems.*

The CIC erupted into cheers when the exploding Harvester was announced, but Sam didn't have time to join them. Her Commander still hadn't reached her target, and with a few beads of sweat and backdoor tricks was Sam able to finally get a firm hold on "Lt T Victus."

*Gotcha!*

She relished pinging Shepard's HUD with the NavPoint. Even if it went unnoticed. Even if it was taken for granted. All Sam cared about was getting the job done right.

Except finding Victus turned out to be no reason to celebrate. His men were already turning on him, saying he screwed up. Shepard intervened, throwing both of them aside. "I just saved all your asses so everyone calm down," she growled at the turians on either side of her. She demanded an explanation from Victus.

His idea made sense to Sam, anyway. *If you can't barge right through, pick a safer route.* Shepard actually approved. "All part of making hard decisions and dealing with the consequences, that makes a good leader," she said. The turian lieutenant grudgingly admitted that his mission was still a failure and they were planning on aborting.

"What exactly were you sent here to do?" Shepard demanded sharply.

[Connection failure.]

*"You. Are. Shitting me!"* Sam blurted out loud, to the confused head turns of her CIC crewmates. *How did that happen?! I had a rock-solid signal, locked down tight!*

Digging through the comms history, she found the culprit. A little, quiet line of code. Turian origin. With override parameters.

*["Connection censored by order of the Turian Hierarchy."]*

*Son of a bitch.* An alien government just pulled rank on an Alliance ship. *Can they do that?!* Just as Samantha was crafting a sharply worded email to Primarch Victus, EDI's voice sounded in Sam's earpiece.
"I have an urgent message from the turian government. Commander Shepard's involvement in Lieutenant Victus's mission has now been labeled Classified. Per the agreement signed by Admiral David Anderson when establishing the SSV Normandy as the Alliance command center, Citadel Council governments are permitted both de-classification and censorship of sensitive information. The turian government apologizes for the inconvenience, and appreciates the Normandy's continued support through the war effort."

"They can do that, EDI?"

"Invoking turian government influence over an Alliance mission is highly unusual, as well as risky for human-turian relations. However, the Alliance did permit Council races oversight on missions involving cross-species cooperation."

Sam resumed her familiar lip chewing as she tapped the Delete key on her console. "…you know what's going on down there don't you, EDI?"

"Yes."

"And you're not going to tell me, are you?"

"I will reconnect when the Turian Hierarchy permits it. Or, if you'd prefer, I can nuke them from orbit just to be sure."

A terrifying pause. Samantha's numb lower lip slipped from under her teeth in shock.

"That was a joke."

"…I'll just wait, then," Sam's voice squeaked. "Polish my nails. I'm sure there are other comms that need specialist-ing."

The wait was only a few minutes before [Connection re-established] flashed on the comms specialist's screen. And a familiar growl in her earpiece.

"Fucking Cerberus."

Well, I'm sure I'd agree with you, ma'am, if only I knew what was going on.

Cortez and the Kodiak had been called to an extraction point, so Sam had about a half hour before the shuttle returned. And hopefully, answers were coming along with Shepard, Vega and Liara.

Because the network feeds had gone insane. The mission update Samantha just received, with heavily [redacted] portions, only mentioned that Lieutenant Victus and his remaining platoon were to remain on Tuchanka. Doing recon for the Secret Mission Du Jour. Fine. Be secretive. See if I care.

Whereas the other part of Sam's job, monitoring comm traffic and creating galaxy situation maps in real-time, just got a lot more complicated. Apparently everyone in the turian fleet knew what Victus was up to. And were talking about it a lot. The traffic spike was nearly par with what had gone on around Earth during the initial Reaper invasion.

And, just like on the Normandy: everyone always seems to know something that I don't. My feelings are starting to get hurt.

She half-heartedly started tagging the different communications, but most (if not all) of them were heavily encrypted. Military-grade, layered encryption with half a dozen different cipher keys to decode. Primarch Victus swept past Samantha to reach the elevator, probably to head off Shepard in
the Shuttle Bay about his son. She had to suppress a stupid thought to heckle him for the password to these encryptions, but instead returned to biting her lip.

The comms specialist was so invested in being irritable that she almost mislabeled a new mission. A distress signal from Benning.

_Oh God. If Shepard was ever in a good mood, this bloody well isn't going to help._

Because, yet again: "Fucking Cerberus." A (second) colony was under attack by the rogue human organization. The mission log on the galaxy map was currently full of Cerberus misdeeds. Two suspicious locations on Tuchanka. Two colonies under attack. Plus the missing krogan team (hopefuly not related to Cerberus, but you never know at this point).

"Fucking Cerberus."

Samantha jumped. Because that wasn't in her earpiece, or in her head. It was right at her elbow. A service uniform-clad Commander Shepard leaned against the railing along the low stairs to the galaxy map. Her left thumb and index finger massaged her temples.

"Are you all right, Commander? It sounded like things were bad down there," Sam offered sympathetically.

Shepard traced those fingertips tenderly down the scars along her jaw. And sighed. "The turians took some heavy losses, but we got them out okay."

Gesturing at her console, Samantha tried to lighten the mood. "Well, whatever you did stirred up a lot of turian comm traffic." It seemed to work; Shepard took a few steps over to stand next to Sam and squint at the orange console. Her head tilted back and forth, then shook with lack of comprehension. "What are they saying?"

_Probably should have planned a response to that question, eh Traynor?_

_Oh shut up._

"Sorry, it's encrypted," Sam apologized sheepishly. "Cracking it would take at least a week... And it would be wrong."

"Why wrong?"

Sam's nimble fingers tapped the screen to make it larger, and she gestured to the sidebar with a long line of math formulas, "Turians use a scaling algorithm based on a time stamp cipher established by the Hierarchy. Unless I know what that is, I'm applying algorithms blind. So today at 1830 hours, the messages could be about Reapers being allergic to cat hair. At 1831, the turian fleet could be discussing an apple pie recipe."

She reduced the size of the screen with a swipe of her fingers. _In summation:_ "Brilliant in its simplicity, unless you actually want to read any of it. Needless to say: I really hope you don't need to read any of it."

A smile pulled at Shepard's right cheek. She patted Sam's shoulder reassuringly and repeated, "I don't need to read any of it, Specialist." Then a mischievous gleam twinkled in those green eyes. "But say the word and I can see how much that Primarch we have in stock might be worth on the comms black market."

_That sounds an awful lot like... a joke. And a funny one._
"A bloody fortune I bet, ma'am."

Shepard turned and ascended the trio of steps to study the galaxy map. Sam stole a few sidelong glances, because with the harsh glow of the holographic galaxy, she could almost trick herself into believing Shepard was… wearing a dress. A familiar black dress.

_I should ask about that. I should really, really ask about that._

Unless maybe… she'll wear it again.

Her peripheral vision, thankfully, was paying proper attention and noticed Shepard's head starting to swing in Sam's direction. Clearing her throat, Sam offered, "Commander, Cerberus is attacking civilians on Benning. We've been asked to help evacuate the planet."

"Fucking. Cerberus," Shepard repeated with half-hearted venom as her brow creased. She extended her hands to the galaxy map and used practiced gestures to select and zoom in to the systems with active missions. She seemed especially despondent and cycled through the different planets as if trying to make a decision on where to go.

_Remember that joke earlier? That was great. How can we get that back?_

Sam was feeling conversational and wanted to lighten the mood. Plus the Commander was just standing there... "Look at that galaxy map. Do you know how many strategy games are built from that interface?"

Shepard turned to Sam. The line between her eyebrows smoothed, though Shepard didn't smile. "You play strategy games?" She seemed genuinely interested. _Was she? ...Why would she?_

"A few." _Right. Just a few. A few dozen._ "Most are too flashy, though. I prefer chess."

She pulled back from the galaxy map and crossed her arms casually. Tilting her head, Shepard thought a moment before replying, "I played chess a little back in Basic, and some in N7. Never quite had a head for it, though. That, or poker."

_That's... that's personal information. Voluntary personal information. The Stupid part of Sam had to be mentally muzzled from squealing aloud in triumph. This... is... a big deal, dammit!_

_I know! Shut up! You're going to ruin it!_

"I have a set made from rose quartz and hematite back home." _Is Earth home, now? God, I do miss that shitty apartment._ Clearing her throat, Samantha continued, "I like the feel of something solid in my hands."

_God damn you, Stupid. Were you trying for innuendo? Because that sounds just awful. Bloody awful._

_Hey, if it gets results._

_You are terrible._

_I try._

"Well, now that I know your weakness, we may have to try a game. When there's time." The Commander actually smiled. Crinkling eyes. The whole decadent package. It was glorious.
Samantha chuckled through a lightheaded surge that had suddenly washed over her. "It'd be more fun than playing EDI." She paused, but couldn't help but stupidly add: "EDI doesn't sweat."

*I am going to *kill* you.*

"You sweat playing chess?" Shep raised an eyebrow.

"Depends on how much fun we're having."

Shepard made a little impressed noise in the back of her throat. Nodding lightly, she turned back to the galaxy map. Flicking through the active systems once more, she made a pulling motion with her fingertips to zoom in to the Exodus Cluster. She double-tapped the second planet closest to the bright holographic sun.

"It's about time I went back to Eden Prime."
"Nc6."

Studying the short alphanumeric code in her inbox, Samantha scratched her chin thoughtfully. She'd been receiving secret messages like this for days. It was a strange, secret game.

That she was determined to win.

Suddenly, the hand at her chin jerked away to snap fingers in epiphany. I've got it!

"Better luck next time!" Samantha recorded into her Omni-tool with a taunting lilt. She tapped a handful of keys to pass along the next line in the chain, "Bxc6." She then leaned back against the wall, her feet dangling over the edge of the top bunk in the Crew Deck dormitory.

"I've got your king on the run, Dad. My bishop is coming for you, so you better think on your next move carefully."

The email chess game had been her father's compromise for their lack of correspondence. They'd been playing a losing game of tag over the last few weeks, agreeing to at least stick to a vid-mail schedule in lieu of actual conversation. And always starting the same: the alphanumeric designation for their next chess move in the subject line followed by a quick message at the very least or a long message if they could manage it.

Or sometimes Sam's mother would pass along the chess move with a cheerful eye roll, usually accompanied by "You two!" in that exasperated, motherly way of hers.

Tucking her hair behind her ears, Sam reoriented the orange screen that was recording her vid-message.

"There are so many things I want to tell you guys. Amazing, impossible things. But unless you want a two-second video that just says 'REDACTED' in big, fat letters, I have to be all important and mysterious. I could probably get around it, except the Alliance probably doesn't fancy some lowly comm officer spilling their classified secrets on a message to their mummy and daddy. I'd rather be court-martialed for something more exciting, like… a drunken rampage. You know, something to make you proud."
Even if Samantha could talk about Commander Shepard finding a 50,000 year old living Prothean, it seemed just a little anti-climactic to spill the beans in the family mail. Also, a tiny bit insulting to the reporter on board the Normandy bursting at the seams with excitement, but too professional to leak the biggest story in the galaxy.

*And we certainly can't abide by Allers being the shining example of restraint, can we?*

*We cannot.*

It had started off an ordinary *(for the Normandy, anyway)* mission. Cerberus messing things up. Civilians in danger. Cue Shepard and Company to the rescue. Sam had even been privy to a lighthearted discussion between Liara and Garrus on the shuttle trip down to Eden Prime, while Shepard had been characteristically silent.

Liara was humbled by the visit to Eden Prime. Apparently this was where this whole thing had begun, before rogue SpecTRes and Prothean beacons and Reapers were even known to exist.

*Happy to hear the band is back together,* Samantha thought sarcastically as she scanned the comm feeds for incoming Cerberus patrols.

Garrus had asked offhand what Liara was doing before he rejoined the Normandy after Palaven.

"I fought several explosive battles with Cerberus, I helped Shepard stop a robotic assassin on mars… oh, and I discovered Prothean plans for a doomsday device that was buried for 50,000 years." Liara's tone was impressively deadpan, with a slight hint of smug amusement. It made Sam laugh into her earpiece, but luckily it wasn't a two-way connection.

Garrus had only smirked. "Just 'this and that,' then. I was afraid you were getting boring."

*Truly boring, indeed.*

Liara teased him about his Archangel identity. And that his exploits on Omega generated a few articles and security footage. She asked if he really took out three Blue Suns mercenaries with one bullet. "The third one had a heart attack so he doesn't count," the turian replied simply.

*Note to self: remind me not to cross Garrus. Or Liara. EDI. Williams. Vega. Shepard.*

…*Who's left to cross?*

*Joker?*

Shepard finally spoke up, bringing down the light mood. She asked Garrus if he'd known anything about Victus's son on Tuchanka. Samantha had been watching her feeds, and saw a signal start to poke around the perimeter of encryptions. She tagged it as the Turian Hierarchy again. *Keeping an eye on its precious, precious secrets.*

But Garrus didn't know about the secret Tuchanka mission, and the creeping signal started to drift away slightly. *That's right. Hit the road, you.* Musing about busting his ass back in C-Sec trying to find evidence on Saren, Garrus lamented the old days mired in bureaucracy while people were dying. So he could understand the Primarch's approach; he preferred a straight up fight though, not the cloak-and-dagger secrecy of government and red tape.

Shepard suddenly shushed them both.
The arrival on Eden Prime was quiet. The dig site was completely empty, as the Kodiak had timed landing during a shift change while Cerberus was retrieving more workers from the terrorized colony a few clicks away.

It was a military thing Sam hated. She knew it was necessary and strategic and proper to use the element of surprise to investigate. But when Shepard and crew had stumbled across that first terminal in the prefabs, and found that Cerberus correspondence gloating about sending people to their deaths… The comms specialist wanted Commander Shepard's rage to equal her own. To see that fiery redhead march up to the bulk of the Cerberus forces and liberate the oppressed colony.

*She'd saved bloody Elysium with a stick of chewing gum and a rock, if reports could be believed. Why not bring the Normandy's wrath down on a horrible invading force and give those people their lives back?*

*At least… until the Reapers show up.*

Just as quickly, Sam deflated herself while observing Shepard's team carefully work over to the dig site controls. She knew she would make a dreadful soldier, because she'd want justice done all the time. Especially for colonists. Who had suffered enough.

*That's why we have Shepard. To make the tough calls.* Samantha wondered if Shepard was just as riled, because the impassive Commander was focused on the task at hand. Sam didn't know if it would make her feel better or worse that Shepard could be aware but doing nothing.

Liara's voice pattered on enthusiastically in Sam's earpiece, the asari's curiosity earnest. What could Cerberus be after? A Prothean artifact to help with the Crucible? Another super weapon? It was one of the rare moments Sam truly saw who Liara used to be: just a (relatively) young, geeky researcher looking for answers.

*Huh. I can relate to that.*

*Just a little.*

And then suddenly, the asari uttered this doozy: "That's not a Prothean artifact. That's an actual Prothean."

*That's... impossible.*

"You're right," Shepard replied incredulously, mirroring Sam's shock. "That doesn't seem possible."

From there, most of the mission was a surreal blur. The comms specialist had barely been able to focus, because her mind simply couldn't process a 50,000 year old alien sleeping in a box. She also had a job to do. Liara pinged Sam's comm, asking for backup. It seemed the Eden Prime colonists did have a rebellion in the works, and the communications Shepard had been intercepting would do wonders for their efforts.

*All right. Actively helping people. Yes. I can do this. I am the queen of doing this.*

Cerberus was quite crafty. Signal dampeners, monitoring platforms, patrol sweeps. It had taken some quiet probing with EDI's assistance, but Samantha had found a chink in Cerberus's comms blackout. A hardline connected a remote, abandoned and unsecure outpost to an inside community area within the Eden Prime internment camp. All the two Normandy ladies (both organic and synthetic) had to do was seize control of the outpost system remotely, and pass the message(s) along.

The distraction was stressful, but welcome. Anything to take Samantha's mind off the Prothean
fairytale that Shepard was fighting her way towards. Sam admitted it to herself: she was a little afraid to see it. …Him? Her?

Because she remembered the Collectors in her nightmares. The humming of those insects that rendered her powerless. The four eyes and domed heads marching onward, stuffing her people into boxes. And at Shepard's public military hearing a few months ago, it had been revealed the Collectors were Protheans warped by thousands of years of genetic modification.

And they were about to reawaken the original nightmare: the template for Samantha Traynor's fears.

Okay. Okay okay okay.

Wiping her eyes to clear the memory from her mind, Sam returned to the task at hand. It did help that Commander Shepard was waging all-out war with Cerberus troops at the dig site. So all enemy comms were focused on that, and not on the quietly rallying colonists... Colonists now armed with information about the mole within their ranks and the weaknesses of the Cerberus occupying force.

Show those arseholes what colonists are made of.

By the time Shepard had flung the last Cerberus soldier off a prefab roof and was ready to crack open the millennia-old stasis pod, Samantha had wished the colonists luck and hailed the closest Alliance dreadnought to stop by and help out some humans with their insurrection. Then the comms specialist turned to study the feed from Shepard's hardsuit camera.

Javik. The last Prothean warrior.

Okay. Okay okay okay.

Luckily, Sam didn't quite feel the urge to drop to the floor and curl up in the fetal position. Nor was she overcome with horrible post-traumatic stress flashbacks of humming insectoid wings and creeping demons kidnapping half her hometown. ...Much, anyway.

The resemblance was loose. The Prothean had a defined mouth, chin and neck, where all Samantha could remember from the Collectors was their glowing eyes and thick, stocky bodies. The now-extinct Collectors also were just bulky exoskeletons while the sleek Prothean wore definitive armor. Like... like a samurai.

Comparing Javik to a human legend steadied Sam's breathing some. It made the Prothean a person in her mind, rather than a monster. People wore armor. Monsters didn't.

What about Cerberus? They wear armor.

Shut it. One horror at a time.

While not (entirely) a monster, there was one thing Javik definitely was not: a savior resurrected to help this cycle with the Crucible. Or the answer to Liara's prayers.

That would be a touch too poetic. Or maybe biblical? At any rate, Javik was not the missing piece to the Prothean super weapon. Instead, he was a pointed, sneering creature filled with rage.

"Primitives," he calls us. It was a derogatory term that irritated Sam to listen to over and over. Shepard somehow took it in stride. The Commander even offered the Prothean a place on the Normandy. To fulfill his one mission: kill all Reapers.
He was going to be on the ship. Living here. Eating here. Fighting here. The little urge to curl up in a ball came roaring back, and was only stifled with some serious meditative breathing. Okay. Okay okay. The part of her that wasn't terrified at his Collector resemblance had sunk down into the pit of her stomach. And knew he was right.

Primitive... We are primitive. We should have listened to Shepard years ago.

...I am not okay.

Taking a deep sip from the water bottle balanced between her knees, Sam sighed into her Omni-tool recording. She didn't want to alarm her parents with ...that.

["Boundless heroism is still on the menu, at least. I can only imagine the rumors flying around the ANN, and probably a lot of them are true. If only I could talk about them."]

It reminded Sam of a conversation she had with Diana Allers shortly after the mission was over. Allers was in her room editing feeds, banished from the action to keep mission privacy intact. Something the reporter resented, but tolerated because Shepard usually allowed juicy tidbits to cross her desk once missions ended.

Samantha had been watching the elevator with trepidation, slightly fearful their new Prothean guest was going to saunter through the CIC. She punched in a few keys on her Omni-tool to connect to the private intercom system aboard the Normandy.

She had "Allers, D" on speed dial.

Allers's voice was somber when she answered. "Just the woman I needed to talk to. I need a signal boost from Earth, Traynor. Rumor has it that that the Reapers had been sticking to big cities. Now I've got reports that reaping had started in rural areas. Millions dead in Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. I have to serve up footage of what happens when the Reapers don't bother to indoctrinate."

Oh, bloody hell. Makes my insecurities seem almost petty in comparison.

Inspecting the QEC feeds, the comms specialist opened a secure socket for the reporter's console down in her Starboard Cargo Hold room. EDI had already cleared the permissions, and within seconds videos of Earth were flashing on Sam's remote mirror. She swallowed the dread in her chest.

She knew she shouldn't, with everything going on... but Sam couldn't help but ask: "Have you seen our newest crew member?"

There was a long pause.

"You mean the biggest story in 50,000 years that I can in no way talk about?" Diana sounded a little resentful, but mostly neutral. And relieved at the subject change.

Sam nodded to herself. "So you have seen him. Just wondering."

"He's rooming across the hall from me. If he asks to borrow a cup of sugar, is that permission to interview him, you think?"

"I think you'll still have to clear it with our landlord," Sam had deadpanned into her earpiece. "I hear she has a soft spot for reporters, though."

"Don't threaten me with a good time," Allers actually chuckled, before sobering at what Sam was
referring. "Oh, you're talking about the Shepard fist-sized bruise on Khalisah al-Jilani's face. Yeaaa… I think I'll pass. It isn't worth my good looks. Mostly."

Samantha had glanced at her console. Comms were updated. Shepard already set a return course to Tuchanka. She tapped her Omni-tool to page Xian to the CIC to take over for a few minutes. "As long as you have standards, Allers."

"We've got our very own ANN rep aboard the Normandy. The Battlespace reporter, Diana Allers. I know how much you fancy her, Dad. Better not tell mum, her jealousy knows no bounds. But she's a decent enough friend. So no need to worry: your little girl is relatively well-adjusted. A few of my coworkers from the retrofits are still here, plus we picked up a couple engineers who are, in one word: delightful.

Even though one of them is a Scotsman."

Gabby and Ken had been in the mess hall while Rashad and Adams took over their shift. They were sifting through the kitchen cabinets while reminiscing about an old crewmate. Samantha was content to yawn in the entryway and stretch some.

"Say what you will about Cerberus, but at least Gardner could make a decent haggis," Donnelly groused as he pulled an MRE out and inspected it.

"Yes, that's a loss for all of us: a lack of haggis." Daniels quipped back. "The Alliance isn't exactly known for its love of comfort. But at least they aren't evil, Kenneth."

Ken stuck out his tongue. "Maybe a good haggis is worth a little evil. That's probably what made it so good. Who's the new cook on the Normandy?"

"I think the log said a Mess Sergeant Beaumont was on board, but she only does scheduled meals for breakfast and dinner. If you're working those times, it's leftovers or MREs for you." Gabby's tone was neutral as she opened up an aforementioned leftover container in the fridge. She sniffed the large container, then grabbed a large spoon to dole out a portion. "Can't argue with casserole. Better than that shit you're eating."

Donnelly snorted and mumbled something about "Never trust a Frenchman, especially a French woman." He peeled back the foil before asking lightly, "What do you think of our new yeoman? Miss Traynor?"

Oh. Joy. Samantha had just been about to enter the mess when the mention of her name held her back.

"She's not a yeoman, she's a communications specialist," Gabby corrected curtly.

I knew I liked her.

The female engineer continued preparing her meal without even glancing up. "…and you're barking up the wrong tree, Kenneth. You're not her type."

Well, as long as that's… clear to everyone? I guess?

Or you could be the subject of the affections of Mister Donnelly here. If that's what you want.

Ugh.
"Ohhhh," Ken rotated his head in understanding, though he did seem legitimately disappointed. He recovered quickly. "Well... perhaps you should go and talk to her then."

A very small part of Sam was intrigued by this train of thought, especially when Gabby despondently grumbled, "Maybe I should... nobody's barking up my tree."

"...Be sure to take video!"

_Ugh. That man is impossible._

Sam backed up to be just behind the divider then walked briskly into the Mess Hall, acting as though she hadn't heard a thing. "What's on the menu, Normandiers?" _Did I just say that? God dammit, Joker. You're in my head now._

"Traynor," Gabriella acknowledged Sam before taking a cautious bite from her plate. "I think it's some sort of beef casserole. Full of protein and nutrients and crap."

"I expect nothing less from the Alliance," Sam had agreed. "Why have frilly, tasty things when your food could unlock its tasteless but efficient potential?" She requested a spoonful, which Gabby obliged. Donnelly regarded the two women curiously. Maybe even hopefully. Sam just wrinkled her nose at him in feigned confusion before having a seat across from Daniels.

_Bark up another tree, Scotsman._

"Oh yea, nicely done with EDI there, Traynor. I've been meaning to thank you." Donnelly purred at Sam.

The comms specialist was confused. "What do you mean? The body was a stolen mech from Mars." _That sounds like a hot band name._ "Otherwise, EDI downloaded herself into the bloody thing. Liara kept her from running amok in the Crew Deck. All I did was firewall the shit out of the old AI program long enough for EDI to overwrite it and install her own consciousness."

Rolling her eyes, Gabby jabbed her spoon at Kenneth derisively. "He's just glad to have a sexy mech on board. Live out the immature male fantasy."

"Hey, our alternative on the old SR-2 was Legion. _This_ EDI is an amazing work of engineering. Elastic titanium-silicon polymers. Ultra-light harmonic-phased power cells..."

"Mmm-hmm..." Daniels interjected skeptically.

The Scottish engineer grinned. "And if she ever accidentally walks into a wall, there's just so much... padding." At Gabby's disgusted scoff, he hurriedly amended. "I have you to thank as well, Gabby. That work you did on EDI after that last mission... I've been meaning to ask: were oils and lubricants involved? Was there any... moaning?"

It was Sam who couldn't contain her disgust that time. Her "Ugh" was in sync with Gabby's and both women shook their head at the scruffy engineer.

"How do you like our latest guest in Engineering?" Samantha asked lightly, desperate to feel out what sort of (creature) person the Prothean was. _And desperate to change the bloody topic._

Donnelly frowned though his voice was lecherous. "Certainly not as easy on the eyes as Miss Allers." He glanced over at his fellow engineer. "What do you think, Gabby? Is the 50,000 year old Reaper-hater an improvement over the blood-crazed krogan and psychotic biotic? I could throw my chips in either way."
"Just keep your chips away from Shepard, Kenneth," Gabby scolded him. "You got suckered by her feminine wiles last time and we both lost our shirts in Skyllian-Five."

What?

That lying bi—

"Shepard plays poker? She told me she didn't have a head for it." Sam didn't know why this tiny, insignificant, sidetracking revelation disappointed her so much.

What is with her? I was just trying to be friendly and her first instinct is to lie. About the stupidest things. Who cares if she's good or bad at poker?

Well, maybe that means she's secretly good at chess.

Ooo. That is interesting. I wonder if—

Kenneth snorted with laughter. "'No head for it' my arse. Shepard's a bigger shark than Vega. I'm just glad we played her later rather than sooner, otherwise she probably woulda clean out my entire savings."

Chewing over the bland (but undoubtedly nutritious!) casserole, Sam asked what they meant.

Sam chewed her lip and leaned back against her bunk, shifting her wrist over her knee in a more comfortable position. ["A couple of the engineers dealt with what we did on Horizon, Dad. The old SR-2 crew got abducted by Collectors. They have the same nightmares we do. And Shepard got them all back."]

It had reassured her. That someone else understood. Donnelly. Daniels. Dr. Chakwas. They had been in the belly of the Collector Base and come back. They'd all woken up from a shared nightmare. Only to start another one.

She just wished that Shepard had been able to rescue the colonists. Part of her was a little angry at the Commander. If she'd only been stronger. Faster. What had taken so long? Didn't she care? Why couldn't she save them?

Shaking her head, the comms specialist stopped that thought from festering into bitterness.

She's done more than most. And is doing more than anyone right now. Traynor, you're on a ship where the turians and krogans are about to be allies. Nearly a thousand-year-old genophage is about to be cured. She could—she could stop the Reapers.

Perspective, Traynor. Just... perspective.

Samantha sighed. She stared at the ceiling.

["Commander Shepard continues to surprise me. And confuse the shit out of me. I've seen her do amazing things. Ridiculous rescues. But she is utterly confounding. As a soldier, she shoots first and asks questions later. But as a person…"]

The engineers had had an interesting perspective on Commander Shepard. Their first introduction nearly a year ago had been unimpressive. Kenneth had hope to ingratiate himself to the Commander by telling her how much he'd stood up for her, that he believed her about the Reapers.
But when she heard Kenneth had quit the Alliance and joined Cerberus, and Gabby had followed, Shepard was furious. She berated them both for turning their backs on home and duty. That she was a prisoner on this tin can with orange paint only as long as she could find out the truth behind the colony abductions.

Shepard's insubordination against Cerberus hadn't even been subtle. Donnelly laughed about it while Daniels was a little more concerned. Every piece of secret intel gathered on Cerberus was handed over to Alliance intelligence with a flourish. Shepard relished every opportunity to wave her loyalty in The Illusive Man's face.

But her loyalty started to erode. She wasn't reinstated to the Alliance. Her SpecTRe status was still withheld. The engineers didn't exactly have solid perspective, since they were just trying to keep up with drive core repairs while the Normandy ping-ponged around the Terminus Systems.

Their one bit of off-duty time with the Commander was just one game of poker. But there had been no deep conversations about loyalty or the Alliance. In fact, Shepard had been almost jovial. While she took all their money.

"I've been warned against playing the Commander at cards. But I don't think she can scam me at chess." Sam winked at the orange recording screen. "If she ever accepts a challenge, I'll try to get her to consent to recording it. I do quite fancy bragging rights to whipping the first human SpecTRe at chess. If it's leaked to the extranet for all to see, all the better."

Glancing at her windowed inbox, Samantha spied a progress update.

No results. Her latest attempt at probing the Normandy SR-1 database still had yet to net any hidden information. Liara will be disappointed.

Sam cleared her throat and returned focus to her vid-mail to her father. "But I don't just fantasize about epic tourneys all day. I have a few other responsibilities and side projects in the works. I do accomplish things from time to time. I don't think the Ballad of the Comms Specialist is being written any time soon, but hopefully it'll be a footnote in history next to Commander Shepard Kicks Everything's Arse."

A newer memory, not quite clouded by Collectors and Protheans and confusion, touched Sam's thoughts. She felt herself smiling quite against her will, but she couldn't very well explain why to Dad.

"Also, my Basic Training Drill Sergeant would be so proud: I started working out. If only to be better able to crawl through the service ducts and tinker with the QEC cables. I definitely prefer the mental exercise to the physical, but it would be nice to outrun a hanar for a change."

It was as close as Samantha was willing to get to Engineering and Javik. The Shuttle Bay was at least an ideal place to run a few laps, plus James Vega had a few weights in his corner that Sam was too terrified to use.

Yet.

Oorah, soldier.

But for all her preparation, the comms specialist never did get around to working out. Her intentions had been grand. She was dressed for the occasion in loose pants, running shoes and a tank top. She’d even had the foresight to bring a towel and had programmed a workout regimen in her Omni-tool to
follow. An excellent distraction from her failure to find anything in Liara's data, or face their new addition without hyperventilating.

Except upon entering the allegedly empty Shuttle Bay, there was Commander Shepard.

Shepard was stretching against the requisitions console in the middle. Her red hair was half up in a messy ponytail while the rest stuck to her glistening forehead or neck.

The Commander was in a sweat-stained shirt, work-out pants, and running shoes. A clean, matching hoodie was just being put on. Everything was black, crimson and white and emblazoned with N7s everywhere. Shepard propped one long leg up and leaned into it, while the other was flexing at an obtuse angle behind her.

She was messy and sweaty and focused.

And, a small part of Sam whispered, *sexy*.

The comms specialist didn't even realize she'd accidentally cleared her throat awkwardly until Shepard looked up.

"Traynor? What are you doing, slumming it down here?"

Sam saluted lightly and tried to focus on not stuttering. *Or staring. At the very least.* "I… um… thought I'd recapture my youth with a little workout. Good exercise beyond standing inert at a console all day. May I ask why the Commander of the ship is 'slumming it' down here?"

A smile pulled at Shepard's mouth. "…you may. I might not answer."

Sam raised an expectant eyebrow, because Shepard's delivery had been full of wide-eyed sarcasm.

"Just cooling down after a good session. Only really open space on the ship to get a workout in. And… trying to avoid having another chat with our new teammate." Shepard first nodded towards the half-empty bottle of water and protein bar wrapper on the console, then above her at the Port Cargo Hold.

*The Prothean.*

*I'm not the only one avoiding him.*
"I hear he's quite the charmer. With 50,000 years of practice," Samantha quipped lightly. She wasn't sure if she wanted to talk about Javik. Or to Javik. \textit{Oh God. He's going to need a comm link if he goes out on missions. Oh God oh God oh God.}

Shepard's eyebrows raised and she nodded stiffly in agreement as she took another swig of water. "50,000 years that felt like yesterday. Oddly enough, something I can relate to. I just hope being too stubborn to die is the only thing we have in common."

"As opposed to?"

"Both our species going extinct at the hands of the Reapers," Shepard replied simply. \textit{Oh.}

\textit{I don't know why I was expecting (hoping?) for a funnier response. \textit{You know Shepard. Always a riot.}}

The Commander leaned against the console thoughtfully before placing the cool bottle against her forehead. "He said he could sense fear in me. Anxiety. Distress. He knew the Reapers are winning."

"I think we all feel that way right now," Samantha agreed. "But it doesn't mean we throw in the towel."

Shepard was silent for a few moments. Sam gently asked if she wanted to talk about it. Honestly, she was surprised when the Commander actually continued. "I could… \textbf{feel} his failure. The despair. His people created the beacons so we wouldn't make their mistakes. And here we are. I wish I could blame him for being pissed, but he's right. I've been angry for the same reason for so long. And now that it's here I don't feel anything."

"I dunno. I've still seen you pretty pissed, Commander."

Shepard exhaled with amusement and waved her hand dismissively. "That's just regular pissed. Happens all the time. I get bitchy when I burn toast." \textit{A self-aware joke at her own expense. Is it my birthday?}

"I'd tell the Reapers to watch out for the Super Mega Pissed Shepard, then," Sam smiled, then got very serious. "Because it's truly terrifying."

Shooting Sam a mock-serious frown, Shepard's brow furrowed then smoothed. She took another thoughtful sip of water before continuing her earlier thought. "He asked me how far I was willing to go. He has no reason to exist other than to destroy every last Reaper. The embodiment of vengeance, the anger of a dead people. I just… it wasn't enough then. What if it's not enough now?"

Suddenly those green eyes were on Sam. Probing her for answers. It froze her in place. \textit{Now is not the time to be silent, Traynor.}

"Well, we have a plan, right? The Crucible? Allying everyone? Revenge is all well and good, but so is wanting to save your family. Your home. That's stronger than vengeance, isn't it?"

Shepard scoffed, but not too harshly. "Right. The power of love."

"A few thousand years of songwriters and poets can't be wrong," Samantha countered lightly. She was rewarded with a noncommittal "Hmm" noise from Shepard, so she considered the debate a
draw. And took it as permission to approach the console across from the SpecTRe and place her

towel down. The comms specialist also made a feeble effort to stretch out her calves while Shepard
stared off into space thoughtfully.

Sam alternated holding the heel of one shoe against one of her unshapely thighs. Then the other.

Shepard fiddled with the zipper on her hoodie while she finished the remains of her water bottle. Up.
Down. Up. Down. The intermittent zipping noise drove the OCD part of Sam's mind crazy, because
it didn't sync up to any sort of rhythm or beat. Occasionally Sam could spy another small N7 insignia
on the shirt the Commander wore underneath.

"Where do you soldiers get your bloody wardrobe from?"

The zipping stopped and Shepard blinked at Sam. She'd only been half-listening. "…I'm sorry…
What?"

Samantha waved her open palm up Shepard's length and back down again. "Your wardrobe. I bet
everything you own has a dashing N7 somewhere on it, down to your socks and skivvies." And now
we're getting a mental picture of Shepard in her knickers.

Gesturing to her own generic Alliance outfit, Sam sighed. "Us lowly tech specialists don't have our
own marketing department and branding. I suppose I could start a movement to get the quantum
entanglement formula on a jacket, but it's hard to summarize in a pithy abbreviation."

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, Traynor," Shepard smiled lightly. She thought a moment. "I guess I just
take it for granted that special forces showers us with custom clothing and weapons."

Mm. Showers.

Shut up shut up shut up.

"It's like the Alliance thinks you deserve special treatment for being so amazing or something. But
one day, Commander," Sam threatened mockingly. "The underappreciated comms specialist will be
the desired Alliance position. And then we will be the ones with all the endorsements and action
figures and fancy clothing deals."

" Desired position," huh?
"Well, in the meantime..." Shrugging off her hoodie, Shepard held the garment by the shoulders and offered it to Sam. "Here. See what it feels like to be an N7. Since we're defined by what we wear, apparently."

"Are you serious?"

"I figure this is faster than you petitioning the Alliance for your own line of clothing. See what all the fuss is, or isn't, about."

Well, that's unexpected. Sam waited a few seconds for it to be a joke, but Shepard continued to stand there. She even shook the jacket slightly. Enticingly. "Call it a thank you for listening to me vent. I'm sure you have better things to do, Traynor. I just... I appreciate it."

"Well, my mum didn't raise me to be ungracious..." Intrigued, Sam took a few steps forward. She stood in front of Shepard for a few seconds and regarded her suspiciously. The redhead just jostled the jacket again. Extending her right hand into the dense fabric, Sam's fingers found give in the hole for the right arm. She slowly turned 180 degrees to work the hand through the sleeve, and began reaching her left hand behind her to find the other sleeve.

Shepard was sort of helping. She lifted up the jacket and stepped backwards out of the way, but not before Sam's stupid left hand brushed against Shepard's abdomen. The firm muscle tensed, but then relaxed. Sam had to will a blush from creeping into her cheeks.

She felt lingering hands on her side while another lighted on her shoulder. They didn't move immediately so Sam wasn't sure if they were even there. It wasn't until she brushed her fingertips over Shepard's hand on her shoulder did she know for certain.

Then the blush wouldn't be kept at bay. Sam took an awkward step away from the Commander to focus on the feel of the hoodie. It took a few seconds and deep breaths before she was willing to turn around.

Shepard didn't seem to be really looking at Sam. Her gaze was faraway, trained somewhere between Sam's sternum and off into eternity for all the comms specialist knew. Taking a moment roll her shoulders and stick her arms straight out, Samantha appraised the fit.

Very nice. Those N7s know comfort.

When Sam glanced up, Shepard was studying her face this time. Her expression was muted. There was just a hint of a crinkle around her eyes. A turn of her full lips. It made Samantha fluttery inside. Without even realizing it, her hand had gone to her face to tuck phantom hairs behind her ears. The crinkle around Shepard's eyes and lips deepened.
"And now you're impersonating a soldier."

Sam snorted. "This was a trick."

"Maybe."

"Since we're both N7s now... can I ask you a personal question, Commander?"

"You may. I might not answer."

Well, at least she's self-aware about that joke.

"It's important to me that you not lie."

"What makes you think I'll lie?"

"Experience. The baseball. Poker."

"What about poker?"

"I talked to your new engineers, Donnelly and Daniels. They say you are a total card shark and cleaned them out of credits."

"Heh," Shepard exhaled at the memory. "Right."

"So I'd greatly appreciate the truth right out of the gate, Shepard."

"Okayyyy..." The crinkle disappeared, which Sam regretted, even for the sake of the joke.

"...how has Socks been?"

And just like that, it was back. Shepard smiled. Even subdued, it was radiant. "He's fine. Back in his old hangout above my desk. He's got fish friends to play with. Thanks to you." Her eyes glittered appreciatively.

"Excellent. Otherwise, I'd be forced to use my newly acquired N7 powers. Deadly as they may be."

The friendly banter had loosened the chains around Sam's Stupid half. Even though warning lights were flashing in the comms specialist's mind, she ignored them. She was cautiously enjoying herself. She had briefly forgotten about Eden Prime.

Shepard hadn't. Her head turned behind her and looked back up at the Cargo Hold where the
Prothean resided. Sighing, the Commander rolled her shoulders and gestured toward the elevator. "I better go have another chat with Javik. Liara will never forgive me if we don't know every possible detail about Prothean society."

"The asari heart wants what it wants," Sam agreed solemnly, to a rewarding exhale-laugh from Shepard. The Commander gave a perfunctory nod of dismissal as she headed for the elevator.

"Wait! You forgot your jacket." Sam started to take off the hoodie, her left fingers running along the dark red and white stripe on the right arm.

The elevator doors already opened, Shepard stepped through them. She shrugged. "You can borrow it. You need the N7 superpowers more than I do. Try not to hurt yourself on your workout. Your stretch technique needs serious work."

Sam waited for the joke, but it seemed the Commander was being serious. *Oh. That would have been terrific flirty banter. If I wasn't just told my workout is crap.*

"I trust you to return it." The lift doors closed on a light, glittering smile.

And that simple statement brought the heat back to Sam's cheeks. She was just glad Shepard wasn't there to see it.

["I won't be winning any marathons any time soon, considering the Shuttle Bay is about a 15 meter jog between ammunition and tech crates. Boring scenery. Also, our resident physical trainer, a Mister Vega, has assured me I have the upper body strength of a wet noodle. So I have a long, hard, tedious road ahead to obtain the shapely figure that the cinema and extranet has long promised me."]

Sam sighed.

["Otherwise, things are going well here. It's very different from Arcturus. It's noisy, cramped, and supremely dangerous. My work is constantly being picked apart by both the Alliance and Council governments. If we're not dodging imminent death, I'm helplessly watching my CO dodge imminent death several kilometers away. Shifts are long, intense, and I never know what will happen next."]

Samantha glanced down at the neatly folded black hoodie sitting next to her on her bunk. She traced a finger over the lettering, *N7.*

And smiled.

["But it's starting to feel like home."]
Let's see here... 13 to one odds I get thrown out an airlock? Maybe... eight to one I get a creepy ESP reading where I'm told I would have made an excellent slave or something.

Three to one I unsuccessfully avoid wetting myself.

Taking a few cleansing breaths, Samantha clenched and unclenched her fist.

"Are you all right, dear? You look pale," Dr. Karin Chakwas inquired at Sam's elbow. The two women were sharing a very slow (and yet, too fast) elevator ride down to the Engineering Deck. Sam swallowed and smiled unconvincingly at the older woman.

"Just a little ...anxious. I don't fancy pissing off the second angriest person in the galaxy by botching a comm implant." At least Shepard already has all her implants.

Karin studied Sam's face before softly asking, "What colony was it?"

"How did you know?" The comms specialist was incredulous. Was I that obvious?

"Traynor, I know exactly what you've been through. Your face is like looking in a mirror." Sighing, Chakwas ran her own nervous fingers through her bob of white hair. "Myself, I was a prisoner on the Collector base. The things I saw. Heard. Felt. So trust me when I say: I know what you're feeling right now."

"How are you so calm, then?"

"I focus on what's at stake. And rather than fear Javik... I empathize with him. He has lost everything. Literally everything. And still fights with us."

Huh. Fair point.

The lift doors opened on an empty hallway though the large, long window revealed a Shuttle Bay below bustling with activity. Shepard was tinkering at the weapon bench and half-dressed in her
hardsuit. Vega and Cortez were huddled near an open panel of the Kodiak. *Assessing some damage, no doubt.* A few seconds later, Steve dropped to his knees and slid under the low vehicle while James held several tools at the ready.

Shepard's crew was about ready to rejoin the Primarch's son and his platoon on the desolate Tuchanka surface. The Normandy had been in orbit over the assault site for a few hours now. Preparations were nearly complete.

Just a few things left to do.

One of those included equipping their new team mate with some bare necessities: an Omni-tool and an auditory implant. The resident physician wanted to get a complete biometric scan of Javik in order to actually clear him for active duty. But also to maybe answer more than a few lingering questions that the resident Prothean expert aboard might have about his long-extinct physiology.

*Liara owes me one. A big one. Dipped in chocolate.*

"Ready? I'll administer the scan first. Make sure there aren't any lingering issues from his long sleep in that stasis pod, or adverse reactions from being woken up," Dr. Chakwas explained patiently. "Then I'll assist with your comm implants."

"How much do you know about Prothean ears, Doc?" Sam tried to chuckle to keep from passing out from the anxiety.

Karin was neutral and professional. "I'll know more once the scan is complete. At a glance, I don't have enough information to tell if an asari or turian style implant would be better suited. Or if we need to create one from scratch. How's your tech work, Traynor?"

*Fair to middlin', Doc.* A pang of sorrow hit Sam in the chest when she thought of Specialist William Corday back on Arcturus. He was the Hands of her R&D group, the tech craftsman who made their experimental work a reality. *And now he's dead.*

"I can hold my own, ma'am. We were researching mental comms implants based on asari physiology before I joined the Normandy retrofit team. Very tiny pieces. Nanocircuitry almost. Complex to work with and repair. …Though the military application arm of the Alliance was far too interested in the mind control aspect of the implant over the stealth implications." Samantha was rambling. And slightly bitter. It had been Corday's pet project, a neural comm unit capable of integrating with a squad for quicker relay of orders and reaction time.

*Though the hiccup had been turning the damn thing off. Or filtering thoughts. Unless you wanted your CO hearing everything you were thinking.*

*About how attractive you thought your CO was.*

…wait, what?

Clearing her throat, Sam amended. "What I meant to say was: I'll cross that bridge when we come to it. I'm ready." *As ready as I'll ever be.*

Karin led the way to Javik's quarters at the port side of the deck. Sam chanced a longing look down the hall at Diana Allers' room in the Starboard Cargo Hold. A stupid conversation about nothing sounded pretty good compared to poking the last Prothean with a stick.

The Port Cargo Hold had changed a great deal from the empty room it had once been. The atmosphere was more humid. Several of the low tables had been converted to more artful water
features in a feeble attempt at making the room more homely. A screen at the back of the room now had details and specs about the Normandy ticking by.

*He's doing his homework.*

*Is that reassuring or terrifying?*

"Good morning, Javik. I am Doctor Chakwas and this is Specialist Traynor. Commander Shepard has cleared you for combat… pending a medical examination." Karin was cool, collected, and straightforward.

Samantha was anxious, sweating, and skittish. She peered over Karin's shoulder to study the Collec—Prothean, who had turned from his vigil at one of the tables.

His accented voice was a reverberating hum while his four eyes flicked from woman to woman. "We had worker drones like you in my cycle, the densorin. I still cannot comprehend that humans have become warriors and physicians and mastered space travel. Your race was only adept at climbing trees last I saw you."

*Well. That's good to know. At least we're getting off on the right foot.*

Dr. Chakwas activated her Omni-tool and approached Javik slowly but purposefully. She sidestepped his snide remark. "We've come a long way. Now, I am logging your biometrics in the Normandy's system. It will better equip us to treat your injuries with medi-gel and monitor your vitals. May I administer a scan?"

Crossing his arms, Javik tilted his head. He did not respond, but did not move to stop Karin either. An orange glow traced over his form for a few seconds before retreating back into the doctor's Omni-tool. Her wrist gave a satisfied beep, and she echoed the sentiment with a nod. "I appreciate your cooperation. We would also like to offer you an Omni-tool implant."

Javik scoffed. "You primitives and your tools. You still communicate using letters and numbers. It is highly inefficient."

Chakwas glanced at the holographic screen on her wrist, studying the notes as she spoke. "Commander Shepard mentioned that you had a VI of your own named Victory. Would you prefer to use your own technology?"

*The woman should have been a diplomat. She is beyond cool.*

The Prothean's evil tongue stilled at the mention of his old friend. "Victory was tied to the stasis pods. I have retained a few essential programs and weapon designs in the memory shard, but too little was salvageable without power. Victory is gone."

*No, it isn't. We've got Shepard, Sam's stupid mind couldn't help but think as she interpreted his words literally.*

There was a trace of sadness, but it was quickly buried under the usual disdainful mask. Javik gestured to the table to the women's right where a small fragment of metal was suspended behind a protective barrier.

Sam finally decided to speak up. *This is ridiculous. He is the complete opposite of a Collector. They never spoke and he never shuts up.*

*And now I'm just as awful as he is. Bloody hell.*
"We have a bracelet version so you aren't stuck with an implant if you'd prefer. Either will make connecting with our comms much easier. Especially if you hope to join Commander Shepard in combat."

A veiled threat to cooperate. Ballsy, Traynor. Possibly stupid, but ballsy.

"Ah, the other primitive speaks. I had thought you a mute, or maybe even a helper monkey for the doctor. What is your role, Specialist… Traynor?" If he hadn't been so serious, Samantha might have taken Javik's tone for sarcasm.

Sarcasm would have been much better than being sincerely asked if Sam was a helper monkey.

She wanted to bite back, but the jitter in her stomach flared up. It was very good at overriding Sam's hot anger with timid deference.

"I'm here to connect you with the rest of the ship. The rest of the galaxy, really. Normally, a communicator implant also serves as a translator… though I'm not sure many of us speak Prothean. And I don't know how you'll speak volus, elcor, or quarian without them nearby."

Shit. I probably should have thought of this problem sooner. His magical ESP-through-touch ability is a bit of a handicap, despite being really neat. Should we just drive to the Citadel and let him loose to grope all the species he's never seen?

That'll take care of it.

Sighing lightly, Javik gestured to the memory shard. "Fear not, meek Specialist. Victory knew some of your races would be thriving in the next cycle. I have a language matrix used amongst our slave races to speed integration into the Empire. It should serve your purpose." He mumbled under his breath. Something about surprise that the fat volus ever managed to master space flight.

Sam approached the small Prothean shard, though was shouted away from touching it with bare fingers. His bark made her shrink and she nearly fled the room, but the comms specialist bit back tears and fired up her Omni-tool. It took a few moments for her scans to understand how to extract information from the small shard, but indeed there was a translation matrix based on a simple mathematical formula sitting at the surface.

The commentary that we are considered slaves to Protheans is noted.
Luckily, Javik was less resistant to the comm implant process than Sam feared. His ear canal was disguised in a fold on the side of his head much like the asari. Brushing up against the rough skin made Samantha tremble slightly, as did being so close to those bright yellow eyes. But Dr. Chakwas rested a reassuring hand on Sam's shoulder and offered to implant the tiny black nodule.

The comms specialist had already logged the implant's serial number and after Karin injected it, a diagnostic was run. It worked blessedly perfectly. Javik was suspicious that we would be eavesdropping on all his conversations, to which EDI unhelpfully decided to chime in. "All communications on the Normandy are already recorded for posterity."

His spark of rage was quickly tempered when Samantha showed the Prothean how easy it was to turn on and off with the help of the Omni-tool bracelet. He did not accept Sam's help to learn how to use the device, but he was very shrewd and intelligent and soon had the orange face glowing with newfound information.

*You're welcome.*

Javik dismissed both women with a wave of his hand and turned his back to them. He seemed eager to dig through his new spy tool. Joker's smart-assed nickname for the Prothean drifted back into Sam's mind as she and Dr. Chakwas exited the room. *Have fun (re?)conquering the galaxy with just an Omni-tool, Prothy.*

Holding open the elevator politely, Karin started to praise Sam for her courage. But the comms specialist had an idea. She paused at the lift. "You take this one. I'm going to pop over and say hello to Diana before the next mission. She goes a little stir-crazy when she's on self-exile during mission blackouts."

The doctor accepted that answer and nodded. It made Sam feel a little bad. The comms specialist took a few steps down the hall to the Starboard Cargo Hold. She glanced around, made sure the coast was clear, then darted through the door to the drive core. Descending the hallway stairs, Samantha snuck over the secret cot under the engineering deck.

*Coast is clear!*

After flopping onto the bed, Sam quickly checked her messages. Still another hour until Shepard was heading to Tuchanka.
Just enough time to take another crack at the Normandy SR-1 black box data. For the fifth time.

*Thank God Liara didn't have a deadline for this little side project. Though I'm sure a few more weeks compared to three years without justice for Shepard is a drop in the bucket for asari.*

The *(alleged)* spy bastard had been downright elusive, but Sam wasn’t ready to give up yet. She’d found the fake turian signal by looking for things that were meaningless but still out of the ordinary. It had to work again. She began probing internal comms and emails again. It was the same place she’d been for the last week, but something didn’t feel right. She just couldn’t figure out what it was.

*Maybe "looking for things that aren't there" is the problem, Traynor.*

*Shut it. There has to be a good reason Shepard was kill—Shepard died—Shepard was in the wrong place at the wrong time.*

Because on the surface, all the SR-1 communications were downright ordinary.

*Although…*

*What?*

*Although… is it a little odd to have a requisitions officer aboard? Isn't that something better left to colonies? And bases?*

*Who is this guy?*

Poking around the personnel files, Requisitions Officer Chris Postle was listed aboard the Normandy SR-1 as a mechanic assigned to maintaining the M35 Mako. She skimmed his file further. Nothing exceptional. But he did serve aboard the SSV Agincourt with the Normandy's Navigator, Charles Pressly.

*Okay. Old shipmates. That's not a crime. But it is a link. And a mechanic dealing armory licenses on the side could be something?*

Chris Postle was curiously absent of correspondence. He never communicated with anyone other than forwarding the armory licenses Shepard had acquired on her travels. And trading shipments of upgrades, armor and amps. Postle only used ship-wide update memos and nothing else.

*Okay. Maybe he doesn't have a family. Lots of people don't have families.*

Navigator Pressly, on the other hand, was an active communicator. He had a daughter he vid-chatted with regularly. An ex-wife. Old friends on other ships. And some of his emails signed off with "P.S. Spero inter lilia."

Sam scanned the extranet for some sort of book or quote to match that statement to since it sounded significant. Nothing.

*Weird.*

Every email with that postscript had an extra layer of encryption. It went to its intended recipient, but it was odd. Sam started throwing filters at Pressly's and Postle's correspondence, trying to peel away some of the Alliance code.

And there it was. A message. Something had been deleted. She found it in Postle's memo about new amps. A keylogger had recorded his message, and it had been retroactively deleted. Sam's scrubber
algorithm pulled it from the garbage bin and pieced it back together:

"spero inter lilias."

*They're using a code.*

*But what the hell does it mean?*

Sam was simultaneously elated and irritated. Finally, she had something tangible to bring to Liara. It just wasn't proof of anything. Pressly and Postle could have been war buddies. Or lovers. Or just in on the same dumb in-joke.

"Specialist Traynor, please report to the war room immediately. Specialist Chen Xian requires your assistance coordinating the communication feeds for the turian, krogan and Alliance," EDI paged over the intercom.

*Duty calls.*

Saving her progress, Sam sighed. She hurried up the steps while simultaneously cursing the rotten timing. …it only took a few weeks to come across one mysterious, possibly useless phrase buried in an email. I'm sure with a few more years I'll have something worthwhile to tell Liara.

*Well, maybe she'll know what to do with it.*

Sam vowed to swing by Liara's cabin after the mission. It was time for actual work.

The war room was livelier than usual. It seemed to be divided neatly into thirds, with the turians, krogan and Alliance sprinkled around the central and perimeter consoles. Everyone had something to monitor for their faction. Sam just hoped they were all on the same team. She had to resist the urge to wrinkle her nose at the male turian seated at her favorite console.

*How much do you want to bet he's responsible for the Turian Hierarchy poking around my feeds?*  
*How much you got, Traynor?*

Lt Victus and the Ninth Platoon were already on the ground by the time Shepard sped down to the surface in the Kodiak with EDI and Javik. Sam watched the feeds for the Hierarchy to interfere. Sure enough: their code was there. But rather than creeping in to monitor, it was resolutely around the border.

...*Wait, they're not keeping me and Xian out.*

*They're keeping other signals from getting in.*

*Does this mean we finally get to know what the big secret is?*

"Tell me about this Cerberus bomb," Shepard suddenly demanded into her comm connection to Tarquin Victus.

*What?!*  

*They're flying straight to a bomb?!*

But Shepard wasn't worried. The Commander asked for a sitrep like she was asking for the score to a biotiball game. …*and that's why she's in charge.*
Tarquin Victus rumbled back in response. "It's not Cerberus, Commander. It's …turian."

What?!

Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me.

Shepard asked incredulously, "What do you mean, 'turian'?"

"It was planted centuries ago after the Krogan Rebellions. It was a safeguard against another galactic war."

There was a long pause on the comm, before Shepard responded. "Makes sense. Couldn't trust the krogan to play nice. But right now we focus on disarming that bomb."

Sam was glad Wrex wasn't in the war room to eavesdrop on the conversation. The krogan chief had been on a tear over all the poking and prodding he was getting from the salarian doctor in the Med Bay... A part of the ship Samantha usually avoided, and not just because of her lingering phobia of hospitals. Plus the doctor's work seemed so big and important that idle chitchat with the comms geek seemed silly.

"Yes, but Cerberus found it. Detonation would mean all-out war between my people and the krogan," Victus continued.

Ugh. Sam was horrified. How bad had things been almost a thousand years ago that they had a bloody contingency plan for genocide? They were talking complete and utter krogan extinction.

And now Cerberus had their finger on the button.

"Fucking Cerberus."

Sam was inclined to agree. She tracked the blip of the Kodiak to a small abandoned area with destroyed buildings. Cerberus troop comms were lighting up like fireworks in the area. Sam did not envy Xian being responsible for keeping order on the comms. Her job was consolidating feeds and forwarding relevant updates.

Speaking of fireworks, the comms on the ground were just impossible to hear once the enemy was engaged. It was an all-out war zone with noisy explosions mixed with the pinging of bullets on shields.

She had a windowed view of the battlefield through Shepard's hardsuit cam. The Prothean turned out to be a (shockingly) bossy team mate. Javik gave orders as often as Shepard did, demanding the need for cover and pointing out enemy positions.

The waves of troops were cut down by the Prothean's rage, Shepard's brute force, and EDI's control. Javik's biotics were unlike anything Sam had ever heard of: a crushing prison of energy that poisoned everything around him. She detected Cerberus scout chatter similarly bewildered and awed by the Prothean's abilities. You're just mad we got him first.

Finally, the chaos finally gave way to speculation by Javik.

"The turians must have truly feared the krogan to plant such a weapon."

EDI supplemented. "While morally questionable, the strategy is sound."

Of course. Of course EDI and Javik would get along. Soon they'll be holding hands and singing
"Daisy Bell" and planning our pending enslavement to our synthetic and Prothean overlords.

Around the corner, Sam was (permitted to be!) tracking the Ninth Platoon. Victus's troops were careful and methodical. Their tracking blips were splayed out in tight groups and carefully cut down each group of Cerberus troops before continuing the next. Very efficient.

Until it wasn't. The entrenched Cerberus troops had mortars and decimated a quarter of Victus's men in seconds. The turians backed off and circled around just as Victus demanded assistance into his comm.

Everything was dire, but a Cerberus comm Sam intercepted almost made her burst out laughing. They were ready to arm the bomb (not funny) but then gave orders to "contain Shepard." The brief mental image of Shepard in a fish tank for observation was part of it. The other was just the absurdity that they could somehow muzzle or harm Shepard.

Especially considering the Commander and her team pushed through their ranks without stopping.

Probing the Tuchanka feeds netted some signal spikes around the perimeter of the bomb. Sam scanned channel arrays and finally landed on the frequency where Cerberus was broadcasting an emergency notification. To start evacuating the area.

Oh God.

Sam forwarded the information to Specialist Xian in the CIC. Information the resident comms specialist kind of needs to know.

Victus made note of Cerberus first. "We're getting a lot of comm chatter. They're prepping for evac."

Xian's light tenor popped into Shepard's squad comm, "Commander, our intelligence also confirms that a Cerberus evacuation is in progress." And then he just cut out. Very professional, out of the way, concise. Sam admired it. Normally she was too terrified to talk on the comms, preferring instead to forward her findings to EDI to report.

"I don't like the sound of that." Shepard stated, though it was confirmed when Javik then barked over the comm. "Cerberus is retreating!" He sounded annoyed but also slightly exhilarated. "We should move to higher ground!"

You do know that means a bomb is about to blow up, right? That's a thing that's in danger of happening.

Pops of gunfire peppered the channel as did the hum of drop ships taking off. The patter of footsteps ground to a halt when Shepard and her team discovered the unearthed bomb. The specialist next to Sam, Jason Gentry, was the sitrep analyst. Even he gasped at the situation he had to report: the measurements of the bomb were nothing sort of a planet-killer. And it was out in the open and armed.

"It has been strategically place for maximum yield," EDI evaluated coldly, before prodding. "I advise haste, Commander."

No shit.

Sam counted two more Cerberus ship signals bugging out of the bomb site. A stupid part of her wondered if they'd been bored, waiting around for someone to arrive to stop them. Then Shepard and the turian platoon have to go and show up at the last minute. Jerks, Sam thought sarcastically. She changed her fictitious tune when a pair of ships suddenly reversed trajectory, probably aware
that their bomb was in danger of being thwarted by some meddling kids.

"Cerberus made a mistake. They should have made sure we were dead first." Again, Javik was gleeful. But all Sam could pinpoint on the map was a lone turret. A laughable roadblock that was quickly mowed down. They met up with the turian platoon at the bomb control panels. Specialist Gentry noted the bypass needed to override Cerberus lockdown: Victus's plan was to reprogram the trigger mechanism to render the bomb useless.

Shepard sounded tense. "Are you sure you can disarm the trigger?"

"Yes. It's old tech. I know what to do," Victus snapped back. "Just buy me a few minutes, Commander."

"I put my team at risk to get you here, Lieutenant. You better deliver." Shepard was scathing. Protective. Even Javik, who had nothing to lose and owed no loyalty to the Commander, was shielded by Shepard's "Team" label. A fleeting pang of envy struck the comms specialist.

He just shows up and immediately becomes one of the crew. It took me weeks just to get a relatively unawkward conversation.

Except, Traynor, all it takes to get in Shepard's good graces is to risk your life for her. No big deal.

Victus grumbled. "I know what's at stake, Commander." But he softened with appreciation. "Thank you… for making sure I get this chance."

Then Sam's comms feeds went haywire. A big surge of Cerberus troops was inbound, complete with signal dampeners to delay or cut her comms.

Oh, no you don't.

Do they realize they're going to die? Either at Shepard's hand or from the bomb? Are they just that dedicated to the Cerberus cause? Or what?

She suddenly remembered some communications Shepard had intercepted awhile back on Sanctum. A journal chronicled a newcomer to the Cerberus organization who had been apprehensive and excited and more than a little concerned that he was expected to keep a cyanide capsule in his teeth. All his uncertainty had dissolved by the next entry, when his free will had been completely overridden. Were all of these soldiers like that boy? Once volunteers and now just husks?

Shepard handled the ensuing firefight like a normal person would divide up household chores. Javik on point, EDI on the left, Shepard up the middle. The Prothean drew incoming fire while Shepard charged in, shotgun blazing. The AI and her decoy suite covered the Commander's back when Cerberus started flanking. It was a dizzying spectacle, and instead of Shepard keeping plates spinning she was keeping troops from invading.

Another gasp from Jason on Sam's left distracted the comms specialist from her own subdued air-pump of victory after an Atlas mech exploded. Switching comms, Samantha discovered what the fuss was about: Cerberus had overridden the trigger and a countdown was in progress. With one minute left.

Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God.

What are the odds?

Oh God…

The odds, Traynor. You can do it. Focus.
A dull coolness came over Sam, that intense surge of attention when she had a problem to solve. It was a much better attitude than hand-wringing over Shepard about to be blown up.

But still… Oh God.

Traynor!

Let’s see… If the turian can make it to the detonation platform by about the 25-second mark… I’d give it… 20 to one.

Can we do any better?

That’s …not up to me.

Indeed, Sam had stopped studying her comm feeds and was just blatantly looking over Specialist Gentry’s shoulder. He had a holographic GUI display of the entire bomb site. Red blips of swarming troops surrounded the four blue dots of Shepard, Javik, EDI and Lieutenant Victus. The turian leader had started to disengage the bomb platform after partially-ejecting the trigger mechanism when suddenly a large exclamation point appeared on one lone arm of the bomb.

He's not going to make it. It's jammed.

Shepard, EDI and Javik are about to be vaporized.

...Would EDI feel pain? Her mind is here. That's just her body. It would probably be more of an inconvenience, especially after all that we went through to get that bloody body working.

And the irony of the last Prothean dying only a day after being reawoken is just too painful. ...Laughable? …Horrible.

And Shepard... no... not again... Nausea hit Samantha's stomach hard, as though it had just sunk down as far as it could go. She jumped up out of her seat, unable to take just sitting anymore. The timer ticked down.

"18 seconds," Gentry reported as a digital timer linked from EDI’s feed appeared.

Oh God… Shepard…

"15."

I still have her hoodie. I haven't given it back yet. Oh God, I'm a thief. A dirty thief.

It hasn't been the right time! That bloody thing is a trap! I can't just waltz around the Crew Deck with it! People might notice!

Sam looked away from Gentry's console and squinched her eyes shut. She couldn't watch. If she did, she'd probably just throw up.

"10."

I should have given it back.

She tried to force herself to recalculate the odds, but the comforting numbers wouldn't come. Sam's breathing had escalated, nearing hyperventilation.

"6."
But something in her breathing triggered a memory. It was suddenly calming. With her eyes closed, she could almost see Shepard's face. And Sam's own hitched exhales sounded like… like… Shepard. Like that little noise she always seems to make around Sam. The Commander's terse equivalent of a laugh. So tiny and brief and… lovely.

_I didn't tell her—I think—_

"Victory… at any cost." It crackled into Sam's comm and then was gone. It made her freeze, because the timer hadn't stopped. But there were no sudden exclamations around the war room of mourning or anguish.

Rather, a cheer erupted.

"Traynor!" Gentry had grabbed Sam's forearm and shaken her eyes open. Sam cautiously pried an eye open to look at the sitrep holo: the bottom part of the bomb had detached and fallen harmlessly down the mineshaft.

Sam spun on her heel to look for the Primarch on the opposite end of the room. His small turian entourage had parted, allowing the father space to drop into a nearby chair. _He just… he just lost his son._

She wanted to go over there. To hug him. It was a silly, childish thought. She was a stranger. They'd never even spoken. And, at a time like that, all words would be inadequate anyway.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Awful. "He was very brave." He knows, he saw.

Instead, Samantha fell back into her own seat and tapped back into her comms feeds. The krogan chatter that had been a mild trickle suddenly flooded her screen. She forwarded the report to Joker, who relayed the message to a (wonderfully alive) Shepard that was already back in the Kodiak.

"What the hell did you do?" It was Urdnot Wrex. He had stormed into the war room, limping slightly. The krogan chief had been an unfortunate pincushion for science over the last week or so, his eagerness to volunteer for the genophage cure waning considerably. And the perfect outlet for his pent-up anger was the turian leader.

The Primarch's security forces hefted their rifles in an effort to curb the krogan's angry charge. Wrex skidded to a halt a few inches in front of them and pointed angrily at the glowing holo of Tuchanka in the middle of the war room. "The genophage wasn't enough? You had to plant a bomb on my planet?"

"The decision was made hundreds of years ago. So much has changed," Victus replied. He was exhausted. Unprepared.

Wrex rumbled back. "Not enough to tell us about the bomb, you coward!"

The Primarch only sat there, his shoulders slumped. Wrex continued to rage. It angered Sam until she realized something.

_Maybe Wrex doesn't know. Why doesn't someone tell him?_

Listening to her comms, Sam decided to let someone the krogan chief claims to trust break the news. She patched in the Kodiak comm feed into the war room intercom. And flipped the broadcast switch. Shepard's voice rang into the room and silenced everyone instantly.

"The price of war is high. We lost a lot more than a few buildings, EDI. The Primarch's son
Javik’s low hum supplemented. "Lieutenant Victus fought for a cause he believed in. A soldier can’t ask for more than that. He died well. And saved many."

"Nobody dies well." Shepard growled back with muted anger. "I’m tired of saying otherwise."

Disconnecting the feed, Samantha stood up and glared defiantly around the room. Wrex seemed to be chewing over the new perspective. He then shouldered past the turian guards to where the Primarch sat. And extended a three-finger hand. "...in your place, we probably would have done the same damn thing. If anyone understands the pain of losing children, it is the krogan."

The turian leader’s mandibles seemed to flex and clench with suppressed emotion. "My own son died trying to make this right. I hope you understand the secrecy." But he stood, inhaled sharply, and shook the war chief's hand. The two men only nodded in acknowledgement before Wrex turned on his heel and went over to his two krogan advisors, mumbling about a clean-sweep of Cerberus from Tuchanka.

Adrien Victus shooed his hovering security detail away and walked over to the large round holo in the middle of the room. He studied the holo of Tuchanka glowing from the device, leaning pensively against the railing. After several long minutes, Primarch Victus finally had the energy to speak again. And he did so to Samantha. Very quietly. His dark eyes glittered even from across the room.

"My son… he died with the respect of his men. I want to thank Shepard for that. His sacrifice will be recorded in the histories of the ninth platoon. Something any father would be proud of."

Nodding with empathy, Samantha saluted politely. "Yes, sir." She watched the Primarch for a few more seconds, nodded, and returned to her seat.

Sam started to shut down her work station. Now was about the time the Kodiak returned to the Normandy and they had a little down time before the next mission. When Shepard gets back, I have a few grievances to air.

_The big one being scaring the shit out of your comms specialist. That's just rude._ She had to be mentally flippant just to distract herself from the stress, the fear, and the unspoken—

_Wait, what?_

She heard Joker ask, "Cortez, what's your ETA?"

It was Shepard who responded. "We're not going back to the Normandy just yet." _Oh that's just— wait, what?_

_Stop thinking that, Traynor._

"Uh… what?" was Joker's classy response. _Ha! I'm not the only one! "What do you mean? Where the hell are you going, then? Pleasure cruise?"

"Intel says more Cerberus is on Tuchanka. It's time we paid them a visit, and show them what we think of blowing up krogan."

"We don't have enough fuel for a sight-seeing tour, Commander," Steve interjected. But the holo of the Kodiak (yes, I'm still looking at Gentry's screen. I'm a bloody screen-watcher, okay?) changed its trajectory to an old military compound only a few hundred kilometers east of the Shroud facility.

Noticing an incoming transmission, Samantha ran a bypass and tossed it Xian's way. She held a hand
to her ear to eavesdrop on Admiral Hackett's brief chat with Shepard.

…Great. A military installation with a ground-to-space cannon, now under Cerberus control. Sam dug through her feeds and, sure enough, located some familiar comms signals. The Cerberus forces that had been extracted from the bomb site had headed straight for the old krogan base as reinforcements.

I'd admire their strategy. If they weren't so bloody evil. And almost killed Shepard.

And EDI. Can't forget EDI. I'd miss her terribly.

Shepard's orders were simple. "Kill anything that gets in our way." Javik's old glee had returned. "This, I can do."

Cortez was sent off to investigate the target of the facility's cannons. Xian asked Samantha for intel, and boy did she find it: a Cerberus cruiser inbound. And it was a big one. That was now shielded by a massive cannon clearing the way.

Scratch admiring their strategy. Bombarding krogan resistance that are fighting Reapers? That's just pure idiocy. Since when did pro-human become "help the Reapers wipe all other species off the galactic map?"

This isn't evil. This is cartoonish supervillainy. And we already have the Reapers for that.

For a giddy moment, Sam wanted to send in the superhero dream team of Archangel, The First Human SpecTRe, The Last Prothean, and Mecha-EDI onto that Cerberus cruiser in a ball of flame and have them heroically blow it up from the inside out then make an amazing dive out an airlock to then be rescued by the Normandy.

That's all it'll take, right?

"It's time to test this cannon." Shepard's voice brought Samantha back to reality. She chanced a look over at Gentry's console, which confirmed an absence of red dots in the area. But it was going to be a short-lived victory; already Sam could hear comm chatter of Cerberus drop ships and Tomkahs inbound.

Sam had her fist ready to uplift in victory, until a series of comm bursts cut her celebration short. Enough forces had poured out of an underground tunnel to cut the cannon power before Shepard could reconfigure the cannon.

After more nail biting as Shepard scrambled to get the ancient generators back on, Sam just slumped down in her seat. I can't handle all this excitement. All these near misses with failure and death. Or failure meaning death. How do these people do it? All the time? Without stopping? She was unfortunately having flashbacks to the Reaper invasion Earth. Yet another time when Sam felt hopelessly overwhelmed.

It's not going to get better or easier, Traynor. Administering the genophage cure won't be a breezy, jammy affair. We suck it up and follow Shepard, yea?

I can—I can do that.

"Cortez to Normandy, come in Normandy. We need Dr. Chakwas to meet us in the Shuttle Bay. Shepard's hurt. I repeat: Shepard is down."
The Requisitions Officer on the Normandy SR-1 didn't actually have a name. Since he wasn't on the memorial wall that I'm aware of, I just gave him the name of his voice actor. Very unoriginal.

I changed the structure of the bomb conversations at the end between Wrex and Victus to be more Sam-centric. Still canon, just not correctly attributed canon.
Samantha was still staring numbly at her console. Her mind was doing an incredible job keeping the unruly mob of emotion at bay, because otherwise she'd probably just explode into nonsense in the middle of the war room.

Under normal circumstances, the Communications Specialist was (arguably) one of the best tactical positions on the ship. Eyes and ears on the field, but safely tucked away from the threat. Always in the know.

Sam would give anything to not know what was happening on Tuchanka right now. Or at least hear about it later as one of those briefly-alarming-but-everything-works-out anecdotes that soldiers are so fond of telling. Usually in a bar. Preferably in a bar.

...is Shepard one of those kinds of soldiers? I never asked.

Not for lack of opportunity. You ran into Shepard in a bar on the Citadel, remember?

I do remember. Vividly.

…Shepard. The Commander's comm wasn't picking up anything other than briefly labored breathing. Then nothing. It had been 48 minutes and 35 seconds since there had been any activity on Shepard's comm. Sam had been counting.

The ground team was still at the cannon facility, waiting for Lieutenant Cortez to extract them. He'd been a ripe target for some escaping Cerberus fighters and shaking them in the Kodiak was taking a dreadfully long time. In the interim, Comms Specialist Chen Xian had patched Dr. Chakwas directly to EDI for instruction on how to care for the fallen Shepard.

And Javik...

"If the Commander is meant to survive such wounds, then she will. It is plain and simple. The bigger concern is how to cut away this... Cerberus. In my cycle, anyone who did not fight the Reapers was
executed. Any delay is harmful and wasteful."

"Probability of survival is greater when active measures are taken. My programming also values treating injury more highly than passively observing potential survival rates for science. …Though the information from such study would undoubtedly be illuminating." EDI paused. "That was a joke."

That is not funny. But EDI had no reason to be alarmed, being a machine and all. Panic would just be illogical.

"Too soon, EDI," Joker scolded over the comm, before updating them on the ETA of Admiral Hackett's reinforcements. And Cortez, who had finally checked in. "Burnin' atmo," the shuttle pilot replied to the urgent hail from Joker.

*What the hell is taking so long? The war will be bloody over by the time the cavalry gets there. Are they going so slowly on purpose? Did extractions usually take this long?*

*Does anyone care that Shepard is hurt? Anyone at all?*

Proper protocol for this situation would be to wait for further orders from a commanding officer.

*And what's the proper protocol when the aforementioned commanding officer is lying half-dead in a ditch on Tuchanka?!*

Okay. Okay okay okay. You're probably exaggerating, Traynor. Shepard's a soldier. They take hits.

*And if I'm not exaggerating? What then?*

*We... um...*

Before Sam even knew what her stupid hands were doing, they were swiping over her console. A private comm channel was opened. Encrypted properly. And then connected.

"What—uh—what do... what do we do?" The comms specialist's voice wasn't exactly calm. But she wasn't dissolving into sloppy hysterics. *Yet.*

A long pause on the other end before a male voice answered.

"About what?"

"You mean you don't know?!" Considerably less calm that time. *Get a grip, Traynor.*

"Whoa, whoa. What are we talking about, here?" Joker asked into the intercom, his voice slightly high-pitched with confusion. "What was the first part of this conversation that you so frantically glossed over, Traynor?"

*Oh. Right. He has no bloody clue what I'm going on about.*

*Well, he should.*

*I agree. But, here we are.*

Sam tried again. Not that her thoughts were any better composed, but the overall shittiness of this chat thus far was at least forcing her brain to work. "What I meant was... what do we do when the commanding officer of the Normandy is injured? Stare at the walls? Rend our uniforms in
anguish? What?

Another long pause.

"Oh."

*I am going to bloody strangle you in three seconds, Flight Lieutenant, if you don't—*

"We wait. Hackett already has a platoon of N7s on their merry way to the site. They're administering field triage for Shepard... by which I mean EDI is taking good care of Shepard. Javik would probably put a bullet in her if she sneezed."

**That is not helping, Joker!**

"That is not helping, Joker," Sam growled quietly, though it was an improvement over what her mind would have preferred: to scream into the comm channel like a banshee. "How are you so calm about this? How bad is it?"

"Hey, I'm worried. I'm just not going to wet my pants over it." Joker sidestepped Sam's question, which she noticed. She also noticed a slight strain to his voice. He wasn't as calm as he was pretending to be. "Shepard had a chance to be vaporized in a nuclear bomb, I seriously doubt the universe would be so lame as to let a couple Cerberus strike teams win. That's just weak."

Punctuating her words sharply, Sam gritted her teeth. "How. Bad. Is it?"

Joker's voice got quiet. "She took two shots through the armor. Doc says her blood sugar was too low and she had a hypoglycemic seizure. Before or after getting shot, we don't know. Shepard burned through her emergency insulin stores in her hardsuit but kept using biotics. Body couldn't handle it, plus the blood loss."

"So what do we do?"

"See? Aren't these charming discussions so much better when you don't cut to the chase? Now I know what the hell you're talking about." The orange blip signifying Joker's comm plateaued for a few seconds before spiking again. "We wait. Just got the call from Cortez. He's picked everyone up and they're already on their way back. In the meantime, we keep cool heads and not flip a bitch at our incredible pilot. Deal?"

Sam grudgingly hissed through her teeth, "...Deal."

Just before Sam was about to disconnect the comm link, Joker added quietly, "I know how it is, Traynor. I feel the same way when I'm up here and they're down there. You wish you could help. That there's more you could do. And... you're doing it. Doing your job is helping. It just doesn't feel like it is. Kinda bullshit, when you think about it."

Leaning back in her chair, the comms specialist chewed on her cheek. "Does it ever get easier? ...I've never been in this situation. No one ever got hurt in R&D. And if they did, it's because they stubbed their toe or did something similarly idiotic."

"Sexy pillow fight injuries?" he asked hopefully.

"...Yes. We unraveled the secrets of the galaxy in between sexy pillow fights. The taxpayers were less than thrilled at the Pillow Tax the Alliance levied, but by God did we ever get research done," Sam snarked back, but the stupidity of the conversation did make her feel a little better.
The pilot summarized matter-of-factly: "Sexy research."

She taunted back lightly. "In your dreams, Moreau."

"No better place, Traynor. …and no, it doesn't get easier. Sometimes people come back banged up. And sometimes…” Joker trailed off.

*Sometimes they don't come back.*

Lieutenant Commander Ashley Williams flashed back into Sam's mind. She really wished she hadn't. Granted, Williams was the Better Case Scenario of the two, but her bloody, tousled head was a memory better left repressed. And swapping the injured LC's face for Shepard's was just…

Samantha stood up from her war room console. She didn't even say goodbye to Joker on the comm. She just logged out, turned on her heel and walked mechanically over to the short flight of stairs leading to the exit. There wasn't so much a specific thought going through the comms specialist's head more so than just a jittery feeling of: *I have to get out of here.* It vaguely resembled bile trying to work its way unceremoniously up her esophagus.

*I really should talk to Dr. Harper about dealing with adversity through vomit. There's got to be a more constructive way to feel helpless and alone. Maybe I could channel this horrible feeling into a renewable energy source. Or turn it into a weapon to smite my enemies.*

"Traynor. Traynor! Don't make me shoot you. Stand still. You're messing up the security scan."

Private Bethany Westmoreland's bark brought Sam briefly back to reality. She realized her hands were buried in her armpits and she probably looked wild-eyed and crazed. Pushing a few errant black strands of hair behind her ears, Sam straightened as the grid of white light traced over her body in the security screening area just outside the CIC.

"What's with you, Sam? You went to work this morning happy as I've ever seen you. I think you even complimented my coffee." Private Sarah Campbell tilted her head curiously, her beret slipping down a half inch.

*Has it only been a few hours? *Wasa I in a good mood this morning?*

Sam had been. It was true. *Probably a little too good, but surely this isn't retribution for being a little cheerful?* Especially considering the target of her good mood was now (badly?) wounded. *That's just rude, Karma, if that's the case.*

Clearing her throat, Sam realized she'd been silent for far too long and Sarah had repeated her name twice. "Well, your batch of coffee did seem to suck slightly less today. But that's all going by the wayside with all the excitement on Tuchanka. Did you hear?"

Bethany sighed. "EDI informed us. We're on high alert to monitor the war room in case…"

"In case what? The turians or krogans stage a coup and take over the Normandy?" Campbell raised an incredulous eyebrow. Her fellow security guard squawked indignantly. "You never know! Maybe they want any advantage they can get in this war! What better time is there when the commanding officer is out of commission?"

"Out of commission." Such an odd turn of phrase. *So much more polite than "bloodied and maimed." Or "half-dead."*

*I need to go. Now.*
Sam mumbled something resembling agreement, darted past the two soldiers and rounded the corner to the elevator. Specialist Xian was in Sam's spot by the galaxy map, swiping over comm channels and talking quietly into his ear piece. Normally, she'd stop and engage him in shop talk. What algorithms he used to tag the Cerberus comms. What a pain in the ass the war room server was to manage. The little nuances only comms specialists understood.

But his worker bee demeanor was compounding Sam's already-bad mood. It irritated her that everyone was going about their business. She didn't have a good reason for feeling this way. Conversely, everyone running around in circles with their hair on fire also wouldn't help. Considering how close Samantha was to the latter possibility, at least mentally, she needed a distraction.

Well, doing your job was your distraction. So unless you elbow Xian aside and start doing his, you're probably gonna need a Plan B, Traynor. Suggestions?

Slinking past the CIC tech specialists to the elevator, Sam's hand paused over the lift keypad.

Go see Diana?

…she'd probably be more interested in updating her Battlespace followers about what happened to Shepard. That's even less helpful, considering that's the Thing I'm trying not to think about. What else?

You do owe Liara an update on the Normandy SR-1 black box progress.

Sam couldn't hit that bright number "3" fast enough. Liara! She's probably so immersed in her … whatever it is she does… she might not even have heard. Plus her cabin is right across the hall from the Med Bay. I'll know the minute that Shepard—

The elevator door opened on the stark Memorial Wall, hollowing out Sam's chest even further. She'd never really looked at it. Only noticed it in passing on her way to the bunks or mess. It had been added as part of the retrofits, an odd request from Admiral Anderson. And apparently one Shepard had taken to heart and populated with lost crew. People Sam had never met, so she couldn't really assign particular value to their lives other than names on a wall.

"KAIDAN ALENKO" was the only one she recognized, and only dimly. Almost meaningless to Sam, but so important to Williams, Garrus, Shepard—Wait.

Charles Pressly.

Shit.

Samantha's brilliant uncovering of a secret message was hardly relevant if one of the men were dead. She reread the wall to see if Chris Postle was also on the list, but he was absent. It could still be something.

She told herself that a few more times as she turned the corner to the starboard-side hallway. Maybe if she said it enough, it would make it true. So then she wasn't just meekly wasting hers and potentially Liara's time on a goose chase just to further her own denial. Maybe.

Well, at least you're surprisingly self-aware. Though you still kind of suck at it.

I try.

Glyph cheerfully allowed Sam entry, but when she called out there was no answer. There were
remarkably few places to hide in Liara's cabin and again the bed was untouched. *So unless Liara actually sleeps under the bed rather than in it, she's not here.*

"Glyph? I had some data to go over with Liara. Is she around?"

The white holo drone spun its way over to Samantha. "Dr. T'Soni departed the office 3.2 minutes ago for the Shuttle Bay. Estimated time of return is 7.5 minutes. You have been flagged as a special guest and are permitted to remain here to wait, if you wish. Her away message indicates she will return once she has seen to the well-being of Commander Shepard."

*Now why didn't you think of that, Traynor?*

*Because that would be weird. Do comms specialists usually sit by the front door waiting for their CO to come home?*

*Wait, are you a dog or a fretting housewife in this situation?*

*Um…*

*Then... which is Liara?*

*Ummmm…*

"I'll wait, if that's okay." The drone acknowledged the woman with a bounce and floated back over to the corner console. Tilting her head, Sam ventured a question. "Just out of curiosity, what would happen if I *weren't* flagged as a 'special guest'?"

Glyph did not turn around, but stated simply: "I would be authorized to use deadly force to extract unapproved personnel from the premises."

"…Seriously?"

"My programming is quite specific regarding the matter. Would the Comms Specialist like a demonstration?"

Sam squawked a little more loudly than she intended. "No! No, no. That's quite all right. I'll just celebrate my place on the coveted Authorized List and wait here."

Which was easier said than done. Granted, feeling awkward was a vast improvement over being worried. *But that's like saying it's better to be punched in the gut than the head. It's still a terrible feeling.*

Plus it felt weird being in Liara's space without Liara present. Walking around and poking at her things was an odd violation, even though there was nothing much to see. The computer equipment everywhere was certainly tantalizing, but something told Sam that firing up one of the consoles would get her demoted to the Kill With Deadly Force category of Glyph's programming. So she had to slowly walk around the room while looking without touching.

She'd never gotten past about the halfway point to the room, usually conversing with the asari information broker at her tower of screens along the right side or near the window console along the left. Beyond this area was yet another console which Glyph currently occupied, wedged in the corner right before the divider to the bedroom.

Sam was curious and took a few timid steps past the info drone, and when she wasn't electrocuted *(or whatever else drones use to attack. Foul language?)*, she peeked into the bedroom. It was a
modest suite. The bed took up most of the space but a low couch was tucked underneath another window and a few end tables were sprinkled throughout. No art work or personal items. Or even clutter.

The only thing in the unremarkable suite Samantha could even see was a small white picture frame sitting on the right end table. But it was empty. It wasn't until Sam started to turn did she see a glint of light in the frame. Venturing closer, the comms specialist leaned over and studied the frame.

It wasn't meant for pictures. It was lightly padded and soft. Set in the middle was a dangling chain, and hanging from that chain were two badly charred pieces of metal. Sam ran her fingers over them, and could barely make out the etching.

It was bold, familiar human writing. On the back of one, a white "N7" was barely visible. On the front of the other:

"SHEPARD
ANNELISE R
012.7.31454.1-N2
SYSTEMS ALLIANCE"

*These are... Shepard's dog tags.*

*No they aren't. I saw her wearing them the first time I met her. In the Shuttle Bay.*

*Not those dog tags. Her other ones. The ones before she died. She died in these.*

*And Liara has them.*

"I apologize for keeping you waiting, Samantha," Liara announced as her cabin door swished open. Her blue eyes searched the room, giving Sam a precious second to back away from the memento and take a few innocent steps toward the asari.

Once the asari spotted the human, she strode briskly forward. "Glyph alerted me to your arrival. Is there news I am unaware of?"

Samantha cleared her throat to give her guilty, fluttering heart a second or two to calm down. "Probably not. You heard about Shepard?"

Sighing, Liara nodded before gesturing toward the couch beside her bed. Sam felt privileged to be offered a spot and sat down earnestly. The comms specialist hunched over and clasped her hands while the asari leaned back with legs crossed. *Always elegant, even in distress.*

And she was distressed. "I met Dr. Chakwas in the Shuttle Bay to help with transporting Shepard. She needed some assistance with the hover gurney, though I think she was just being kind. I've seen Karin shoulder a full grown human man to administer treatment." At Sam's confused head jerk, Liara continued, "Dr. Chakwas and I are old friends. From the original Normandy. I actually roomed in the medical bay for most of my stay aboard the SR-1. She took excellent care of me after several difficult meldings with Annel—Shepard. While we were hunting Saren."

The informal slip-up was unlike Liara. And some other things she said were buzzing in Sam's brain. Though not in any good or helpful way.

"That was generous of you to help." Sam replied dimly, though it came out more insincere than she'd intended. This wasn't the good idea she'd thought it would be. In fact, it was starting to upset Samantha in a different, stupid way. She wanted to change the subject desperately, but had to remain polite. "How is the Commander?"

The asari's smile was pure relief, as was the sigh that accompanied it. "She'll live to scare us another day. Though she has certainly had enough practice at it." The next sigh was less relieved but still good-natured.

Sam wanted to ask several things. Most of them wildly inappropriate or worse, things she didn't want the answer to. But there was a quiet whisper. It was a simple observation demanding a simple follow-up.

Shepard is in the Med Bay. You should go check on her.

"I don't know how you all have managed years of this excitement. I'm used to a quiet laboratory where we fought over who got to use the better server connection or who had to send the latest report to our COs. The closest I ever got to actual combat was..." Horizon. But Sam didn't want to say that out loud. She wished she hadn't brought it up.

"Yes? Was what?" Liara leaned forward earnestly. She was being so friendly.

"Oh, um... there was some excitement on my homeworld the last time I was on vacation. Invaders, Alliance intervention, that whole thing. Little ol' me, I was just frozen in place. Couldn't do anything about it," Sam pattered on vaguely. She was surprised Liara didn't know all about it, considering how nosey she'd been earlier.

If the doctor did know, her face revealed nothing. It was still a mask of concern, and she nodded with emphasis. "Sometimes our first foray into an unfamiliar situation isn't as...memorable... as we'd wished." She leaned back again, and started to lift a hand to run over her head fringe. She stopped herself when she saw bright red blood on her white, gloved fingertips and instead focused on that. "I had a similar experience myself the first time I met Shepard. Goddess, it was so embarrassing.

The comms specialist softly asked to hear about it.

"I was an archaeologist studying Prothean Ruins on Therum with a research team. We'd received a generous grant to collect samples for study after a mining company discovered the find. Even though it was more of a public relations exercise than sincere research, we made some wonderful finds."

Her geeky enthusiasm resurfacing, Liara cleared her throat to get back on track. "Anyway, our site was attacked by geth working for Saren. I barely made it to safety behind a Prothean security barrier, but then I got sloppy and became trapped in a stasis field. A foolish mistake. I remained frozen in place for several days, helplessly watching the geth below me try to find a way to reach me."

That... is remarkably close to how I felt on Horizon.

Maybe... maybe she can be trusted. To understand.

Smiling lightly in spite of herself, the asari continued. "Then Commander Shepard arrived, guns blazing. I thought I was hallucinating. She was so fiery but so official. She politely introduced herself as part of the Alliance Navy, told me to remain calm, and that she would help me. 'By the book,' I believe the expression goes."
"When Shepard did finally free me, I was so weak from thirst and lack of food that I needed assistance just to walk. I could barely use my biotics when we encountered the geth on the way out, and the escape from the collapsing mine shaft was none too easy, either." Liara shook her head. "I was frantic and careless. But also extremely lucky. Shepard could have pursued any number of her other leads for Saren, but instead she sought me out first. Not an ideal first impression to make with the first human SpecTRe, wouldn't you agree?"

Sam did agree, and it made her appreciate Liara a little more, considering she's been a part of this whole Reaper mess since the beginning. A familiar story, too. Humble, innocent origins before being thrown into a hurricane. *A hurricane with bullets and ion cannons and monsters.*

Samantha chuckled. "At least you didn't shoot her."

"What?!"

Smiling sheepishly, Sam buried her face in her hands. "I know! Absolutely mortifying! It was all Lieutenant Commander Williams' fault. She handed me a pistol and gave me a rousing speech about defending the Normandy. Which I believed. Like an idiot. So when Commander Shepard was coming aboard the ship after being picked up, I didn't know who, or what, she was from the other end of the Shuttle Bay. I pulled the trigger."

"Oh, Samantha." Liara's inflection was equal parts pitying and cringing.

"Oh hush, Dr. T'Soni," Sam snarked back, but kindly. "It was an accident. She deflected it with a barrier like she was swatting a fly, then biotically ripped the pistol from my hands. Truly a remarkable experience. I'm just happy I didn't get fired. On top of, you know, being happy I didn't kill someone. Especially Commander Shepard."

"We're all quite grateful for that," Liara agreed. "And I am grateful you have stopped by to speak with me. I feel much better, all things considered." There was a long pause before she cleared her throat. "Glyph messaged me that you had some data to discuss?"

*Oh! Right!*

…*Right.*

"Right, so I was combing through the SR-1 black box correspondence and found a curious message buried in the code of a few internal and outbound emails." Sam fired up her Omni-tool and slid around the U-shaped couch to be closer to the asari, who was now leaning forward earnestly.

["Spero inter lilia."]

Liara repeated the phrase aloud a few times, trying to grasp the unfamiliarity of a non-translated human language. "Does it mean something to humans? My translator does not have a full database of human languages. In Thessian, it would translate to a nonsense phrase along the lines of 'carpets not have quick thought above.'"

"It's almost as nonsensical. In Latin, it means 'hope among lilies,' which sounds profound except it doesn't exist in literature, poetry, or anything else of significance." Gesturing to the wall of screens in the next room, Sam asked, "Know of any person or organization that cares about lilies? …they're a type of flower on Earth. Usually associate with funerals." She had to quickly supplement her question when Liara shot her a confused look.
The asari stood up and sat in her high chair and began typing away. Sam settled in beside Liara, though the comms specialist wasn't sure what she was looking at. Samantha's translation implant was auditory, not optical, so she couldn't read the asari writing currently streaming across the screen. She just hoped the good doctor was having more luck than she did.

"Does the phrase 'lilium inter spinas' mean anything to you?" Liara finally asked. Sam tilted her head. "Yes, actually. I studied the human Christian Bible in college. It means 'lily among thorns.'"

Liara swiveled in her chair and studied Sam for a moment. "I have found your 'hope' phrase paired with the 'thorns' phrase in a fringe organization once part of the Alliance. It was a motto of sorts for a group of Alliance soldiers during the First Contact War, though they have been defunct for almost 40 years."

Sam's heart sank. "So it's useless."

"Not necessarily," Liara interjected thoughtfully. Her eyes flicked back to her screens with a raised eyebrow. "Maybe the group went rogue after the war ended. Maybe they had an agenda or continued after they left the Alliance. I don't know. I will look into it." Her fingers resumed their studious tapping at keys.

It wasn't quite the epiphany Samantha had hoped for, but maybe it was a solid lead. *I'll keep digging, too. Maybe I can find out what happened the day Shepard—oh…*

"I'm glad to be of help," Sam added, though Liara seemed to be completely focused on her work now. The comms specialist started to inch backwards out the door, when the asari leaned forward in her chair. "Oh, Samantha. One more thing. Who sent the message?"

"It was partially erased from one man's message, and sent externally by another. But one of them is dead, so I don't—"

"Their names?" She turned back slightly, her fingers at the ready.

"Officer Chris Postle had the partial. Navigator Charles Pressly sent it outside the ship. Several times."

The blue in Liara's cheeks blanched to a light periwinkle. "...I see. Thank you for your assistance, Samantha. Please let me know if you come across anything else. I will start working on the information you have so kindly provided." She swallowed deeply and returned to her work station.

Sam wanted to ask what she knew. Which name had her so crestfallen. But the dismissal was kind of a relief. It reminded her she had another stop to make.

Glyph chirped a merry goodbye which Sam answered with a small salute as she walked out the swishing doors. Across the hall, the Med Bay was visible. One of the cots was occupied. She started to walk across the mess when an idea struck Sam. It seemed brilliant in its simplicity, plus charming and sweet to boot.

*A win-win.*

Digging through one of the lower kitchen cabinets, the comms specialist found a small box already open. She tucked it under her arm and headed for the Med Bay. Inside, the krogan female on one of the other rows of beds appeared to be asleep while her salarian protector was absent. Dr. Chakwas was poised over a reclined Commander's abdomen. Her gloved hands were meticulously applying Medi-gel sutures.
Swallowing deeply, Sam had to force herself to glance down at the edge of the bed just to keep from staring. Shepard was awake. And clad in only a sports bra.

A bandage was tightly wrapped across her forehead while a deep cut on her nose was bare but shining with fresh medication. Her cheek was bruised purple. Bandages were wrapped around her left shoulder while blood lightly seeped through. More gauze could be seen peeking over the blanket around her waist. Again, the peppering of bruises from gunshots on bare flesh. Along with even more scars, puckered flesh, white scratches. And freckles.

So many freckles.

*Did she have them everywhere?*

Sam cleared her throat and met the eyes of the two women who glanced her way.

"Specialist Traynor? Come to check on our stupid, brash Commander?" Karin winked amiably at Sam before resuming her work at Shepard's stomach. The stupid, brash Shepard hissed an inhale at both the insult and the sharp pain.

"Your insubordination is noted, Karin. And after I bought you that bottle of brandy on the Citadel, even. You wound me." The SpecTRe's voice was a little raspy, which alarmed Samantha, but her severe tone was weakened by the glittering mirth in her eyes.

Dr. Chakwas snorted and stood up, snapping off one of her gloves. "You wound yourself, Shepard. I know gunshot trauma well." She thrust a finger at the shoulder bandage. "That injury is the oldest. Probably happened shortly after you landed at the bomb site."

Snapping off the other glove, she gestured at the IV attached to Shepard's wrist. "Which didn't help your constant biotic use. I watched your biometrics. Your hardsuit was warning you even before you went gallivanting off to the other side of Tuchanka. I had to override the built-in moderation of insulin just so you'd stay on your feet. If you weren't bleeding out what the suit was putting in, you would have gone into hyperglycemic shock instead."

The doctor was shaking slightly, trying to keep her anger in check. "If you have a death wish, Commander, please let me know now. That way I can save the good medical supplies for the crew members who give a damn about their lives." Nodding at Sam, Karin sighed. "If you'll excuse me, I need some air. And a drink. If you can talk some sense into our leader, I, and my supply of Medi-gel, will thank you."

She stalked out of the Med Bay without another word, leaving Shepard to scowl in her bed. It was terrible, but also a little funny, to see the great Commander Shepard being scolded by a frustrated mother. It wasn't quite what Sam would have preferred Shepard suffer after the scare she'd given the comms specialist. But literally shaking some sense into the injured Commander would probably (*definitely*) get Samantha fired.

Tiptoeing up quietly, Sam tried to be optimistic. "The important thing, ma'am, is that you kicked the shit out of Cerberus. And stopped a war from occurring in the process. And saved a lot of krogan. And did I mention stopped a bloody war? That can't be emphasized enough."

Shepard tried to roll her shoulders but winced with the effort. She settled with cracking her neck with a sigh instead. "We came pretty damn close, though. Fucking Cerberus. I wish I knew how they were somehow everywhere at once. Even The Illusive Man doesn't have unlimited resources, but somehow he's attacking multiple targets all over the galaxy. And I am going to find out how. And why." Another sigh. "If I can ever catch up to him. He's always a step ahead."
Oh shit. Is she …feeling sorry for herself? Has this (second) brush with mortality made Shepard doubt herself?

Oh no. No, no, no. We can't have that at all.

"You stop that right this minute, ma'am. …And, here." Deciding now was the perfect time to unload her ingenious gift, Sam took the box from her armpit and upended it over Shepard's lap. About three dozen wrapped protein bars rained into the injured woman's lap.

She looked up at Sam in confusion. "What the hell is this?"

"Blueberry protein bars. Your favorite. Eat up, you need your ass-kicking strength back," the comms specialist replied knowingly.

A long, awkward pause. "…These aren't my favorite."


She cleared her throat. "…They aren't?" Damn you, Rashad. I trusted you. "I heard from a reliable source you're the only one who eats these."

Shepard actually chuckled lightly and picked up a bar to study it closely. "That might be true. But not because they're my favorite."

"May I ask why, then?"

"You may…"

"But you might not answer," Sam finished. She was slightly frustrated, but was too relieved to be talking to Shepard to fly into a rage over something as stupid as protein bar flavors. "Fair enough, ma'am. I was only asking. You don't have to tell me. Secrets are secrets."

"It's not that, Specialist. It's just…" Shepard trailed off. She looked away, then looked back fiercely. "I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me."

The way she said it… she'd said it a lot.

"Feel sorry for you? You're Commander bloody Shepard. I feel sorry for everyone else. Myself included." Sam stupidly hazarded a wink to punctuate her point. It worked.

Shepard wrinkled her nose lightly at the compliment, but she was pleased. She sighed. "These aren't my favorite. I just know that no one else likes them. So I know that there will always be some for me."

"I fail to see how that would evoke pity. It's rather shrewd, actually. Disgustingly shrewd, because those blueberry things are totally abhorrent. But still shrewd nonetheless."

Unwrapping the bar, Shepard broke off a piece in her hand and studied it. She spoke to the bar and not Sam. "You just… you learn to not be picky. I was taught to eat what was put in front of me. A helpful lesson when you grow up poor. Go hungry a few times and you learn pretty quick not to turn your nose up at anything. Everyone's loss is your gain." Popping the piece in her mouth, Shepard chewed it heartily. Her eyes revealed no satisfaction, but yet no disgust either.
It was a topic that piqued Samantha’s interest greatly, but a small voice (not the Stupid one) told her to leave it alone. She chose instead to get to the bottom of a very important matter: "So what is your favorite, ma'am?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?" Shepard asked disinterestedly.

"Of course it matters."

"It's just food. As long as I stay on my feet: that's my favorite."

"Still. There are little joys to take out of enjoying things you like. Even stupid things like protein bars. It can turn your whole day around."

Shepard studied Sam, her focused green eyes flitting over (through?) Sam's brown ones. She reached for the empty box still in Sam's right hand and ran a thumb down the promotional blurb advertising the other exciting Fish Dog Food Factory flavors. She pointed to one and showed it to Sam who nodded with satisfaction.

_Cherry vanilla. A fine choice._

"Now, was that so hard? I swear to God, Commander, everything is so dramatic with you. If you're not careful, Mother is going to ground you," Sam chided lightly, thrusting a thumb at the closed Med Bay door that Dr. Chakwas stormed out of earlier.

Rolling her eyes with an immature scoff, Shepard settled back down into her pillow. She was staring at the ceiling. Sam didn't know where her mind was, but she could guess. "…I heard what Victus did."

"He was a brave man," the Commander agreed solemnly.

"I don't think I could…" Sam paused. She had stopped herself, and not just because it sounded cowardly. _Could I? If everything were on the line and falling on a bomb might help defeat the Reapers? _"Huh… there I go again. I was _going_ to say that I could never do that."

"But?"

Samantha stared intently at Shepard. She just realized how sincere the next words were even before she said them. "But I was wrong. Being here, watching you… You've shown me what it means to serve in the Alliance."

To be willing to give up everything. All the time. Every minute of every day. And still fight every second with everything you have. Shepard could have returned to the Normandy and gotten patched up. But she risked bleeding out to steal an inch of space on Tuchanka from Cerberus. She could have taken it easy and not used biotics, but she is hardwired to give everything at every moment. Until she can't anymore.

Shepard smiled back with a nod. "You're a good officer, Traynor. Glad you finally realized it."

"Thanks. Not that I'm volunteering for bomb-jump duty. I'd suggest someone who has armor first. If possible," Sam retorted, though she felt heat color her cheeks at the compliment.

"I thought you knew what it meant to serve in the Alliance, Traynor. Now that you're so inspired, not to mention deadly, I think you're ready for frontline duty. We'll get you fitted for that bomb armor ASAP." Shepard was so _bloody_ sincere in her mockery that it threw Sam off guard for a moment.
Sam's voice was more coy than intended. "You have **terribly** unrealistic standards."

Oh, that exhale-laugh. Sam had almost never heard it again.

*Oh…*

*Oh shit.*

*Shit shit shit.*

Sam cleared her throat awkwardly and backed away. Repressing the train of thought that was making it's way around Shepard's full lips down her graceful neck—*stop it!*—made the comms specialist ramble instead. "I'm sorry to have kept you talking when you probably need your rest, Commander. I was just checking to make sure you were all right. You sincerely scared the shit out of me, ma'am."

"Aww, Traynor. You do care."

Shepard was teasing, but she had rendered Sam speechless. It was Samantha who blushed furiously and stubbornly refused to answer. The Commander blinked at Sam curiously, but then her blinks were longer and soon accompanied by a yawn. She mumbled a thank you before her breathing deepened.

Sam desperately wanted to brush the Commander's wispy bangs from her eyes, but she just looked so peaceful. Finally. Only in sleep is Shepard at ease. It made Sam curse what a dud the blueberry protein bars had been, because she did honestly want to do something nice for Shepard.

She suddenly realized the Med Bay was completely empty. As was the Mess Hall. She **did** have something to give Shepard, though it wasn't that nice. Creeping out of the Med Bay, Sam made her way over to the section of lockers. A thumbprint to the keypad unlocked the comms specialist's locker. She scooped up the item and scurried back to the Med Bay, hoping no one had spotted her.

Unfolding the clean, black hoodie, Sam tenderly draped it over Shepard's sleeping form like a blanket. This time, she did run a finger lightly across Shepard's forehead to sweep her bangs away. Only a sigh acknowledged the action.

She straightened up innocently when she heard the Med Bay doors open once more, but it was Dr. Mordin Solus returning to his lab space in the corner. He was humming a familiar tune. *Is that from the "HMS Pinafore"?*

Just as Sam was turning to leave, the salarian doctor suddenly exclaimed a loud "Oh!"

Samantha shushed him and gestured to the sleeping Shepard, who had stirred but not awoken. Mordin uttered a quieter, but still enthusiastic "Oh!"

She respectfully asked Dr. Solus what was going on. His thin lips smiled wildly. He nodded at the sleeping Eve, then back at his console.

"Cure ready."
I dug around a few wikis looking for any asari language translations. But despite the valiant efforts of the ME community, there just isn't much to go on. Frankly, I was impressed with all they did find. So I fabricated the translation of "spero inter lilia" in High Thessian.

There is also a plot point used in Midnight Lion's "Pressure" fanfic that I found incredibly interesting: it's pretty much taken for granted that all these different races can understand each other. An "implant" is the blanket explanation. However, unless everyone got implants in their eyes and ears (or just shoved directly in their brains), they probably can't read everyone else's stuff. Maybe there are retinal scans or something on the Citadel to translate stuff for advertising, like in Minority Report. Otherwise, I bet everyone would rather just lock everyone else out of their written language.
Shaken Faith

Squinting at the sudden piercing light, Samantha Traynor yawned deeply in her sleeper pod. The glass lid had defrosted along with her alarm, revealing a bright, if empty, Mess Hall. Sam had set her alarm earlier than usual, mostly to get a solid crack at the coffee pot before her shift started.

After all, she kind of needed to be awake today.

Since today Commander Shepard was going to cure the krogan genophage.

So far so good, Sam. Try the ol’ routine for good luck: get a pot of coffee going, set aside service uniform, shower, light breakfast, and hit the ground running.

The shower was pretty unsatisfying overall. The pressure in the showerhead was fond of randomly alternating, as was the temperature. Cursing it had also become part of Sam's morning routine. She was glad to hop out of it and quickly get dressed to attack the fresh coffee and a breakfast MRE.

Mm-mmm. A ham omelette that bears a striking resemblance to congealed vomit. Breakfast of champions. Mum would be ecstatic.

Leaning against the kitchen counter island, Sam tensed her left wrist to send the muscle signal for her Omni-tool to boot up. Mixed in with the usual status updates and comm network feed queues was a short instant message.

[Message received: "thx 4 the heap of prot bars u lft in my med bay. i keep finding em all ova. they r evrywhr. nxt time, try flowers. less trash 2 pik up. –dr c"]

Sam should have felt sheepish about leaving a mess in the Med Bay, but it was impossible for her to take Dr. Chakwas seriously when she wrote like that. But hey, if there was so much trash that means Shepard actually ate some of the protein bars. Don't I get some sort of honorary medical merit badge for helping nurse the Commander back to health? Or at least a lemon curd tart and a "thanks for trying," for God's sake. I'm a simple woman.

Glancing over at the Med Bay from her vantage point in the kitchen, Sam noted the cot once containing Commander Shepard was empty. And neatly made up as though no one had ever been there. The salarian doctor was at his post in the corner, poring over his centrifuges and scanners. Eve
was sitting upright on her own cot, but she seemed fragile. There was a noticeable tenderness to the krogan female's movements, and she occasionally shook with deep coughs.

The comms specialist sighed, poured her second cup of coffee, then headed to the elevator. Her mind was already organizing her day into manageable chunks and checking off mental boxes of tasks she'd already performed in preparation.

_one day to organize an interspecies mission is hardly enough. I'm still trying to get the hang of the turian's combat feed algorithms. They're so finicky about process. And the krogan comm array has the opposite problem: it's so bloody rudimentary than any Cerberus rookie with an Omni-tool could hack it. Bolstering their suites has taken me to depths of the extranet I haven't seen since college._

_and one day for Commander Shepard to recover from several gunshot wounds also hardly seems like enough. She was still limping around the CIC before I went to bed. Hopefully she's on the Good Drugs today._

It wasn't until Sam reached the elevator did she realize that Liara was only a step behind her.

"Oh! Liara! I didn't see you. It's nice to see you coming out of your fortress of solitude."

The doctor's rich blue eyes crinkled with welcome, and she shifted a small black box in her hands. "I am hardly locked away in solitude, Samantha. I'd prefer more quiet, to be honest. Glyph can be overly effusive and I am often conversing with information sources or Crucible assets. It is a busy time for everyone."

"No, no, the Fortress of Solitude is—nevermind. Forget it," Sam shook her head. She didn't fancy explaining an obscure human literary or comic book reference to the asari.

Instead, Sam tapped the button for the CIC and stole a sip of her coffee with a satisfied slurp. "Well, as long as you're not bored. I bet you're insufferable when faced with dreaded Leisure Time." She winked amiably at the woman in the hopes to spread her good mood. _Amazing what extra coffee and a good night's sleep will do for a body._

Liara chuckled. "I may have a slight problem with sitting still."

The lift opened and Sam took a half-step out, but stopped when she realized Liara wasn't following her. Tossing her head at the galaxy map, Samantha asked, "You coming? It's Operation: Genophage and I have a note on my Omni-tool requesting all the major players in the war room at 0800. I think
that includes asari archaeologists who hate fun."

There was a noticeable purpling of Liara's cheeks as she leaned over and tapped the glowing "1" on the panel. She gestured with the black cube. "I have an … appointment. With Shepard. To discuss a project I've been working on. I'll be sure to remind her of her own meeting, though."

"Oh" was all Sam could utter as she stepped into the CIC. She also might have mumbled something about "See you later" but the elevator doors had already (thankfully) closed.

There was a distinct hollow feeling in Sam's chest, mostly up around her throat. It was an odd mixture of anger and disappointment. She hated that feeling. It made her feel stupid, petty and small. She tried to dull it with more coffee, as well as head over to her work station to add work to the Denial Party.

Firing up her console, Sam did another check of her messages. More updates. Specialist Xian, who was on war room duty for the mission, was about to start consolidating feeds. A follow-up note indicated he had to adjust some of the comm cabling under the war room floor, so Samantha was tagged as "It" for picking up the slack. It was mindless busywork but fairly comforting, considering…

\textit{Considering what? Liara and Shepard are in her cabin having a private reunion?}

\textit{Why do you care? A few conversations with Shepard and you're dating now? Where do we start with all the things wrong with that train of thought? Fraternization, delusion, not to mention impossible…}

\ldots \textit{why did I think "fraternization" first before "delusion"?}

"All hands, full stop! Hostiles detected at the landing coordinates," Joker shouted over the ship-wide intercom. The Normandy lurched, and Samantha's feet vibrated forward a few centimeters with the abrasive halt.

Sam's comms lit up. She scanned the frequency, her jaw readied to start muttering obscenities at Yet Another Cerberus attack.

But it wasn't Cerberus. Not even close.

It was a Reaper. A \textbf{huge} Reaper. The Reaper's signal frequency brought up a match in the freshly updated Alliance codex, aptly called a "Destroyer." The codex also cited frames of reference, which for some reason tickled Sam with oddly macabre humor. Apparently Destroyers were bigger than a "Hades cannon" but smaller than a "Sovereign-class," planet-killer Reaper.

\textit{Oh. Well then. It's just the mid-sized, sport utility Reaper. For mobility and convenience. I feel much better.}

Sam forwarded her report to Joker's console, and she could dimly hear him reading it over the intercom. "Sensors show a Reaper parked at the Shroud facility. No way you're going to be able to land a shuttle there, Shepard."

"Get everyone assembled in the war room. I want eyes on the Shroud," Shepard barked right behind Sam, who jumped. \textit{Where did she come from?}

Turning around slowly, Samantha was a little apprehensive. She feared seeing a disheveled, sleepy Shepard. Or worse: a glowing, overly perky one. With an asari on her arm. There were lots of horrible, petty, stupid scenarios Sam could imagine. She was a very creative person.
But the Commander was in her normal service uniform and, other than a noticeable rolling of her injured shoulder to loosen up the muscle, looked the same as always. Her red hair was loose and clean, with wispy bangs swept across her forehead carelessly. The cut on her freckled nose was a faded dark line. The wound on her head was down to a small gauze pad with a strip of tape covering it. No additional color to her high cheekbones (other than the rivers of cracks with orange cybernetics peeking through), and the bright green eyes had their usual focus.

*Same old, blessedly same old.*

Shepard locked eyes on Sam for a brief second, but the only thing communicated was pensive concern. Then the SpecTRe strode past the galaxy map to the war room. A moment later, the elevator behind Sam opened and Dr. Solus bobbed by.

Pinging Xian for some inside intel, it was several long, agonizing minutes before her fellow Specialist responded. He had opened up a private channel from his vantage point underneath the floorboards of the war room. This would probably look like spying from an outside perspective, but Xian was too focused on urgent repairs to sit in his seat like a good boy just to take down meeting notes. So Sam volunteered to eavesdrop via his console and fill him in later.

*I certainly hope the Alliance Military Tribunal sees this situation as "cooperation" and "doing a fellow specialist a favor" rather than "espionage."

A combined attack was formulated. Turian air support would be sent in to ideally take down the huge (*but apparently not-too-huge*) Reaper guarding the Shroud. Shepard and company would escort Mordin and Eve along the way. Krogan ground support were tasked with clearing the way and drawing the Reaper away from the tower so the cure could be administered.

"Yes, distraction. Small team can reach Shroud facility, finish synthesizing cure." Mordin's higher voice pattered on in the distance.

Shepard chimed in as well with grim finality. "Then it's now or never."

Wrex growled in agreement. "**Now. The genophage ends today.**"

A message flashed across Sam's screen, forwarded from Xian's console. It was heavily encrypted. She was getting slightly tired of all the sophisticated, military-grade messages coming across her terminal. *Oh, the days of lazy civilians with open broadcast buoys.* Every inch of frequency was now bathed in code. She was just constantly peeling an onion that would end at a blackhole… with another onion at the center.

*I don't even like onions. I'm allergic.*

After finally clearing the salarian signal, Sam tapped the broadcast button to report, "Commander, incoming message marked urgent. I'll put it in the comm room for you." Being a good comms specialist, Sam kept a weather eye on the message from the salarian dalatrass. To make sure the connection integrity held.

She wished she wasn't such a good comms specialist.

"Commander Shepard. We know you've reached Tuchanka." The salarian woman's voice garbled over the comm. "And by now, I imagine Mordin Solus has proposed using the Shroud."

"Are you spying on us?" Shepard's scathing rebuke actually made Samantha wince a little. Mostly because that was exactly what *she* was doing at that moment.
"Hardly. The Shroud is the only viable course of action open to you."

*Of course all the salarians are absurdly intelligent.*

"Commander. You can't allow the diplomatic pressures of this war to cloud your judgment. Do you honestly believe curing the genophage will end in lasting peace?"

The comm was silent for only a heartbeat of time before Shepard answered simply. "No. I don't. The krogan are too violent. But I don't have a choice here."

"Then allow me to offer you one. Years ago, our operatives sabotaged the Shroud facility to ensure what you're planning couldn't be done."

**What?! …Dear God.**

"Mordin will likely detect this malfunction and repair it… But if you ensure that he doesn't, then the cure's viability will be altered just enough so that it fails. No one will notice the change."

"You mean trick the krogan?"

The very thought made all of Sam's insides sink.

"They need not be any the wiser. Let Urdnot Wrex believe you fulfilled your promise," Dalatrass Linron stated simply.

"Mordin would never stand for that."

"How you deal with him is up to you, Commander." The salarian diplomat let the threat hang in the air for a moment before continuing. "We can provide you our very best scientists to build the Crucible. And the full support of our fleets."

**Something you should be providing anyway, you lying, conniving—**

The silence was a chasm that made Samantha slump forward. *No. You can't possibly be considering…*

"…if I sabotage the cure," Shepard finished for the dalatrass solemnly.

*No.*

"Think about it, Commander. The choice is yours."

The comm cut out.

Sam was horrified at this development. A thought was trying to work its way into her mind, but she knew the consequence of doing so.

**Traynor. The odds. What are the odds?**

*Well… I don't quite have the math figured out for success rates against Reapers.*

*Probably for the best. Running around screaming "It's hopeless!" might not be terribly endearing to the war effort.*

*Indeed. As far as everything else… We need krogan. We need turians. We need salarians. Asari. Volus. Elcor. …Humans. We need bloody everybody.*
Samantha swallowed. She loved math. It was universal. Every species understood it. Even if they had different words for them, the numbers themselves were sacred and unchanging. But, this also made them cold. Unyielding. Probability took emotion and assigned it a value of 0. It had no place.

She didn't envy Shepard. The Commander had come out of the war room looking ashen. Sam wanted to say something. To tell her not to go through with it. That it wasn't worth it. But Shepard was already in the elevator after mumbling to Joker about suiting up in her quarters.

Sam waited a few moments. She wanted to go speak to Shepard in person, but her absence would most certainly be missed. Instead, she quietly opened a comm link. And paged the Captain's Cabin directly.

"Commander. May I speak with you a moment?"

"Specialist Traynor? Why are you in my ear? Something to report? …Because otherwise I'm kind of busy." Shepard's sharp tone, which usually sent Sam reeling like a scolded schoolgirl, actually bolstered the comms specialist's confidence.

"No, Commander, nothing to report. But… I overheard your …chat."

Shepard didn't respond, but then again Sam didn't ask a question.

"I hope you don't go through with her plan, ma'am."

"Is that an order, Specialist?" An even sharper tone this time, dripping with venom. Sam might have reeled a little at that one.

"No, ma'am. I trust you to make the right decision. But please. Do it for the right reason. Don't be blackmailed or bullied. Do what you think is right."

Only silence on the other end of the comm. Samantha was hesitant about saying specifics aloud where prying ears might overhear. "I can cite a lot of boring figures and probabilities for success, if you'd like. I'm rather good at it. But the truth of the matter is: we're trusting the reclamation of our homeworld to these people. Allies. Friends. Galactic quid pro quo, as it were. But… how we can trust them with our future if they can't trust us with theirs?"

"I have to go."

And the comm went dead.

Uncertain whether she honestly expected a response, Samantha sighed deeply. There was no self-satisfied glow from speaking her conscience to her commanding officer. No triumphant feeling of "I did all I could!" Probably because Sam had no idea what Shepard was going to do.

And it scared her. That maybe that woman who had a fondness for baseball and hoodies could break a promise and betray her friends for the highest bidder.

Sighing again, the comms specialist returned to her console. Specialist Xian sent her a message that his repairs were complete and asked if anything exciting happened while he was below deck. Sam did not reply.

Cortez's shuttle was quite full this time around. Shepard, Liara, Garrus, Wrex, Eve and Mordin. The
turians had also lent another shuttle to carry Wrex's honor guard to the surface.

"I've ordered the clans to assemble at the Hollows. It's our sacred meeting ground. We'll land there and take an armored convoy against the Reaper." Wrex's lip curled with malice through the flickering screen of Shepard's hardsuit camera. "This will be the defining moment of krogan history."

"Krogan history filled with defining moments," Dr. Solus retorted clinically. "Most bloody. Hope this one better."

Eve finally spoke, her grating voice raspy and weak. "Commander. You seem troubled."

Please, Shepard. Please do the right thing.

Shepard's comm link upticked slightly, indicating an inhale of breath. Please. Then the signal spiked when the Commander spoke.

"There's just a lot on the line. I want this to go well."

Oh. Shepard.

"Have faith," Eve coughed quietly as she labored under her words. "No matter the adversity we face, some moments are destined to happen. This is one of them."

Suddenly, static blasted over the comm as Cortez reported the shuttle under fire. "Hang on tight! We're heading in." Reapers were already at the krogan gathering place.

It was such a simple plan. Already gone to hell.

Wrex fled the shuttle to gather his clans, leaving Shepard, Garrus and Liara to protect Eve from Reapers. It seemed terribly unfair. But blessedly quick. It was only a smattering of Husks at the site, and their grasping claws were met with shotgun blasts and concussive rounds.

"They'll sing songs about this someday. Reaper blood has finally soaked our soil." Wrex roared as he crushed the last Husk skull.

Is he happy about this?

Shepard urged the warlord forward, demanding a quick path to the Shroud. Mordin echoed the Commander's urgency. "Female safe, Shepard. Recommend haste, however—vitals troubling."

Urdnot Wreav bitched about Mordin's presence. He was brood brother to the krogan's "illustrious leader," as he sarcastically put it. Sam already didn't like him. Wrex clarified that he and Wreav shared the same mother and nothing else. Then the dick-measuring of "what it means to be a true krogan" began.

"We flay our enemies alive and drown them in a geyser of their own blood. We don't invite them into our home," Wreav growled at Mordin as his entourage also shouldered forward.

Oh God. Please kick his ass, Shepard. For me.

Shepard stepped in front of Mordin protectively. "There's no time for this. Whatever grudge you have against salarians ends right now."

"As long as it involves a bullet in his head. Time for some payback," Wreav muttered as his hand reached for the shotgun on his hump.
And then Wrex headbutted him in the face and ordered him to stand down. Sam wished it had been Shepard, but she'll take what she can get.

"Enough!"

If Eve was weak, her scathing shout revealed no sign of it. Every brutish krogan in that dingy hideout stood at attention.

"You can stay here and let old wounds fester as krogan have always done… or you can fight the enemy you were born to destroy—and win a new future for our children. I choose to fight. Who will join me?"

Sam wanted to salute her.

"I don't want to regret curing the genophage. Do you want this or not?" Shepard growled back. It perked up Sam's ears and made her dare to hope.

Wrex rumbled agreement and demanded it from his brothers. A chorus of roars and cheers erupted from all krogan in the room.

And with that, the tomkahs for the ground teams rolled out. Sam's viewpoint was so distant, in lower orbit on the Normandy. She tried to appreciate the situation from the perspective of Shepard and the others, but all she could see were blips on a map (and not even the fancy sitrep rendering that Specialist Gentry has). Turians to the air, krogans on the ground, and Shepard's crew mixed in somewhere. She was certain it was an inspiring sight, though.

Coordinating both strike teams was a difficult task. Luckily Xian was tagging turian ships in the war room and routing comms to Sam's terminal while she reinforced the tomkah link ups. It was a strange, collaborative dance. Though probably more akin to spinning plates than dancing.

In 10 minutes, the turian force, code named "Artimec," would engage the Reaper. And the fight to cure the krogan would begin.

"Wreav isn't the only krogan who wants revenge for the genophage, Wrex. You'll have to placate them somehow," Eve coughed inside the cramped convoy on its way to the Shroud.

"I'll demand the Council return some of our old territory. We'll need room to expand—recapture the glory of the ancients." Wrex's tone was greedy.


What, did no one think about this? No one at all?

Well, technically the salarians did.

Oh shut up. But surely the krogan and turians and Council have some sort of plan for what to do with the new krogan?

If they didn't… it's because they expected it to fail. Or expected the galaxy to fail.

…I don't like either of those options.

Shepard was curious about the ancient krogan. Sam admitted she had never heard any mention of krogan ancestors either, but she also hadn't spent any meaningful time with a krogan either. …What's
Shepard's excuse? Sam sighed at herself.

The krogan female's shaman nature took over. There was something in her voice. It was… pride. "Tuchanka wasn't always a wasteland. In the old times, the krogan were a proud people. We had dreams. A future to look forward to."

"Until salarian interference," Mordin interrupted. His statement was cold and simple, but there was a slight undertone of sadness.

Eve was sharp. "No. We destroyed Tuchanka ourselves. Technology changed us. It made life too easy. So we looked for new challenges. And found them in each other. Nuclear war was inevitable."

"And now our planet is rubble. We'll need a better place to live," Wrex finished.

A familiar lesson. And warning.

Shepard sighed. "Any hint of the krogan trying to expand again could raise alarms." Always so practical, Commander.

"My children aren't going to suffocate in this cesspool. I want them to witness a new age—a krogan empire," the clan leader rumbled back.

That… is alarming. Samantha cursed inwardly. Wrex's empire-lust was just proving the salarians right. Which the Commander has probably noticed. But still... wanting a better life does not make genocide okay. It just... doesn't.

Eve echoed Sam's sentiment by wheezing out the clan leader's name with disdain. Wrex hurriedly amended his statement. "I'm not saying we won't ask first. But the Council can't expect us to stay here forever."

"There's that look in your eye, Commander. What's troubling you?" Eve asked again.

Please, Shepard. Please. Do the right thing. Sam's breath caught in her throat. She found herself leaning forward, her nose almost touching the holo screen for Shepard's comm.

Shepard was thoughtful for a moment. "Just thinking about… Earth," she evaded.

…No, Shepard. No.

Huffing with empathy, Eve nodded in understanding. "Your courage for my people will be remembered. You won't be alone in your fight."

Two chances to come clean. Two chances wasted. She's… she's going to do it. She's going to allow the krogan genophage to be sabotaged. She's willing to have a shaky alliance just to repel the Reapers, then she's going to leave the galaxy to fight out its betrayal after. The turians, krogan and salarians will know peace for a short while only to never have peace again.

You're assuming we can beat the Reapers, Traynor. Maybe an alliance based on a lie is all we have left anyway. In the end.

The convoy of tomkahs ground to a halt. All the locater beacons on Sam's radar were stationary. The comms specialist couldn't see what was so alarming, because her feeds weren't picking up anything. But that didn't stop Shepard from barking into the global comm. "Wrex! You and Mordin stay with Eve! It's looking ugly out here!"
Garrus finally spoke. "This… could be a problem."

Comm chatter from the other vehicles in the tomkah revealed the issue: the road was out. The route to the Shroud was blocked. But the air strike was still on its way. The turian half of Samantha's console suddenly lit up as the Primarch's fleet swept in to engage the Destroyer.

"An airstrike alone won't do it," Garrus deduced. "We have to get in that fight."

Shepard swore quietly over the comm, and a heartbeat later was barking. "I don't care if we have to build a new road. We are going!"

Samantha inwardly cheered the inspiration, but quickly silenced it when she noticed a blip on her feeds flitting dangerously close to the convoy. A turian fighter had been hit and was going to crash. On top of Shepard. A detail not unnoticed by Liara, who shouted the Commander's name.

The fighter pilot was desperate. Pleading. He had lost control and was going down. Then abruptly silenced. The small blue dot indicating his position winked out.

Holding her breath, Sam frantically dug through the emergency locators. She was beaten to the punch, however, when a shrill order from the Commander drowned out all other comm chatter: "Wrex! Get the female out of here! Go! Go!"

The convoy took off, using the downed fighter and their own wrecked tomkahs as a bridge. But Shepard, Liara and Garrus were left behind. Cut off. The Commander was still collected, issuing orders to the air strike to regroup and wait for them all to join the fight. But the comm signal started to fray. Liara mentioned a nearby tunnel. It was wreaking havoc on Sam's comms. She struggled to keep a hold on Shepard's team.

For the next 20 minutes, Samantha could only capture fragments of conversations.

Shepard started to mention ruins, before Eve interjected. "Commander. That's the city of the ancients. No maps exist. It's been abandoned for thousands of years."

"You're a trailblazer, Shepard!" Wrex was jovial for some reason. Amused. "Get through there and we'll find a place to meet up."

Right. It's just that easy. "Yea, we got separated from the convoy on the way to dinner. No biggie. We're just gonna take a little detour through the unmapped, collapsing ruins. See ya in 10! Laters!"

Liara and Garrus did not reassure Sam. She could only hear snippets of conversation centering around mysterious sounds, tremors and collapsing rubble. The comms would occasionally go silent, presumably because the team was picking their way through a tunnel. And hopefully not because said tunnel had collapsed and crushed said team.

It was several long minutes before Liara gushed over an apparent krogan artifact. Sam tapped into the vid connection of Shepard's hardsuit, hoping for a glimpse of what had caught the asari archaeologist's eye. But she could see only snow with brief flashes of light from a flashlight.

"Fascinating. This painting suggests krogan had an artistic side."

"'Had' being the operative word. Now they have rubble," Garrus quipped sarcastically before being alarmed about another tremor.
Shepard asked for an update from Wrex to confirm the seismic activity. He didn't.

Eve did.

"It could be something else, Commander. It is said that Kalros, the mother of all thresher maws, lives in this region."

*You have got to be *shitting* me!*

"...did I hear that right?" Liara asked timidly. "Kalros, the mother of all thresher maws?"

And Garrus again. "When the krogan name a thresher maw, you know you're in trouble. They don't think anyone's ever going to kill it. And that's from the race where you have to kill a thresher maw just to make it through puberty."

...wait, what?

Only grunts could be heard as the team picked its way over debris. Then Garrus asked the dreaded question: "What *is* that?" All Sam could make out on Shepard's poorly lit hardsuit cam was an insect-like body with bulging sacs.

"Shepard, if I didn't know better, I'd say we've seen this before." Liara was hushed.

"She's right," Garrus agreed. "This kind of looks like rachni."

"But how? The queen you released on Noveria promised to live in peace," the asari wondered.

*I have a lot of catching up to do, Sam thought dismally. Because I think I'd remember the Alliance mentioning that the rachni are back.*

"This one's different. Mutated," Shepard assessed. The readings on the Commander's Omni-tool reached Sam's screen. She forwarded the findings to one of the science officers in the CIC, who was quickly communicating with Alliance HQ about this new development.

"Wrex, those rumors you heard were true. We've got rachni here." Shepard sounded worried. But at least her signal was improving slightly.

The clan leader wasn't worried. His team had just taken a few out. They'd deal with them later after the business with the Shroud was complete. They were a nuisance in the meantime.

A few minutes later, Shepard's signal strengthened. Whatever distance that had been keeping the signal weak was gone. They had found light and an open courtyard. The ruins were beautiful and surprisingly lush.

The camera panned over elegant architecture weathered by time. Statues kept silent vigils, while vines reclaimed portions of the once-proud building. Green fronds poked up through fallen stones and a bubbling brook traced its way through the pillars and walkways.

Even Liara remarked on the greenery. "I thought plants were extinct around here."

"You're looking at hope," Eve replied through the (thankfully reconnected!) comm channel. "All that's left of it on Tuchanka. This was once a world full of beauty. Given a chance, it can be again."

A whisper of hope touched Sam's heart. She wanted to know Shepard had heard Eve, had understood what she was saying. That the sabotage wasn't just wrong, but criminal when krogan like
Eve existed. Sam wanted to save her world, what little that was left. And she wanted Shepard to want to save Eve's world. *More than anything.*

"I never knew the krogan had this in them," Garrus remarked with awe.

Liara agreed as she could be seen studying one of the crumbling statues. "Maybe Eve is right. Curing the genophage might lead to a krogan renaissance."

The turian assassin seemed optimistic. "Seeing all this does make you wonder."

Then Reaper forces busted in. A bloated rachni Reaper, now tagged as a "Ravager," spewed salvos of bullets and acid at the team. Tiny skittering Swarvers poured out of a burst sac on the beast's belly and charged for Liara, who repelled them with a Singularity. Cannibals and Husks also flanked from the sides, eager to continue their dark harvest of Tuchanka.

Their battles were peppered with rumbling tremors that sent the squad stumbling for cover. Reapers in front, Kalros lurking below. So far, the Mother of All Thresher Maws had been content to just follow along. Wrex urged them on through the comms just as dull roars echoed through the stony ruins.

Shepard agreed with his urgency. "Wrex, you're right about Kalros. She's on the move."

"Yea, we've got some ideas on that—what?" Wrex trailed off as the krogan female interrupted him. Shepard barked irritably into the comm, "What's happening?"

"Some crazy idea we can talk about later. Just worry about getting out of there right now."

Parts of the ruins were eerie. In some places, a gap in the road meant a tumble into unknown depths. What secrets those caverns held had been kept for thousands of years. And discovering them just required a flashlight and a jump. *No big deal, right?*

More Husks, Cannibals and Ravagers pressed in to block their path. The blips on Sam's radar were so close to meeting, but just a narrow neck of wall separated the Commander from Wrex's group coming up around the ruin perimeter.

"Really starting to hate this place!" Garrus suddenly exclaimed into the comm, followed by the dull bursting sound of his sniper rifle firing.

Just as the last Swarmer insect hybrid was crushed under Shepard's boot, the team finally had a visual on the greatly reduced convoy just a few meters below.

And then Kalros came sweeping by with her jagged spine, easily cutting a swath *through* the high bridge Shepard's team was on. But her current target wasn't the tiny human, asari and turian team above her, but one of Wrex's hurrying tomkahs.

Wrex shouted for Shepard to go on ahead, just as Mordin's panicky voice cut into the comm. "Thresher maw getting closer!"

"Tell me something I don't know," Wrex growled, while Mordin added unhelpfully, "Metal in truck an excellent iron supplement for maw's diet!"

*He probably didn't know that,* Sam chuckled soberly.

Just like that they were already separated again, with Shepard the one taking the straight path and
"This planet is one giant death trap," Liara mused as they jogged through several airy gazebo-like structures.

Garrus smirked back. "And the thing is, I bet Wrex is enjoying this."

The jittery hardsuit camera panned away from the vast scrubby desert to the next area. Larger than life krogan statues stood proudly on pedestals every few meters. Garrus speculated that they'd reached a memorial of some sort. With more Reapers to fight.

Soon larger obelisks peppered the landscape of the ancient krogan city. More drawings of Kalros were emblazoned on walls. There was an almost reverent treatment of the giant thresher maw by the ancients. *Maybe this was the maw's home and these krogan once took care of her and her ancestors.*

Wrex's bark roused Sam from her introspection of the krogan culture's possible beauty.

"Shepard! We've almost lost Kalros. Get down from there and we'll find you!"

High steps led down to a naked desert floor. It was so exposed, it made Sam nervous. But Wrex's truck rounded the corner and made a beeline to Shepard while his brother Wreav parked nearby to keep watch. Shepard and team jumped aboard just as tremors crept closer. The maw's high-pitched wail made Sam's teeth chatter even into her comm. *If it was that loud through a comm, how close must it have been to them?*

The truck lurched forward just as a smashing sound could be heard. The other tomkah's comm suddenly blanked out. *He's... he's gone. Wrex's brother was...*

"There's no way he survived that. And he was a pain in the ass anyway," Wrex rumbled with finality. He did pause a moment in respect. "...Let's finish this. There's a Reaper waiting for us."

*It certainly was.* The Destroyer was parked right in front of the Shroud's entrance. There was no sneaking around it. The turian fleet had already retreated, their premature airstrike a failure.

"We're curing the genophage no matter what it takes. Everything my people will ever be depends on it," Wrex crowed. *Does nothing scare him?*


The female krogan revealed her genius plan: use Kalros to take down the Reaper. Shepard was skeptical, but Mordin was optimistic. "Already discussed strategy. Just need to distract Reaper, draw it from tower while cure synthesized, release."

"If Tuchanka has a temper, Kalros is it. Nobody's ever faced her and survived." There was a touch of awe in Wrex's voice.

Shepard seemed optimistic. "We flew through the Omega 4 relay and survived. We can do this."

Two maw hammers, "the largest in existence," serve to summon the maw to attack the Reaper. Mordin pointed out a small prefab that sat under an awning at the ruin. A salarian work station, no doubt. He suggested he and Eve go there to finish synthesizing the cure for distribution through the Shroud.

"Let's make it happen." The Commander nodded, satisfied with the game plan. The trio started to
advance down the imposing walkway where the Destroyer sat in wait. But Wrex shouted for them to stop.

"Wait! I wasn't sure we were still friends, Shepard. But you proved me wrong. You've been a champion to the krogan people. And an ally of clan Urdnot. …Thank you." The krogan leader extended a hand to the human woman. A peace offering.

Sam hoped that cut Shepard deep. Really deep. He trusted her. How do you reward that trust with betrayal?

…please, Shepard.

More Reapers suddenly showed up. They were all about to be pinched from two sides; a giant Reaper in front while an ambush of Ravagers and Husks pressed in from behind.

It made Sam feel helpless. There was nothing she could do. The Reapers didn't operate on a communication network that could be jammed or tracked. They operated under indoctrination, a hive mind. There was no warning a comms specialist could give. She could only observe and pray.

Wrex shooed the team to the hammers and reached for his shotgun. He was going to singlehandedly cover their six. He cackled wildly before shouldering the weapon, then charged the skittering attackers.

"I AM URDNOT WREX AND THIS IS MY PLANET!"

The Reaper roared just as Shepard leapt to the cracked bridge. A glow of red flashed across the jostling camera, and Sam shut her eyes. She was afraid she had just witnessed Shepard getting vaporized, but instead she heard grunts. The Commander's part of the bridge had collapsed.

"Did we just get shot by a Reaper?" Garrus gasped as he stumbled behind a pillar.

"Consider that practice," Shepard retorted grimly before pushing forward. Sam laughed, once, ruefully.

The Destroyer was probing the rubble for weaknesses, forcing the squad into cover. They had to dive and roll their way forward. But their last leg of cover was too far apart. Just as Shepard made a roll for a collapsed pillar slightly out of reach, the Destroyer's red eye focused on the Commander. A loud whirl could be heard as its cannon charged up. Right before it wiped the team out, the Reaper was hit by gunfire.

The turians had returned with their remaining air forces, keeping their promise. It cheered Samantha up immensely, and she enthusiastically worked with Xian to keep the attacking fleet synced up. She and EDI were frantically seeding algorithms to the fighter ships to give them every advantage on predicting an unpredictable enemy.

Brutes blocked the final sprint to the maw hammers, but Shepard got up close and personal with her shotgun. There was an occasional popping noise over the comm when a Brute slammed its way home and broke through the Commander's barrier. Only labored breathing and grunts could be heard over the comm, as well as intermittent groans of pain. Shepard was sprinting, rolling and ducking so much that Sam couldn't even watch her camera anymore. It made her nauseated.

The Commander hit the first hammer and then demanded, "How's it coming, Mordin?"

"Shepard, some luck! Original strain in storage. Almost have cure! Eve's vital signs dropping! Trying to compensate!"
Every now and then a giant claw leg from the Destroyer would slam down to try and crush the Commander. The view was caked with dust and falling debris, on top of the half dozen Brutes bearing down on the team. Wrex again barked for the team to activate the hammers.

Shepard was not amused: "There's a Reaper in my way, Wrex!"

With a grating thud, the second hammer was activated. Shepard then demanded Liara and Garrus get back to the truck while she took care of the cure. The turians had the best view of the next show. Their fighters were awed by the approaching thresher maw, and Sam could even hear cheers from the war room when Kalros plowed into the side of the giant Reaper ship. But Shepard had a front row seat to the whole battle of giants. It was a dance that blotted out the sky. The turian fighters were hard pressed to dodge the two massive bodies currently tumbling around the Tuchanka landscape.

But was it ever satisfying to see the thresher maw dip below the surface, then pop out of the ground next to the Reaper. The creature's jaws crushed the front of the Destroyer, bringing it down, then the massive thresher body coiled around the ship and dragged it below the surface.

It was the first time Samantha had ever witnessed a Reaper being taken down. It was old hat for the Commander, who had helped bring down Sovereign at the Citadel. But this...Sam needed this. To believe it was possible. That their enemy wasn't immortal and all-powerful. It was a brief, welcome relief after so much anxiety and deeply buried despair.

The relief quickly evaporated when Sam received a "For Your Eyes Only" communication via EDI. She was being ordered to take Mordin and Shepard's comm off Alliance channels and patch them into a private, secure channel. And, if asked about it, the comms specialist was supposed to lie and say it was interference from the Shroud. Shepard's hard suit camera was also shut down. Nothing to record her actions and nothing to make her responsible for her actions.

It stunned Sam. She's... she's going to go through with it. Sabotage. Murder. Continued genocide. And Sam was an accessory. It was her job to assist Commander Shepard, to follow orders, to be the best for the Alliance.

Maybe... maybe she'll tell Mordin. About the sabotage. Yes. That's it. If it's on live comms, the krogan and turians will know, and the salarians will be dead in the water. Please let that be it.

Please, Shepard. Please.

Within moments of doing as told, Sam received pings to her console by the turian and krogan intelligence teams in the war room. They wanted updates. There was a tiny surge of pleasure to be gained from censoring them with an Alliance company line the way she had been during Lieutenant Victus's tenure. Focusing on the windowed comm channel on her console, Samantha tracked the two blue beacons of "Cmdr A Shepard" and "Dr M Solus" meeting inside the tall tower.

The Shroud. It was such an odd, ominous name.

Shepard managed to make it to the Shroud laboratory at the base of the spire. Atmospheric Reaper attacks had done a number on the Shroud's integrity. Small fires peppered the facility as alerts and warning klaxons blared loudly in the background of a tense conversation.

"Mordin! Is the cure ready yet?" Shepard wheezed, out of breath.

Emphatic tapping could be heard around Mordin's pattering voice as he presumably worked on the dispersal parameters. "Yes! Loaded for dispersal in two minutes. But Eve... dead."
"What happened?"

"Stress sampling too intense. Too much trauma. Wanted to stop. She refused. Her decision."

"A lot of people died today, Mordin. There's nothing we can do."

"Female was stabilizing force for krogan. Would have helped Wrex rally more clans in support."

A Shroud facility analysis by Mordin showed a temperature malfunction that needed to be reset manually.

Oh God. That's... that's what the dalatrass was talking about. From the previous STG team. And Mordin knows. But he doesn't know know.

What is Shepard going to do?

Only muffled rumbles could be heard over the channel, before Shepard spoke up. "It's not a malfunction, Mordin. It's sabotage. Your people did it years ago."

Mordin didn't seem surprised. In fact, he chewed it over in his usual, quick-talking way. "Of course. Shroud necessary for distribution. STG would have backup plan, contingency to stop cure. ...and you knew."

His last sentence was terse. Laced with disappointment.

Sam was the opposite. She was cautiously pleased. The Commander was being honest. Maybe...

"The dalatrass offered me a deal: her full support for the Crucible Project."

"Difficult moral circumstance. Salarian assistance reluctant, minimal. Need their loyalty for intel, assistance with Crucible. Understandable. But not acceptable. Will not sacrifice krogan for political gain."

Shepard's tone, so clinical before, raised nearly to a shout. It grew in volume with each scathing word. "Every time we've talked about this before, you've defended the genophage. That the krogan were dangerous and needed to be in check. Did you hear what Wrex said in the truck? He's already planning his expansion and we haven't even defeated the Reapers. The galaxy is weak enough. I can't save it only to lose it to Wrex's ambitions. Is that what you want?"

There were a few seconds of silence, before Shepard continued. She was borderline hysterical now.

Trying to convince Mordin?

Trying to convince herself.

"Hell, you destroyed Maelon's data! We agreed then that it was too dangerous. You said yourself: the krogan weren't dying off, they were being kept in check. Genocide is the ugly political word for balance, stability. The krogan squandered their future once, and this was to prevent them from destroying everyone else's. I listened to you. I believed you. How can you change your mind now?"

"I made a mistake!!"

Mordin's shout echoed through the chamber. It stung Sam. Almost as much as Shepard's desperate rationalizing did.

The salarian whispered this time. "I made a mistake. Focused on big picture. Big picture made of

"Mordin! Walk away!" Shepard shouted, and there was a noticeable hum-click noise immediately after.

*Was that—I know that sound. That's the sound of a pistol being drawn. She—she pulled a gun on Mordin. She would kill him.*

"Can't do that Shepard."

"I don't have a choice here. Walk away or I will fire."

_No, Shepard. No._

"Not your decision. Not your work. Not your cure. Had to be me. Someone else might have gotten it wrong." Mordin was scolding Shepard like a parent would an unruly child. **He** was lecturing **her** about responsibility.

"No time to argue. Cure dispersal imminent. Must counteract sabotage. Stop me if you must."

There was the sound of a gunshot. Sam flinched. She couldn't help it. Luckily, no one was around to see it. _No one knew what Shepard has just done_—

"Had to be me."

*That—that was Mordin. Which means…*

A frustrated sigh could be heard on Shepard's comm link. There was also a clattering noise of metal on stone. _It sounds like… she threw the pistol away. Maybe she couldn't bring herself to kill her friend._

Moments later, a message reached Sam's Omni-tool. It was permission to reconnect Shepard and Mordin's comms to the main network. Mordin's locater traveled up the spire, and a few moments later Shroud warning alerts flooded the screen. EDI patched the repeated automated message through the entire Normandy:

["Dispersal commencing."]

A cheer erupted. It worked.

The krogan… they were cured. One thousand years of suppression: gone.

Suddenly, the tracking beacon for Mordin Solus disappeared. Comm chatter spiked, reporting an explosion at the top of the Shroud. Krogan comms were anxious, fearing it would impact the cure dispersal. But the circling fighter ships indicated no reduction in the vapor-like compound raining from the heavens.

No, just a salarian had died.

It saddened Samantha Traynor. She knew others would mourn him. …She _hoped_ others would mourn him, anyway.

*Would Shepard mourn him?*
Thinking of Shepard swirled that melancholy into resentment. *Shepard. That… that bitch. She almost made me an accessory to killing Mordin. How could she do this? Why would she do this?*

*Do I want to know?*

…I need to know. I need to believe… What?

*That she's not a betrayer?*

"Cortez here. Kodiak inbound with Commander Shepard, Dr. T'Soni and …Garrus…" Steve reported over Sam's local channel. Garrus snickered at his lack of title, though Liara assured him he, too, could be Dr. Vakarian with just a few short years in a good doctoral program. He declined. "Just Garrus" was much more mysterious. "And sexy."

Laughing lightly at the break in tension, Samantha stretched her arms behind her head. A satisfying pop could be heard in her lower back. A few abrupt turns of her neck yielded more rewarding pops. She shut down her work station and headed to the war room. The two Privates in the security area speculated on what this could mean for the war, though Bethany was relieved that the turians and krogan would finally be off the Normandy.

When Sam entered, Specialist Xian leapt up from his console in eagerness to discuss the mission with his fellow commms nerd. While the Primarch's men speculated on how best to get krogan troops to Palaven and congratulate the fleet on its performance against the Destroyer, Sam and Chen gushed about particularly difficult QEC riggings and field update parameters.

He waved her over to the vid comm room to show her the updates he'd made to the system. Appraising the cabling, Sam gave Xian a thumbs up. They should receive more stable holo patches now.

Satisfied, Sam turned to leave. She stopped in her tracks when she found the war room nearly empty. *Nearly.*

Commander Shepard stood at the center console, still in her hardsuit, staring at the war asset log and Crucible updates. The opposite door swished shut as the Primarch left to rejoin his fleet.

Sam had no idea what to say. Seeing Shepard stuck a coarse mixture of emotions in Sam's throat. Relief, for one. Pride. Gratitude. But there was resentment. Anger. Confusion. Sam wanted to
confront her. Demand an apology. Demand an answer, a reason.

But there was something about her. The SpecTRe looked... fragile. Small. It brought whispers of hope back. That maybe Shepard did the right thing and wanted to do the right thing in the end.

She did help cure the genophage.

"Nicely done, Commander. You must be exhausted," the comms specialist finally said, though she couldn't help wringing her hands nervously.

Shepard's head turned at the sound, but she didn't meet Sam's eyes. She sighed at the holo schematic of the Crucible. "I'll sleep when I'm dead. Or when this war is over. Whichever comes first."

The truth of Shepard's words quelled the simmering anger in Samantha's head. Instead, sympathy rose to the top. I want to know. I need to know.

But... I can wait.

Taking a few cautious steps down, Sam stopped just short of Shepard. "With respect, you've been going nonstop since Earth."

The Commander did glance over to Sam this time, her eyes crinkling softly. Warmly. "That sounds vaguely like an order, Traynor." Her expression changed. It was impossibly sad and burdened.

We'll talk about... this... later. For now...

Sam softened and her hand went to her chin. "A polite suggestion from someone with a vested interest in your success... Commander." For some reason, her eyes couldn't help trailing lingeringly down Shepard's backside. It was rather snug in that armor.

What the hell is wrong with you, Traynor?

Standing up abruptly, Shepard sighed and winced. She brought a hand to her side and held it there tenderly. "I supposed forty winks couldn't hurt." One last look at the war asset log. "But first sign of any trouble, I want to know. That's an order."

"Understood." Sam's hands clasped to her back respectfully as Shepard brushed past her. Stupid eyes made another appraisal of the Commander's firm—

"Traynor."

"Ma'am?"

Shepard stopped at the door and paused. Turning slightly, she tossed this over her shoulder at the waiting comms specialist:

"I want to know how rachni got on Tuchanka."
To: ['All teh kr0gan']
19:38:20 GST, 08/04/2186

Subject: All teh seXX

For a good time, visit the Shroud.
All Ladies Night, All the Time (females drink free!)
Hop the nearest cruiser and sign up with Urdnot Wrex before all the good ladies and drinks are taken.

Snickering at her own immaturity, Samantha's index finger tapped away at the delete key until the "New Message" window on her Omni-tool was pristine and blank once more.

She was supposed to be helping craft a broadcast correspondence to all the krogan in the galaxy to return home to Tuchanka. The genophage cure wasn't space magic; only the krogan actually on Tuchanka could be desterilized. Which leaves a whole lot of mercenaries out there still bitching about needing a good shagging.

Sam began composing something a little more official (and appropriate) along the lines Urdnot Wrex actually had in mind. Not normally the job of a comms specialist, but her reputation apparently preceded her. She wondered if Shepard had found out that the endless backlog of elcor spam in her inbox was Sam's doing, and this was her punishment.

To: ['Wrex, Urdnot'; 'bulk-mailing-list']
CC: ['Victus, A'; 'Shepard, A'; 'Hackett, S'; 'Anderson, D']
19:42:39 GST, 08/04/2186

Subject: Genophage Cured

All able-bodied krogan who want to be cured, come to Tuchanka and ally under Warlord Urdnot Wrex's banner to fight the Reapers. Contact turian government outposts for shuttle information. Terms of breeding protocols to be established once
"Hey. Hey! It's your turn."

Glancing up from her Omni-tool, Sam's eyes flicked across the Mess Hall table. Diana Allers was drumming her fingers expectantly on the surface. The reporter had a haughty eyebrow raised as she waved a hand over the chess game currently in progress.

It was a simple holo setup. Sam had found the small projector disc pre-loaded with a chess interface on the Citadel for really cheap before they'd departed the last time. It was displaying a bright white and black chess grid along with simulated pieces staggered out across the tiles. The comms specialist gave the board the briefest of glances before raising her wrist again to continue the email.

"No, it's not."

"Like hell it isn't. I moved that horse piece... knight? ...right there. It's your turn, Traynor."

"Try again."

"What?"

"I said pick another move."

"What's wrong with this move?"

"That move means I win in three moves."

"Bullshit. You don't know what I have planned."

Samantha sighed and flicked an index finger over the orange interface on her wrist to close it. Giving the chess board her full attention finally, she started emphatically pointing at places on the grid.

"Your knight leaves your bishop easy prey. If you don't attempt to defend the gap your knight left, I'll have check when my rook takes your bishop. You can either move your king, which means I'll have checkmate from my knight here, or you can take my rook with your pawn, wherein my queen will also have checkmate. So I say again: pick another move, Allers."

Diana could only scowl. She had promised to be a sound combatant. She had talked a big game, though her questions about piece names ("horse piece"?!) did not inspire much confidence. It didn't take long at all to discover Diana Allers was a big, fat liar.

Or at least a fairly attractive, shapely liar.

But still a liar.

The reporter huffily sighed. "This game is stupid. And you're no fun to play with, Miss Smarty Pants. Back at the ANN, we played Drunk-slash-Strip Chess. Now that was the game of kings."

Sam groaned and shook her head. "Oh, Allers. What a pun. I thought you were a woman of dignity."

"Clearly not," Allers scoffed as she rolled her eyes, "because I'm still playing this after the fourth time you scolded me for a wrong move. What fun is this stupid game if you already know all the answers?"

"Clearly you don't know many nerds. Because knowing all the answers is the fun."
"Hmph. I suppose being a nerd isn't far off from being a reporter," Diana grudgingly admitted. "But I prefer the thrill of the hunt and digging up secrets over this memorization shit. Like now: being on the Normandy when a freaking thousand-year *genophage* gets cured. Beats the hell out of reporting on the Milgrom City Council."

"You're oversimplifying my obvious strategic superiority. Chess is not about *memorization*." Sam rolled the word around disdainfully. Dismissing the also-blasphemous notion that chess was "shit," she thought a moment. "I don't think I've heard of Milgrom. What planet is that on?"

"Bekenstein," Diana said with pride. "It's right next door to the Citadel. I'm a colony kid."

"Me too," Samantha said without thinking. She didn't really have a good reason why she still avoided talking about Horizon, and she had been on this boat with Allers for over a month now… Sam took a deep breath. "I'm from Discovery, on Horizon."

Diana tilted her head and brought her hand to her chin. She made an intrigued "hmm!" noise in the back of her throat and her eyes twinkled. "You've been holding out on me! A survivor of the famed Collector attack, and BFFs with LC Williams and Commander Shepard, no doubt? There's a juicy interview in your future, Traynor, and not about your chess skills."

Sam's eyes rolled. *Right. That was why I don't tell people: the embarrassment. And in Allers' case: the public embarrassment.* She resumed evasion. "I wasn't stationed on Horizon, nosey. I did R&D for the Alliance at Arcturus Station." Leaving those statements purposefully vague, Sam swallowed deeply to suppress the heavy emotion associated with both places.

"Oh." Allers leaned back in disappointment. She fired up her own Omni-tool anyway. "Well, don't think you can escape my camera forever, Traynor, even if you are shy as a pyjak. Especially with that pretty face of yours."

Sam's eyes wandered around the emptying Mess Hall while Diana chattered on in the background. Dinner had ended over an hour ago so the last few crewmembers were either heading to sleeper pods for rack time or off to their night shifts. Joker and Garrus, the last to leave, were laughing amiably as they rounded the corner to the Port Observation Deck to grab a quick (though more likely a long) drink.

It had been two days since the genophage mission. Immediately after, the Commander had retired to her cabin. Sam had been watching the feeds with a heightened sense of interest. A trickle of trepidation ran up her spine shortly after her conversation with Shepard in the war room.

Sam realized she honestly had no idea if the genophage was cured. She hadn't seen it. She'd heard a shot fired, but she had no idea if it had hit the salarian doctor.

Maybe it was as Samantha hoped: Shepard had missed (hopefully deliberately) and Mordin had made it up the elevator to correct the temperature problem before the cure was released. Then he had perished in an unfortunate explosion.

But her intelligent other half had nagged her. Odds were calculated. Another scenario was possible: Shepard had wounded Mordin, he had made it to the elevator, but the salarian was too far gone to reach the console in time to stop the dispersal. The explosion that followed only served to cover up the evidence.

It was a possibility that made Sam sick to her stomach. The doubt gnawed at her. But it wasn't something she could talk about. No one else knew. She wasn't even supposed to know. It was Commander Shepard's and Dalatrass Linron's dirty little secret. And then Sam had done something
so stupid as to tell Shepard she knew. And worse, begged Shepard to do the right thing.

Conspiratorial worries set in quickly. *Am I going to be killed off? Some "accident" where I'm stepping out of the Docking Bay on the Citadel and I'm gunned down by some lunatic?*

*What if—what if Shepard ... No. She wouldn't hurt me. ...Would she? To protect something like that?*

Samantha had scolded herself for thinking such a thing... but it wouldn't quite go away. Because something like the genophage cure being sabotaged *would* be a pretty important secret to keep. Worth dying for, certainly.

What Sam did have at her disposal, while not as useful as weapons and combat knowledge, was still a vital thing: information. She had foregone the shift change after the mission ended to stare at the logs of network feeds. Most of the salarian communications were heavily encrypted. Hacking them would be a colossal waste of time. But monitoring them might not be. Increases in traffic, keyword tracking, and locations of heaviest comms could paint part of a picture.

Hopefully that picture wasn't a giant target on Samantha Traynor's back.

There were certainly plenty of mentions of the krogan genophage being bandied about by the salarians. And everyone else. It was a pretty big deal. But there was no movement from the salarian fleet to indicate their involvement. Neither joining up with the turians nor retreating to salarian space had occurred.

It was an odd thing to hope the salarians didn't join the war effort. Because their allying with the rest of the galaxy meant they had gotten their selfish, stupid way with the genophage. Every salarian ship that moved closer to the Krogan Demilitarized Zone sent waves of panic through Sam until she realized they were usually just jumping through the relay to somewhere else.

The fastest way to get to the bottom of this would be, of course, to talk to *Commander bloody* Shepard herself. It was that thought that usually calmed the conspiracy theories in her mind. The way Shepard had looked at her in the war room. The burden, the weight. There had been no accusations in those green eyes. Or regret.

Those eyes were what allowed Sam to finally go to sleep that night. She decided that Shepard was studying the asset log because the Commander knew she had to make up for the loss of salarian help. It was a numbers game, and we were on the wrong side. And Shepard knew it. *That was why she had almost...*

It hadn't been the greatest sleep. Being in a cramped crew bunk bed certainly didn't help, but considering Sam's day shift was starting only five hours after she had gone to bed, she took what she could get.

She dreamed of emerald green eyes and red lips and tumbling sheets. It was a dream she was starting to remember more and more these days, when before it was just a whisper at the back of her mind. And immediately forgotten upon waking.

The following morning had been a busy one. Several of the crew, mostly the combat team members, had been ferried down to Tuchanka for funerals for Eve and Mordin. Shepard had been spied only briefly in the elevator, going down, in her dress blues. A classically attired Liara had stepped in beside the SpecTRe from the Crew Deck and kindly straightened the human woman's slightly offbalance lapel.
Sam felt some *schadenfreude* when Liara had cautiously placed a comforting hand on Shepard's wrist... and just before the lift doors had closed, the Commander shook it off.

Sam really needed to have a good long chat with herself at her disorganized feelings about Shepard. And Liara. And a lot of things. But then the elevator had returned to take the comms specialist up to the CIC, and she was able to resume her blissful denial for a few hours more.

*You can't escape this forever, Traynor.*

*I can try.*

["Until tomorrow, this is Diana Allers. Good night and stay strong."]

Blinking a few times, Sam realized Diana was waiting expectantly for something. *Oh. Oh shit. I think I was supposed to be listening to her Battlespace edit.*

"Your silence wounds me, Traynor," the reporter accused.

Sam flashed an overly cheesy grin. "I'm sorry, some of that cut out. Care to replay it for a dear, beloved friend? Who will quickly end your suffering at chess?"

Allers muttered "Don't you threaten me with a good time," before focusing back on her wrist. "I can't decide what this piece is missing. I managed to get a sound bite from the Primarch about the return to Palaven with krogan troops. Urdnot Wrex gave me a bunch of gloating quotes about his pending empire. Not. Reassuring. What I could *really* use is…"

Instead of listening to Diana's report for a second time, a new distraction entered the Crew Deck. Sam's chair was facing aft so she had a wide angle vantage of both hallways leading to the elevator. She noticed a figure limp into the Med Bay and take a seat at the cot closest to the door.

The figure was Commander Annelise Shepard.

*She looks positively dreadful.* Deep, dark rings under her puffy green eyes. The unkempt red hair had an oily sheen. A white Alliance-issue t-shirt had several dark patches that looked like soaked-through bloodstains. Some looked old and faded, while the shoulder and abdomen stains were newer. She was curiously barefoot under striped workout pants.

Dr. Chakwas appeared from the left and appraised the Commander's miserable appearance. With the
Med Bay door shut, Sam couldn't hear any words. She could only guess the diagnosis based on Shepard's pantomimes.

Her left shoulder rolled stiffly, but Shepard waved her right hand with distressed motions. Her fingers flexed a few times, then she closed into a fist with only the index finger extended. She made a trigger motion a few times, then returned to a full hand-flex. Karin leaned over to assess the abdominal wound with probing fingers, then her Omni-tool popped open. The Med Bay privacy glass frosted a moment later to give doctor and patient privacy.

"Hey. Hey! I'm still talking to you. And I made a different move. Maybe you'll pay attention to that since my career clearly bores you."

Sam's head jerked back to meet narrowed hazel eyes. Diana looked completely irritated, down to her arms crossed under her breasts. The reporter puffed at a stray hair that had wandered too close to her mouth.

The comms specialist chuckled sheepishly before getting impossibly serious. She gestured to her wrist. "If you write this email for me to the krogan galactic community, I won't tell everyone how bad you suck at chess. Especially after all the bragging you did beforehand, which I'm positive EDI has recorded and can mass email at a moment's notice."

The Normandy's AI hummed from the ceiling that she would be pleased to assist, which evoked a wicked grin from Sam.

Diana scoffed dramatically and drummed her fingertips on her bicep. "Hm. Tempting. Though mostly just to prove that I'm better than you at something. …what else?"

Glancing over at the Med Bay, an even more wicked thought crossed Sam's mind. "An interview with Shepard."

"Bullshit."

"I'm serious."

"When? After the war?"

"Right now."

"Bullshit."

"Only one way to find out, Allers. I thought you liked the hunt, the mystery. Isn't knowing all the answers for boring nerds?"

Diana raised that haughty eyebrow again and squinted at Sam. Studying her. "If you lie to me, Traynor, my wrath will be swift and, more importantly, public. You'll be getting hate mail from volus grandmothers without extranet access. I'm that good. Which you would know if you listened to my damn program."

"Deal. I'll subscribe to your damn show right this second," Samantha laughed.

The two women fired up their Omni-tools so that they could exchange information. After receiving a few choice notes forwarded from Wrex, Diana was soon tapping away at her Omni-tool and murmuring to herself, sounding out what she wanted to say. She already had a first draft forwarded to Sam's Omni-tool by the time Sam made her next chess move.
Her final chess move.
"Checkmate, Allers."
"Bullshit."

'Fraid so. Come with me." The comms specialist pushed back from her chair and stood up, waving for Diana to follow. The reporter wrinkled her nose in skepticism, but followed obediently. She was then confused when Sam stopped in front of the Med Bay and nonchalantly bent over.

"What are you doing?"
"Um, lacing up my boots?"
"Your boots don't have laces. If this is a ploy to get me to check out your ass, mission accomplished," Allers joked and made a big show of leaning over and leering emphatic approval at Sam's butt.

"At least you're observant… Just wait, you git. And pretend like we're talking about something."
"Like what? Non-existent bootlaces? The existential crisis of non-existent bootlaces?"
"Just whatever, dammit. For a reporter, you're awfully—"

Sam didn't get to finish her sentence, because at that moment, the Med Bay doors hissed loudly to allow Commander Shepard through.

"Commander! Commander Shepard! Got a minute?" Diana waved a hand. She shot Sam an approving glance before firing up her Omni-tool. Her camera drone, which had been sitting inert in a chair at the Mess Hall table, whirred to life and hovered over.

Shepard still looked pale. She backed away from the loud reporter for a moment and tried to sidestep them both. "Not now, Allers. I have some important business—"

Samantha chimed in helpfully. "Did you mean the rachni mission, Commander?"

Stopping to shoot Sam a relieved look, Shepard nodded. "Yes. Yes. The rachni mission. Very important. Urgent, even."

Not swayed in the slightest, Allers was still fidgeting with her Omni-tool and held up a waiting hand.

"Oh, good. I'm glad we agree." Sam's smile was saccharine-sweet and toothy. She paused dramatically, before switching to sheepish mode. "I'm so sorry I haven't had time to research that, ma'am. I promise I will hit the feeds before I go to sleep so that you have some leads. I will work all night if I have to, so that you have the information you need, ma'am.

"…in the meantime, I do believe the Normandy mission log is empty. So you have plenty of free time to talk to Miss Allers here, ma'am. Again, I'm so sorry for the delay," the comms specialist finished solemnly.

She relished the triumphant expression from Allers and the dismay from Shepard.

Turning on her heel, Sam steered down the hall toward the elevator while leaving Allers and Shepard in the mess to chat. She stopped right at the corner and turned back to survey her handiwork.
Damn, Traynor. That was downright diabolical.

I try.

The Commander looked exasperated, but knew she was beaten. She tried to run her fingers through her messy hair, but couldn’t quite preen away her exhaustion. She shot Sam a terse glare, but immediately softened to a lighthearted twinkle. When Allers leaned to adjust her camera, Shepard mouthed at Sam:

I’ll get you for this, Traynor.

Sam did not reciprocate the joke. Instead, she allowed herself a briefly smug smile before giving Shepard just the briefest flash of… pain.

Samantha was a woman, after all. A master of communicating everything, or nothing at all, with a glance. Shepard needed to know that Sam felt betrayed. Caught in the middle and pushed to the edges of what her conscience would, could, allow during the genophage mission. It was this and more that Samantha allowed Shepard to see. The hurt, the betrayal, the damage.

Mostly, the disappointment.

Shepard understood. Her green eyes flashed wide for a moment, then a crease of concern between her brows, and finally a frown of realization. She started to call after Sam but the reporter in her way pressed closer, Omni-tool at the ready.

Allers’ stern question floated down the hall. "Commander Shepard, you’ve just implemented a cure for the genophage. Millions of krogan will start fighting the Reapers. What do you say to people who think humanity is starting another Rachni War and Krogan Rebellion?"

Wow. That is a doozy of an opener, Allers. Try not to get punched.

Sam didn’t wait to see what happened. Instead, she headed for the elevator.

It hadn’t been a lie, she did intend to review the feeds for more information on rachni. Up in the CIC, an hour of feed consolidation turned into an entire night of sifting through reports of rachni sightings. Invading worlds were starting to report this Ravager-class Reaper along with the "usual" Husks, Cannibals and Marauders.

The Ravagers’ newness was unique. The comms specialist had recent access to the turian database and used it to comb through combat and civilian reports. With EDI’s assistance, the galaxy map was converted from a mission log to a tracking GUI.

EDI also helped fill in a few curious blanks. First and foremost being: weren’t the rachni sort of… extinct?

Three years ago, the Commander had discovered a rachni queen on Noveria. It—she—was being used by Saren (and later, Cerberus joined that party to more disastrous results with clones) to create mindless shock troops. The ultimate goal being to hopefully aid the rogue SpecTRe’s plans to summon the Reapers. Despite the Rachni Wars, which necessitated the krogan genophage later, this younger Shepard had freed the rachni queen and allowed her a life of obscure peace.

Not exactly a headline on Commander Shepard's dossier. Probably in that middle two-thirds of Shepard's file that is just one big [REDACTED] note. Samantha would know: she’d read it more than once since her nosy escapade with the Commander’s Profile in Courage.
The comms specialist started simple: tag all known rachni relays and former worlds and cross-check intel with sightings and mentions. *God knows how hopeless this would be without EDI.* Samantha's consolidation algorithms were jamming through databases practically at FTL. Dots of activity that appeared on the galaxy map were then funneled through another set of parameters that timestamped and categorized the intel further.

It wasn't until Private Sarah Campbell clapped Sam on the back did she realize she'd dozed off while standing up at her CIC console. Yawning deeply, Sam checked the holo clock.*Bloody hell. 0731 GST. I've been at this all night.* She tried to rub some of the weariness out of her eyes.

She had, so far, found a few likely locations of where the rachni queen had gone to ground after being spared. But two years was still a long time, and it was proving difficult to discern the false sightings (*klixen are not rachni, people!* and hoax reports from the real ones. Sam needed fresh eyes. Clearing her throat, Sam waved Specialist Chen Xian over to the galaxy map work station for a consult.

Xian, annoyingly perky and rested, was bouncing around the CIC to gossip with the influx of specialists about what had happened on Tuchanka. He reveled in being close to such important work. He was the morning shift, and quite surprised to see her at work already.

"Damn, Traynor. You look like shit. Been here all night? I didn't see any urgent requests in the comm log. You workin' off the books or what?"

"Just a favor for Commander Shepard," Sam couldn't help but yawn. She gestured to the repurposed galaxy map. A slight pattern had emerged, pointing to a few promising locations in the Attican Traverse. "She wants to know where the rachni Reaper came from. Maybe if we cut off their source, we'd have one less Reaper on the ground to worry about."

He surveyed her progress with a hand tucked under his chin. "You've done an amazing job collating data. Probably a little too thorough. You really just need the oldest reports." Flicking his wrist over the galaxy map controller, he wiped away most of Sam's tracking pins. Xian tapped on the keyboard for a moment. "See, here. The turians and salarians reported a distress signal through Listening Post X-19 in the Ninmah Cluster nine months ago. An uncharted world between systems with pirate activity and one asari merchant survivor. Pirate activity then disappeared shortly after. I bet you that's where your rachni are hiding out."

"You make that look so easy," Sam muttered bitterly. She wasn't pleased that she hadn't been the one to figure it out.

Xian laughed and punched her on the shoulder. "I have to get one every now and then. Keeps you humble, otherwise you'd be smug all the time rather than just most of the time. You were probably just too sleep-addled to read it. Maybe ask for some help next time, Traynor."

She grumbled about learning the after-school lesson of the week. "I don't fancy owing you one. Because I know you'll collect. And it'll hurt."

He requested permission to log in to the galaxy console. He actually had work to do. She obliged and bent over to stretch her aching calves.

"Dammit. You had this all along, Traynor."

She snapped upright. "What? What do you mean?"

Switching back over to the galaxy map, Xian pointed at the Ninmah Cluster. A glowing Nav Point,
several weeks old, was already posted. *Oh bloody hell. Wrex asked for Shepard's help ages ago to find a missing scout team.*

*A billion to one odds they found the fountain of youth and became immortal superheroes. A million to one odds they found the secret to destroying the Reapers and we can all go home. A thousand to one they just bailed and have been partying at an asari brothel for a couple weeks.*

*Twenty to one they found bloody rachni who didn't appreciate being found.*

There was a day-old status update to that request indicating Urdnot Wrex was impatient and now sending his own team, Aralakh Company, to investigate. But Shepard was welcome to tag along and help.

*I think this is something she wants to help with.* Xian already had a message open to send to Commander Shepard, since he was the comms specialist on duty. But he was kind enough to allow Sam to read it over and give her blessing before forwarding it along.

Sighing deeply, Sam turned on her heel to the elevator. Her sleeper pod had never sounded so inviting, and she—

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?" Xian called after her.

"Bed. I'm not on duty. I dismissed myself."

"How about I call in that favor you owe me so that our relationship can be free of obligation?"

Sam sighed and turned around. Xian smiled hopefully back. She yawned into her hand before replying. "Is our relationship so precarious that it can't wait a few hours? I didn't realize we were so damaged, Xian. What happened to us? Are we breaking up?"

He chuckled back. "Never. You know you're my one and only, Sam. I could never break it off with my work wife. …Just don't tell my wife wife." Gesturing at one of the console feeds, Xian continued. "It'll be quick, I promise. One of my cabling adjustments must have crossed a wire somewhere. Our Terminus feeds have gotten spotty. You know the underbelly of the ship better than I do. Can you check out under the war room and see what the problem is? After you catch some rack time?"

"I noticed you snuck a compliment in there, as though that could gloss over the fact you're asking me to dig around the sub floor wiring. You know how to show a girl a good time," Samantha sighed, but agreed. "I'll check it out before my shift starts. Promise."

Slogging her way to the elevator, Sam shifted unsteadily on her feet the short ride down. Her eyes felt dry and grainy, and her neck was killing her from her brief upright nap. She had a feeling even a solid round of sleep wasn't going to cure this tired, achy feeling.

When the elevator doors opened, Sam almost ran right into Commander Shepard.

*Oh bollocks. Just what I need.*

The Commander certainly looked better. Groomed. Fresh uniform. Coffee cup in one hand, blueberry protein bar in the other. Sam muttered an apology and sidestepped around, but Shepard stopped her.

"Specialist Traynor, is there something we need to talk about?"
Yes. No. Mostly yes. But Sam didn't say that. "Oh, I almost forgot, ma'am. The turians have given us top-level access to their combat data. Their ships are already moving in to help the Alliance fleet. Things are going much more smoothly now."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "Traynor."

Sam continued, though her voice had softened. "You actually secured a krogan-turian alliance. It's one thing to hear about Commander Shepard... it's quite another to see her in action." She let that statement hang in the air. And waited.

Infuriatingly, Shepard did not react. Her face was a mask. "Traynor. Permission to speak freely."

"Very well, ma'am. Comms Specialist Xian and I think we have found where the rachni originated from. If you find this rachni queen you yourself saved, and she is capable of being saved: what are you going to do?" It was a stupid thing, being given permission to speak her mind. And even stupider that Sam thought that was a good idea.

"It depends."

"On?"

Sighing, Shepard's eyes narrowed. "Traynor. Don't be naïve. The rachni are dangerous. And they're in league with the enemy, either on purpose or against their will. It doesn't matter. They have to be stopped. We need every possible advantage in this war, and having one less enemy to fight counts as a big advantage."

"Why doesn't it matter, ma'am?"

"They're dangerous," Shepard repeated.

"If they're so dangerous, why did you save them the first time?"

The mask finally broke a little. Pink suddenly colored Shepard's cheeks. "I was... I believed they could change."

Sam took a deep breath. She'd been practicing this little rant during her late night of data-digging. Hopefully she got it right. "I read the history logs. Rachni spread like plague across the galaxy. It took millions of krogan to bring them down over several centuries. From what I could gather from their reproductive rates, the rachni spawn rate is even more aggressive than the krogan."

"Are you making my point for me, Specialist?"

"No, ma'am. I've calculated Reaper reports versus predicted rachni population. If this queen had resumed a galaxy-conquering mindset and began cranking out kids from the moment you freed her, the Terminus would have been overrun before the Reapers invaded. So we should have had millions of Ravagers on top of a few billion batarian Husks on our doorstep. But we don't. All signs point to recent indoctrination, within the last few weeks, and that the already existing rachni population was not dense enough to begin with to indoctrinate."

"What's your point, Traynor?"

Tilting her head, Sam softened. "My point is, Commander: change. This queen changed, just like you asked, and would have lived out a quiet life with her modest brood before the Reapers. Aliens—people can change. For the better, even. Isn't that what we're basing our existence on? The hope that we can overcome our old, separate grudges and come together against this enemy? What's the
point of any of this if we can't believe in the best of us? That our best can and will prevail? And even more: that we **deserve** to prevail?"

The SpecTRe raised her chin defiantly. Her green eyes pierced into Sam's. Despite her impassioned plea, Samantha was actually looking for answers about the krogan genophage.

And Shepard knew it. "You're fishing, Traynor. If you have something to ask me, then ask. Otherwise, I will take your words under advisement only, which I may or may not heed depending on the situation that presents itself."

"I would, Commander. Except… I'm afraid I wouldn't like the answer."

"The answer, Traynor? Or me?"

*Both,* Sam thought. But she couldn't say that.

Shepard still knew. Her shoulders stiffened, as did her tone. "I don't require your approval to do my job, Specialist. Or yours. You will follow orders, keep security protocols, and respect the chain of command. Is that clear?"

Knowing when she was dismissed, Samantha's feet came together and her fingertips swung to her temple. "Ma'am, yes ma'am!"

And with that, Shepard pushed past Sam to the elevator. The comms specialist finally dropped her salute when the doors closed. Sighing deeply, Sam headed for the sleeper pods. The Mess Hall was bustling once more with crew finishing breakfast. She couldn't make eye contact with any of them for fear of bursting into tears.

Because she was afraid of what Commander Shepard was capable of. She went to sleep wondering if finding the rachni was a mistake. That they were about to discover a fate worse than being Reaper thralls: Shepard's wrath.

And she wondered again if the krogan were actually cured.

---

Hours later *(how many? Ten? Twelve? Fourteen?)*, the soft chime of an alarm resonated through the sleeper pod.

Sam was right. She still felt like shit. What few dreams she had were a chaotic jumble. It felt like her brain had been awake the whole time, and insisted on going through every possible worse case scenario in the war. Most of them ended with the galaxy being wiped out and her family being burned away.

Too weary to even eat, Sam trudged over to her locker for a fresh uniform, got dressed, and headed straight to the CIC. A shower seemed pointless, because she couldn't wash this feeling of dread away.

*I think that's a symptom of depression, Traynor. Which you're required to report to a psych officer.*


*Like a good girl.*

"Ugh. I thought you were down for rack time, Traynor. You look even worse somehow," Specialist
Xian taunted when he saw Sam. She could only grunt a monosyllable of acknowledgement. She
tried shooing him aside to take over, but he waved a scolding finger.

"Uh-uh. War room cabling, remember?"

"Oh, come on!" Sam exploded a little louder than she'd intended, gaining a few worried looks from
the other CIC specialists. "Can't it wait?"

Xian was taken slightly aback, but he shook his head. He gestured to his console, which was quite
active for an idle ship.

Wait. Where the hell are we?

"No shift change during an active combat mission. Comms Specialist Rule #1. So it's a perfect time
for you to do your dear friend Chen a favor." His mouth opened to say more, but then his hand
pressed to his ear and he turned to study his feeds.

The galaxy map was zoomed in to the Mulla Xul system in the Ninmah Cluster. The Normandy was
in lower orbit over planet Utukku. Shepard must have jumped straight for the relay and jammed at
FTL the whole time to make it here already. Because there's no way—


Okay, okay. Sam would have killed for a sitrep, but apparently these bloody cables were just that
important.

Her feet and back protested every movement, and even more so when Sam strode through war room
for the corner where the access panel lay. Popping the clasps that held the floor tile in place, the
comms specialist pushed it aside and dropped down into the low sub deck.

Shimmying under the floorboards in the war room, Sam sighed with relief. This was her second
home on the Normandy. The guts (brains?) of the ship. All the pieces of Normandy that connected
her to herself resided in flowing cables to create a nervous system maze. And Sam knew almost
every inch of her.

She paged Xian with her Omni-tool, and the glowing interface also served to illuminate the dark
corridor. A schematic of the QEC uplinks were sent back, along with a few notes from his repair.
Padding down the narrow sub deck, Sam had a briefly smug feeling.

Her perfectionist nature was quietly embarrassed that Xian had figured out the rachni before her. No
big thing by any means, but something her subconscious was likely to bring up in the future to
humble her ego should it get too large. But already the tables were turned and she was helping him
fix a responsibility of his.

He had been pretty bloody quick with reducing my search parameters. I suppose fresh eyes are—

An epiphany struck Sam in the throat. As she continued shuffling along to reach the QEC access hub
below the comm room, Samantha opened a private channel to Xian. For another professional
opinion.

"Hey Xian. How would one break stealth on the Normandy? Without being caught?"

"I'm a little busy at the moment, Traynor. Trying to coordinate Cortez to pick up Shepard and
Aralakh Company. …why the hell do you want to break stealth?"
Um, isn't secrecy the whole point of your little project for Liara, Traynor? Bringing Xian in kind of defeats the purpose.

Shut it. I'm tired of hitting dead ends. I just… want it to be done.

"I don't. Hypothetically, how would an untraceable comm signal get off a stealthed ship? No comms sent or positions given away, at least in the ship logs. No system hack or database tampering. The ship is stealthed the whole time. Go."

It was a few long minutes before he replied. Plenty of time for Sam to reach to the cable hub and diagnose the problem. Yanking a cross section loose, the comms specialist switched her Omni-tool into a micro blowtorch to start soldering the base connector. Someone got sloppy during the retrofits and thought they could get away with only replacing some of the Cerberus cabling with Alliance-issue. Lazy sods. If I find out who—

Xian's voice crackled over Sam's wrist. "Oh that's easy, Traynor. You deploy a signal tether from a separate source. It's not linked to the main network, but would still have solid broadcast range. Bigger the range, the bigger the source needed. Activate it before the ship is stealthed and it's basically a trail of breadcrumbs. To get out of a system, you'd probably need something huge, like a Mako or Kodiak. The distress beacon on a Mako has massive broadcast depth. Why do you ask?"

"Oh… just a wager I have going with one of the Engineers. Th-thank you, Chen. You've been a brilliant help."

The Mako. Its comm database only gets scrubbed before and after missions. If someone used it to flag the Collectors down on the SR-1… they were betting on the Normandy being destroyed. I don't have the Mako's database in the blackbox because it was too badly damaged from the crash.

Who has access to the Mako?

How about the engineer responsible for it: Officer Chris Postle?

We still don't know if he and Pressly were in cahoots. But this is the best scenario I can come up with. Better message Liara about this theory.

Finishing with her repair an hour later, Sam called Xian again. He muttered approval that the Terminus line was behaving itself, before asking, "Traynor! What do I do? I've got an urgent message for Shepard from the salarian councilor but the Commander isn't answering my pages to her cabin."

"I'll tell her."

The voice was lilting yet commanding, and sounded like it was right next to Xian's ear.

Liara.

Sam's head jerked up so fast she slammed it into the low ceiling. She swore quietly as Xian continued over the channel. "…thanks, Dr. T'Soni! …good thing she was here. I really didn't want to go tell Shepard the salarian councilor called again. The Commander's been avoiding the Council for days and they're getting pretty aggravated. I hate being the messenger."

"All's well that ends well then, Chen," Samantha intoned as she rubbed the sore spot atop her head. "Mission accomplished on my end. I'll be back up in a few. Traynor out."

She followed the cables back behind the comm room to give them a thorough once-over. They
seemed to be in good condition. Crawling back, the thrum of the servers nearly drowned out voices above. It wasn't until Sam was under the comm room did she overhear a heated conversation.

Between Commander Shepard and Councilor Valern.

"—and I made my decision, Councilor," Shepard snapped back with finality. "There's not much anyone can do about it now."

"I don't approve of your methods, Commander," the salarian's high voice scoffed. "Who's next in paying the price for your pessimism?"

*Oh God. No, Shepard. What did you do now? What did you do then?*

"Someone once told me that a pessimist is what an optimist calls a realist." Shepard paused significantly. "In any case, the Crucible now has loyal workers to speed the project along. Are you going to argue with results, Councilor? Even if they are rachni?"

**Rachni. Shepard found the queen. And saved her.**

*Why?*

"Yes, we have preliminary reports from your latest mission. Apparently two squads of dead krogan aren't enough of a hint that the rachni are dangerous. You're acting as though using a hurricane will put out a wildfire. What will keeping rachi around accomplish? To have one more predator to prey on us when we're weak? Your species doesn't remember the Rachni Wars and Krogan Rebellions like mine does." Valern's tone was frigid.

"*One more predator.*... one more?"

Shepard growled, her tone scathing. "This is laughable criticism coming from you. The rachni queen owes me, and humanity, her race's life. Twice. We've cut off her spawn from being used against us anymore as Reapers. While you... When I was on Sur'Kesh, I found a hidden log of your efforts to uplift the yahg to fight your battles for you. How did you plan on containing them should we manage to destroy the Reapers? What will they owe you for dragging them to the slaughter then tossing them aside? If anyone is learning from their mistakes, it certainly isn't the salarians."

"We are willing to do what it takes to win this war. Which is more than can be said for you, Commander Shepard."

A dull slam sounded that reverberated down the wall to where Sam sat below. *Did Shepard just put her fist through a wall?*

"I was willing to kill Mordin Solus for you. My team mate. My ally. My friend. I valued your support more highly than his life. Because we need every single able body to fight the Reapers. I am willing to do whatever it takes to win this war."

*No... She—she did it...*

"And look where that got us, hm?" Valern quipped back.

*What? What does he mean?*

There was an agonizing pause. It was Shepard who replied. Her voice was quiet. "I... accept my failure. And what it means for the galaxy. I hope the price to be paid is mine and mine alone for what I did, and if it isn't..." She trailed off.
Another pause, before the Commander's tone changed to be more official. "I failed to kill Mordin. I pulled the trigger, but the battle through Tuchanka flared up already-existing injuries. My shot went just a hair wide. He was already to the elevator by the time I'd recovered. Unequipped with any other means to stop Dr. Solus, he corrected the genophage cure.

"His death is on my hands regardless," she continued somberly. "He died believing I wanted him dead. And I did. I couldn't risk it and… I still failed. All I can do now is move forward… and hope the best will prevail. …I don't expect you to believe me. And I don't need you to."

"Yes… We're all saved, thanks to you." The sarcastic salarian didn't sound very grateful.

Sam was. She was on all fours, peering at a crack above her in the floor. It was no use, it only revealed the comm room ceiling. But somewhere up there, Shepard was confessing to accidentally curing the krogan. And Sam was about to burst into tears with happiness. "...hope the best will prevail…"

She… she didn't do it.

She wanted to, Traynor. She tried.

But she didn't.

Sam could hear the Commander clear her throat. It was her turn to be cold. "I've had time to assess this unfortunate development. I still don't believe the krogan can be trusted. But for now, to stop the Reapers, they are a loyal and useful ally. The future is not my concern anymore. I'm fighting for the present. Which leads me to my offer to you, Councilor Valern."

There was an intrigued but suspicious "Yes?"

"Join us. Join us and fight. Help build the Crucible. Because if you don't… You will share the same fate as the batarians. You will cry into the darkness for help, and there will be no answer. Those slavers stood alone, apart, and died alone. You will still help us… by giving the Reapers something to harvest while the rest of us rally to survive. So I'm giving you the opportunity to help us save each other. Or else: die apart."

"We will take your generosity under advisement, Commander. I am not certain I respect your decision regarding the krogan, but we all have our part to play in this war," the salarian Councilor returned coldly. "Speaking of… I need to talk to you about humanity's representative, Councilor Udina. He's been moving vast sums of money."

The rest of the conversation requested Shepard return to the Citadel to speak to the Councilor in person about Udina. Shepard didn't sound surprised, and assured Valern it was her highest priority. Unfortunately, the Normandy was still three days out from Citadel space and needed to refuel, but would return as soon possible.

Stunned, Sam was still crouched under the comm room when Shepard's footsteps faded away. It took Xian paging her Omni-tool to wake her from her shocked stupor. She crawled back to the war room in a heady daze on total autopilot. She could barely muster responses to Campbell's and Westmoreland's small talk.

Xian patted Samantha on the shoulder, told her she did a good job, and was anything wrong?
"No. Nothing is wrong. I just… have an email to write."
"Commander, you have a new message at your private terminal."

Shepard acknowledged the comms specialist with a vaguely interested "hm" noise as she entered the CIC from the lift.

Samantha went back to dutifully typing away at her console, forcing herself not to look up. Her peripheral vision saw the Commander go to her terminal on the adjacent side of the galaxy map. A small burst of light indicated Shepard had powered on her own console.

"Specialist Traynor," Shepard called. It was neither question nor statement, but somewhere in between.

"Yes, Commander."

Sam felt eyes on her, but she still remained focused on updating the war asset log. It took all her willpower to keep a smirk suppressed.

"Did you seriously just page me about a new message... that was your message?" Shepard sounded baffled, but amused.

"Yes, Commander."

"Couldn't you have just told me the message in person? It's not like I don't see you every day. Sometimes more than once."

Finally turning, Samantha tilted her head. She had been practicing a matter-of-fact tone for this very conversation. "That's not how this works, Commander. If I'm now responsible for reading aloud your messages in addition to alerting you to their existence, I fear my voice will grow hoarse. Then how will I alert you to the messages I will eventually have to read? Is there worker's compensation for that sort of cyclical, on-the-job injury, ma'am?"
"...Forget I asked," Shepard sighed impatiently, but the crinkle around her eyes belied her anger. She glanced back at the screen to reread the request from a Lieutenant Traynor.

---

From: ['Traynor, S']
To: ['Shepard, A']
18:05:55 GST, 10/04/2186

Subject: Game Night?

Commander,

Thanks for all the times you've taken a moment to speak with the civilian. I'd love to see how Commander Shepard kills time between missions. Why don't you give me a call if you'd like to grab a drink? I promise a night of fun and games.

Or just one game.

Chess. A game of chess.

Traynor

---

Apologetic, but interested, the Commander called back over to Sam. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at chess, Traynor. The odds would be stacked in your favor. Unless you can go easy on your old Commander."

Sidestepped the drink offer, I noticed.

Sam shook her head imperiously. "Sorry, ma'am. Games are meant to be won. Plus, we don't want you going soft. It's important to keep the mind sharp. I can offer you a tutorial, but it won't come cheap. I have a lavish lifestyle to maintain, after all." She tossed her hair theatrically and waved a hand over her service uniform with a flourish.

Shepard raised a skeptical eyebrow, but allowed a terse exhale between her teeth. A laugh. "I don't think I can afford you, Traynor."

She turned back to focus on her private terminal. The casual Commander was dressed in a clean service uniform. She also seemed to have healed overnight; no longer did she favor her side or shoulder, and there was no trace of limp or subdued pain. Pushing a red strand of hair off her freckled nose, Shepard studied her other, older messages.

Several long minutes passed.

Which was plenty of time for Sam to kick herself for being unprofessional. A chess game, Traynor. Right. That'll fix everything.

I didn't hear any other helpful suggestions.

Do you really think a game of chess will undo what she did/almost did?

Of course not. I'm not a naïve idiot.

Then what's the point of the game?

Maybe... I'd just like to understand her.
If you understand her, then maybe you can forgive her?

…I don't know. Maybe?

This was not a new mental argument for Sam. She'd had hours of a quiet shift to discuss it with herself, plus almost day of travel time so far. All that time to think, and she was still at square one.

Commander Shepard saved the krogan.

Except Commander Shepard didn't want to. At all. If she hadn't been injured, she would have murdered a good friend. A good friend who died anyway.

Does she even care? Sam didn't know. What little she had seen of Shepard was the perpetual officer's mask. Neutral. Stern. Calm.

Well, that's not entirely true. Only the day before yesterday...

The Normandy had picked up a passenger. Just one. A krogan in silver armor named Grunt of clan Urdnot. He was a bloody mess. There were still flecks of dark orange blood smeared in the Crew Deck hallway and in the elevator. Grunt's condition was critical from injuries sustained on Utukku, and he needed to get to the Citadel as soon as possible if there was any hope he might survive.

Sam had heard from Allers that Shepard had shouted for help, even stood at Dr. Chakwas' side as an extra pair of hands to administer Medi-gel and gauze for the wounded krogan. Another good friend, apparently. It explained some of Shepard's attitude during her conversation with Councilor Valern shortly after. The anger. The desperation.

Unless she planned on sacrificing him later, and the rachni had just beaten Shepard to the punch.

…Traynor.

Yes, I know that's harsh, but I just... I don't know. I don't know what to believe. Maybe I've just been fooling myself believing she's this great woman. Someone worth following to the edges of the galaxy. And believing in. Someone worth fighting for. Someone worth falling for...

Wait, what was that last one, Traynor?

…Nothing.

Normally a glass-half-full sort of person, Samantha was shaken by Shepard. And reading over the rachni mission update only confused Sam's impression of Shepard further. The Commander couldn't seem to make up her mind to be heartless, reckless or both.

Somehow, krogan ranked lower on Shepard's hierarchy than the rachni. Considering the rachni (outside of the Reapers) "Did It First" in terms of trying to overrun the galaxy with sheer numbers, for whatever reason there was no bartering or games or false alliances for the rachni's future. Unfortunately, Urdnot Wrex's scout team, Aralakh Company, had paid the price to get the rachni queen off Utukku with Grunt being the only (barely) survivor.

I just don't understand her. At all.

"Traynor?"

Shepard's hand on Sam's shoulder roused her from her musings. Apparently it wasn't the first time the Commander had said the comms specialist's name. Blinking a few times, Sam focused on the
light scarring along Shepard's jawline.

*Did it seem… healed? Just a little?*

"Sorry, ma'am. I was off somewhere else." Sam's eyes snapped up to meet Shepard's.

"Don't let it happen again," the Commander intoned seriously, before following with a crinkling smile. She removed her hand to run those fingers through the thick mane coiled around her neck. "I was saying if you have time later for that game, I'm free."

"Superb!" Sam chirped eagerly. …*where did that come from? Am I really that excited?*

Maybe?

"Where would you like to do it, ma'am?"

Shepard's face was impressively stony, though she did raise an eyebrow. That *bloody* eyebrow made Sam blush slightly. *Oh bollocks, I didn't mean…*

*You didn't?*

*Shut. Up.*

Ignoring the innuendo, Shepard asked, "How about after chow in the Port Observation Deck? You *did* mention a drink in your email. I'm all tapped out in my cabin, unfortunately. And if I'm going to lose as soundly as you're promising, I'd like to have a full belly and access to light, throwable things that shatter when I break them." Shepard broke out into an actual smile this time. Even showed some teeth.

It was… *distracting.*

_Danger, Traynor. Danger. Remember what that pretty face hides.*

"It's a date, then. A date with defeat. Ma'am," Samantha replied respectfully. Shepard exhaled with approval and made her way around the corner to the war room. With a swish, she disappeared behind the security door.

_No mention of our little spat in the elevator the day before yesterday, when she pulled rank. It was like it never happened. Did it? All is forgiven? Or forgotten? Or both? Maybe it didn't matter to her. Maybe the chess game doesn't matter either.*

…*It matters to me.*

Sighing, Samantha continued tapping at her console, no more enlightened about Shepard than she had been two days ago. Or two weeks ago. Or even a month ago.

*Well, not any more. Tonight: answers.*

*And tonight, I figure out what the bloody hell is going on in my stupid head. One minute I'm angry, the next I'm flirty.*

*Pick a side already, Traynor. Or are you just such a confused *woman* that your emotions have become so tangled that they all just blend together?*

*Now, now. No need to be sexist and hostile. I'm a military officer on a military ship. Oo-rah, remember?*
The rest of the day continued the mental debate. Again, with no satisfying result. The comms specialist's mind was having a jolly go at her logical, emotional, and hormonal sides. All dueling for supremacy on who should best represent Samantha Traynor in her chess game against Commander Annelise Shepard.

Channeling her manic thoughts into work meant the war asset log had never been cleaner or more up to date. Sam had worked up several overlays on the galaxy map that coincided with mission log updates and requests.

It was a strange thing, to assign numeric value to people and things. Apparently the Alliance's analysts had worked up an impressive catalog of battle statistics and figures. According to Sam's and the Alliance's numbers, they were still no where near ready to attempt an assault to retake Earth. The addition of the krogan and turians were certainly a boost, but the next order of business was ships. Lots of ships.

*If only the quarians were around.* The Migrant Fleet would be the perfect convoy. Self-sustaining, organized, and adaptive. Sam had been prodding her feed for updates on the quarian fleet, but there was even less data than usual. Apparently every quarian in the galaxy had been recalled to the Fleet a month ago when the Reapers hit Earth. Except there was now no sign of them.

*They didn't have a homeworld to attack, so technically... they were safe?*

*It's tragically brilliant, in a way.*

A chime on her Omni-tool told the comms specialist her shift was over. She had a little over an hour to kill before dinner. The perfect time to go talk to Liara about her working theory about the SR-1 she'd worked up... with Xian's help.

The Mess Hall was already bustling with hungry Normandiers. Mess Sergeant Beaumont ladled a rich-smelling goop into the welcoming tray of Ensign Copeland as the few kitchen tables filled with laughing bodies. Engineer Rashad waved Samantha over to an empty seat next to her, but Sam declined with a sad shake of her head.

Thrusting a thumb at Liara's cabin, Sam flashed an open palm with spread fingers and mouthed: *Five minutes. I'll be five minutes.* Rashad gave a tight-lipped, skeptical nod, but rolled her eyes good-naturedly. Sam could barely hear her shout over the din, "I've heard that before." But then Specialist Douglas leaned across the table and the two immediately engaged in a too-quiet conversation.

The comms specialist veered away from the dinner crowd to the short breezeway to the side cabin.

*Man, it's been forever since I sat down with everyone and caught up. All these quick-turn missions make predictable shifts impossible. I wonder how Morena's husband is doing. And if Douglas has heard from Hertzfeld since the retrofitters split up. I should look up Seth Lucas on the Citadel, I think he's on HQ comms duty. On loan to C-Sec, if I recall? ...Oh crud, I didn't return mum's call yet, she'll be in hysterics if I go too long.*

Sam was so immersed in her thoughts when she barged in to Liara's room that it took her a moment to realize the asari wasn't there.

Or rather, the asari wasn't in her usual chair(s).

It was a few longer seconds before Sam realized why the sight was so unfamiliar: Liara T'Soni was in her bed. Sleeping.
Granted, Liara was on top of the bed, not under the covers. And she was clutching a datapad, so she probably fell asleep working.

But there she was. Sleeping.

Samantha started to tiptoe backwards to the door, until Glyph chimed in very loudly, "How may I help you, Specialist Traynor?"

When she shushed the small hovering drone, it continued in the same booming tone. "Please repeat your query."

"Gah! Can you drop your voice a few levels? When was the last time Liara slept?" Sam hissed as quietly as she could.

Blessedly softer this time, Glyph helpfully answered. "Volume level reduced by fifty percent. It has been two days, four hours and nineteen minutes since Dr. T'Soni last achieved REM sleep. She did so previously at her corner desk."

"You can stop whispering, you two. Or rather, failing at whispering. I'm awake."

Liara blinked blearily as she pushed herself into a sitting position on the bed. Sam took that as permission to sheepishly jog over, though her hands were wringing slightly. "I'm so sorry, Liara. I had no idea. ...Though you really should catch more shut-eye. I took one nap standing up and regretted it deeply. I get rather cranky and murderous without a few solid hours. Days on end without sleep and I'd be punching every person I saw."

Rubbing her neck, the asari shot Sam an ominous eyebrow. Sam held up her hands pleadingly. "I was not volunteering my face to your war effort. I just came to talk, but I would be ecstatic to come back later. With painkillers. And chocolate. ...Alcohol? Any bribe to keep my beloved face organized exactly the way it is now."

After a long stretch, Liara started to dig through her mattress of datapads. She hadn't bothered to rebutton her armored white coat, which revealed a pleated blue undershirt. It marked the first time since they'd met that Samantha had seen the asari as anything less than completely put together. It was slightly refreshing, actually. She was only human after all—or... um... mortal? Organic? Only asari after all?

Bloody hell, we need better idioms. Better representation for the non-humans in our colloquialisms.

"Don't worry, Samantha. I'm actually quite rested, thank you. My servers were running a long diagnostic so I had some downtime. ...Was there something you needed?"

Rather than ease into it with more horrid small talk, Sam just blurted out her theory about Officer Postle using the Mako to alert the Collectors. She decided against admitting she got help from Xian, erring on the side of secrecy. Though she internally promised to give him co-author credit if it yielded results.

"It does seem likely, Samantha," Liara agreed after mulling it over for a moment. She seemed to have finally found the datapad she'd been seeking, and started reading through it from the comfort of the couch by the window. "Combined with what little information I've found, it does create a plausible, if unproven, picture."

She patted the couch to invite Sam to sit down, which the comms specialist obliged. "Officer Postle's grandmother was a soldier on the human colony of Shanxi during the First Contact War. She, and his..."
father, were active members of the Terra Firma political party. Are you familiar with it?"

Sam had to think about it. She'd remembered Terra Firma platforms amongst a few politicians on Horizon, but they were usually voted out of office pretty quickly. "Bunch of whining twits claiming we don't need the rest of the galaxy to do anything. I bet they were the first ones that went begging for Council help when the Reapers hit, too," Sam glowered.

"A crude, if apt, summary," Liara chuckled before sobering. Back to business. "This group went from a major political power to a fringe party with little support. Thank the Goddess for small favors. Most do not advertise their affiliations with Terra Firma. Officer Postle didn't, nor did Navigator Pressly who had a grandfather who served during the First Contact War."

"You were on the bloody SR-1. Do you remember either of them? Surely they would have stood out to you, being an alien and all. Amongst a pair of alien-haters."

Smiling lightly, Liara nodded. "I talked with Navigator Pressly a few times. Tali'Zorah was far more charming and won him, and Engineer Adams, over eventually. Those two would talk about ships for hours. Pressly was a kind man, though very guarded at first. Officer Postle, however, I do not remember vividly. He always faded into the background when we would board the Mako, and would not engage in conversation even after a mission was complete.

"I asked Wrex if he recalled the Mako engineer," the asari continued. "Wrex made a quip about what a 'weasely little pyjak' he was who 'only talked to Williams.' We are returning to the Citadel, so I will have the opportunity to ask Ashley herself about the Officer's conduct. I would prefer every possible bit of information before confronting anyone. Especially considering Officer Postle is currently residing on the Citadel in Bachjret Ward."

Damn. She's thorough. I bet she'd make a cutthroat lawyer. Or assassin.

…I wonder…

"Liara. What's your end game with all of this? I mean, if the reigning theory is that Pressly or Postle or both conspired to contact the Collectors, destroy the Normandy SR-1 and kill Commander Shepard: what then? Present evidence to C-Sec and get Postle arrested? Hire hitmen? What?"

That last part Sam said as a joke, but there was no answering chuckle. Rather, those sapphire-blue eyes darted away evasively. Samantha's jaw dropped. "…you're kidding me. Are you going to kill him? …Thank God Pressly is already dead, then, so he doesn't have to face your fury?"

Liara flinched at the glib reference to Pressly. Sam did, too. She felt bad being so tactless, but she was simply in shock.

What did you think was going to happen? Especially if Liara and Shepard were lovers… Sam flinched at that thought, too. Wouldn't you want to kill the bastard that killed your girlfriend?

…Bloody hell, how many times am I going to be an accessory to murder this week?

Third time's the charm, Tray—Shut up!

"I don't know, Samantha. Honestly. I want to talk to him. This hidden message he and Pressly use in their emails... It means something. It might be a link to a larger organization, or at the very least a ringleader. I would have pegged it as Cerberus, except I don't know that Cerberus is in the habit of killing people, then spending billions of credits rebuilding them. …But if Postle or Pressly, or both, were working with the Collectors, there's a chance one could now be working with the Reapers.
And he should be stopped. Don't you agree?"

The asari's voice got a little shrill at the end. Desperate. Pleading. She claimed to be rested but she sounded tired. Sam reached out and clasped at a blue hand.

Liara's skin was soft. Supple. Slightly textured, but warm and firm. Sam squeezed the hand, willing the asari to understand her. "I get it, Liara. I want to know, too. I just... I don't want blood on my hands. I fight with information, not bullets. I don't fancy being on the front lines of the doling-out-justice business. And maybe—maybe he had a good reason? Family held hostage or something? ...not that murder is ever justified, but... ugh, this is coming out wrong," Samantha rambled in frustration. She wasn't sure what she was trying to say.

Thinking back to her debate with Shepard about the galaxy and the Greater Good and who lives and who dies, Sam realized how many morally ambiguous rabbit holes were being dug right now. And Liara was in danger of losing herself to vengeance the way Shepard might be lost in survival mode.

So Sam tried a Big Picture high ground approach: "We're quickly becoming an endangered species. I would just... like to believe that if given the chance, we can be redeemed. Saved. And that we actually bloody deserve to be saved, minus a few stupid, selfish lapses. Maybe we can start with this man and go from there? Or at least attempt to give him the benefit of the doubt?"

Sighing, Liara squeezed back. "I am sorry, Samantha. I cannot promise anything. If my, or anyone else's, life is threatened by a confrontation... I will stop him with any means necessary. ...would you... like to join me? On the Citadel?"

At first, the immature part of Sam thought "You mean, like a date?" and she almost laughed out loud. She sobered quickly when she realized Liara wanted Sam to meet the Destroyer of Normandies. "Um... I suppose? Maybe? If you think you'd need me? Though I'd be better suited for little things like hacking and analysis rather than epic gun battles. ...Should—should Shepard go? I mean, wouldn't his fate be her call? Since she did lose—" …everything.


...lovers?

Liara chewed her cheek a moment. She pulled her hand out of Sam's to run her fingers along her head fringe. The alien version of Shepard preening her hair. I guess everyone does that. "You are right. Shepard deserves to know. Once I am certain, after speaking with Ashley, I promise I will tell Shepard of our findings. I am uncertain how she will react. Her behavior has become ...difficult to predict as of late."

You're telling me.

Sam sighed, but she took what she could get. "I appreciate the consideration from a lowly comms specialist, Liara. There's a saying that 'it's easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission,' though I don't know which of those would be easier with a Commander Shepard. Forgiveness for asking permission, probably."

Smiling sadly, the asari stood up. Still hefting a datapad, Liara set down before her familiar tower of screens where a large "[COMPILING COMPLETE]" message could be seen. "I will figure it out when the time comes. I hope."

The room quieted to an almost silence, broken only by the gentle hum of the information broker's server equipment. Sam invited Liara to join her for dinner in the mess. "I'll be just a moment," the
asari said, but Sam didn't believe her.

It had been considerably longer than five minutes, but Rashad had patiently waited for Sam to emerge. She just hadn't been patient enough to not eat without Sam.

Mess Sergeant Beaumont sweetly offered a helping of beef and vegetable stew to the late comms specialist, citing high protein and energizing amino acids. It was surprisingly flavorful, though the cook admitted she needed more ingredients from the Citadel. Without a restock soon, she'd just be making MRE-and-protein-bar casserole. *Ugh.*

The comms specialist enjoyed joking and gossiping with the Normandy crew. It took her mind off... *things.* Up until the Thing she was trying not to think about got off the elevator. Shepard's eyes met Sam's briefly, then the Commander grabbed her own plate of dinner before disappearing down the hallway leading to the Port Observation Deck.

"Too good to eat with us grunts," Ian Douglas muttered across from Samantha. He hadn't been the only one to notice Shepard's absence. A few others grumbled as well, but the talk quickly turned to Shepard's accomplishments since they'd been aboard. No one had ever been on a ship like the Normandy, with the exception of Engineers Donnelly and Daniels. Or even been on a ship that did so much without having to sit around waiting to be evaluated by the Alliance bureaucracy after every mission. Even Douglas's complaining quickly shifted to relief and awe. *Thank God for that. He's an insufferable blowhard otherwise.*

It took far too much internal agonizing for Sam to determine the best course of action to skirt away to her locker, grab the chess holo, and meet Commander Shepard in the lounge.

*Feign illness? Too many questions. Yawn and say I need to go to bed early? Too much mockery. Say I need a drink? They might offer to join me.*

After much odd-calculating, scheming and strategy, Samantha stood up and wished everyone a pleasant evening.

"What are you up to tonight, Traynor?" Rashad asked.

"Just playing some chess. Care to join me?" Sam was betting on the truth to be far more boring than a lie.

She was right.

Rashad and Douglas both wrinkled their noses in disdain and emphatically passed on the offer.

*Your loss, kids.*

Sprinting to the crew bunk area, Sam scooped up the small disc from her locker. Commander Shepard sat at the Port Observation lounge couch area, an empty tray of food in front of her on the low table. She stood up politely when Sam entered.

Joker, Vega and Garrus were tucked inside the small poker table nook, laughing and swearing behind their hands of cards. The comms specialist was a little disheartened at the lack of privacy. But the way those boys were carrying on, they wouldn't last much longer without either a) passing out or b) throwing up, based on the number of empty booze bottles littered around the table.

"You're passing up on poker to hang out with Traynor?" Joker yelled in disbelief. His blue cap was pushed back on his head, allowing short red hair to peek out from the front.
"Oh, was that an offer, Moreau?" Sam taunted back. She held up one finger at Shepard, pantomiming *Just one moment*. Squinting at the Skyllian Five game currently in progress, Sam skimmed over the discard pile cards along with the in-play cards that were face up on the table. "I bet you a million credits that your hand is total rubbish."

Joker was a tad too drunk to mask a scowl, which made Vega and Garrus both up their bets. The Normandy pilot threw his cards down in disgust. "Goddammit. Lucky guess, Traynor."

Sam grinned superiorly. "Hardly. Based on your bravado with your bets, the cards on the table, and the discards, you had a 120 to one chance of making that straight flush you're pretending to have. Now, my money is on Garrus for a full house. Probably with a face card? Vega can't be doing better than three of a kind."

The turian's eyes glittered as he revealed his hand, while Vega pouted as he slapped his down. Sam called every single one of their hands.

"You count cards?" Shepard was behind Sam, surveying the game.

Sam smiled back. "It's not hard when they're not playing with more than one deck. But by all means, Moreau, if you'd like me to join you for poker rather than a nice, boring, bet-free chess game with Commander Shepard... I'd be happy to alter my evening's festivities. I forget, what is the Alliance salary for a frigate pilot?"

Joker, Vega and Garrus all shooed the women away as they loudly shouted that the game was full. Shepard's shoulders shook with silent laughter as she returned to the couch. Sam sat down on the opposite couch. She waited for some sort of go-ahead from Shepard. An icebreaker. Anything.

Nothing.

"Sorry if you wanted to play Skyllian Five instead. I think I'm banned for life from playing with them now. If you'd rather play that..." The comms specialist trailed off despondently. It was rather pathetic how much of her self-esteem was currently hinging on this answer (*and possible rejection*). *So Stupid.*

Shepard's eyes crinkled lightly and she tilted her head. "Been there, done that. I've already taken plenty of their credits. I'm up for trying something new. I'm game if you are, Traynor."

"Well, in any event," Sam said softly, "thanks for being willing to play."


*Mm, apparently Stupid Sam is determined to make an appearance already.*

The Commander just looked back curiously. And that damn thoughtful silence again... Sam rushed to fill it as she placed the black disc on the table and booted it up. "I bought a board back on the Citadel. Holo GUI. Not as much fun as real pieces. ...But maybe you can give me some pointers."

"Give me some pointers?" *I think I'd remember Commander Shepard on the chess tourney circuit.*

*So unless she's secretly a hobbyist chess master, you're going to wipe the floor with her, Traynor.*

*Shut it. I'm lulling her into a false sense of security by going right to her ego?*

*Great plan. That makes no sense.*
Shepard squinted suspiciously. "I seriously doubt that. But hopefully, at the very least, I can make you earn your win. Now, how do we decide who goes first?"

Sam gestured to her Omni-tool, saying she had a coin-flip application. Shepard shook her head. "I'm not letting you have any more advantages than you already have. Why don't we go old school? I'm thinking of a number between one and ten. Guess it, and you can go first."

Ooo! A guessing game! My favorite! Probability-wise, the most common numbers are usually three, with a one in—

Traynor.


Reaching over, Sam pointed at Shepard's hoodie lapel. N7. "I'm gonna have to go with seven."

"Then the honor is yours, Traynor," Shepard smirked, and gestured welcomingly at the now populated holographic chess board. Very chivalrous. I'm impressed, the comms specialist thought with a slight blush as she typed at the interface to set Players 1 and 2. Blue and orange keyboards extended to Sam and Shepard to allow them control of their side.

Fingers hesitating over the small holo keypad, Samantha glanced up at Shepard. "Just so we're clear: this is just a game. No rank, no protocol, and, most importantly: no retaliation."

"Add 'no gloating' to that list and you've got a deal, Traynor," the Commander nodded back.

"...Not even a little? I mean, I wasn't going to start a fan site on the extranet, but give me something, Shepard. It's what makes it all worthwhile!" Sam admitted she was whining a little, but she really just wanted to test the waters of saying "Shepard" for a change. Not "Commander" or "ma'am." She typed in the coordinates for her opening move.

Pawn to d4.

Leaning forward to study the small white piece sliding forward two spaces, Shepard exhaled lightly. "Fine, you can gloat a little. Just try to restrain yourself. And no announcing it over the QEC network or hacking the ship intercom."

"Deal. Though it's like you think I'm a communications specialist or something." Sam grinned back. The banter was a good sign.

"Wonder where I got that idea," Shepard returned sincerely. Her black pawn slid forward directly in front of Sam's white.

Sam's fingers tapped away, sending another white pawn to join its mate. One of her favorite opening moves: the Queen's Gambit. It would give her an opportunity to see how aggressive a player Shepard could be. "Anything I need to explain, ma'am—Shepard? Piece names? Board movement?" She kept her tone kind. She wasn't trying to be patronizing.

It didn't quite work. Shepard answered sharply and quickly, "No, I think I got it." The SpecTRe studied the board before her black pawn knocked one of Sam's pieces out.

So. Queen's Gambit Accepted then. It was a sacrificial move that unfortunately left Sam's front line exposed to assault. But the trade-off, if/once she regained control of the board, could be a rewarding
challenge. It all depended on how Shepard played it.

They traded a few more moves in silence. Sam didn't quite know how to strike up a casual conversation. "How's the family?" She doesn't have one. "How's work?" A bit stressful? "What's the deal with you and Liara?" ...Oh God, why did I think this was a good idea?

Shepard didn't seem interested in chatting, either. She did know the rules of chess and avoided common sloppy pitfalls that would end the game comically quickly. But she didn't comment on her moves, or Sam's, or the weather, or anything else.

"By the spirits, are you two even having fun? Or is this one of those human woman silent treatment things I've heard about?" Garrus teetered next to them. Glancing at the emptying poker table, Sam assumed by Garrus's triumphant expression he had won. Vega was standing up and looked ready to leave, but he and Joker were too busy trading insults.

Sam started to open her mouth, but instead opted to see what Shepard said. The Commander had her chin in her hand and didn't look up. "Beat it, Vakarian. You're wrecking my concentration. And it's a nice, quiet change of pace. If I have to hear you and Joker trading racist jokes one more time, I'll drink a keg of ryncol."

"Well, at least indulge in a toast, ryncol optional. It's not every day we get to celebrate a little thing like helping the krogan and winning the rachni over. Again. ...Okay, maybe it's every other day for the Normandy. Basically: you need to drink more, Shepard."

Straightening up in her seat, Shepard looked at Sam questioningly. Sam nodded. That sounds like a lovely idea. And a lovely segue to a topic I had no idea how to bring up.

You are a gem, Garrus Vakarian.

The turian picked past Sam to the bar area and uncapped a thick cylinder. He doled out three lowball glasses of purple liquor and balanced them between his large hands on his way back to the couches. Shepard and Sam both leaned over and snagged a glass, their fingers briefly bumping.

The two women exchanged smiles and raised their glasses.

"To the rachni queen, may she always be creepy. But creepy on our side," Garrus grinned before swiftly finishing his drink in one swallow. Shepard followed suit, though Sam just took a cautious
sip. It was unfamiliar, but not unpleasant. A deeper swallow added to a growing warmth in her belly.

*Lightweight.*

*Shut it.*

The turian saluted Shepard and bowed before Sam, then strode past them. He apparently saw Specialist Douglas heading for the elevator, and shouted after the human to discuss his calibrations. Vega and Joker were a few steps behind, both poorly harmonizing a lewd boot camp song Sam dimly recognized. They leaned against each other to stay steady, but Joker was definitely worse off.

"Ah, finally. Some peace and quiet," Shepard sighed happily. She slurped the dregs of her small cup before focusing back on the holo board.

Unwilling to go back to the awkward silence from before (*especially since we're alone at last*), Samantha tried to talk about something slightly relevant.

"You know, my lab studied the rachni. Long-distance communication with no time lag, the ability to control workers… And at close range, the queen can even speak through dead or dying members of other species. I'd never want to meet one in a dark alley, I just thought they were interesting."

She had to take a deep breath from that long-winded blather.

But it worked. Shepard looked up curiously. "How did you study rachni? When?"

Clarifying sheepishly, Sam had to amend her rambling. With more rambling. "Well, we studied the *theory* of the rachni. Back when I first joined R&D, so... 2182? We had no idea they still existed, since apparently that's a new development thanks to you. My lab was trying reproduce similar biological communication signatures, though we couldn't extend it over the sort of distance the rachni could. Or even beyond a bloody room, actually. It's an extremely high frequency with limited signal degradation. The entire body has to be susceptible to sending and receiving signals. I bet the rachni queen is just one big tuning fork."

Shepard nodded and made an impressed noise deep in her throat. "I'll be sure to ask her the next time I see her. Or maybe she's making friends on the Crucible and one of them is writing a thesis on it. You don't mind someone else beating you to that discovery of a lifetime, do you?"

*She's... She's making fun of me.*

Rather than be offended, Sam was delighted. "As long as they don't cock it up: absolutely. But if I doublecheck his or her math and I find anything wrong, I want permission to take over and do it right."

"Not really my area of influence, Traynor," Shepard shook her head as she moved a bishop. "I suppose I could put in a good word with Admiral Hackett, though..." She trailed off thoughtfully.

"I see what you're doing, Shepard." Sam's eyes narrowed.

Shepard's head jerked back in faux-shock. "Me? What am I doing?"

"Really, Shepard. Bribing me into going easy on you. It's appalling." Sam shot the woman a withering look. She then captured the black bishop with a white knight, eliciting a scowl from Shepard.

"Can't blame a girl for trying. [...]What *would* it take for you to throw the game? Hypothetically, of
"Oh, of course," Samantha returned sarcastically. She leaned back against the plush couch and thought a moment. "I can only think of one scenario where I would even consider losing on purpose."

Shepard’s ears perked up. "Oh? What situation would that be?"

"Let’s see... Maybe if my future-wife was carrying my unborn child and her not winning would induce labor or something similarly tragic, I might consider throwing the game. So unless you have something to tell me I'm not aware of, Shepard, you don't stand a chance." Sam shook her head at the woman, who scowled again. But the trash-talking rejuvenated Shepard some. Even Sam had to admit she was no novice. No grievous errors or openings to exploit yet. There was an undercurrent of uncertainty from the Commander, though Sam couldn't quite pinpoint its cause. And it was extremely bizarre to be in the presence of a Commander Shepard that wasn't 100% sure of herself.

_Even when she was pulling rank over our rachni talk, she never gave an inch. ...why now?_

"You don't scare me, Traynor," Shepard growled with false bravado.

"This from the woman who just a moment ago was attempting to seduce me into throwing the game."

Trying to decide between a pawn and a rook to move, Shepard wrinkled her nose at Sam. "You're misrepresenting my words. That was purely hypothetical. And a scenario you proposed, not me. Are comms specialists in the habit of skewing the truth? Maybe I should have EDI do an audit of your feeds, Traynor."

Sam shook her head sadly. "From bargaining to blackmail." She almost said something wildly stupid like "What would your mother say?" But thankfully she caught herself. It was getting far too easy to tease and joke. Easier than she'd ever imagined, honestly. "Audit all you like, ma'am. You'll find nothing but truth, and you'll find no better dynamic duo at the galaxy map helm than Specialists Traynor and Xian. ...along with EDI, but she helms pretty much everything."

Only that little amused exhale, a hiss of air between Shepard's teeth. Her green eyes continued scanning the board, since things had gotten serious. An equal number of black and white pieces now encroached on the other's territory. Sam could count four openings to exploit, depending on Shepard's play. But at least no instant-checkmate like with Allers.

A minute of silence passed.

Sam hated silence. "Speaking of the truth..."

_Dammit, Traynor. This is going really well. Friendly. Open. Amiable.

I'm very gifted at ruining the mood, yes. But you forget: I have to know.

Even if it ruins whatever this is?"

"Whatever this is" would just be a horrid lie if she's just a monster, don't you agree?"

Bright eyes flicked up to meet Sam's warm brown ones. But not with anger or reproach, surprisingly.
Only resignation. "I was wondering when this would come up. No longer afraid you won't like the answer... or me, Traynor?"

Sam took a deep breath. "More like, no longer afraid to know. I still might not like either in the end. But...I would still like to hear the truth from you."

The Commander glanced over at the closed Port Observation Lounge door, which remained shut. The clamor of well-fed Normandy crew had died down over the last half hour or so, presumably as people hit the sleeper pods or the night shifts took over. And with the poker crew off to sleep off their revelry, it was just Sam and Shepard.

All alone.

*If she wanted to, Shepard could just shut this down with a single bark of an order.*

...does she? Want to shut this down?

"If you think you can handle it," Shepard started slowly as she leaned forward. Her elbows balanced on her knees to allow her fingers to tap each other. Rhythmic. "What do you want to know, Traynor?"

It took a great deal of willpower for Sam to not squirm or shy away. She was determined to meet the Commander's focus with strength. Samantha cleared her throat, and finally asked what she'd been dying to know for three days.

"Did you shoot Mordin Solus?"

"Define 'shoot.'"

"Did you point your weapon at him and fire?"

"Yes." Shepard's gaze was hooded, but she didn't hesitate in her answer. Only continued the tapping of her fingertips.

"Did you miss?"

"Yes."

"On purpose?"

A subtle twitch of dark red eyebrows. Shepard tilted her head. "Does it matter?"

"It does to me."

"Why?"

Why? Why?

"I need to know."

"Again, why?"

Sam inhaled deeply. "I need to know what sort of person you are, Shepard. What sort of... human. Are your allies just tools? Are we all just tools? Things? Are you going to discard us... me... anyone... if the convenience arises?"
"Do you believe my decision was so simple?" Shepard asked. She was trying to restrain a sharpness. The same sharp tone she’d used near the elevator. "That I made it lightly?"

"I asked a favor of you, ma'am, before the mission started, to do what you believed was right. Do you think killing Dr. Solus was the right thing to do?"

The Commander’s cheek twitched this time. "No."

"No?"

"You asked, Traynor. I answered. No, trying to kill Mordin was not right. Or just. Or fair. But... I thought it was necessary. Needed." Her tapping ceased. "I've spent a great deal of time with the prothean, Javik. Have you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Why not?"

It briefly occurred to Sam to lie. But instead... truth. Since she was expecting so much, it was only polite to offer truth in return. "He frightens me. What he represents." What happened to his people when they failed. And what his people did to mine.

"Because he's the last. He is what can and will happen to us if we lose this war. He told me that war is our sculptor, his and mine. And that we are prisoners to its design. Because of that, morality and friendship do not matter now. 'Allies are simply resources to use against the Reapers.'" Shepard's voice dipped low in an impression of the prothean's voice. She did not mimic his accent, which probably would have made the conversation comical.

And this was anything but funny.

"Was that what Mordin was? Or Grunt? Or all of us? Garrus? Joker? Vega?" Liara?

Shepard's eyes flashed wide with anger. And even more, pain. "I'm going to tell you a secret, Traynor. Try not to run off to Allers with it. Since you two are such good friends and all."

Sam winced with the low blow, but she couldn't deny she deserved it. "What secret is that?"

"That I don't have all the answers."

Waiting for some sort of sarcastic punch line, Sam prodded further. "What does that mean?"

"I'm going to tell you two stories, Traynor. Once, around nine months ago, I was on Tuchanka with Dr. Mordin Solus. We discovered an old friend of his, an ex-STG doctor, working with a rival krogan clan to cure the genophage. His methods were barbaric. Dozens of dead females who died painful, terrible deaths. Other species also experimented on and sacrificed to try and break through the genophage genetic sequence. Human included. I asked Mordin what we should do, and he advised that Maelon's data be destroyed. And Maelon, too. Mordin pulled the trigger that time. I was realistic. The experiments were dangerous, and pursuing them would cost lives. Ironically, the lack of data cost Eve hers."

"What is the second story?"

"Once, two and a half years ago, I was idealistic. Like you seem to be. I met a rachni queen on Noveria. She pled her case, and I believed her. I released her. And because of that act, the Reapers found her. Stole her children and unleashed them on the galaxy. My friend, my ally, Grunt, lost his
entire team because of that decision. Grunt very well may die, too. As will countless other species
that have to face the Ravagers that the Reapers managed to get off world. And who knows what my
mercy might wreak in the future? Another krogan-rachni conflict?"

"Why did you save the queen a second time, then?"

"Because I thought I'd try it your way, Traynor," Shepard sighed. She pushed away from her knees
and leaned back against the couch. Propping up an elbow on the armrest, she used her right hand to
massage her temple.

Before Sam could ask what that meant, Shepard continued. "My gut told me that freeing her was the
right thing to do. I didn't listen to my gut on Tuchanka. And now I have to go to sleep every night
hearing Mordin whispering accusations in my ear. Seeing his face as he went up that elevator.
Knowing that I'd failed him. Betrayed him. Disappointed him. That it was his job to clean up my
almost-mistake. And he died for it either way in the end. Everyone else always pays for my mistakes.
Mordin. Eve. Grunt. ...the galaxy, maybe.

"The moral of these stories is this, Traynor: I make decisions every day that get people killed. Would
it make you feel better or worse to know that I've tried to be realistic and idealistic... and still failed?
That I don't know which approach is right or wrong anymore? I make the best decision I can with
what I have available, and even in the end it still might not be enough."

Shepard leaned her head into her fingertips, which dug into her cheekbones and forehead. The
Commander looked so tired. Her green eyes looked sunk into her face, allowing a brief glimpse
behind the mask: despair.

There were so many parts of that Sam wanted to dissect and discuss. Empathy prickled in the back of
her head. It was a powerful longing to want to be consoling.

But only after she got closure on her original concern. "Do you believe curing the krogan was
wrong?"

"I don't know. And I still don't know." The SpecTRe sighed. "I spoke with Eve. She told me her
species would seek balance once they were cured. That the females couldn't bear the shame of being
infertile and often killed themselves. She told me that the genophage forced the krogan to live on
hope alone because there was nothing else. 'There is no reason to exist other than to hope that the
next day will bring change. And if it doesn't, there is always the next,'" Shepard softly quoted while
pressing her fingers to her chin now.

All Sam could say was "Wow." It was a terrifying thought. It only took possible galaxy-wide
extinction for us all to feel like that. We're all like the krogan. Or quarians. Struggling to hope that
our mistakes don't damn us into oblivion.

"She sacrificed herself to save her species. She said she and I were alike, to show the men what
women were capable of. While Mordin kept saying 'it had to be me.' He didn't want anyone else to
cure the genophage but him. It was his mistake to fix. He believes the krogan could follow their own
path. And maybe a strong leader like Wrex, or Grunt, can lead them. I don't know what the future
holds for the krogan. I was afraid of that future. But now? I just want to make sure we all have one."

It was a lot to digest. Honestly, Samantha was slightly overwhelmed by the sheer fact this was the
most she'd ever heard Commander Shepard speak. The lack of admitting guilt over attempting to kill
Mordin stood out to Sam. But the complexity behind the decision was humbling at least. As was the
awe that this comms specialist was allowed such a deep glimpse into Shepard's mind. The trust.
I can see why the established leader of the galactic resistance might be reluctant to voice "I have no idea what needs to be done."

"Shepard? I have to ask. Are we—are you… angry with me? Do you—?" Samantha trailed off. She immediately regretted bring up the salarian deal. She was afraid of Shepard's anger, how sharp and fierce it had been. It made her feel small and childish, after such a Big conversation.

The hands pulled away from that pale chin, and clasped tightly in Shepard's lap. She studied Sam for a moment before finishing the question. "...Do I blame you? For Mordin and Eve?"

The comms specialist gave a small, frightened nod.

And what a strange thing to happen: Shepard softened. Her head tilted, a crease appeared between her eyebrows and she took a deep breath. "Traynor. …Samantha. You are not responsible for the decisions other people—I—make. It was my decision to not tell Wrex about the sabotage, my decision to destroy Maelon's data nearly a year ago, my decision to… let Kaidan die on Virmire."

Her voice cracked at Kaidan's name. She cleared her throat. *Not a subject to linger on.*

"You did what you thought was right, Traynor. And you were right. Eve's sacrifice wasn't in vain. Or Mordin's. I have to live with that. And hopefully believe that. And keep pushing forward. It's all any of us can do now."

Sam swallowed. She wanted so badly to reach out and clasp Shepard's hand. To be comforting. To make it all right.

She... *She doesn't just carry a suit of armor and a shotgun. She's carrying all those lives on her shoulders. Mordin. Eve. Kaidan. And those are just the ones I know about. The battarians from the Alpha Relay? Civilians from Elysium? The colonists abducted by Collectors? How many others? How does she stand up straight? And keep going?*

Wincing to think of her Horizon friends and loved ones on Shepard's back, the comms specialist decided to change the subject. It had been something she'd wanted to bring up earlier, but the timing didn't seem right.

*Well, it doesn't seem right now, but still.*

"Thank you for this, Shepard. Ma'am. I know you don't owe me an explanation, or anything else, but I just wanted you to know I appreciate your honesty and candor. And I don't know about you, but I feel better. Not worse."

Shepard scoffed, but hunched forward to return to the briefly abandoned chess game. After making a move, she asked, "You feel better that your CO admitted to making it up as she goes?"

Samantha smiled warmly as she answered the capture of her knight with a cautious check. "It's not ideal, certainly. But at least you *look* bloody sure of yourself. Appearances are half the battle, are they not?"

Blocking the check with a rook, the Commander traced a fingertip along the scarring of her cheeks. She sighed. "If only the appearance wasn't so banged up and scarred."

"Oh hush, ma'am. I've seen you look stunning," Stupid Sam purred lightly as she tapped at the chess GUI.
"Reign it in, you. Just get to the bloody point."

"By the way, where did you get that dress you wore to Purgatory? The black one?"

Shepard pushed a pawn in towards the white king for a check of her own. She chewed her cheek a moment. "Uhh... I found it in on top of a stack of my personal effects. An old friend, Kasumi Goto, had purchased a few things for me back during the old SR-2, I think. If you're looking for what boutique it's from, I couldn't tell you."

"It didn't happen to come in a red satchel, did it?"

"Why?" Shepard asked suspiciously.

Sam kept her face a mask as her queen swept away the offending pawn. "Oh, nothing, just that it was mine. I brought it aboard before Earth was hit. I'd... had a date lined up before... Well, before everything."

...Izzy...

Shepard's apology immediately derailed that train of thought."Oh. Oh! Oh shit. I'm sorry, Traynor. It looked a lot like one Kasumi got me for a mission. You and Allison Gunn have similar tastes."

"Allison Gunn?"

"My alias for the mission. Sophisticated and classy mercenary leader. Much nicer than Commander Shepard."

"Hmmm!

...Shut up!

"Is it Allison Gunn's birthday, too?"

The stunned look on Commander Shepard's face was priceless. She stuttered demands to know how Sam knew her birthday was April 11. The comms specialist just waved a dismissive hand that "everyone knew that, of course."

"Well, I don't have much to offer, ma'am, on an Alliance salary. But if you'd like, since you already seemed so terribly cozy in it, I give you permission to keep my favorite black dress. Happy birthday."

Not fancying being a thief, Shepard tried to weasel out of it. To apologize more. To offer to return it. But Sam wouldn't hear any of it. She had already mentally mourned the loss of the dress, but knew it had found a good (shapely) home. It made Sam genuinely happy for Shepard to keep it.

Especially... if she wears it again.

The gift also served a far more insidious purpose. It flustered Shepard into making a mistake. She'd been doing so well, too. But a misplaced bishop allowed Sam an opening.

Checkmate.

"My word, Shepard. It's almost as though you wanted to spare your pawns the indignity of living under my regime."

"In real life, that tactic would have worked," Shepard growled unhappily.
"In real life, one also doesn't move on an eight-by-eight square grid."

Shepard pouted slightly, but she leaned back thoughtfully. "You know what I mean. The pawns are infantry. A good infantry line, like the krogan, can take a charge like that."

*Oh, so they're a "good infantry line" now, are they?*

*Traynor. Don't ruin the mood. You've come so far.*

*You're right. It'll be hard to forget, but ...I can forgive. Some day.*

"That reminds me of a joke. What's the difference between Commander Shepard and a krogan?"

The SpecTRe tilted her head expectantly. Sam continued. "One is an unstoppable juggernaut of head butting destruction..."

Shepard smirked at the insinuation. She jumped in before Sam could finish the punch line. "And the other doesn't have a smart-ass comm officer to keep her in line."

A rush of delight tingled along Sam's jaw. "Oooh! That's even better than the number-of-testicles punch line."

The two women sat in easy silence for a moment. Shepard looked relaxed. Calm. And there was something around the edges of her serene face that sent an odd jitter through Sam's chest. The Commander smiled warmly, and conceded the game with a hand wave.

"I'm glad you didn't run back to the lab, Traynor."

Samantha clasped her hands and gave them a brief shake of triumph. It calmed the jitter some. "What do you say, ma'am? Rematch? Best two out of three?"

Shepard tilted her head. Though her red bangs fell across her eyes, they couldn't shadow the sparkling green behind them. A curl appeared at the corner of her mouth, pulling her cheek into a soft, lopsided smile.

"Hell yes. Next time, Traynor. Next time."

---

**Chapter End Notes**

I had had HAD to change the line where Sam says "GUI interface." She's a smart tech geek who would probably hate a person who is basically saying "General User Interface interface." It's like saying "ATM machine." Ugh. I also tweaked Traynor's email to Shepard. I know: blasphemy. It wasn't quite getting the message across that I needed. And in the game part (for those of you who played chess rather than shower antics), Traynor was using a datapad while Shepard clearly has a holo keyboard... Why? I don't know. Fixed.
"Are you all right, Samantha?"

"I'm all right."

"You're sure? Sammy, we saw the news. Are you really okay?"

"I'm really fine, mum."

The claustrophobia of the top bunk in the Crew Deck Quarters made Sam feel like her mother was right in her face. An Omni-tool window was about three inches from Sam's eyes and balanced above her left forearm. Her right arm was propping up the comms specialist's chin as a makeshift pillow.

"Was it—was it the Reapers? Did they… attack the Citadel?" Priya Suresh-Traynor's voice grew hushed. Geoffrey Traynor could be heard quietly lecturing his wife in the background, "You know that's always classified, honey. She can't tell us details."

"I can see how you might think that, after everything going on. But no. Not Reapers," Samantha sighed into her wrist. She stopped just short of wishing it had been Reapers, but knew that was a stupid, terrible lie. "When the ANN says 'the Normandy stopped an attack on the Citadel,' rarely does that imply 'Samantha Traynor, Senior Comms Specialist, charged in while felling enemies left and right with her rapier wit.' So I mean it when I say I'm uninjured."

Priya was in no mood for jokes. She scolded back, "Don't be glib, Sammy."

"Sorry, mum. What the ANN really means is 'Commander Shepard and her strike team stopped an attack on the Citadel.' My meager contribution was done via the safety of a docked Normandy. I still have yet to get permission to go ashore and check out the damage. Everyone else put in their request ages before I did, so I'm at the very bottom of the shore leave queue."

This started an argument between the Mother and Father Traynor while the Child Traynor could only stare despondently at her arm. Which had a spot of drool, now that she noticed a slight dampness there. It was also a little hard to breathe, sprawled out across the bunk on her stomach.

Priya said that if the Citadel could be attacked, no place was safe. They should go to Sanctuary at the
other end of the planet and wait this thing out. Geoffrey disagreed. The Alliance was taking precautions. Limited military presence in Horizon space to not draw attention, but close enough to summon transporters should the colony be attacked.

"You call that a contingency plan? Wait to be reaped and just hope the Alliance is quick enough to save most of us?" Priya argued, her voice growing higher and louder.

Geoffrey was more patient. "Maybe we should go forward with meeting my sister and her family on the Citadel. Take some time away. We'd be closer to Sammy at least."

"You mean, go stay on the Citadel that was just attacked by God knows what?!"

The younger Traynor couldn't exactly fault her mother's skepticism. Especially the Alliance's painfully slow response to what had just transpired on the Citadel. But Sam wasn't about to say that out loud. She wanted to be reassuring. But the information about Cerberus involvement hadn't been released to the public yet.

"Is Aunt Maggie here, then?" Sam asked, trying to change the subject.

Geoffrey's face pushed to the front of the vid window. "Not yet, sprog. She's en route last I checked. They had to evacuate from Terra Nova last week. It took a bit for your uncle Kirk to come down from the X57 site and gather everyone up." He turned back to Priya. "But Terra Nova is faring better than most colonies, probably because of the Alliance precautions. They've even been talking about trying to retake the planet from the few Reapers that landed, even. We should stay put, sweetie."

"I still think we should go to that Sanctuary bunker. At least we'd still be near our home," Priya grumbled as she pushed her hair back in frustration.

Her parents asked if there was anything she could tell them, but Sam could only repeat the standard Alliance talking points: the turian-krogan alliance was being honored and in full swing. Once the krogan regrouped on Tuchanka and the turians received a good-faith batch of troops from Urdnot Wrex, both races would start bolstering the human fleets. Her father seemed relieved by the news, but her mother was still pessimistic and worried.

"If anyone can win this war, mum, Commander Shepard can," Sam smiled encouragingly. She was surprised to hear herself say such a thing, and almost as surprised that she actually believed it.

The Traynors signed off on well enough terms with the usual I-love-yous, though Sam's mother did say she was resolved to find out more about this Sanctuary place. Sam promised her mother she, too, would look into what the Alliance said about Sanctuary. When I have time.

Which is shockingly hard to come by after a coup d'etat on the bloody Citadel.

The Citadel coup had been a terrifying development. And C-Sec was impossibly lucky that the Normandy SR-2 had picked just the right moment to try and dock right as everything went insane.

It had started off ordinary enough. Sam was at her CIC console, reviewing the feeds again. She had been making a mental checklist of all the things she needed to scope out when they landed. First on the list being: get permission to disembark. It's still early yet, but still. Second, I should see if there's an upgrade to the chess board I bought. Bloody thing keeps saying I have to register the purchase. Hate all that registration bullshit, it's just so—

And then she'd gotten a page from Joker. Just a simple ping to her console.

[Message received: "Check the control tower. Not getting any response."]
That's not even possible. Air traffic control is always there.

Except it wasn't.

Not a peep. Inbound or outbound. There wasn't even interference, it was just… nothing.

Joker tried to request clearance to land again, and again nothing.

Sam and the pilot both had the same idea at the same time: scan emergency channels. Which, on the Citadel, could be a crapshoot. With a very dense population, some wards maintained emergency channels regardless of emergency. Very irritating to a comms specialist probing for serious problems.

EDI was the one who found a hidden signal being broadcast from a storefront on the Presidium. The ship AI patched it immediately through to Joker, who greeted the voice like an old friend.

Commander Shepard's comm tag suddenly joined the channel. Sam hadn't realized the SpecTRe was even in the cockpit.

Also on Sam's list of things she didn't realize: the emergency signal was from an IP that Samantha hadn't recognized. Mostly because it listed last name first.

"Krios, T."

"Thane," Shepard said warmly, but with an edge of concern. "What's going on?"

So.

Thané.

His voice was layered and gravelly. But the man didn't waste a single word. He explained the situation concisely. A coup from Cerberus. They controlled the docks, were attacking C-Sec and were nearly in full control of the station's command center. Ashley Williams had gone to protect the Council while Thane chose to assist C-Sec. Both needed Shepard's help.

They wasted no time deploying Shepard, Garrus and Vega in the Kodiak. The shuttle camera showed a grim sight: firefights had broken out all along the path to C-Sec. Police and guards were engaged in urban warfare with troopers wearing silver and orange. An occasional Atlas mech stomped through shallow defenses, mowing down turians and humans in a barrage of bullets. Smoke billowed out of hallways and burned out police cars, shrouding the attackers further as they pressed their advantage.

Vega growled in Sam's comm already, eager to get down there and kick some ass. Garrus was more concerned about his former employer. Shepard said nothing. She hadn't said a word when she had passed by Sam in the CIC to the elevator, either.

But Sam could still remember the way the woman's eyes had glowed with focus. There was a hard line between her brows. The slight bulge of a vein in her forehead. She made brief eye contact with Sam before hitting the button for the Shuttle Bay, but didn't communicate anything other than calm, cool focus.

Needless to say, Samantha pitied whoever got in the Commander's way when she looked like that.

The Angry Commander made for some very short battles. The briefly overrun docks were soon littered with Cerberus corpses. An injured "Cmdr Bailey, AO" was rescued and soon became Sam's new best friend. His credentials as head of C-Sec allowed a very eager comms specialist deep access into the heart of C-Sec communications.
While most of the main channels were shut down, Commander Bailey's newly created channels allowed Sam to bypass the regular network. It was soon a full time job rerouting officers requesting assistance. Their IPs were easy to identify with the same numeric heading, and the formerly blind police force was nearly back online.

Any attempts from the Cerberus engineers to shut down Bailey's overrides was met with a triple team led by Samantha, EDI and Specialist Xian in the war room.

So busy were the comms specialists that it was difficult to keep an eye on what was actually going on. Something about the salarian Councilor knew this was going to happen. Valern had been separated from the other Councilors to meet with the C-Sec Executor to prosecute the human Councilor, Donnel Udina.

An overheard conversation between Garrus and Shepard was almost cryptic to Sam.

"I miss Tali," Shepard suddenly said. An odd non sequitur considering she'd just finished taking down a dozen Cerberus soldiers.

Tali... Tali... Who is—

"Ah, our favorite quarian engineer. You miss her bubbly personality? Her charming accent? Her way with combat drones? …Or are you referring to her portable size that fits neatly into air vents?" Garrus asked with his usual, amused charm.

Ohhh… More SR-2 nostalgia. I need to consult my flow chart.

Shepard smirked back. "Oh, all of those things, of course. But her vent crawling would be the most useful at this exact moment."

"Never underestimate that accent, Shepard."

Vega was offended that he was the third wheel in this little trip down memory lane. "If you ladies are done daydreaming, we're at the Executor's office."

The fighting that followed was almost too chaotic for Sam to keep track of.

An assassin. Suddenly two assassins. One of the assassins was good? One of the assassins was Thane. The Cerberus assassin stabbed Thane and fled. Shepard followed after the man, vengeance in her voice. He still escaped.

Sam was surprised at how relieved she was when she heard Thane's voice over the comm again.

"…I have time. Catch him."

It was such an odd thing to say. Does he... does he know he's dying? Sam was worried, but she didn't have access to the drell's biometrics to see how bad it was. To… tell Shepard how he was. Because the Commander had nearly been in hysterics when she demanded medical attention for Thane.

But she couldn't stop. Commander Shepard couldn't just stand there and take care of her friend. She pressed on. Through aerial attacks, a crash landing, and more Cerberus. So much Cerberus.

How had they gotten so many on the Citadel without anyone noticing? There were probably a hundred soldiers. Two hundred? So few compared to the 200,000 C-Sec forces on the space station, but apparently enough to cripple an entire space station.
Sam had sought to do everything she could to delay or hinder those Cerberus forces in her own special way. Garbage data to clog up their channels. Selective interference by fragmenting signals with viruses. The cherry on top was when she rerouted the emergency dispatch into the channels Cerberus did control. Suddenly their nice, quiet network was receiving the entire influx of the emergency dispatch call center.

*Good luck sorting out your sons of bitches from the thousands of emergency calls the Citadel gets a minute.* …*Bastards.* But Sam wasn't a total monster. EDI helped rig a program that would divert serious emergency calls back to the hospital and fire departments. But in the meantime, it was an amusing diversion to see Cerberus try to fix.

Commander Bailey had been doing all the heavy lifting guiding Shepard and company through the Citadel, including the legwork involved in reprogramming the elevators. So the Normandy comms specialist had been able to focus on her work knowing Shepard was in capable hands. It wasn't until Samantha heard an unfamiliar, yet familiar, female voice did she notice Shepard's team had reached the Council.

"Shepard?!

Jumping to the Commander's hardsuit camera, the scene unfolding was none too encouraging. A shuttle behind the three Councilors was in flames. The Lieutenant Commander, looking well and clad in a new uniform, had a pistol trained right on Shepard (*and, through the camera view, it felt like the pistol was pointed at me, too*).

Udina shouted that Shepard must be with Cerberus. For a stupid second, Sam forgot that he was the current lead suspect in the cause of this whole mess. Because it just sounded like a stupid mistake.

*Shepard? With Cerberus? That could not be more absurd. Just… just explain it.*

"Ash. You better listen. Stand down," Commander Shepard growled, but her shotgun was still poised in the camera view.

*That is not explaining it. That is the opposite of explaining things.*

Ashley Williams (*shockingly*) wasn't convinced. She took a sidestep, heroically placing more of herself between Shepard's barrel and the Council. "I can't do that."

A few long seconds passed. Sam didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until the camera view shifted. A glance over to Garrus followed by another to Vega. The hand gripping the shotgun barrel tightened some.

*Oh God. Is she signaling for them to attack? Oh God oh God.*

*Not again.*

*Please.*

*Not again.*

Suddenly the barrel disappeared from view.

"Would I do this if I wasn't dead certain, Ash? If I weren't right?" The view jostled as Shepard took a few steps forward. Her voice in the comm was icy and authoritative. "Udina's behind this attack. The salarian Councilor confirmed it. There are Cerberus soldiers in that elevator shaft behind us. If you open that door, they'll kill you all."
Well, it sounded plausible to Sam, anyway. Councilor Udina scoffed, quipping that Shepard never did anything with proof. The asari Councilor was less skeptical, and the turian Councilor sided with her. It all seemed to be going well until Udina indicated he was going to override the elevator lock.

A new barrel popped into the first-person view. A narrower red pistol with a scope. With Councilor Udina in its sights.

*Oh God. Somehow this is getting worse.*

Ashley's head bobbed forward as she blocked Udina from Shepard's wrath. Her dark brown eyes were confused and fearful.

"Just stand down, Shepard," the second SpecTRe warned. "You don't want to be shot by your own marine."

*Oh God.*

Shepard had to choose this moment to be snide. "You find a big shot human to defend and suddenly you have teeth, is that it?" Her tone shifted from scathing to stern. "You were standing beside me when Anderson said Earth needed us."

*Oh God. Is this Shepard's idea of helping?*

*She's… she's going to shoot Williams. I only met her twice. She believed in me to help protect the Normandy. And said I could stay in her hospital room because I brought booze. It was a beautifully brief time.*

*God oh God God God… Please don't kill her.*

But strangely enough, Shepard's hostility actually worked.

The Lieutenant Commander's finger loosened on the trigger. She softened slightly. "He said 'you're our one chance,'" Williams quoted.

"I don't give a damn about you trusting me or not trusting me, Ashley." The Commander's pistol wavered. "So if you don't trust me, trust him. Respect Anderson's decision if you can't respect mine. We're in this for him. And Earth. …I serve the Alliance, same as you. What was our motto after we found Rear Admiral Kahoku on Binthu three years ago? Our rally cry?"

Both women's pistols were synchronized as they lowered to point at the floor. Ashley stood up straight, a fierce gleam in her eyes. Two alto voices echoed the same phrase. A familiar phrase that Sam knew well, too.

"Fucking Cerberus."

And just like that, Williams spun on her heel and swiftly moved between Councilor Udina and the turian and asari Councilors, her gun now trained on the human.

"Udina. Step back from the console."

He did not oblige. Both SpecTRes fired within a second of each other when Udina pulled a gun on Councilor Tevos, who attempted to reason with him. Two spots of red, less than a centimeter apart, appeared right above Udina's heart. He dropped to the ground and lay still.

A ping from Sam's console showed an elevator on the move. It whipped past the one stalled just a
few floors below the whole rooftop showdown. At first the comms specialist was terrified, then she sighed with relief when "Bailey, AO" sent her a NavPoint for the Normandy to dock. *It's the cavalry.*

Another ping from EDI indicated that the Cerberus lockdown had been overridden. C-Sec Headquarters had been retaken by the proper authorities, though they were none too pleased about the influx of dispatch calls they were now receiving. They threatened Samantha with tampering and hacking charges, but a terse memo from Armando-Owen Bailey immediately silenced the temporarily inconvenienced C-Sec comms supervisor.

Sam apologized again and sent over a consolidated list of all received emergency calls, categorized by severity, location, and time received along with precinct availability synchronized to their route schedule software.

They wanted to know if Sam's program could be licensed. She could only smile.

The following few hours should have been a relief, but they weren't. The smoldering Citadel was a stark reminder of how vulnerable everyone was. Compounding that was Joker announcing that Shepard would be returning. Thane, the heroic drell that had fought off the salarian Councilor's would-be assassin, was dead.

Sam had retired to the Crew Deck on her break. She had a sudden, overpowering need to call her mother. She wanted to hear her parents' voices. To tell them she loved them.

It had mostly worked.

Pushing off the bunk and rolling to her side, Samantha sighed and stretched. Before, her worry over her parents' safety had been suppressed. The busyness of her work and the lack of threat to Horizon made it easy to ignore. But an attack at one of the most protected places in the galaxy... by Not Reapers but a human organization...

*Nowhere was safe.*

"Hey, Traynor. Purgatory. Tonight. You in?"

"I—what?" Sam stuttered at the intense face of a Diana Allers that had appeared in the Crew Deck Quarters doorway.

The reporter was dressed to kill. Sleek black skirt, tall heels, and a stylish bolero jacket that lifted her cleavage to impressive new heights. Floating just behind Allers was her familiar camera drone.

"Oh... no, sorry. I can't."

"Why the hell not?" Allers demanded as she stalked behind Sam around the corner to the kitchen.

"Shore leave log is full. I don't have permission to leave the ship until tomorrow at the earliest." At Diana's disappointed "tsk" noise, Samantha amended. "Oh, don't be so sad. You'll get forehead wrinkles. We can go tomorrow night. Tonight I can catch up on my correspondence. Or practice my chess defense gambits. Or unravel the mysteries of the universe."

"Mmm-hmm. Sounds boring as shit. Whereas I am going to be the lead anchor on ANN Tonight to report the Citadel Coup," Allers grinned triumphantly. "Check out this sound byte."

Pouring a glass of water, Sam sipped it slowly while the prettified reporter fired up her Omni-tool. *Glad to see a little thing like a coup attempt doesn't dampen her spirits.*
"So… the rachni being back. That must get your mouth watering."

"Hmm? ...Can't do a story," Diana sighed as she continued her tapping at her wrist. "That's as classified as it gets."

"I suppose it would cause a panic. But wouldn't the news drive up recruiting?" Sam was more asking herself. ...Would an attempt to take over the Citadel drive up recruiting?

"It might also piss off a krogan with diplomatic immunity. No thanks."

"Oh, right. They tend to overreact to things slightly."

Diana scoffed slightly as she glanced up at Sam. "Just a little. Think 'yelling fire in a crowded area,' but switch 'yelling' with 'shooting.' Not something I want to be responsible for just to have the first scoop. Let an idiot like al-Jilani or, hell, even Temmi try that out.

"Now this… just look at this." Allers sidled up next to the comms specialist, thrusting her wrist between them. Sam's eyes couldn't help but wander south. She told herself she was just wondering what type of bra Diana used to pull off that sort of… performance.

Commander Shepard stood in her cabin. She was still in her armor with blood spattered across her cheeks. Diana gloated that she had demanded the interview, to inspire vigilance against other Cerberus sleeper agents. So everyone would watch over and protect each other.

Sam was more interested in Shepard's eyes. They were certainly bright and fiery. But they were glazed slightly. Detached. Still, she didn't stutter a syllable.

["Thanks for your time, Commander. This is Diana Allers for Battlespace. Good night, and stay strong."]

Lifting her hands to politely golfclap the reporter's victory at securing a willing Shepard interview, Sam froze when the recording didn't stop there.

["...Be careful, Commander. You keep feeding me like this and I'll follow you home."]

What?!

It was the entire thing that wrenched in Sam's gut. The veritable purr in Allers' voice. Her dolled up appearance that set off every curve she had (and probably created a few she didn't). The swaying, come-hither body language. It was… it was...

Diana uttered a short "Oops!" and reached to turn off her Omni-tool screen. But instead, Samantha grabbed her right wrist (a little harder than she'd meant to) and held it still to watch the entire off-the-record chat.
To Sam's slight relief, Shepard looked confused. Also, tired. But she still said lightly, ["Looks like you already have. What happens now?"]

Now Sam, she took that question as "What happens now with the interview?" …right? That's a perfectly reasonable assumption.

…Rather than Shepard was flirting with bloody Allers?
…Right?
That's not how Allers took it on camera. Her purr intensified and she leaned in closer, flicking strands of chestnut hair behind her ear. ["You gave me a good interview, Commander. That's all I need."]

The camera bobbed backwards to follow Allers to the elevator. It captured her swaying, superior walk and her flirty hand wave. ["…tonight, anyway."]

The transmission ended.

Samantha's eyes slowly trailed along Allers' wrist, to her shoulder, up her neck and to her eyes. That once furtive glance to her breasts was a distant memory.

Diana’s mouth was a straight line, perpendicular to the confused line in between her brows. "Can you let me go? …what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Don't. Don't do it.

"What the hell, Allers?"

Yanking her hand out of Sam's grasp, the reporter took a step back. "What?" Allers demanded sharply.

What do you mean "what?"


"What do you mean, 'what?'" Sam barked back shrilly.
"What the hell was that with Commander Shepard?"

...Are you even listening to me?

Diana rubbed her left thumb and index finger over where Sam's grip had dug in a little too hard. "What? That won't be in the final cut, obviously. And I was just testing the waters. Totally harmless. I don't see what the big deal is."

All Sam could do was scowl. And try to stop her brain from scolding her. Her heart rate had suddenly spiked, leading to more rapid breathing.

You keep this up, Traynor, and you're going to have an asthma attack. Do you want to explain to Dr. Chakwas you flipped a bitch over Allers flirting with Shepard? Because you can't even explain this to yourself.

Suddenly, the reporter stepped in front of Sam. She put her hands on her hips. "I know what this is about," she said knowingly.

"You do?"

"Yes."

The reporter's flair for the dramatic was irritating. She paused for a good ten seconds.

"Well, let's have it then. The suspense is killing me, Allers."

Grinning smugly, Diana waved her hand dismissively. "You're such a stickler for protocol. You literally can't imagine going outside of regs for two seconds. Maybe you'd find out you liked it if you took a few risks."

...wait, what?

I think she's calling you a stuffed shirt, Traynor. With no imagination. How wrong she is.

...wait, what?

"Plus, I'm not an Alliance soldier. Civilian-class, baby. Fraternization doesn't apply to me," Allers pulled the hand close to her eyes to inspect the nails. Her manicure was impeccable. She carried on disinterestedly. "So no one is tampering with your precious order of things, Traynor. ...unless Shepard asks. Then I reserve the right to change my mind. I can handle a little crazy. Especially when it looks like that." She licked her lips for emphasis. Sam did not find that sexy or funny.

It also struck a resentful chord in Sam's mind. "You think Shepard is crazy?"

"What, weight of the galaxy on her shoulders and everything that can possibly go wrong is? If Shepard isn't a little crazy, she's hiding it really well." Made-up eyebrows raised as Diana blinked lazily back at Sam. "Anyway, just relax, Sam. We'll find you some bad decisions at Purgatory tomorrow night. You'll still have the chain of command waiting when you get back." Allers wiggled her fingers in a silly wave before heading for the elevator. She had work to do.

Sam could only stand in the middle of the kitchen squeezing her empty glass. She wanted to ask why Shepard wasn't an option for a bad decision. She wanted to know why Allers' first thought was that Sam was protective of her boss, her job. Rather than because Sam was...
God dammit.

I'm attracted to Shepard.

...Finally.

What?

We've all been waiting with bated breath for that obvious revelation to see the light of day. Because you've been in danger of boiling over for about... what? Three weeks now? It seems like an eternity.

Shut it.

You're the one who nearly had a panic attack of insecurity because your dear friend's first instinct wasn't that you want to shag your CO.

Oh God, the floodgates have opened.

Sam decided right then she needed to go do some work. Surely there was work to do.

Right, because that's been working so well so far.

The elevator was agonizingly slow considering no one was even on it. Algorithms were forcibly running through Sam's head as she listed again all the things she needed to check into on the Citadel. Updates to existing suites. Maybe a new security patch. Some updated cabling if there wasn't a run on it.

A neutral voice suddenly whispered at the back of Sam's mind: *I haven't had sex in over a month.*

*What? Why? Why why why* would I think that?

The voice didn't answer. It was just some random observation her brain decided to make. She decided to stick with her tried and true method: ignore it. Back in the CIC, the Normandy was nearly empty. Only one Specialist sat in one of the side consoles going over calibration suites. Logging into her console, Samantha decided to check the shore leave log. It was quite substantial. And reinforced that she should have put in a request ages ago.

["Logged: T'Soni, L is ashore. Last tagged location: Presidium Commons.
Logged: Vakarian, G is ashore. Last tagged location: C-Sec Headquarters.
Logged: Moreau, J is ashore. Attended by EDI mobile unit. Last tagged location: Purgatory.
Logged: Vega, J is ashore. Last tagged location: Docks: Holding Area.
Logged: Cortez, S is ashore. Last tagged location: Docks: Holding Area.
Logged: Xian, C is ashore. Last tagged location: Tayseri Ward.
Logged: Campbell, S is ashore. Last tagged location: Human Embassy.
Logged: Westmoreland, B is ashore. Last tagged location: C-Sec Headquarters.
Logged: Donnelly, K is ashore. Last tagged location: Purgatory.
Logged: Daniels, G is ashore. Last tagged location: Presidium Commons.
Logged: Adams, G is ashore. Last tagged location: Kithoi Ward.
Logged: Douglas, I is ashore. Last tagged location: Tayseri Ward.
Logged: Gentry, J is ashore. Last tagged location: Zakera Ward.
Logged: Mason, B is ashore. Last tagged location: Human Embassy.
Logged: Chakwas, K is ashore. Last tagged location: Huerta Memorial.
Logged: Rashad, M is ashore. Last tagged location: Presidium Commons.

Logged: Rashad, M is ashore. Last tagged location: Presidium Commons."

Logged: Rashad, M is ashore. Last tagged location: Presidium Commons.
Skimming over the long list again, and eyeballing the additional names of people still with unapproved requests, Samantha sighed deeply. Even Javik, the 50,000 year old story-of-the-century, was going to be on the Citadel before Sam. She wouldn't be getting off the ship anytime soon, but hopefully at least once before they shipped off again.

There was an absent name from this list: Commander Shepard. She was recorded as back aboard the Normandy.

A shipwide memo suddenly appeared in Sam's inbox. Composed by none other than Commander Shepard. An invitation (no obligation) to attend a memorial service for Thane Krios. Time and date were pending, still. Likely the next time they returned to the Citadel.

It was a truly terrible email. It meandered for too long. Shepard didn't seem to know what to say. She thanked the crew for their service, but then demanded vigilance. Before the comms specialist knew what she was doing, her fingers had wandered across her console. To the intercom button.

"Commander? Are you there?"

Nearly a minute passed. Sam had no idea what she was expecting. Or what her stupid fingers had just done.

"Traynor," came the terse reply.

Sam's mouth flapped open. She hadn't planned this far ahead. Or for a conversation at all.

Luckily, Shepard spared Sam the agony of improvisation. "If you're not doing anything, I've got a few hours free. Would you like to come up for that rematch?" Her tone was surprisingly airy and neutral.

"I—yes. Yes I would, ma'am."

Only through hazy autopilot did the scatterbrained comms specialist manage to go to her locker and grab the chess holo disc. It wasn't totally successful, because she did end up going too far and getting off at Engineering first, then wandered into Life Support on the Crew Deck where there was nothing there. It took fifteen long minutes for Samantha to find her way at the Captain's Cabin door.

Sam's trepidation over entering Shepard's cabin was this writhing, jittery thing in her gut. It was so strong that she entered the cabin with her eyes closed, fearful to find the entire place in shambles. She remembered the Commander's rage on Sanctum only too vividly, and was bracing for a storm. Hazarding one eye open as the door swished shut behind her, Sam saw—!

Nothing.

The aquarium threw a blue, shimmering glow across a bare floor. There were no bloodstains, fist-sized dents/cracks, or model ships tossed around by a Hurricane Shepard. It was more or less exactly as Sam remembered it from her very brief visit over a month ago.

A second later, Shepard appeared at the foot of the set of steps leading to her living area. Clad in her trademark N7 workout outfit, she did not resemble the vengeful valkyrie Sam had overhead on the comms during the coup attempt. She simply looked like a very drained Commander Shepard. Other than a touch of redness to her eyes, there was no evidence Shepard was anything less than 100%
fine.

There was also no crinkling smile of greeting. Or handshake. Or hug.

...really, Traynor?

Shepard simply beckoned Sam over to the living area, and waved a hand over the L-shaped couch to offer a seat. Sam obliged, and squeezed the small disc uncertainly. The Commander sat in the neighboring chair and settled in. But she only stared at the comms specialist thoughtfully.

No, not at Sam. She was staring through Sam.

Samantha cleared her throat. It had become surprisingly difficult to generate the saliva necessary to speak. "Anyway, ma'am. I recall you delivered something that closely resembled a challenge."

"Hoping to, anyway," the woman retorted. There was a brief competitive twinkle in her eye, but it quickly dulled. She looked far away.

Shepard's chess game was dreadful. Sam started over twice because the Commander's focus was so bad that Sam checkmated in like three moves. There was also an oppressive fog in the room. Neither woman was able to speak, though for markedly different reasons. Diana Allers' smug taunting kept drifting through Sam's mind, making her scowl more than once. Shepard would notice and look concerned, but Sam just shrugged it away.

While Shepard... she didn't look sad. She didn't look like anything. It baffled Sam. All the things Jack had said about Thane. Their closeness. It wasn't reflected at all in the stoic, though slightly messy, Shepard. All the questions in Sam's head started to build. They each shrieked for dominance, as did her own questions to herself that she had kept silent for far too long.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Do I not look all right?"

"You look fine. Boy, do you. ...oh God. "That's what worries me."

The Commander scowled at her most recent rook loss. She glanced up at Sam from her hunched position in her swiveling chair. "How am I supposed to look?" Glancing down at her outfit, Shepard then shrugged. "I'm off-duty. I let my hair down. Can't be straight-laced all the time."

No, that's not what I—Sam sighed deeply at herself. Where did the impression come from that I'm such a turian about protocol?

"That's not what I meant, Commander. I—I heard about Thane."

No reaction.

"I heard you and he were close." When Shepard looked up sharply, Sam hastily explained, "From Garrus. And Jack. I'm sorry about what happened to him."

"He was a good man," the SpecTRe said automatically.

"That's what they said." Sam paused, but it was a terribly generic thing for both of them to say. "They said he was special to you. Would you... like to talk about it?"

Shepard thrust an impatient hand at the board, gesturing your turn.
But... she didn't say no, Sam noticed. She decided to simply wait. She was a patient person.

The chess game wasn't nearly as lively as the first had been. Shepard was clearly distracted. And making mistakes. But Sam didn't want the game to end. She had said "best two out of three" before, and if she won, the game would be over. They'd never discussed another round. Maybe Shepard was bored of chess. Maybe this was the last game they'd ever play.

So Sam waited. She made little mistakes. She twisted her face over-dramatically to suppress false anger and glee. It felt silly manipulating a game that should have been over 20 minutes ago. And yet, here they were. Until...

"How old am I?"

I...what? "Beg pardon?"

Shepard repeated the question more slowly, though not condescendingly. "How old am I?"

Is this a trick? "Umm... 2154... 32?"

"Am I?"

I don't even... "Are you what, ma'am?"

"Am I 32?"

Sam straightened in her seat and put her hands on her hips. Not terribly imposing from a sitting position on a couch. But it was all she had. "I don't understand what you're asking me, ma'am. Math says if you are born in 2154 and it's 2186, you are 32 years old."

It was a few long seconds before Shepard answered. "I don't feel 32. I didn't even get to feel 30." She paused again. That faraway look. "Thane never told me his birthday. I asked once. He said he might not see it, and it was pointless to place such power on a distant day when all the power should be in the moments he was living now."

"That's... a beautiful way of looking at things." Sam thought a moment. She gingerly asked, "...why did he not think he would live to see it? Because he was an assassin?"

"That." A curl pulled at Shepard's mouth. She seemed to alternate between liking and hating this conversation. Now she hated it. Her voice grew sad. "...and... he had Kepral's Syndrome." At Sam's confused nose-wrinkle, Shepard elaborated. "It's a drell disease. From living on the hanar homeworld. Inoperable. He was in the final stages. Kai Leng's blade was a merciful end to an otherwise painful remaining time." She sounded bitter.

"You'll get him, Shepard." It seems like a better thing to say than "I'm sorry."

Fire sparked back in her eyes. She didn't even need to say "Yes. I will." It was a given.

"What was he like? ...Thane, not Kai Leng."

The mention of the Cerberus assassin set Shepard's teeth to grinding. But she softened.

"He's... he was... I don't know." She scratched at her neck. She seemed a little uncomfortable. "He was just... solid. He understood what it was like to come apart at the seams. To be left with nothing. To feel like nothing. To feel like you didn't belong in your own skin. And, after all that, still keep going. Make something of yourself when every instinct tells you it's pointless."
"Is that how you feel, Shepard?" Sam kicked herself for the psychologist-esque tone of voice she'd used. *Dr. Harper would be thrilled. I should throw out the "one day at a time" gem and see if Shepard kicks my ass out of her cabin.*

Shepard countered with a question of her own. "Have you ever felt sick?"

It was such a random, left field question that Sam didn't have any coherent reaction. "I... uh... right now? No? I mean... should I?"

Shepard's elbows were balanced on her knees. She rocked to the left and right in her chair slightly, a nervous tick. Her hands were propping up her chin. She pressed further. "Like you feel wrong inside? You don't know whether you're going to be sick or not, and it's the not knowing that feels especially wrong."

Sam tried to lighten this very confusing line of questioning with honest humor. "Commander, as a lactose intolerant with a number of ridiculous allergies, I can assure you: yes. Yes I have."

"That's how I feel all the time."

"Come again?"

"I feel wrong all the time," Shepard confessed. Her hands pulled away from her chin, and her fingers started to rub her palms. "Whatever Cerberus did to me, I don't feel right. When they ...rebuilt me, for lack of a better term, they did things. They improved my reflexes, my strength. My body is more durable, efficient, and powerful. My biotic nodes are larger, increasing my abilities. They went to all this trouble to upgrade me to a newer model when I didn't want, or understand how, to be fixed."

Leaning back, Sam tried to absorb this information. But rather than try to understand what the woman was trying to say with inane questions, Sam decided to just sit back and let her talk it out. Maybe that's what she needed right now.

"I spent 29 years... 32 years? ...understanding my body. My biotics. My strengths. Weaknesses. I knew my limits, how to push them, where to push them, when," Shepard continued. There was a very light rasping sound as Shepard's fingertips kept rubbing circles around her palms. "But this isn't that body. The skin I'm in isn't mine. And... fucking Cerberus. They took away the one thing, the only thing, I'd had control of my entire life: me."

What do I do? Be reassuring? Placating? Tell her a story of my own childhood that could not possibly relate to this in any way? Oh God. I'm the worst friend ever.

"So I owe them everything, and they left me with... Now I don't even..." The SpecTRe stopped herself. She tried to redirect the conversation. "Thane understood that. What it was like to feel used. ...Like your life wasn't your own. He took solace in his gods, which I didn't fully understand. But... it gave me hope that someone like him had hope. If that makes sense."

Nodding in sympathy, Sam wanted so much to reach out and clasp Shepard's hand. But she hesitated. It was too intimate, too close. *Why had it been so easy to do with Liara?*

"I didn't...handle coming back. I didn't know how. And Cerberus. They fucking took everything from me. The Alliance blacklisted me, called me a traitor. The press was having a field day. Ashley turned her back on me. The Council... they said I could come back as a SpecTRe as long as I stayed in the Terminus. And Liara..."

Sam felt herself lean forward in her seat. But the Commander had trailed off, mumbling something
Shepard cleared her throat and returned to the topic at hand. "Without support, the only thing I still knew how to do was survive. Nothing else mattered beyond that. Thane was... he reminded me that's not all I was. That he knew what it was like to be dead, for all intents and purposes, and come back from it. He made me feel... I don't know... okay. It didn't take away the wrongness, but it made it easier. And it was just enough to not feel like that for a few seconds to believe it was possible to be whole again some day."

"I'm sorry I never got to meet Thane, ma'am. He sounds like an amazing person." Sam paused. "I only saw him that one time, at Huerta Memorial. After you gave me the Cision Pro Mark-4. Which I never thanked you for, by the way. It was a wonderful gift, and thought, and I am incredibly grateful. Is that a kindness I should also attribute to Thane?"

Finally. That light, exhaling laugh reappeared. "Heh. Probably. ...Thank you, Traynor." Shepard's voice was warm with genuine appreciation and her eyes glittered.

Well, that was...interesting.

The silence after was not the awkward space filler Sam hated. It was comfortable. Satisfying. The room felt a little brighter, a little less heavy. And rather than lunge forward to drown out the silence, Samantha allowed herself to savor it. And savor the change in Shepard.

The Commander was not the fragile, tense creature Sam had met at the foot of the stairs. She seemed solid again. Her stony veneer was starting to slip back on, and she sighed with relief even.

Taking a deep breath, Samantha leaned forward across her own knees. "I'm going to ask you something, ma'am. And I swear to you that I am not being sarcastic nor teasing in any way. It's a genuinely serious question."

"And I would really appreciate an unsarcastic, unteasing answer," Sam continued slowly.

Flicking a hand, the Commander gave Sam a nonverbal go-ahead. Her face had settled back into its usual mask. But there was still an undercurrent of curiosity and attentiveness.

The comms specialist took a deep breath nonetheless.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

Shepard tilted her head in confusion, but she didn't answer right away. She never does. Sam rushed to explain herself.

"I just mean, I truly appreciate your honesty, ma'am. I would like to believe that we are... friends? And obviously you never owe me an answer to anything..." Get to the bloody point, Traynor. "I was just—just wondering why you... y'know... tell me this stuff?"

Another long silence. And Sam never would have guessed Shepard's response.

The freckled woman's face, normally so stony, contorted in an almost gargoyle grin. The tops of her white teeth appeared above her bottom lip, while her already sallow cheeks were taut against her cheekbones. A staccato of hissing laughs leaked from those lips as her shoulders shook with the effort. Layered above her laughter was a whisper where she repeated Samantha's question. "...Why
am I telling you all this…"

Well, I'm glad it was a funny question, anyway, Sam thought. More than a little hurt, she started to blush in embarrassment at the reaction.

And just like that, Shepard stopped. The strange grin softened to just a sad little smile. Her eyes pierced Sam's, freezing the comms specialist in place. "Because, Traynor."

…that's it? "Because?" The embarrassment started to boil to irritation. That's it?!

…That wasn't it.

Shepard finished slowly, enunciating each syllable. "Because… you asked, Traynor."

What does that mean—oh.

It stunned Sam. She couldn't suppress the slack-jawed gape that had just dropped open. And even more so because the Commander nodded once at Sam, as if to confirm that her shock was justified.

Does… does no one ever talk to her? I always thought…

She has all these people around her. Joker. Garrus. …Liara. Ashley too, yea? All this history and family and connection. …right?

Is she really that… alone?

Maybe she talked to Thane about these things. And now he's…

"Well, this evening diversion has suddenly taken a dreadfully serious turn," Sam joked lightly and cleared her throat. She wanted things back to where they were before. Otherwise she was in danger of bursting into sympathetic tears.

Shepard leaned casually back in her chair. "How do you suggest we fix it, Traynor?"

"How about you give me a tour?"

"Haven't you been on this ship for, like, six months? Seven? You've been on this ship probably as long as I have, time-wise. I bet you know the Normandy better than I do." The Commander seemed to welcome the lighter change of pace.

"I don't care. You called me up here. That makes you the hostess. Hostesses give tours. And serve drinks and those little sandwiches without crusts," Sam explained imperiously. She made a pinching motion with her hand to symbolize an invisible tiny sandwich.

Shepard gave one loud exhale through her nose. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Never." Sam crossed her arms.

A sparkle of amusement. Shepard bowed sarcastically. "As madame wishes." The comms specialist stood up and walked over to Shepard, who led her to the end table and bed at the far end of the cabin.

"So, that's a bed."

There was a noticeable flutter in Samantha's chest, but she stifled it with a sharp inhale. My, my, Traynor. You're going to start blushing any second now.
Shut it. "...No, no, you're doing this all wrong."

Shepard's lips pursed with amusement. "How would you do it?"

There was that flutter again. God damn it.

Head. Out of gutter. Now.

"Well, you're supposed to embellish. Tell a story. This is not a mere bed, but the site of an epic battle." Sam paused. "Or at least tell me it has a decent thread count, for God's sake."

"It has a decent thread count."

"Hmph," Sam scowled. "Where to next on this whirlwind tour?"

Shepard smirked back. She led Sam over to the aquarium where there were a few fish flitting between synthetic seaweed fronds. "That's a fish tank. I never asked if this was some sort of Cerberus tradition. Maybe fish are good luck on a ship." She shrugged.

"Until the tank breaks and your luck is flopping around, stinking of dead fish. Then where will your 'decent thread count' sheets be?" Sam quipped dryly. She gestured to a school of red fish. "Do they all have names and epic back stories?"

Shepard laughed once, uncharacteristically loudly and awkwardly, then petered off. "Well, these little guys are...second generation. Their predecessors might have been victim to a faulty autofeeder." Her mouth tightened to an embarrassed smile.

"Shepard. You didn't."

A sigh. "I did. I forgot to feed them. I didn't want to tell you earlier. They survived nearly six months on their own. But being rejoined with their master..." She trailed off sadly. "I found the few survivors some new friends at a Citadel gift shop. And a top of the line feeder. I at least tried to buy their forgiveness."

"Ugh. This is getting tragic. Move the tour along. But if you killed that adorable hamster, ma'am..."

Snorting in indignation, Shepard grabbed Sam's wrist and dragged her over to her desk across from the aquarium (of Death!).
Luckily, there was a nice, clean cage with a bright-eyed hamster looking back at the two women. Socks squeaked as he tossed bedding behind him.

Sam made a little high-pitched noise of approval in her throat. "Oh, thank God. Because I crawled around the Engineering Deck for tens of minutes trying to rescue that little guy."

"He appreciates it," Shepard replied, though her tone was soft and a little husky. Sam looked over and couldn't read Shepard's face. But her gut said... She's the 'he' who appreciates it in this story.

"Happy to hear it. Now, I'd love to know the story behind all the ship models," the comms specialist hurriedly changed the subject. A jitter had started in her chest, but Sam couldn't quite tell if it was social anxiety or intimidation or something else. That was the problem with feelings: they didn't come with labels or announcements to clear up exactly what was going on.

Shepard crossed her arms and there was a mischievous twinkle in her green eyes. "They're not models. They're real ships, each helmed with a 1/50 scale crew to guide them through the galaxy and wage war against my enemies. This is just their berth."

"Now that: that is some solid bullshit, Commander."

"I try, Traynor."

Sam flashed what she hoped was a winning smile, though Shepard just looked at her curiously. The jitter was growing more insistent. It wanted her to flee. She ignored it. "In all seriousness, your cabin is gorgeous. I've seen apartments smaller than this."

Shepard nodded her head once, acknowledging the compliment.

Taking a step away from the wall of model ships triggered the bathroom door motion sensor. It slid open with a hiss, and Sam couldn't resist peeking inside. And then walking inside.

This is... Heaven!

"Oh! An actual shower!" Samantha exclaimed. She tossed a dry quip over her shoulder. "The faucets in the women's bathroom are crap, by the way."

No answer, but then Sam was too busy studying this palace of a room. It's glorious. Not just a shitty little stall where everyone can see your bum hanging out.
Oh, Shepard. You're so... Sam stopped herself before she called the Commander "lucky" in her mind. Because for every extra pillow or ship model or square foot of shower that woman had, she'd paid for it with hard decisions and bullets and scars. Tucking a loose strand of black hair shyly behind her ears, the comms specialist met Shepard back at the door.

"Sorry. I was spellbound by the view. Did you want finish that game?"

Tilting her head, Shepard crinkled her eyes and crossed her arms. Her eyes flicked to the shower and back to Sam. "That's funny, I figured you'd be more interested in a shower."

"I... um..." Sam stuttered, trying to keep that jitter from exploding into a seizure. "I didn't realize that was an option." She tilted her head to match Shepard's. Trying to get a read on subtext, if there even was any.

Does she realize what she's offering? She does. She has to.

...Doesn't she?

She couldn't possibly.

The SpecTRe took a step back and shrugged casually. "It's an option."

"Well... just... give me a moment to grab my things?"

Shepard stepped aside and allowed Sam to pass.

The elevator ride down to Deck 3 was a haze. And one long mental argument.

What's going on? Did I do something wrong?

Or really **really** right?

Shit.

What the hell am I even doing? I'm borrowing **her** shower. Granted, a fresh shower is never a bad thing. And totally worth being mortified over the thought of yet another cramped, lukewarm shower in the women's restroom.

...well? Don't you have some sort of reason why I shouldn't just go hide under the bunk bed in the crew dormitory?

Still trying to figure out that double negative, Traynor. So you **want** to hide and pretend this isn't happening?

...Maybe?

And yet, there you are: grabbing your toiletry bag from your locker.

Do I need a towel? She probably has towels.

Shit.

I have a clean spare uniform. Fresh underwear and socks. What else?

Maybe you won't need any of those things.
You. Are supposed to be. Helping. What happened to giving me an aneurysm for just thinking about this scenario? And now, here we are: Aneurysm Central.

There was fortunately (unfortunately?) no one in the Crew Deck for Sam to run into. Everyone was on shore leave. Or at their posts. No one to ask Sam what she was doing, getting her shower gel, hair conditioner, loofa, or another neatly folded uniform. No one to wonder why she was taking those items to the elevator. No one to make Samantha Traynor be more worried or insecure or panicky than she already was on her own.

And... no one to stop her.

Stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid was the main conversation that occurred on the return trip up the lift. It had lost meaning on whether Sam was referring to herself, the shower, the situation, or her feelings as stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid. Probably all of the above.

Shepard was back at the couch when Sam returned to the cabin. She seemed to be examining the chess board, and aimlessly spinning the holo interface. Contemplating her next move, maybe?

She better think hard. Unless she's got some master defense up her sleeve, I'll have her begging for mercy in four moves.

...Mercy, eh?

Jesus Christ. You are useless .

...Maybe I'm helping, Traynor.

"Are you sure this is all right, Shepard?" Sam had actually agonized for part of the elevator ride up, in between stupids, on just what to call her. Ma'am? Commander? Shepard?

...Annelise?

Leaning over in her chair to squint at the comms specialist standing awkwardly in the entryway, Shepard just clasped her hands. "It's fine. Go ahead." Her tone was infuriatingly neutral.

The shower door hissed open and Sam stepped in. Setting her clothes in the corner next to the towels (oh thank God, there are plenty) and her toiletry bag on the floor, Samantha had to clench her hands to keep calm.

Is this happening? Am I just making a big deal out of this? Am I just being stupid?

Shit.

As odd as it felt peeling off her service uniform and turning on the water, it felt odder to just be silent. No point in being rude. Adjusting the holo dial for the door, Sam cracked it a tiny bit. She stepped under the steaming stream, and nearly yelped. Too hot! She turned it down some before digging into her little bag for her loofa.

"Hot water and room to stretch!" Samantha shouted behind her. "I could get lost in here."

She couldn't help but just stand there, letting the showerhead massage her scalp and shoulders. "Oh, it's like a week’s worth of stress getting washed off."
Sam poked around the little shelf and appraised Shepard's collection of soaps. She sniffed at a few. *Standard Alliance soap. Another with some sort of honeyed perfume. This one is nice. Strawberry? Cherry? Something fruity.*

Something about the absurdity of Commander Shepard liking a thing as ordinary as strawberry soap changed the jitter in Sam's chest. It had morphed from a jumble of nerves into more of... a purr. A good kind of panic. A hopeful one.

It made Sam want to be ...Stupid.

"The timing's perfect. I was hoping to look nice for somebody."

*There. Just a little thing. Putting it out there.*

It worked. Shepard finally shouted back, though her voice was still painfully far away. "Hot date lined up?" Conversational, but the neutral tone was a little more interested.

Starting to rinse off the foamy gel, Sam replied, "Hopefully more than that." A Stupid thought crossed Sam's mind, but it stuck in her throat. She focused on some errant soap suds on her calves for a moment.

*Just say it, Traynor. You've come this far.*

"I play for keeps." Stupid Sam waited patiently.

It wasn't long. And Shepard sounded (was she?) more curious. "Sounds serious."

Deep breath.

"That depends on whether she's interested."
M rating in effect for this chapter due to some relatively graphic adult content. Regularly scheduled T-rated shenanigans will pick up next chapter, as always with a warning about profanity. Any/all future M sections will be similarly called out in advance.

This is also my first foray into the smutty side of things, though I tried to keep it tasteful. You be the judge.

Samantha thought she had said something wrong. There was no response after all. Just the gentle hiss of warm (gloriously warm) water.

She was a touch crestfallen and unwilling to look out the slightly cracked bathroom door to see if Shepard had up and left completely.

_Could you be any more obvious? Or desperate? She was just being nice. And here you are, the shameless flirt. Taking advantage of her mourning period._

_Stupid, Sam._

_Stupid._

Standing under the patient, steady stream, Sam simply closed her eyes. There was a gentle heat beneath her eyelids, but she refused to allow those emerging tears to blend with the waterfall above.

_14 to one she didn't even hear me over the running water. Nine to one she pretended not to. Five to one she's debating how to awkwardly cut the evening short to spare my feelings. ...Two to one she won't spare my feelings at all._

_Where did this even come from? This isn't me. I don't... I don't _fraternize_. Allers was right. This is absurd._
A carousel of images suddenly rotated across Sam's mind, projected onto her closed eyelids like a vid. Green eyes. Careless bangs. A cut on a freckled nose. Soft, shining lips. Snapshots of her fire and beauty, glimpses of long, taut legs and sculpted arms. It was a strange mosaic of all the bits and pieces that made up Commander Shepard...Annelise... to Sam. Her scent, her voice, her presence.

It was an incomplete collage that Sam desperately wanted to fill in (...Traynor! What a pun! ...ugh, sorry) but lacked the detail. She just hadn't realized how badly until the night had begun. Even after the whirlwind of emotional uncertainty. Even after a nagging voice continued to whisper skepticism and mistrust about the sort of person Annelise Shepard was. ...But especially after this superhuman woman admitted that she trusted her simply because Sam had asked.

Why am I doing this? ...that's why, a strong whisper answered.

Nubby goose flesh suddenly rose across Sam's arms, and an electric tingle sizzled up her spine. Half a second later, Sam's ears popped. From the supersonic boom of a biotic charge.

Then hot breath was at Sam's neck and fingertips pressed to her bare waist.

Guided in a 180-degree turn, Samantha noticed a biotic haze first. The light aura of smoky energy absorbed into the shower steam and dissipated. But for the shimmer of blue in the low light, Sam could scarcely believe she'd seen it at all.

Commander Shepard standing before Sam was yet another thing she could hardly believe. And even more absurd was the SpecTRe's hands still clinging to a comms specialist's hips.

And this is the part where I wake up.

Sam expected to meet green eyes, but Shepard's gaze was instead lower and lingeringly tracing its way upward. The woman seemed completely unfazed by the spray of water that darkened her clothes and reduced wispy red hair to damp waves.

Freezing childishy before Shepard's scrutiny, Sam's mind was a jumbled snarl of insecurity, longing, lust, and even a brief cheek-reddening hint of modesty. That last one was a surprise even to Sam, for showering in front of dozens, if not hundreds, of other women over her military career had more or less (apparently "less") trained naked modesty out of her mind. Until now.

A spark of green finally darted up, crinkling with intensity. There was no playful, or amused, or brooding glint in Shepard's eyes this time. Just complete and utter focus.

Sam was hypnotized by the eye contact, unable to break it. Filling Sam's vision with freckles and impossibly soft skin, Shepard's face pressed in closer as she huskily whispered:

"She's interested."

Sam closed her eyes as glistening lips crashed into hers.

Oh please don't wake me up.

The jitter in Samantha's chest thrummed into panicky overdrive while her brain started repeating a booming mantra of this is happening this is happening this is happening. Her hands were still stupidly frozen at her sides. They hadn't received the memo yet, apparently. If they had, surely they would be slightly more productive at this moment.
But the kissing. Oh, the kissing.

The chapped roughness was a surprise, as was the flavor. A faint, bitter tang of alcohol (was she drinking before I arrived? …why wouldn't she be drinking? …fair point) laced amongst a slight scratchy texture on Shepard's lips. But Sam's lips also brushed past a notch of smoothness, a slight scar that sat on the woman's upper lip. Sam's mind went briefly blank when she realized she was finally here, living a fantasy she had desperately suppressed. For fear of …what? Rejection? Disinterest?

…this is happening this is happening this is happening

A hand reached the back of Sam's neck, fingers lightly tangling in her wet hair. She felt herself smile into the kiss and, from the feeling of Shepard's cheek pressed against hers, Shepard was smiling back. Just a bit, but it was there.

That ghost of approval from Shepard was enough to awaken Samantha's hands from their stupefied slumber, though sliding up rough pocketed pants and a thick cloth hoodie was highly unsatisfying. The kissing more than made up for it, though.

An alternating pattern of nibbles and flicks was so oddly intoxicating under the pattering shower stream. One moment Sam could feel every pull of Shepard's teeth, the next was dulled by the flowing water, creating a quietly building intensity.

this is happening this is happening this is happening

Finally coming up for air, the comms specialist had to once again confirm she wasn't hallucinating the whole thing. Her lips tingled from the absence of contact, but the view more than made up for it.

Red hair splayed in rivers around Shepard's cheekbones, meeting up with the freckles on the plains of her forehead and chin. Her eyes were briefly closed before opening with concern, but immediately softened. Her expression was downright roguish.

My God, she's gorgeous.

It was Samantha who reinitiated the kiss, but Shepard recovered quickly and began exerting pressure. First with deeper, more insistent kisses, then fingertips began roving beyond Sam's hips. Up her sides, down her back, higher, lower, higher again, even lower. It sent a shiver up Sam's spine, as well as an answering pang within her. She craved more.
The redhead nibbled and probed and pushed until Sam's back gently butted against the shower wall, trapping her in Shepard's arms. Sam's hands felt awkward wrapping around the wet cloth of the woman's hoodie, but the fabric at least provided a solid grip to pull closer. She inhaled sharply when a rough zipper seam brushed against an exposed nipple. Tugging Shepard closer until she was flush against her, Sam was now effectively sandwiched against the wall.

this is happening this is happening this is happening

Too gruff, too intense, the probing fingers on Sam's hip went from a pleasant tingle to a pinch of pain. It was brief and forgivable, as she was too enraptured by Shepard's deft lips. But another harsh squeeze on an inner thigh made Samantha gasp.

"Shepard."

Too soft of a word. The exploration continued, as did the smothering discomfort. The feral intensity was officially distracting from the Kissing, which had now switched to more bite than kiss. Plus, Sam was now pinned against the shower wall with no room to even breathe. Fingernails raked her back. Separately, these could be construed as playful urgings from a more demanding partner. But all clustered together had pain dominating pleasure by a ratio of about three to one.

I hate those kinds of odds.

She was terrified of breaking the spell, that any acknowledgement of what was happening would end it just as swiftly as it had begun. And it had taken so, so long to even happen. Sam so badly wanted to ignore it (after all, I'm quite good at ignoring things... shut it) and focus on losing herself in the moment.

But a fifth wince forced her to pull away.

...not like this...

"...Annelise."

Saying the Commander's first name did it. Shepard froze and jerked back, her green eyes searching Sam's lips as if to make certain where the unfamiliar word had come from. They flashed wide while a blush rose to Shepard's cheeks.

Is she embarrassed? I can't imagine why, she's a complete pro at this.

No, not embarrassed.

Ashamed.

Shepard took a step backward, mumbling an apology.

Shit.

Shit.

No, no wait!

It was Sam who had to be aggressive this time. She grasped a smooth wrist just as the hand on her thigh pulled away.

"Annelise," Samantha repeated quietly. Insistently. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't want this. Just..."
Touching Shepard's shoulder with her free hand, the comms specialist whispered, "Slower. Gentler. I'm not going anywhere."

*Oh please don't tell me I ruined it!*

...*Well, technically she's the one ruining it.*

*Shut up! Fix it!*

Unconvinced, Shepard continued to back off. Her head dropped and her chin dug into her left shoulder to avoid eye contact. Sam firmly held the claimed wrist while gently tracing her other hand up Shepard's collarbone to her chin. And lightly tugged. Thankfully, Shepard wasn't being so childish as to jerk away, but instead allowed her face to be guided back to Sam's.

Oh, the kissing. It was timid and soft at first, but their mutual courage returned quickly.

Suddenly, the lips disappeared again and Sam opened her eyes. She was about to repeat that it was all right, that it was okay, until she felt a nibble (*gentle, this time!*) along her jaw and throat. Her vision was now half filled with sopping red locks of hair as Annelise planted ticklish kisses along her collarbone.

Sam's breathing hitched when Shepard resumed her exploration. Renewed with purpose, Shepard's fingers confidently caressed the curve of Sam's waist and up her rib cage. Samantha clung to Shepard's shoulders just as an electric kiss trailed lower still. And breathing stopped all together when Annelise's lips grazed one breast, then the other.

*this is happening this is happening this is happening*

...*Did I ever place odds on shagging Commander Shepard in her shower?*

*If I did, it was probably a billion to one.*

*We. Have. A. Winner!*

A light moan escaped at that last thought. It brought Shepard back to Sam's lips with fervor. Running her hands up Annelise's sleeves, Sam could feel the tight muscles of her arms. She held on a moment and squeezed. Appreciating the strength hidden beneath the fabric, Sam also felt a twinge of annoyance at the cloth prison hiding Shepard away. But the flick of Annelise's tongue against her teeth drove any unhappiness from Sam's mind.

Shepard's hands suddenly seized Sam's thighs again and, before the comms specialist could fear being pinched, she felt herself being lifted up. Propped up against the shower wall comfortably this time, Sam's knees and calves wrapped around Annelise's waist of their own accord. *Thank heavens,* because they had been in danger of buckling at the slightest touch. There was a heady allure to this new position, to be so exposed to someone she wanted so badly. A thrill of danger set Sam's teeth to tingling….*among other things.*

No longer level with Shepard (or even below, since Sam was a bit shorter in height), the altitude awakened a giddy, even stupider side of Samantha Traynor (*is that even possible?*). She had to suppress a giggle at the delicious absurdity of the situation for fear of ruining the mood.

…*well, Shepard has already gone from sexy to molestation and back to sexy again. If we can overcome that, we can overcome anything.*

...*Assuming I don't say anything particularly stupid.*
What are the odds of that happening?

Shut. Up.

"Are we... mmm... stealing all the hot water from the Crew Deck?" Sam whispered airily. She tasted crisp water along with Shepard's intoxicating flavor. She drank both deeply.

Laughing lightly, Shepard pulled away. She chewed on a wet strand of red hair thoughtfully for a second before puffing it out from the corner of her mouth. "...I think so. Think they'll forgive me?"

"I wouldn't, but then I hold grudges. Tightly," Sam quipped. Before leaning in for another kiss, she intoned seriously. "At least now I know who to blame for the crap faucets."

Annelise kept her mouth just out of range, obviously savoring Sam's attempts to continue. She whispered huskily, "You're just as guilty as me now, Samantha." Leaning in tantalizingly close, she instead reached around her lover to turn off the shower. Her lips swept past Sam's in a torturous tease.

oh God my name she said my name has she said my name before I think she oh God

this is happening this is happening this is happening

"Mmm. I can live with it." Even Sam was impressed with her own nonchalant tone, when she really wanted to ravish Shepard silly just for saying "Samantha" in that *voice*. She was rewarded with a glowing smile from Annelise. And a whole new glow altogether.

That haze of blue had returned, but at first only in pinpricks at the edge of Sam's peripheral vision. She was a bit distracted after all. Devouring Shepard's mouth once more was a full time task. As was threading her own fingertips in that mane of red hair with alternating pulls and kneads. She even slipped one hand up Shepard's shirt and grazed abs with fingernails to the tune of a happy sigh.

By contrast, Annelise was stuck propping up Sam's clutched position at her waist. Though a hand occasionally wandered down a tense thigh or up to a supple breast, it always returned to make sure Sam was comfortable and supported. And that was where the biotic blue came in.

Strands of biotic current lanced outward from Shepard's wrists and where they touched Samantha, goose flesh pebbled in their wake. It was an odd mixture of a massage coupled with a tiny static surge. Pleasure and prickling energy, both vying for dominance but too faint to overcome each other. Sam could feel it not only along her skin, but partly *inside* it. It tickled her thigh muscles and made them spasm lightly.

Suddenly, the hands that had been bracing Sam fell away.

Both of them.

But Sam didn't drop. She was now suspended upright via tingling threads of biotics. She gasped and started to look down. Annelise's hand lifted Sam's dipping chin back upward to keep focus on those green eyes. Shepard's other newly freed hand held at the small of Sam's back.

An intense whisper followed. "Don't look down, Samantha. I've got you."

*You most certainly do.*

Both women held still, savoring racing heartbeats and panting breaths for a moment. A light pattering of drops escaping Shepard's heavy, wet clothes was the only other background sound. They were
right at the precipice of No Return and they both knew it. One awkward word, one pull away, one slight head shake could shatter this Thing.

It was terrifying standing (well… sitting) at that edge looking down. But the view spurred a feral flutter in Sam's chest and caught in her throat.

*this is bloody happening*

The cue to proceed came from Samantha. It was only fitting, considering this impulse was her (Stupid?) idea in the first place. She surged forward in a commanding kiss as she wrapped her arms around the woman's neck. She laced her heels together tightly and squeezed Shepard's hips with her legs. There was a twinge of self-satisfaction at her own initiative, though it was quickly drowned out by the desire to rip the woman's clothes to shreds.

Answering the kiss deeply, Annelise first simply hugged the comms specialist back. But then one hand wandered to Sam's ribs while the other... the other roved south. Those nomad fingers squeezed through the small space between the two women's tangled bodies and continued lower. The first caress sent a tremor through Sam's body. The next threatened to undo her entirely.

With the shower no longer confusing the sensation, Samantha was aware of every thread on Shepard's hoodie, every strand of wet hair that sent shivers of cold water down her own back, and every trailing path those magic fingers took on her curves.

She couldn't suppress the jolt when the pad of a fingertip ran the length of her folds. Annelise anticipated the reaction and clutched Sam tightly for a second in reassurance. The next exploring flick was still gentle but deeper, and Sam intensified their kiss to express her approval.

Shepard curled her finger, making Sam gasp while sparkling flecks of delicious white at the periphery of her vision. A second slid in easily, encouraged by the welcome, slick folds. Annelise was watching Sam intently, scanning for any signs of discomfort. Now lightheaded, Samantha could only whisper throaty encouragement as massaging circles alternated between lingering strokes.

A glorious building rhythm began, tracing its way up the wrist that was pressed between them. Each buck of Sam's hips accompanied hitched moans. Her timbre varied a few times when a particular stroke was uncomfortable or rough, but Annelise quickly adapted. Even more, the current of the vanguard's biotics radiating from thigh to cheek to lower back heightened as the commander moved within Sam.

Arching her back away, Sam could no longer maintain the intoxicating kiss. Unless she either planned on inhaling Shepard or being smothered by her. Because the expert, quickening tempo currently pulsing in her core had Sam struggling to breathe. Nor was there anything to hold as she flung her hands off Annelise's neck and sought a grip on the overly smooth shower wall at her back. She could feel herself start to clamp down in quicker succession, becoming lost in the sensation.

She could only flatten her palms to brace herself against the approaching wave, while Shepard's head dipped down to add sucking bites to Sam's list of Things Overloading Her Brain. Shockingly, the precariousness of her perch only crossed her mind briefly, before a reassuring biotic jolt cradled her back. Ever devious, Annelise decided to add that biotic current to her ministrations on Sam's bundle of nerves, magnifying the intensity tenfold.

*This—"Oh..."—is—"...ah..."—happening.*

"Samantha...!"
There it is again. My name.

She recoiled against Shepard in spasms as her vision went murky. One last, tight curl had unraveled her control completely in a blissful surge, sending her hands clawing for a hold around Annelise's neck. Time stopped for a few seconds and she felt euphorically dizzy. She could literally hear her own heartbeat in her ears as she came down, though not the strangled moan that had also escaped. She heard something else, instead.

That exhale-laugh had taken on a new dimension, especially right in Sam's ear.

"Sam..." Shepard slowed, and Sam's brain function returned long enough to feel Annelise unsteady in front of her. "...it's all right, Samantha. I've got you."

Those arms held as long as Sam needed them to, which was several quivering minutes while Annelise slowed inside her. Aftershocks continued to twitch through Sam's body, centralized in her upper thighs and hands. Once those passed, a whisper at her ear requested she "Let go."

She didn't know what the woman meant until Samantha loosened her strangling grip on Shepard's neck. They nearly collapsed to the ground when the biotic haze lifted, for their position against the wall was incredibly off balance. Annelise panted lightly with the effort as she softly helped a disoriented comms specialist to stand up on her own once more.

No longer taller, Sam had to stretch up a little to offer a gracious kiss. She now felt the hot breath of that pleased exhale-laugh on her upper lip. A sign of satisfaction. When she pulled away, Annelise was smiling. It had been so rare before, so elusive. Foreign. But now it was natural, easy, welcome.

"I can't tell you how much I needed that," Samantha found herself saying once her voice returned.

Shepard's cheek twitched in a slightly wider, off center smile. Her tone radiated warmth and mirth. "Are you using me for my shower?"

Beaming back, Sam put as much flirtation as she could muster in her reply. "I certainly hope so."

A kiss beat Shepard's lips to her response. "Well, in that case: it's yours whenever you like." A kiss that became a promise.

"I'm going to hold you to that, you know."

"I certainly hope so," was the coy reply.

Oh God

They stood together, smiling like idiots, for almost a minute. Or maybe just Sam was smiling like an idiot. Shepard certainly didn't look like an idiot, though she did look at ease. The SpecTRe cleared her throat and took a few sideways steps to her collection of towels. She offered one to Sam and held on to a second. While Samantha dabbed the remaining shine from her shoulders and legs, Annelise doubled over to vigorously attack her soaking hair with the help of (artificial!) gravity.

When Annelise finally stood back up, Sam was mostly dry save for her own damp black hair. The tangled messy curl of Shepard's hair made Sam giggle. The comms specialist wrapped the towel around her midsection and tucked one corner over the other just above her breasts in a makeshift dress.

The two women exited the shower together, though Samantha snickered at the squishing squeak of Shepard's boots. Shepard still seemed unfazed by her wet clothing and the mess they were making.
We need to do something about that.

The Commander was on a mission, however, as she strode over to her low desk. She pulled out a blueberry protein bar from a drawer and tore into it hungrily. Giving a satisfied sigh as she chewed on an overlarge chunk, Sam saw a spark of blue flash across green eyes, probably the sign of her lover's exhausted biotic stores recovering.

"You just have those on hand, do you?" Sam asked lightly.

Shepard glanced back, but her cheeks were too full so the smile she returned was puffy-cheeked and cartoony. Sam giggled. Swallowing, Shepard gestured with the bar. "A nice girl who visited me in the Med Bay once gave me a carton of them. It'd be rude not to eat them, right?" Her eyes crinkled.

"Terribly rude." It was too much for Samantha to resist. She leaned over to kiss Shepard (this is a thing I can do now!) and found she was okay with the blueberry taste for once. Just this once, in this situation.

Shepard's other hand made a squeezing motion and a baseball flew off of her desk. Strands of blue faded as the ball hovered above her right hand.

In lieu of a cigarette, she has... a baseball.

Her fingers alternated between a pinching pyramid, which sent the ball swirling upward, and an open claw with a flat palm, which allowed the ball to lazily dip downward.

Right, Sam remembered. Shepard's Baseball Metaphor Biotics 101.

"We have a problem, Annelise," Sam started ominously. Shepard glanced over in eyebrow-raising concern. "I'm a very competitive person, you'll remember. In the eternal rule that is Best Two Out of Three, I believe a second round is required. Since I simply can't abide by not coming out on top."

…Oh God. Stupid Sam is up to bat.

Not just one, but two exhale-laughs at that dreadful innuendo. Sam silently rejoiced in triumph. Shepard smiled. "So round one went to me, then?"

"In a manner of speaking… yes. I do concede victory. A rather flawless one, I might add. But for round two…" Samantha whispered dangerously and extended her hand. "Would you prefer offense?" Knife hand. "Or defense?" Splayed hand.

Shepard laced her fingers through Sam's warmly, but she said nothing.

So. Defense then.

This should be interesting.
A pair of steps forward put Samantha right within Shepard's personal space. One more reignited a briefly absent kiss. Annelise was surprised, though she seemed open to the suggestion. She also started to reach for the towel covering the comms specialist, but Sam shrugged her off.

*My turn.*

Grasping Shepard's forearms, she kiss-nudged Shepard backward away from the desk. A minor jerk from the Commander told her they had reached the low steps leading to the bedroom area. Not fancying tripping, Sam released her hold long enough to guide them both over to the bed's edge.

After guiding her hands to the black N7 hoodie, Samantha held at the zipper situated at Shepard's abdomen. She tried to focus some of her rekindled jitters into a brave, intense gaze.

And waited for permission to proceed.

There was a brief flash of …something… across Annelise's face. She seemed calm and content, but there was a hint of strain behind her eyes that Sam couldn't pinpoint. She started to ask if Shepard wanted to do this. *Again. You mean "do this again," Traynor.*

…yes. *Shut up. If you're trying to make me less nervous, you're not helping.*

But then the woman nodded. Just once.

The zipper growled lightly as it separated while the fabric was damp and heavy. Annelise remained dutifully still and only stared back at Sam, who traced her fingers up the lapels. Another small nod prodded those fingertips up around the woman's collarbone. Slowly and lingeringly, Sam pushed the hoodie off Shepard's shoulders and started to gently tug it down her arms.

The sleeves gathered at Annelise's wrists, but a quick yank sent the jacket to the floor. She was now clad in a simple white tank top, heavy Alliance pants, and partially unlaced boots. Sam spied a black sports bra outlined beneath the wet shirt, which prodded her heart back to racing. A thrumming eagerness pulsed within Sam, as well as a ravenous curiosity. Especially after finally spying those long concealed arms, so soft and toned.

"You look nervous, Commander," Sam observed more coolly than she actually felt.

A quick swallow and a quicker headshake from Shepard.
Is she trying to convince me? Or herself?

There was a question Sam should ask, but she was kind of afraid of the answer. She hoped a deep kiss would calm the woman. There was a welcome response, though Samantha could still sense resistance. A resistance that intensified when she placed her hands on the hem of that glorious white undershirt.

Sam breathed in Shepard's ear. "Shepard. Do you not want to do this?" She hoped her sultry tone would make the question absurd.

"What? No—I… Yes. I want…" Annelise trailed off when fingernails roved up her abdomen. Sam felt the muscles tighten and the woman gasped sharply. But she allowed Sam to proceed with peeling the wet shirt upward and off. Shepard even laughed when the tank caught on her chin. When she came up for air, she gently kissed Sam.

It was Sam's turn to study the flesh she had uncovered. All she knew of the Commander's body was compiled via brief vignettes. Sam traced over orange cybernetic scars, faded black bruises, and light puckered flesh of fresh bullet wounds on a backdrop of freckles over porcelain skin.

"What is it?" Annelise asked uncertainly. …Insecurely?

What does she have to be insecure about?

Well, she does have a patchwork of scars and wounds. Not generally considered sexy by most women.

"Most women" haven't seen Annelise Shepard in a sports bra. Because it's bloody magnificent.

The sight also accompanied emotions Sam associated with the last time she had seen Shepard in this state: wounded and battered after fighting Cerberus on Tuchanka. Blinking back that memory of concern, Sam smiled warmly. She had to roll to the balls of her feet to be even with Shepard's height. Eye to eye. No room for misinterpretation.

"You are quite lovely. Did you know that?"

Oh, that blush. The smile that rippled to Shepard's eyes was stunningly beautiful.

Sam thought she heard "You're not so bad yourself" but she was too absorbed in maintaining her balance and a heated kiss at the same time. They leaned into the kiss as Samantha's fingertips wandered lower to the buttons on Shepard's pants. Sam felt "yes" whispered into her mouth before deftly hooking her fingers to slide the cargo pants down.

Pushing forward, Sam almost lost her own balance as Shepard dropped away and fell backwards to sit at the edge of the bed.

Shit.

She'd forgotten the boots. The pants had caught at Shepard's knees, considerably reducing her ability to keep her balance. She had latched on to Sam's wrist, but the fall hadn't been far enough to send Sam tumbling on top of her.

Both women were stunned for a second, then burst out laughing. Shepard used her new position to unlace her boots and slide them off, followed by the heavy wet pants. Sam could only stand there giggling, trying to memorize the terrified expression on Annelise's face to relive later. She sobered quickly at the reveal of more pale skin. The towel at her waist felt suddenly suffocating, though it did
keep a coiled eagerness contained. …for now.

Kicking away her other clothing, Annelise stood back up in only a sports bra and black underwear. A small white "N7" could be seen on both. She tilted her head expectantly, though there was that slight twinge of insecurity again. Sam paused questioningly, but Shepard shook off her concern with a careless smile. Sam took that as consent to resume her dazed appraisal of Annelise Shepard.

It was all just as lovely as she'd secretly hoped. She didn't realize how secret until each expanse of skin her eyes wandered towards sparked a timeline of memories.

Shaggy red waves, green eyes, and the tilt of her lips with that trailing scar. First sighting: Shuttle Bay, leaving Earth.

That graceful neck and collarbone with a hint of freckling. First sighting: CIC, headed to the Citadel.

Toned biceps leading to firm forearms. First sighting: Med Bay, right after EDI got her body

Muscled abs peppered with scratches and faded wounds. First sighting: Shuttle Bay, after her fight with Vega.

Shapely thighs curved to taut calves. First sighting: Citadel, during our night off at Purgatory.

Unaccounted for in this history of suppressed longing was what hid beneath those black garments bearing white "N7s."

Time to solve a mystery, Sam grinned cheekily to herself.

Pressing forward, Samantha decided to return the tease. She breathed in the woman's ear and was rewarded with several noticeable shivers. Sweeping her fingertips lightly, Sam ran them together slowly over Annelise's throat, to the slight dip at her collarbone, then outward to her shoulders. There was a light scent of a fruity shampoo above touches of sweat. An intoxicated giddiness rippled down Sam's spine. She brushed her lips by Shepard's cheek, then allowed herself a few light kisses along the woman's jaw and throat.

Pay back torture with tender torture.

I think you're torturing yourself with this pacing, Traynor. Pick it up.
Shut up. It's brilliant and wonderful.

Annelise remained dutifully still, though she did sigh in contentment. The commander made a strangled noise when Sam's drifting fingertips reached bra straps. Sam pulled away to doublecheck Shepard was all right. The woman's eyes were closed, but opened when Sam stopped. Another twitch of...something...was quickly masked. But still no disapproval when a brave comms specialist reached behind to undo the bra and slip it over creamy shoulders.

Even with craters of scars encroaching on Annelise's chest, none marred her breasts. Sam could only breathe "Lovely" at the sight...she could barely keep her excitement caged. For they **were** lovely...soft, pale, medium-size and pleasantly full, only a few freckles, complete with dusky tips and an enticing firmness.

Allowing the light towel that still covered her to drop, Samantha leaned forward to tenderly kiss Annelise. Her embarrassment before at being naked seemed like a distant, silly memory. Shepard responded eagerly, running her hands up Sam's curves again. But there was a noticeable flinch when Sam attempted to return the caress of a breast.

"What is it?"

"I—nothing," Annelise stuttered out a whisper. Sam pulled away.

*Liar.*

"You can tell me. I won't bite." The comms specialist added, "...hard."

Shepard exhale-laughed. "I don't believe you. But...I'm fine." Her strained jaw betrayed her.

*Strike two.*

"Shepard. Something is wrong." Sam hesitated. It stung her to say the next sentence. "If you don't want to do this...you can tell me."

"No, I do," Shepard started unconvincingly. But she held up her hands when Sam glared. "I mean...I just..."

...*God. This again? Lying in threes?*

*I thought we were past that.***

Stepping back, Samantha crossed her arms over her breasts. The temperature in the room felt like it had dropped suddenly. Sam tilted her head, willing Shepard to explain.

She didn't. Or couldn't. It was hard to tell which. "I don't—the thing is...It's been...I just...when this happens I—fuck."

Whatever it was, it was impossible for Shepard to articulate. She flopped down on the bed in defeat, her jaw jutting out in a frustrated grimace. Part of Sam wanted to sit next to her. Work this out. Know what was going on.

But the larger part of Sam, no longer Stupid, no longer in the moment, bristled with insecurity. She felt a stab of rejection. It brought heated, spiteful thoughts roiling to the surface. Because the simple explanation was: Shepard didn't want her to touch her.

*No problem taking control when it suited her. But the first sign of opening up and—? Shut down.*
Bullshit.

She couldn't say these things out loud. They were stupid and childish. Completely unhelpful. So instead, they stayed in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes. Shepard clenched and unclenched the fabric of the bedsheets and had taken up shaky, panicky breaths. Sam bent down to re-wrap the towel around her. It was a gesture not lost on the still sitting Annelise: an indication the night was officially over.

"I'm—I'm sorry. Please don't—I don't—"

"Whatever," Sam hissed bitterly, before catching herself. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly and amended softly, "No, look, it's okay…"

She stretched a hand out and ran it through Annelise's hair, to the rewarding sound of the quick breaths slowing. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Sam's hand jostled slightly as Shepard shook her head.

"Do you want me to leave?"

A long pause. Then her hand bobbed up and down with Annelise's sharp, sad nod.

Sam leaned forward and planted a kiss on the top of Shepard's head with a simple "Okay." It was a harsh sting to bury her cooling excitement under understanding. But deep down, Sam did feel sympathy for whatever was bothering the Commander. It helped diminish her disappointment some, mostly because Sam knew forcing the issue wouldn't help anything.

Without another word, the comms specialist returned to the shower area and quickly dressed. She heard Shepard utter her name once or twice. Except when Sam turned to make eye contact, Shepard couldn't (or wouldn't). So Sam gathered her toiletries and padded out the door.

She couldn't help but pause outside Shepard's cabin door after it closed. She tried to decide if the jitter in her chest was leaning towards making Samantha throw up or just give her a small heart attack. Neither happened.

Just as she tapped the button to call the elevator, Sam heard the loud bang of crumpling metal.

She couldn't be certain, but it sounded like Commander Shepard had just punched her fist through a wall.

Which was yet another confusing development that Samantha's mind was incapable of processing. She numbly took the elevator to the Crew Deck. Briefly considering the crew bunks, Sam decided to crash in a sleeper pod. She ached for a bed, one bed in particular, but figured it was better to just avoid the situation altogether. At least until she could process what the hell had just happened.

Collapsing fully-clothed into the first sleeper pod she could find, Sam started to drift off to sleep almost immediately.

She was abruptly awoken by a ping from her Omni-tool.

It's after midnight, who the bloody hell would be messaging me?

[Message received: "Yo0o Traynr, u r missin a helluva party. Tomorrw nite? We'll get u sum action. –diana"]
Samantha drummed her fingertips on the low table. A subconscious nervous twitch. She had been racking her brain all morning and the stress was starting to show. Even hours of analyzing and self-reflecting brought her no closer to a satisfactory conclusion.

Staying up incredibly late and getting next to no sleep certainly wasn't helping, either.

Luckily, the hustle and bustle of the Citadel Docks Holding Area drowned out the comms specialist's drumming, mumbling, huffing and swearing (sometimes all at once). Sam probably looked barking mad, but at least she was in good company. The refugee holding area had gotten crowded, even after news of the Council coup d'tat broke. *There was nowhere left to go, after all.* Clusters of refugees from all races and ages were hunkered down at nearby tables, pensive and melancholy.

Despite the noisy congestion, Sam's behavior had not gone completely unnoticed.

"Traynor?"

Sam was too immersed in her thoughts to take notice of the hand waving for her attention. *I just... I don't know what to believe. This is all so odd and ridiculous.*

*But maybe people can change. That's something worth believing in, right?*

*Ugh. If I knew the odds on predicting human behavior, I'd probably be in a different profession. And a lot richer.*

…and happier, Traynor?

*Shush.*

"Traynor."

Things just weren't adding up. Sam kept going back to the first hint of something being off. It rolled around in her head slowly. She scanned for warning signs. Everything seemed so certain, so solid. *So what in the bloody hell went wrong?*
Red hair suddenly bobbed into Sam's peripheral vision.

Shepard?

"Traynor! Are you working?!"

…No. Not Shepard.

Running a hand over short bristles of hair, Joker snorted into his beer as he sat down. He'd left his SR-2 cap in front of the chair at Sam's right as a placeholder. Seating in the busy Holding Area was in short supply, and lucky for Joker no one had taken it. Considering how oblivious the Normandy comms specialist was to her surroundings, a pair of salarians could have sauntered up and mated on the table and Sam wouldn't have noticed.

A Stupid whisper made an intrigued "Hmmm!" at the thought of—of... mating.

Oh Jesus.

That damn whisper brought that damn Thing creeping back in to Sam's mind. She had been doing a pretty damn good job suppressing a very specific memory (incident?) from only a few hours ago.

…Dammit, Shepard.

Sam cleared her throat and struck a half-defensive, half-casual tone. "What makes you think I'm working? I'm on shore leave, the most magical Alliance-permitted day of the year." She waved her Omni-tool screen nonchalantly.

"You're a total shit liar, Traynor," Joker returned derisively. "I know that look. You've got Math Face on. It's one step away from Constipated Face. The only thing that can out-brood a Traynor Math Face is Garrus's Calibration Face. Or Commander Shepard. Just—just all of Commander Shepard. ...Or maybe Javik smiling." The pilot shuddered and made an exhaling "woof" sound before mumbling, "...terrifying."

EDI appeared at Joker's elbow. "Your naming nomenclature suggests Garrus's 'Calibration' expression to be comparable to Specialist Traynor's 'Math Face,' Jeff, since they both involve a focus on mathematics. I am having difficulty assigning values based on this subjective spectrum, though it would seem witnessing Javik in a state of happiness would short out my optics. I just got these," EDI finished with mock-annoyance. Sam couldn't help bursting out laughing.

"And what lovely optics they are, EDI. That would be a true waste of such beauty." Samantha's chuckling faded. "And I do not have 'Math Face,' Moreau. That is not a thing."

Joker muttered an unconvinced "whatever you say" under his breath before taking another sip of his beer.

I hate it when that smug bastard is right.

Sam had actually been working. Analyzing data can be a wonderful thing. Just one big strategy game with hundreds and thousands of puzzle pieces to try and fit together. The hunt could be intoxicating… along with that thrilling moment of victory when the puzzle's answer was finally revealed.

And for someone like Samantha Traynor, it was also a compelling distraction.

Especially from—from…
The puzzle in question was a comms signal, a specific needle on a pile of needles inside a galaxy of haystacks. Sam had been studying it all morning. One of her tracker algorithms had picked up a very quiet hail. It was looking for Alliance ships in particular and broadcasting only a terse distress code: ["Help us."]

The signature was Cerberus. Normally, anything involving Cerberus was treated with healthy skepticism. Even the Alliance had flagged it as a low priority, not worthy of immediate follow-up with more pressing Reaper threats looming. But it had caught in Sam's tracking filters and gnawed at her since she'd stumbled across it this morning. Early this morning. After all, might as well work if you can't sleep.

A clever string of code masked by an evolving algorithm offered subsequent detail: a group of scientists, The Illusive Man's best, wanted sanctuary. A trade of knowledge, files and manpower in exchange for safety. Their location was a closely guarded secret, but they were desperate and in danger of being discovered at any moment. Samantha had spent much of the morning weighing pros and cons of informing Commander Shepard about the development.

People make mistakes. Even Cerberus operatives have to have a conscience... a few of them, anyway. "You're either with us or we turn you into soldier-husks" is hardly a motivating work environment. Total rubbish of a pension, if you ask me. Plus, their inside track on the Illusive Man's projects could give the Alliance a much-needed edge.

Or... it could be an elaborate trap. A ruse to get Cerberus agents in the Crucible so they could sabotage or steal the weapon. One act of misplaced trust could bring down the galaxy's Hail Mary project and roll out the red carpet for the Reapers. Kind of a big risk to take on the good word of people who are (were?) Cerberus's top scientists.

But then again...

["Please. Help us."]

Sam shook her head. Being the gatekeeper of information certainly had its drawbacks. She was still debating whether to go with common sense (don't trust them) or her gut (they deserve a second chance).

Shifting focus back to the blinking feed of her Omni-tool, Sam admitted, "Fine, smart arse. I figured I'd have another go at saving the galaxy on my lunch break. Someone has to do it while all you deviants are running around the Citadel trying to get laid."

Trying? Some are succeeding.

Shut. Up.

Joker could only smirk back as he rubbed a thumb over the line of beer froth stuck to his upper lip-stubble. "Hey now, I'm just trying to get a stiff drink. A stiff anything else would be dangerous. … And probably expensive."

Mech-EDI remained dutifully next to Jeff with her hands clasped in front. She inquired, "Is your oblique remark regarding 'stiffness' a reference to joint pain from Vrolik Syndrome, the organic symptom 'rigor mortis' following death, a slang terminology for a male erection, or something else? The context implies a sexual meaning, but I want to clarify before readying a properly contextualized joke. Likely a combination of options one and three to maximize humor."
"Uhh… Nevermind, EDI," Joker quickly evaded before turning the conversation back on Sam. "Why aren't you taking this rare opportunity to go hook up with desperate babes at Purgatory? …and if you do decide to do that, could you take pictures? Maybe some video? Donnelly will pay top credit for it. Before Gabby kills him, anyway. So I'm kind of under the gun here."

Sam glared back. "In your dreams, Moreau." She punched him on the arm lightly, but the abrupt conversation turn (which was your fault by the way, Traynor) depressed the comms specialist.

While Joker negotiated with EDI on the finer points of editing and staging Normandy footage for the pornography industry ("You could be the first ship to make a Fornax cover, EDI!" "You are attempting to use me for my ample quarters, Jeff. Also, those holo drone cameras make my stern look big."), Sam scrolled disinterestedly through her feeds now.

She'd finally run out of excuses and distractions to avoid thinking about… Annelise.

She hadn't seen Shepard since… since she'd left the woman's quarters last night. The only message Sam had received from the Commander was confirmation that her shore leave request was approved. Boilerplate and boring.

Not that Sam was expecting a creepy declaration of love via email or anything.

An acknowledgement that something actually happened would be nice, though, she thought bitterly.

Sam wasn't quite sure what she was hoping for. An apology? A second chance? …an explanation, at the very least.

And maybe a hint that our first time wasn't also our last.

Despite the way the evening had ended, Samantha couldn't deny the first half was rather divine. Part of her was still bursting with giddiness. A boring colony kid who spends all day analyzing comm feeds shagged the first human SpecTRe. A hero. An amazing woman.

Even more, there were subtle indications the two women shared a connection beyond just work, obvious attraction, and gripping conversation. The chess game, the opening up of Shepard's feelings about Thane, the amiable tone of the tour, the shower…

That was... a good shower.

But as pleased as Sam was about the steps forward, the steps back couldn't be ignored. Annelise had shared how damaged she was because of Cerberus, and she clearly had trouble with intimacy. All interesting points to be explored… assuming it wasn't a one night stand because Shepard had been in mourning.

That was the conclusion Samantha hated arriving at. She had no idea if last night's spontaneous encounter was the culmination of weeks of sexual tension (from both sides, of course!) or just blowing off steam from a remarkably busy day. It stung being thought of as a stress-relief aid, and led to unfavorable comparisons to Isabella, which then created an anger-guilt cycle. My favorite.

I really should stop thinking. It just gets me in trouble, Sam sighed at herself.

…Remember last night when you stopped thinking? It was right when Annelise had you pinned up against—
Oh, for the love of God you're not helping!

Samantha had tossed and turned in her sleeper pod most of the night. Flashes of freckled skin or warm lips kept invading her scattered dreams. She'd also awoken with a start around 4:20AM panicked about EDI, of all things, and that had created an awkward conversation with her sleeper pod lid (via the ship's private intercom).

"EDI. EDI! I know you're there. I need to ask you something."

The AI's warm voice was a little tinny and distant through the sleeper pod speakers, but still characteristically EDI. "I am pleased to assist, Specialist Traynor."

"Last night I—well I mean, Shepard and I—do you…?" Real articulate there, Traynor.

"I am aware of your sexual encounter with Commander Shepard, if that is what you are referring to, Specialist Traynor. Do you have a specific question I can address? Perhaps I can provide some pamphlets to assist with erogenous biotic use in the future? Dr. Solus left a few information packets on my servers from his previous stay and I would be happy to forward—"

She was paying very close attention, indeed. "No! No no no, that's perfectly fine. I'm—I mean, I think we're good in that... department."

Oh God, and I thought this just sounded terrible in my head. I am thrilled that it sounds just as absurd with EDI.

Sam had to lick her lips a few times. Her mouth felt dry and tacky. "I just… I was wondering if you had told anyone. About it. Joker, for example."

A long pause. That was something Sam always noticed about the Normandy's AI: the robot mech didn't have a particularly wide range of facial or vocal nuances, but EDI had very unique, telling pauses. It's probably what Sam developed a slight crush on, back in the day.

Now you have a different crush.

Yes. Thank you. I'm aware.

...Took you long enough.

"While the information is certainly relevant to the Alliance's interests, I did not feel it necessary to share with Jeff. Also, my recent conversations with Commander Shepard have expanded my concept of morality into greater freedom of social awareness. I deemed it 'rude' to disseminate private information without having consulted you or Commander Shepard first," EDI stated simply.

It was a very deep conversation to suddenly find one's self in as a half-asleep, half-confused communications specialist in a sleeper pod. A throbbing pain appeared along Sam's temples. "I—You what? About what? I don't even—Well... yes, it would be very rude. Especially since I don't even know what's going on," Sam sputtered. "...Thank you for keeping it a secret, EDI."

EDI's voice chimed in helpfully. "You are welcome, Specialist Traynor. Did you need further assistance?"

Sam did not. She'd managed to squeeze in an hour of sleep after that, but (shockingly) her problems were still there when she awoke. Sam had hoped tagging along with Joker and EDI on shore leave would keep her mind occupied, but even then she'd supplemented with some work on the side. Sighing, Sam balanced the back of her head on the top her chair and stared at the high ceiling.
I had such plans for shore leave. Shopping. Hanging out with Allers. Maybe dancing at Purgatory.

Don't forget possibly helping murder the Normandy traitor with Liara.

...yes, thank you. I had a very full dance card until last night. Now I can't stopping thinking about—

"Joker. Joker! I can't believe you're here!" A high female voice called across the busy refugee area. Sam, EDI and Joker turned to try and identify the voice.

*Will our mystery guest enter and sign in, please?*

A woman in a dirty blonde bob elbowed her way past a line of refugees and threw her arms around the Normandy pilot next to Sam. Joker looked shocked, but not displeased.

"The shit—? Kelly? Kelly Chambers?" Joker tried to wriggle away from the woman with a stranglehold on him from above and behind. She finally released him and giggled with delight.

*Who in the bloody hell is Kelly Cham—*

"It is a pleasure to see you, Yeoman Chambers," EDI also returned lightly. Her wrist whirred slightly as she waved a polite hand.

Kelly turned and recoiled slightly in surprise. "Oh my God! EDI? EDI, is that you?" She paced around the mech to study EDI. "You look amazing." She suddenly stopped and looked around anxiously. "Also, it's 'Felicia Hannigan of the mining vessel Typhoon' now."

Sam looked at Joker questioningly, who quickly answered. "Kelly—Felicia, rather, was the yeoman for the SR-2, Cerberus edition. 'Felicia,' this is Specialist Samantha Traynor. She's got your old post by the galaxy map."

Standing up and sticking out a palm for a handshake, Sam was taken aback when Kelly/Felicia lunged forward with a crushing hug. "It's so great to meet you, Samantha! I hope you're taking good care of Shepard. That spot always did have a great view of the CIC."

Sam could only stammer out, "Uh... pleasure." She scrutinized the woman: high-energy but endearing, attractive with green eyes (*...I seem to be a sucker for those lately...*), dressed in simple miner's fatigues. *And ...ex-Cerberus?*
Joker gestured at the last open chair at their table. "You look different. And I didn't think I'd see you after... after the whole Collector thing." The trio of humans settled in while EDI resumed her sentinel stance behind the Normandy pilot.

"I didn't have much choice," Kelly/Felicia sighed. "It didn't feel right staying with Cerberus. Especially after Shepard saved me from that—that place. I would have had to stay behind to help The Illusive Man go through the remains of the Collector Base. I just—I couldn't do it. I came here. I was making a difference. Helping people. It helped me forget. Until Cerberus showed up looking for me."

Sputtering on his beer, Joker coughed. "Holy shit, Kel—I mean, holy shit. They took time out of their busy coup schedule to settle a score with the frickin' SR-2 yeoman? What the hell'd you do, write a report calling The Illusive Man fat or something?"

"You're so funny, Joker," Kelly/Felicia cooed cheerfully. She sobered quickly and started wringing her hands. "I—I had been feeding Cerberus information. Back on the SR-2. About all of you. And Shepard. About her emotional state. Altercations she'd had with crew. People she was close to and people she didn't trust. I reported everything back to The Illusive Man."

The pilot leaned across the table. "Are you shitting me?!" he exploded at her. The former yeoman flinched. She mumbled more frantic apologies while Joker slapped a fist on the table, crushing his SR-2 cap. "God dammit, Chambe—Harri—whatever the hell your last name is. Why didn't you just hand them the keys to the Normandy while you were at it?!

EDI interjected calmly. "You also willingly accepted employment from Cerberus, Jeff. What expectation of mistrust was supposed to be inferred by Miss Hannigan when even Alliance servicemen joined the organization, yourself included?"

That's... a really good point actually.

Glancing behind him with a scowl, Joker sat back and crossed his arms. He grumbled bitterly for a moment before acknowledging. "...I guess it's not her fault."

"Thank you, EDI." Kelly/Felicia sighed gratefully at the AI. "I'm so sorry, Joker. And... I told Shepard what I'd done. I begged her to forgive me. Especially after... she saved my life."
Kelly/Felicia turned to Sam to explain. "The Normandy crew was captured by Collectors while Shepard and the combat teams were away on a mission. All of us except Joker."

"My moment of glory!" Joker, no longer bitter, elbowed an EDI who quietly mumbled. "Yes, Jeff. I remember."

Gesturing at Joker, Kelly/Felicia (Kelicia?) grew hushed. "He unshackled EDI, who drove the Collectors away, but we were already in stasis pods. Shepard wasted no time storming through the Omega-4 Relay to rescue us and destroy the Collectors. She saved us before what happened to the colony people could happen to us."

Sam's ears perked up. This was one detail the Alliance had never released. Yes, thousands of colonists had been abducted and killed, but the details were sealed by the Alliance "Top Secret" stamp. "What happened?"

"It was awful. They were liquefied into this organic metal goo to help build a new Reaper," the former yeoman shuddered and hugged herself tightly.

That could have been my mother. My father. Me. Sam felt an overwhelming need to call her parents.
and tell them she loved them. It was more horrible than she had expected. But her mind could only process numb shock. Calculating the thousands of colonists taken and converting their weight into kilograms of "organic metal goo" was not a unit of measurement Sam cared to think about.

It took a few mental slaps to not recede back into that dark place after the Horizon attack. When the colony had been struggling to do a head count to see who had been taken. When Discovery colony family members screamed at city meetings for the Alliance to explain. When Sam herself walked familiar neighborhoods only to see the prefabs of childhood friends empty.

*Focus, Traynor. Not now. One day at a time.*

*So, tomorrow then.*

"After that, following Cerberus didn't seem like such a good idea any more. We broke ties. After Shepard turned herself in, we were a little lost. We were afraid to go back to Cerberus. They started capturing the old crew." Kelicia swallowed deeply. Her fingertips traced along her jawline. "Every Cerberus operative has a cyanide capsule implanted in one of our molars. To suicide if we were ever captured by enemy forces. Cerberus turned out to be that enemy. No one turned on Shepard that I know of. I ran here before I could be next.

"When I told her that I'd spied on her, and the crew, and sent reports to The Illusive Man, she was so angry." Kelicia looked ready to cry. *I know the feeling.* "I was so afraid she was gonna hurt me. Or worse: not forgive me. She started to walk away, and I was about to burst into tears. But then she turned and told me to change my look, name, identity. That it wasn't safe for me here. ...C-Sec DNA checkpoint scanners can still pick me up even with a fake ID, but now I'm safe as long as I stay in the refugee area."

"Wow. That is an amazing story," Sam tilted her head in sympathy. One omitted detail nagged at Sam, and she paused a few seconds before gingerly asking, "Did Shepard forgive you?"

The former yeoman broke out into a sad smile. "I didn't think she would. She was so angry when I confessed. Shepard was a tough one to win over, you know."

*Boy, do I ever.*

Kelicia sighed. "At first, she just shoved past me in the CIC, especially in the beginning. Would ignore me when I told her about new messages. Unless I had information about her old crew, she didn't want to hear it. But Shepard changed after Thane came aboard. She wasn't exactly nice to me after that, but she was more patient at least. She even let me share a dinner with her once."

"Oh-ho!" Joker chirped enthusiastically, leaning forward for gossip. "Kinky dinner? It was kinky, right?"

*This is why he doesn't need to know about—about... you know.*

Dismissing Joker with a cheerful "Oh you!", Kelicia tossed her hair lightly and continued. "She came to see me yesterday. To check and see if I was all right. And she even told me about Thane. ...she never said she forgave me, but... I know she does. And that's enough." The yeoman's eyes were glassy for a moment before she dabbed tears away with the back of a hand.

"How is Shepard doing since... since Thane?"

EDI was the one to answer. "Commander Shepard has spent much of her time in her quarters." This would be the point where a human would pause significantly and make eye contact with Sam. But
the AI-mech was cool and professional and proceeded without missing a beat. "Otherwise, the Commander attended a number of scheduled meetings this morning with C-Sec and Council representatives regarding the war effort. She is also currently engaged in negotiations with Aria T'Loak for further assistance."

Kelicia nodded sadly. "That's Shepard, always working. After we found out the Collectors were really the Protheans, she would just say 'I'll sleep when I'm dead.' I've never met someone so focused." The woman turned to Samantha, a geeky gleam in her eye. "You're at the galaxy map console now? Great system. Integrated with the Med Bay biorhythmics and combat data feeds. You've probably looked through her hardsuit camera, right?"

Sam nodded curiously, though she felt a mild stab of resentment that yet another SR-2 Crewmate knew such things about Shepard. Being jealous of the past was starting to get exhausting. And kind of petty. *C'mon, Traynor. Stiff British upper lip and all that.*

Leaning over toward Sam, Kelicia lowered her voice conspiratorially. "She's always at the front of the action, so it's a fun perspective. But try one of her squadmates for a change. And capture that Look that Shepard gets in battle. I swear, it sends chills up my spine. That complete focus. That nothing escapes her gaze. And that she'll never stop until it's done." Her voice thick with awe, Kelicia punctuated her words by waving her index and middle fingers at her eyes.

Sam mumbled that she would take it under advisement. That Look from last night was still freshly burned into her memory, after all.

Joker took over the conversation next, fielding questions from Kelicia about the other old crewmates. "Kasumi Goto" was last seen on the Citadel, and Kelly/Felicia swore she had spotted the thief's shimmering cloak once or twice. Kelicia was concerned about Grunt, who was still in intensive care at Huerta Memorial. And it was back to hired merc work for "Zaeed Massani," who Kelicia had seen from a distance in Aroch Ward months ago.

The two old acquaintances shared gossip easily, but Sam was rendered mute. She was gazing at the woman formerly known as Kelly Chambers. And reached a conclusion about something.

Sam stood up to leave.

Joker leaned back and poked at Sam's wrist. "Where you goin', Traynor? I thought we were gonna team up against James in his batarian buddies' Skyllian Five game. See how your cardsharking measures up against professionals."

Tucking her chair in, Sam stuck a thumb towards the elevator. "Maybe later. And you do recall my disclaimer that my card-counting superpowers are less effective against multiple decks, right? Besides, I need to talk to Commander Shepard. I have some important information for her." *And we need to talk. Talk talk.*

Joker wolfwhistled suggestively. "Some sexy information? Granted, it's Shepard, but I don't think Donnelly is in a position to be picky. Maybe—"

Sam cut him off. "You got me, Moreau. I'm going to go talk to Shepard about the wild night of passion we both shared last night. I'm feeling randy for an encore." She found that in these situations, the truth masked as sarcasm worked better than awkwardly deflecting.

EDI only looked back curiously, but she said nothing. Sam gave the mech a barely perceptible head shake. *That is sarcasm, EDI, not permission to speak freely.* EDI gave a small, acknowledging nod.
Oh thank Christ.

Sam's feint worked. Joker guffawed, "Ha! Right. If you're not gonna tell me, fine. Hope she's in a good mood after hanging out with Aria. Which isn't likely. That bitchy asari makes Javik look like sunshine." EDI requested clarification if Aria came before or after Javik on the Brood Spectrum from earlier. No one answered.

Kelly/Felicia managed to shoot Samantha a knowing look, but resumed talking with Joker. Heading for the security curtain to the elevator, Sam's Omni-tool chimed with an incoming message.

A small, blue, glowing orb appeared above her left wrist. "Specialist Traynor," EDI intoned quietly. "You have sufficient authorization for access to my location log, which indicates Commander Shepard is outside of Apollo's Cafe at the Presidium Commons. And... good luck."

Sam glanced back over her shoulder in panic, but the EDI-mech was perfectly still while the Normandiers chatted. I would say it's kind of creepy that EDI can carry on multiple conversations at once, but I'm sure as hell not complaining.

The elevator ride was a long one with lots of people getting on and off. Medical personnel ran to Cerberus-affected wards. C-Sec guards talked into wrists about threat levels. Businessmen and women tried to find a way to turn a profit with a war going on.

And one communications specialist in the corner wondered about second chances.

Traynor. Just do the odds.

Maybe I don't want to.

Look, it's easy. The probability that Shepard was just in mourning versus her actually—

Maybe I don't want to know.

How are you supposed to plan for a likely scenario if you haven't figured out the odds?

Maybe... maybe I just want to hope for the best for a change. Is that so horrible?

Not so horrible. Foolish, but not horrible. ...and the Cerberus scientists?

…Maybe I just want to hope for the best.

You are hopeless, Traynor.

Actually, I'm bloody full of hope.

You keep telling yourself that.

Finally. The doors opened and Sam squeezed out. She surveyed the tightly laid out shops and sweeping sections of beautifully landscaped greenery. Sam had never been worthy of the Presidium section of the Citadel, but her clearance had been magically upgraded following the Normandy's foil of the Cerberus attack.

Despite the upscale architecture and manicured salarian flora, the Presidium Commons looked dreadful. Broken glass everywhere, holo police lines erected in random areas to cordon off Cerberus crime scenes, and smoke billowed from careful detonation of mines the invaders had left behind. Hardly a dream come true for a first-time visitor like Samantha.
Pattering awkwardly along the airy corridor, Sam stopped often to look over the railing at the Commons areas below. She spied turians, volus, asari and salarians gathered at tables and balconies, but not many humans. And no specific human yet.

And then... that voice.

"You'll get your weapons, General. Kannik is playing hardball but I'll get him what he wants next time the Normandy is on patrol. Just keep up your end."

A turian voice growled back with approval. "I'm a man of my word, Shepard. Aria better put a tight leash on the Blue Suns and stay off my turf. Otherwise... there's nothing to worry about. Other than Reapers knocking at our door."

"Nothing to worry about at all, then," Shepard deadpanned.

Sam finally spotted Shepard standing near a bench two floors below. A turian general was stretched out lazily next to the human woman, but he stood up long enough to shake her hand. Shepard, on the other hand, turned on her heel towards an outer balcony.

Weaving down two flights of stairs, Samantha found Shepard just as she was sitting down at a small table. The seat across from the Commander was empty before Shepard propped a weary foot on it. She was dressed in her dark service uniform, though the front was carelessly unzipped and untucked. Sam also spied a strip of gauze wrapped around the right knuckles with dimples of red peeking through.

So. She had punched a wall last night.

The revelation wasn't so much reassuring as it actually made Sam more nervous for some reason. She felt jittery about being confrontational, even though she had an easy, legit conversation topic to discuss with her commanding officer. She felt herself starting to wither with insecurity as doubts started to assault her carefully reinforced good intentions.

The insecurity halted in its tracks when the Commander powered on the small disc at the center of the table. A chess game, already in progress, sparked to life on a holo stage. Shepard tucked a strand of red hair behind her ears before studying the board.

"That fianchetto is leaving your central outpost exposed," Sam's voice rang out, quite against her will. It seemed her inner chess nerd could beat even Stupid Sam to the punch sometimes.

What does that say about me?

N-E-R-D.

...And proud of it.

The Commander jerked in her chair to look over her shoulder to where her comms specialist stood at the top of the low stairs. Shepard stood up chivalrously and her eyes crinkled softly. "No one likes an exposed central outpost."

"They really don't," Sam agreed. "...though sometimes it just depends on what you do with it. Turn a weakness into an advantage." She remained standing awkwardly but managed to return Shepard's probing gaze with a calm one of her own. Wrapped in the comforting veil that was Chess, Sam felt briefly safe and protected.

The Commander had seen better days. She had a light application of make-up, but dark circles under
her eyes betrayed her attempts at professionalism. Her bangs wisped out in opposition from the rest of her neat waves of hair. Overall, she looked drained.

Samantha eyed the chess board from a closer vantage. The attack formations were actually quite sophisticated. Just about a 180-degree turn from Shepard's chess game from the previous night. "It looks like you've been practicing."

Shepard looked back at the board. Her tone was masked with flatness. "I... had some time. Last night. This morning. I thought I'd... be better for next time."

_Did you, now?_

Sam felt her cool veneer slip slightly. She wasn't sure which half of that last sentence was tripping her up more with possible subtext: "be better" or "next time." Regardless, both options set Stupid Sam off flailing in opposite, giddy directions. Sam hated that she had to clear her throat to get her own mind on track.

_Pull yourself together, woman._

"What makes you think there will be a next time?" It was a colder statement than Sam intended. Especially the true meaning layered just under the surface. But she couldn't take it back now after it had tumbled out of her (Calm, Cool, Big Shot Sam) mouth.

There was a noticeable eye-flinch from Shepard, though her crinkling smile remained.

Now, this could go one of two ways, Sam's mind suddenly threw back. There's about a seven to one chance Shepard will just say "There won't be" and sit down and that'll be that. Which leads to a three to one chance you'll be end up camping out at that gelato shop on Zakera Ward eating your resentment by the pint.

_Brilliant. And the other?_

_Five to one she'll actually play another game with you._

_A game or a "game"?...And no secondary odds? No over-under?_

_That five to one was for a game. 200,000 to one for a "game," suggestive wink included._

_Rubbish._

The Commander scratched at her neck awkwardly for a moment, then arched her eyebrows triumphantly. "Because of the eternal rule that is Best Two Out of Three."

Sam remembered that last game. It had been wonderful and strange and ended far too abruptly.

_Sounds familiar._

_Shut. Up._

"I believe I won last night's game," Sam replied. "That means Two Out of Three goes to me." She wasn't sure if she was proud of, or mortified by, her smug tone.

Crossing her arms, Shepard shook her head. "Sorry, Specialist. No checkmate, no win. We didn't finish the game, which amounts to a draw. As it stands, one win and one draw aren't enough to declare a winner. I thought you played fair, Traynor." Challenge rang in the Commander's voice.
Okay, the bloody double entendre is killing me here.

"Hmm. You are correct, Commander." Sam saluted respectfully. "Permission to speak freely."

"Granted. At ease, Specialist."

"...You are so going down, ma'am."

Shepard's mouth curled slightly as she turned her body to wave welcomingly at the opposite chair. Sam thought she heard a whisper as she trotted over, but was pretty sure it was just in her head: "...I certainly hope so."

Assuming the opposite seat, Sam tapped at the familiar console to clear a new game. She was a little embarrassed that she hadn't realized the chess holo had even been left behind. Well, I did leave in a bit of a hurry.

There. That twinge of resentment. It was enough of an ember to help push aside the jittery meltdown she was in danger of having over "I certainly hope so."

Bolstered by boldness, Sam suddenly had a rather ingenious idea. "How about we make this interesting, Shepard?"

Shepard leaned forward in her chair and lazily propped up her head to study Samantha. Somehow, the Commander's unkempt appearance made her look dangerous. Untamed.

Easy there, tiger.

At the very least, Shepard looked like she had nothing to lose. That's not saying much considering we're talking about chess.

"Not just a friendly game, now? Are you talking about a wager, Traynor?"

"Not quite. More like... a motivator. A piece for an answer. To any question." Sam expected resistance. A fight at least. Something to snap the tension.

Instead, that curl returned. "That seems reasonable." Shepard nodded at the board for Sam to go first, but the comms specialist waved her off.

"White has initiative. Also, age before beauty." The taunt could not have been more delicious.

Even more absurd was Shepard's answering smirk. "Remind me not to bless you with shore leave too often. The freedom seems to be going to your head. Your young, beautiful head." Dripping with sarcasm, she nudged a pawn forward.

A black pawn now stood in white's way after a few key punches from Sam. She smiled at the jab. For some reason, she found Annelise's sly insult kind of charming. That being mocked was greater progress than receiving an oblique compliment. Or an apology.

The next move made Samantha suspicious. Shepard had been paying attention. For Sam found herself contending with a Queen's Gambit. One flick of her wrist could Accept and send her bulldozing into Shepard's ranks. But instead, Sam Declined and lined up a pawn to fend off a possible counterattack.

But it didn't come just yet. Knights and bishops started moseying forward. Shepard was being patient. Thoughtful. Gone was the pure aggression from the first game, as well as the emotional
randomness from the second. It intrigued Sam. She decided to bide her time setting up defenses and let Annelise strike first.

This is her game, after all. Ball's in her court.

You're mixing up your games, Traynor.

Bollocks.

A black pawn disintegrated as Shepard took the space. And won the right to the first question.

"Why did you call me last night?"

Samantha was taken aback slightly. She had spent much of the morning (the parts not spent on work or denial, anyway) sculpting elaborate defenses to possible arguments. Shepard had invited me up. Shepard had asked if I wanted a shower. Shepard had said she was interested. All these Shepard-initiated events failed to take into account the original instigator: Sam herself.

"I—well… I was rather bored and lonely in the CIC since most of the crew was on shore leave," Sam admitted slowly. She had to think a moment. Was that only yesterday? "And then… oh! I received your ship-wide email. It was so dreadful I wanted to see if you were all right."

"Except you didn't say anything," Shepard reminded her.

"I—I don't know. I didn't know what to say. I assumed you were hurting over Thane, but nothing that came to mind was particularly comforting. It was an impulse." Sam could only shrug. It wasn't a very interesting answer. But Annelise gave a satisfied nod.

Now let's see if she plays fair. The white pawn's advantage was immediately taken away as a fresh black piece took the tile. "My question: what the bloody hell happened last night?"

Shepard made a strangled choking sound. "Really? That's how you're starting out of the gate?" She shifted in her low chair, clearly uncomfortable. Sam crossed her arms and tried to give a satisfying glare.

Glaring back for a moment, Annelise puffed at a stray strand of hair in resignation. "I don't know. It suddenly got very crowded up here," Shepard sighed as she tapped at her temple. "First, anger and insecurity at what Cerberus had done to me. Then Thane reminding me to keep my emotions in check. Then good old fashioned fear at losing control. It was just... too much."

It was hard to tell if the Commander was being honest or not. She was rather fond of lying in threes, after all. But she had said the truth was a reasonable request. "Are you really going to make me take three of your pieces to explore all those topics? Not that I'm not up to the challenge, but this could go faster if you'd just—"

"Your turn, Traynor," Shepard cut her off sharply.

So that's how it's gonna be.

It was such an odd thing, now that Sam thought about it as she pushed a bishop up three spaces. There was no small talk or pleasantries exchanged beforehand. No arguments or avoidance. Sam had simply sat down and found herself playing a game of chess with Commander Shepard. As if it were the most natural thing in the world. Even more strange was the atmosphere. What should have involved a lot of awkward chit chat followed by pointless misunderstandings and confrontations, it all got pushed aside. Directly into Sam's comfort zone, of all things. She trampled a white knight that
"What are you insecure about? Because of Cerberus."

Shepard's shoulders tensed up. They matched her clenching teeth nicely. A fingertip ran the length of her jaw and cheek, stopping for a second every time it brushed past the crevice of a cybernetic scar. "I don't look in a mirror much, Samantha. I don't like the reminder of what I am. And what I'm not."

The pause after irritated the comms specialist. "This is bloody cruel. What aren't you? You didn't fully answer the question."

When Shepard didn't continue, Sam attempted to be reasonable. "I see your scars as lovely, Annelise. Your skin has become such an armor against the galaxy. It reassures me that someone like you can crack and remain unbroken."

A pair of moves were traded before white again pushed back black. "How do you know I'm unbroken?" Shepard's green eyes were hooded, but her voice betrayed how sensitive the question was.

Hmm, we're slowly getting somewhere, Sam thought before she replied. "Just a hunch." She took small pleasure in Shepard's obvious huff of annoyance at the short answer.

The board was getting interesting. Annelise had clearly done her homework. Her king traveled with a pawn and knight escort. She headed off Sam's attempts to poke at her defenses.

A black bishop that wandered too close to the white king was swept away. Shepard tapped her fingers together expectantly. "Why did you throw the game last night?"

Sam started to ask, "What makes you think—?" but Shepard cut her off with a withering look. So, she had been paying attention. Clearing her throat, Samantha amended her answer. "Okay. You got me. I just... I didn't want the game to end. I didn't know if you even liked it. Or me. We agreed to Best Two Out of Three, but nothing after that. I didn't... I don't know. I liked playing with you. Talking to you. I just didn't want it to end," Sam repeated helplessly. She wasn't able to look at Shepard, choosing instead to stare despondently at the board.

"So you thought you might hurt me," Samantha clarified. Shepard clasped a firm hand to her chin, but allowed a small nod. Her eyes opened, flicked to Sam's briefly, then returned to the board.

"I haven't been with many people..." A blush rose to Annelise's cheeks. She mumbled awkwardly. "...I'm not like Jack either."

"I don't know what that means." Sam was careful to phrase her confusion as a statement and not a question. She was getting the hang of this.

Annelise leaned forward in her chair and closed her eyes. "Jack is a unique biotic, trained to tap into her emotions to fuel her abilities. When normally, for most biotics, emotions are a handicap. A danger. They take away focus. Being unfocused means... things happen. Unplanned, sometimes dangerous things. Best-case scenario: a few items float around. Worst-case: people get hurt." She winced slightly, clearly embarrassed by the topic.

"So you thought you might hurt me," Samantha clarified. Shepard clasped a firm hand to her chin, but allowed a small nod. Her eyes opened, flicked to Sam's briefly, then returned to the board.
Well, I suppose that's a reasonable fear.

...She sure was overthinking last night. Compared to you anyway, Traynor. You dove in head first without so much as a backward glance.

Yes. Thank you. I'm aware of how busy my hormones were.

And still are.

Shush.

"And if it's any consolation: I'm not afraid," Sam said slowly. "Of—of you, anyway. Your temper, however..." She didn't know if the joke helped, but Annelise did glance up curiously before staring at the board again.

Chessmen crisscrossed the bright board as rooks and bishops chased evading kings. Moves were traded in thoughtful silence, for it only seemed right to earn the privilege to speak now. Sam succumbed to the taut focus of the chess game, and even managed to appreciate Annelise's obvious improvement.

The comms specialist opened her mouth a few times to offer a compliment, but she didn't want to come across as belittling. Especially considering how well this little give-and-take match was going, for both their friendship and...

...relationship?

A white knight hopped easily over Sam's small flank of remaining pawns to take an errant black rook. An authoritative "Check" followed. Sam waited expectantly for a question.

"Why did you come back? After—After last night." There was a vulnerable curiosity in those green depths. A worried line between dark red eyebrows.

"Well... I was working and..." Sam powered up her Omni-tool. "I found something you need to see."

There was the briefest flash of disappointment. Then it was replaced with a mask of polite interest. "What have you got?" Annelise straightened attentively in her chair. A Commander through and through.

Sam kicked herself for ruining the mood, but it was a too perfect a segue. Plus, it was the truth.

Allers was right. You're kind of a turian about protocol.

"A group of Cerberus scientists cut ties and fled. Perhaps they finally realized they were on the wrong side." Stretching her wrist across the table, Sam showed Annelise the threads of correspondence on her Omni-tool. "We don't know what they were researching, but they were among the Illusive Man's top scientists. They could help build the Crucible."

"Unless they're indoctrinated and this is a ruse to get Cerberus close to the Crucible," Shepard scoffed. She grumbled under her breath. "Getting the Crucible intel off Mars has been the only time we've been ahead of them in months."

"I'm not suggesting we trust them fully. But it could be worth investigating."

Skeptical, the Commander crossed her arms. "What makes you so sure we can trust them at all?"
"I don't know," Sam admitted. "Past history says they can't be trusted… but I have seen good come out of Cerberus. The Normandy. The colonists you saved." Like me, Sam swallowed but didn't say. Someday... She'll know she saved my life. "And Kelly Chambers, too."

Shepard wrinkled her nose in confusion. A few freckles disappeared into the pair of small folds, Sam noticed. "Kelly Chambers? What does she have to do with any of this?"

Sam jabbed a thumb behind her to point in the general direction of the elevator. "Ran into her at the Refugee area. She and Joker are catching up. She seems nice. And she knew when to quit Cerberus, even when it was dangerous. And you… you gave her a second chance. You could have left her to the mercy of Cerberus, but you didn't. You wanted to save her, and you did." Sam smiled lightly. "Maybe there are others like her out there. Waiting to be saved by Commander Shepard."

Annelise glared slightly at Samantha, but only quietly chewed her cheek. A long pause before, "Has the Alliance tried to make contact with the scientists?"

**Victory.**

"They've been unable to find them. But they're searching... as is Cerberus. I've been monitoring Cerberus communications. I've charted signal frequency from various Cerberus cells by location and cross-referenced known ship movements..." Sam had to stop herself from rambling further.

"You found them." Not a question, but a statement of absolute certainty.

Sam felt a small surge of pleasure at the faith in her abilities. She continued. "I believe so, yes."

Another long pause.

Then Shepard sighed in resignation. She waved her hand at the sky. "You win. Nice work. Put it on the map next time you're on duty and I'll take a look."

Samantha grinned back, pleased at herself for trusting her gut. And being trusted in return.

**Thanks, Kelly. ...er, Felicia.**

"Was that—was that all? You came here to deliver a message?" That disappointed line had returned to Annelise's brow.

Shaking a smug finger, Sam nodded at the board. "One piece, one question." Part of her scolded her own immature glee at making Annelise unhappy. But Sam started to feel lighter, no longer burdened by that bitterness and hurt from last night.

**Amazing what a mental and physical chess game can do.**

**It's time to end this, though.**

Annelise's check came at the expense of opening her white king to attack, which Sam exploited. Her remaining black bishop pushed forward, sending Shepard scrambling in retreat. A couple of checks occurred before the bishop and then a pawn backed the white king into a corner.

"Checkmate, Shepard."

The Commander's breath hissed out in deflated defeat. She chewed her cheek while the chess board sent up holo fireworks in Sam's honor. The comms specialist didn't relish the victory as much as she normally did. There was one question that still lingered.
"So what happens now?"

Green eyes suddenly blazed with focus on Sam, again freezing her in place. A tremor of fear snaked up her spine as the silence deepened. Childish thoughts of "If you'd only thrown the game!" or "She wasn't worth it anyway..." raced through Samantha's mind.

The former thought? Like you'd ever throw a chess game, Traynor.

And the latter? ...you know that's a bloody lie.

An exhale-laugh drove all those thoughts away. A crinkling smile had Sam holding her breath.

"How do you and the eternal rule feel about Best Three Out of Five?" Annelise's voice was husky and playful.

"Favorably, actually," Sam returned cheerfully. "Especially if it becomes Best Four Out of Seven."

"Whatever it takes to get it right, then." Annelise nodded soberly, but that roguish glint had (re)surfaced.

A hand slowly slid forward, resting just next to Sam's on the table. Annelise's fingertips brushed Sam's lightly before pulling away to run through her hair awkwardly. Sam Stupidly beamed at the touch, pleased by Annelise's small offering of encouragement (apology?).

A chiming sound accompanied Sam's Omni-tool sparking to life. Raising up an apologetic finger, Sam answered the incoming call. A small screen popped open, complete with an asari face.

"Samantha? It's Liara."

Oh, this is just bloody perfect.

"Liara! What's going on?" Sam tried to ask nonchalantly.

"Much. I have secured a few leads on the quarian fleet. I will require Alliance security keys to analyze a particular datapad." Liara was quite distracted and looking at something out of view of the Omni-tool screen. Her voice also seemed to be getting louder.

Sam mentally scanned the request for problems, but it seemed reasonable. "Sounds easy enough. Do I need to update EDI's decryption suite?"
"Possibly," the asari wheezed, slightly out of breath. She was on her way to somewhere. Fast. "I've also talked to Ashley about our 'friend.' It looks like you were right. I'm sending you a dossier I've compiled from C-Sec." And why was Liara's voice echoing all of a sudden?

Shepard leaned forward, dark eyebrow arching. She looked at Sam questioningly but said nothing.


"What is it, Samantha?" Liara finally looked back into the screen and paused a moment.

The words tumbled out of Sam's mouth before she thought to look up. "Where are you right now?"

Shepard straightened stiffly just as a familiar voice trilled off to Sam's right. "I'm at Apollo's Café. I heard you were cleared for shore leave. Have you been to the Presidium yet? Where are you—?"

A tired asari doctor stood at the foot of the café steps, her wrist still poised near her mouth. She studied the two human women, quietly evaluating the scene. Sam felt herself blush even though there was nothing to be ashamed of: there was a chess game on the table and Annelise was sitting a comfortable, innocent distance away.

But that sapphire glint of Liara's was icy with scrutiny all the same.

It was Shepard who broke the awkward silence. With more awkwardness.

"What 'friend?'"
"Touch it."

"No."

"Just… just bloody touch it."

"What are you, my mother? I'm not touching anything."

Samantha crossed her arms and glared back. She had known this was going to be a long process, but Sam couldn't have guessed how stubborn the woman could be.

"You have nothing to be insecure about. It's a perfectly normal reaction after what you've been through. Just—just reach out… and touch it." Sam made a wiggling motion with her fingertips for emphasis.

"Still no."

"We're not going anywhere until you get over your damn hang-ups. Make a bloody effort."

"I'm about five seconds away from pulling rank on you, Traynor. Or putting you in a headlock."

"Oooh, kinky," Sam purred insincerely before switching to earnestness. "Look, I'm just trying to help. This is something near and dear to my heart."

"Oh, well if it's near and dear… Hell no." Cheeky sarcasm flashed in dark eyes.

"Stubborn SpecTRe."

"Bossy Brit."

"Lieutenant Commander Wanker."

"Specialist Lame-or."

Sam burst out laughing. "Oh, that was just terrible."

Snickering back, Ashley Williams shook her head sheepishly. "Sue me, I'm rusty. I haven't been home to trade insults with my sisters in ages."

"Well, I'm an only child and a low level subordinate. I have nothing else to do but practice being a smart arse," the comms specialist remarked.

"That, or practice your aim. A couple blows to the head and I still haven't forgotten your shit shooting on Earth, Traynor." Williams scoffed and tossed her head lightly. Long brunette locks bounced before settling back against her tan cheek.

"If I may interject," EDI chimed in. The robot mech had been standing silently at attention for the entire length of their standoff. "Will the Lieutenant Commander be overcoming her traumatic experience from the Mars incident soon? Or may I take this body back to the Presidium? Joker has
sent me numerous messages that his 'morale is dropping' due to my absence. And I have calculated the success rate of this exercise at 7.2% based on the trend of the current conversation."

Ashley and Sam turned to trade stern looks. Williams crossed her arms, crinkling her crisp, wide-shouldered SpecTRe officer's uniform. Outside the D24 Docking Bay, the two women (and EDI) had been at an impasse for the better part of a half hour. The whole "Introduction to Not The Evil Robot Mech 101" had gone far worse than Sam could have imagined.

"It'll be easy," you said.

"Five minute chat," you said.

"What a great way to welcome the new XO," you said. With no small amount of pride, as you might you recall.

...yes. Shut up. It's not like I planned to waste what remains of my shore leave arguing with the most stubborn person on the Citadel.

Second most stubborn. Shepard is ashore too.

Always first, Shepard is.

...right. Always.

The memo about LC Williams taking command as the Normandy's executive officer had gone out that morning. It was dumb luck that Samantha had been the one on the jet bridge leaving just as Ashley was walking up with her footlocker. A perfect opportunity, Sam had thought as she welcomed the second SpecTRe.

Be a good yeoman for the XO ... and maybe get in good with the CO? ... Or get in better, rather.

You are shameless, Traynor.

It's also the polite thing to do! Mum raised me to be well-mannered!

You're also rubbish at lying.

A woman of many talents, then.
A great idea, liaising between the Lieutenant Commander and the rest of the crew. Ashley was an old friend of Shepard's, but not embroiled in all the SR-2 business that was a constant headache source for Sam. The woman was sharp, sarcastic and friendly. Positively rife with bonding potential.

Except for one problem.

There was a good chance that Ashley Williams was going to either throw the EDI mech out an airlock (a la Javik) or use it for target practice. She wasn't subtle, either. Mid-conversation, Ash had yanked a pistol from a holster and blurted out, "Get that thing away from me." Sam had been taken aback briefly. Turning around, Sam saw Joker and EDI approaching from the bridge.

Then a stupid idea had formed.

Hence, the predicament Sam currently found herself in. She'd tried coaxing, gesturing, bribing, threatening, insulting, flirting, rationalizing, guilting, begging, and even a little reverse psychology. But Ashley Williams was immovable. The only success had been getting her to put the pistol away, and even then only after Sam pointed out that everyone in the docking terminal was staring. And C-Sec was in danger of intervening.

"I appreciate your efforts, Specialist Traynor," EDI continued. "But I do not wish to traumatize Lieutenant Commander Williams further. Perhaps we can reconvene at a later time when the Lieutenant Commander has settled in aboard the Normandy." The mech's head tilted curiously. A picture of nonthreatening serenity.

Sam hastily interrupted. "No, no no noooo. Nope. I'm not flying anywhere in a pressurized tin can with a soldier who could potentially flip out at the sight of your mech body. I'm sure Commander Shepard would agree?"

Huh, blackmail. That's a new tactic. Odds of success?

Ashley smirked. "I was cleared for active duty ages ago. By the Alliance which, last I checked, Shepard still reports to. I can forward you my doctor's clearance if you're also going over my paperwork, Specialist. Save me some bureaucratic headaches if you're volunteering to do it."

Touché.

...shit. She's good.

So the odds were a million to 'fuck you,' apparently.

Pity.

"And I'm not going to 'flip out,' Traynor." The SpecTRe sighed. "I'm just not going to break out the group hugs with the mechs that put me in the hospital." She kicked at her footlocker before picking it up. Ashley hefted it like a battering ram aimed at Samantha's midsection. "Can I go now? Or is the welcome wagon going to continue pushing its little rock back and forth forever?"

Sam threw her arms out to block the door dramatically. The "rock" jibe sparked a memory from Oxford, which Sam quoted in exasperation, "'From the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one's passions, whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt—that is the whole question.'"

This halted the advancing LC. Ashley stopped to stare at the comms specialist. "Did you just quote Camus at me?"
"I did go to college," Sam snapped back. "Even a 'mech-loving grunt,' as you so charmingly referred to me earlier, can be quite educated."

EDI interrupted. "I believe Ashley referred to you as a 'mech-loving circuit-herder' rather than a grunt, Specialist Traynor. An inaccurate description, as you have not logged your habitual synthetic-on-organic pornography in almost 54 days. I also registered some offense at 'circuit-herding,' as I am quite capable of maintaining control of the Normandy's electrical systems. It's only the oxygen I sometimes fail to properly cycle that might require 'herding.' Assuming the crew hasn't suffocated in the interim."

At Sam and Ashley's gaping horror, the AI robot quickly replied. "That was a joke."

_We really need to work on your timing, dear._

The two women exchanged an apprehensive glance. Ashley chewed her lower lip for a moment. Suddenly, she spun on her heel to approach EDI.

"What's your prime directive? Or whatever?" Williams asked uncertainly. She shifted the heavy footlocker to rest on her left hip.

EDI smiled back, her tone gentle. "If you are referring to my programming code of ethics or conduct, I no longer have formal parameters to adhere to after being unshackled. However, I seek to help Commander Shepard complete her mission to stop the Reapers as well as protect the human crew within the Normandy. You are my shipmates," she finished simply.

A few long seconds passed. Sam couldn't read Ashley's expression through the back of her head. But the SpecTRe's posture stiffened as her free right hand swung to her temple in salute. EDI saluted back respectfully, murmured a soft "Thank you for assisting" to Sam, then disappeared around the corner.

Grunting from the effort of readjusting the locker, Williams turned around to look at Sam. "You're all right, Traynor," Ashley said cryptically. Her expression was equal parts warmth and respect. Without another word, she hefted her heavy locker and disappeared behind swishing doors.

_What just happened?_

… _Who cares? I brokered peace between Sexy Mech and Lieutenant Commander Stubborn. I think that calls for celebration._

_Hmm, that sounds like a great scenario for a porn vid starring —_

_You're. Not. Helping._

Checking the time on her Omni-tool, Samantha cursed under her breath. She was extremely late meeting Diana at the ANN station on the Presidium. Several annoyed messages pinged Sam's inbox, condemning her tardiness. The comms specialist started to craft a reply until she saw the taxi line at the docking bay.

An influx of refugees standing next to the rapid transit hub had to be 25 people deep. And while Sam was cleared for open access to the Presidium now, she was not gifted with line-cutting powers. She quickly amended her instant message to Allers indicating how late she was going to be.

Sam sighed and shifted her weight, kicking herself for not getting onto the Citadel sooner. _Well, at least you have plenty of time to think, Traynor_, she thought irritably as she settled into the long queue. And of course her brain would want to latch onto what happened at Apollo's Café yesterday.
afternoon with Liara and Shepard.

Guilt was a hard emotion to suppress, after all.

"What 'friend?"

"Shepard. It's good to see you. And Samantha, you're looking well," Liara had deflected. Her tone was airy and polite as always. Liara seemed suspicious at the sight of Samantha and Shepard playing chess, though she masked it quickly. She cleared the last few meters to stand beside the Commander and Specialist's table.

"What 'friend?" Shepard asked again casually, though there was a gruff intensity around the edges.

Sam had been frozen in place like a scared pyjak, fists clenched and eyes wide. She wasn't sure whether she needed to come clean or if Liara wanted that honor.

_Come clean about which thing?

_Come clean about which thing?

_**Oh dear God, you're not helping** . . . and the bloody traitor, **obviously.** You think I'm going to just blurt out "Also, your ex?-girlfriend and I shared a beautiful moment last night. In the Biblical sense. Now, what were we talking about? Maddening revenge? Huzzah!"

_They say confession is good for the soul.

_But it's bad for the face being pummeled by an enraged asari biotic.

_Fair point.

Liara's small smile was tight with strain around the edges. She crossed her arms and evaded, "A… recent acquaintance. Samantha assisted me in locating him."

"Oh really?" The Commander's voice got a little higher at the end, a mixture of accusation and intrigue. She arched an eyebrow at Sam, but the comms specialist was still afraid to speak. This whole idea had been Liara's, so she was just going to follow her lead.

"I was waiting for the right moment to tell you, Shepard. This is as near to the right time as any, I suppose." Pulling out the chair to Sam's right, Liara carefully sat down and assembled her hands in front of her. After a few long seconds, she said, "It's taken two years, but… I found him."

Shepard leaned back and crossed her arms. She waited a minute, then prodded, "'Him,' who? I don't remember us looking for anyone after Saren. Moonlighting as a bounty hunter in addition to Shado —?"

"No, I found the one who did this to you—us—all of us." Liara stumbled slightly, her calm veneer cracking. "The one who… destroyed the Normandy."

"I—what? What do you mean? Collectors destroyed the Normandy." Shepard straightened in her chair, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Yes, but how did they find us?"

"They lured us. They were probably the ones responsible for those missing ships we were… investigating." A bitter sniff.

"But the Normandy was stealthed at the time. How could they have locked on to the ship to attack?"
"They… uh… have—had advanced Reaper technology?"

"That none of the other Reapers we've encountered have been able to break stealth with. How, then, could the Collectors? The only time the Normandy SR-2 alerts Reapers while stealthed is when—"

"—When we ping star systems looking for possible homing beacons," Shepard had finished for the asari with a clenched jaw. She now seemed to understand where this conversation was going. She nodded at Liara with somber encouragement.

"There had always been whispers of something not right. With the Normandy investigation," Liara started with a sigh. "When the Council and human ambassadors were trying to assign blame, a few engineers testified at the soundness of the stealth drive. That it was a marvel of engineering even the salarians hadn't dreamed up yet. Were the Collectors so advanced? If not, then was there another cause? Could someone have sabotaged the most advanced ship in the Alliance Navy?

"The wreckage was never found. Until, well… you found it," Liara exhaled in amusement. "Which was over two years later. There were no transmissions ever analyzed, no bodies found, no evidence examined. Eventually the case was written off as another geth attack and left at that. But… I was never convinced."

"…you found him." The Commander was pale and unreadable. Sam was still a little apprehensive, because Shepard was just as capable of combusting quietly as she was loudly.

Liara's chin raised in Sam's direction, who nodded back. "My agents recovered the SR-1's black box just a few weeks ago after months of searching. With Samantha's help, I—we were able to analyze the ship's communications to narrow down a likely suspect. We believe this man exchanged encrypted correspondence with an outside organization to arrange the attack on the Normandy."

"Why?" Shepard asked first. Sam thought the obvious question would have been "How do you know?" She chalked it up to utter faith in her comm analytics abilities.

Of course you would.

"I don't know, Shepard," Liara said, shaking her head. "We are still in the dark on the specifics. But we have just discovered his whereabouts here on the Citadel. If you would like to… join me, I am making arrangements for a meeting."

You mean murder.

You don't know that.

…right.

Liara sat back to let that sink in with Shepard. Sam chewed her lip, fighting the urge to jump in and say something. Do I apologize? Say I was just trying to help? Tell her that Liara's heart was in the right place?

The Commander stood up and walked over to the railing right next to their table. Her elbows dipped as she squeezed the bars. Liara started to get up, saying "Shepard—?" But a silent, swift hand shot up splaying all five digits. The nonverbal command for Just stop.

Samantha had tried to smile back at Liara, willing her to believe she did the right thing. But the asari could only look at Shepard's back with concern. Several long minutes passed.
"Who is it?"

"Officer Chris Postle."

"...the Requisitions Officer?"

"Did you know him?"

"Sure, I made weapon and armor purchases through him almost weekly. I don't—I mean—are you sure?" Shepard finally turned to face Liara. Her nose and brow were both deeply lined.

"I'm certain he has gone to great efforts to conceal his activities aboard the Normandy, yes." Liara stood up. "Beyond that, I think the evidence warrants further examination."

"Yes, it does." Shepard's face darkened. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You were quite busy saving the galaxy. Plus, we're scientists. We wanted to test all possible theories. We scientists are just crap without our theories," Samantha playfully interrupted. She had been too silent for too long, plus Shepard looked ready to burst. Though with what (anger? betrayal? outrage?), Sam didn't know.

Green eyes flashed a warning at Sam, who sat back sheepishly.

"You don't have enough to do, Specialist Traynor? You have time to decrypt everyone else's classified data?"

Sam hunched down even further in her chair at Shepard's sharp rebuke. Though that phrasing had nagged at Samantha slightly. ...could Annelise be... jealous?

Liara chimed in. "Please, Shepard. I asked her to." Liara coming to Sam's defense made her suddenly feel less like a child and more like a scoundrel. Here she is, being all kind and helpful, while I—last night I—"

Shepard sighed in resignation. "But you didn't ask me. You didn't talk to me." Her hooded gaze sharpened. "You don't talk to me... we're always too busy, right?"

It was hard to tell what Shepard was upset about: that she and Liara don't talk anymore, or that Liara didn't tell her sooner.

What do you think? 50/50?

I don't want to bet on either half right now.

...also: hypocrite much? Shepard is just as bad as Liara at—

Not now.

Shepard's Omni-tool suddenly sparked with an incoming message. After skimming the small orange screen that popped up then quickly shut, she scowled. Her fingertips raked through red strands a few times to help regain her composure.

"Shepard—" Liara stepped forward as she started to raise her hands. Shepard shrugged her off. She muttered something under her breath that stopped Liara in her tracks. The Commander awkwardly patted Liara's arm and smiled thinly at Sam.

"I have to go. I have a contact to meet at C-Sec lock-up if I want Aria's help in this war. ...We'll talk
about this later."

Straightening her uniform top, Shepard angled her way up towards the C-Sec precinct on the corner block and disappeared.

Sam turned back to see Liara drop into the opposite chair with a sharp inhale.

"Liara—I… What did Shepard say?"

The asari had simply sighed and murmured softly, "She said, 'I wish Thane was here.'"

Oh.

Well. Shit.

They sat in silence for a few moments. The ambience on the Presidium, muffled by the conversation, came back with a dull roar. A couple argued two tables over. The asari taking orders at the café barked at a customer. Cries and laughter echoed above and below. By comparison, Sam's silent mouth flapped open and closed, trying to decide an appropriate subject change.

Don't do it.

"Shepard's right. We never made time. We never make time." Liara's shoulders sank. She didn't seem in danger of bursting into tears, but rather just… tired. Her Omni-tool glowed but she ignored it.

Don't. Do. It.

"Make time for what?" Samantha had asked timidly.

God damn it, Traynor.

Bright blue eyes bored into Sam. Liara rested her wrist on the table. "To say all the things we meant to. There's always some new crisis to address or mission popping up. Like fools, we keep pushing each other away. For the stupidest of reasons. ...Or no reason at all. I don't even know which is worse anymore."

Liara's eyes widened at her own intimate confession. Clearing her throat, Liara clarified, "Shepard and I were once quite close. We were… together. Briefly. Just before she—just before the Normandy was destroyed. She was my—I cared—I care for her a great deal."

Sam tilted her head. "A few of the crew had hinted as much, but no one said for certain so I—I wasn't sure." Her insides felt hollow.

Riiiiiight. You had no idea, Traynor.

Shit.

"We were discrete. And it was only mere months. But an eternity at times." Liara's dark blue lips curled with fondness before straightening. "She is… so different now. I suppose we both are."

"I—you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Samantha smiled weakly. She had desperately hoped Liara would take the out. Because this conversation topic was cutting at Sam deeper and deeper with a mixture of guilt and shame.

But, a betraying voice whispered around the edges, you want to know, Traynor. What
happened. How close they were. What drove them apart. How to avoid their mistakes.

Well... yes. I'd just rather not be both a shit friend and human being in the same breath.

Are you and Liara friends?

...aren't we?

Then why did you go to Shepard knowing full well she and Liara had a thing at some point?

I didn't know Shepard and Liara —

...Traynor.

Okay. Fine. So I had a more than just a suspicion. All along. I knew they were some sexy couple at one point and were probably chock full of sexy history. And I just didn't want to know if it was something they could work out on their own before I stuck my nose in and cocked everything up with a stupid shower. Okay? I admit it.

I told you confession was good for the —

Shut up.

"I appreciate your sympathy, Samantha," Liara replied lightly. "I apologize if I am speaking too candidly. It has been a long time since I have spoken of these things to anyone. Especially Shepard. …she once visited me nearly every day aboard the SR-1. To talk of idle things, even. She was so passionate and focused. And talked so easily. I had such trouble following her dry jokes, as I was unfamiliar with human humor."

Shepard? Jokes?

...you've seen her humor. Remember? You knew this.

That fond smile of Liara's that had briefly returned quickly turned to ice. "Such a far cry from the sullen soldier she is now. Which is partly my doing. I wish I had known the extent of what Cerberus had intended to do with her. But I—I didn't care. I just wanted her back. Even if she wasn't the same person I—" She trailed off and cleared her throat.

Sam hoped her expression was one of attentiveness, and not of guilty despair.

"And I apologize if assisting me has damaged your relationship with Shepard."

Sam had felt her entire body go cold. She was sure the blood had completely drained from her face.

She knows.

...wait, then why is she—

"I confess, I was a little jealous upon seeing you and Shepard here," the asari continued. "Especially considering that whenever Shepard and I speak, we always seem to say the wrong thing or react poorly. So to see the Commander actually sitting still and possibly enjoying herself... Forgive me. I had no right to resent you for allowing Annelise a small bit of peace. Goddess knows, she has earned it." Liara's forehead wrinkled in apology.

Shit.
"It's… ah, it's no problem. Just… a friendly chess game. Haha! I mean… It's a fun break from playing Skyllian Five all the time, right?" Sam swallowed down another awkward laugh. If there was one thing her guilty conscience wasn't equipped to handle, it was an apology that she didn't deserve.

A warm smile from Liara almost made Sam flinch. "I have never had the pleasure of playing human chess. I was quite dreadful at Kepesh-Yakshi in my youth, much to my mother's dissatisfaction. 'You are set up for defeat, Little Wing, if you never strive for discipline first over victory,' Benezia often told me when I grew impatient over losing."

"My father had a similar saying. 'Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win,'" Sam found herself remembering. It was so easy to slip into companionable conversation with the asari. She was just so friendly.

She’s making it so much harder for when you tell her about Shepard.

Oh. Shit. Shepard.

…Don't do it.

"Liara. There's something I—" Sam swallowed deeply. ...need to tell you. About last night.

The asari peered back at the comms specialist curiously. "Yes?"

Don’t. Do. It.

"Liara, I—" Dammit, Traynor—!

At just that moment, Liara's wrist glowed to life. She looked at Sam questioningly before her fingers traced over the interface out of pure habit. But once she glanced down at the newest message, Liara jumped up with a start.

"By the Goddess! I'm sorry, Samantha. I need to go. Something urgent has come up."

"Right. Good. Okay. Okay. We'll... talk later." Sam kicked herself for saying the same thing Shepard had said minutes earlier.

The doctor and comms specialist both politely stood at the same time. Liara stared down at the chair, sweeping her fingertips over the polished metal. "And... thank you, Samantha. It feels good to talk about these things."

"I—you don't need to thank me." You really don't. And shouldn't.

Liara had smiled. "But I do. I appreciate everything you have done. For me... and for Shepard."

Sighing as the taxi line inched closer to the transit hub, Sam kicked herself yet again.

A gnawing dread had settled inside Samantha's stomach for the rest of the day. Even now, it alternated between screaming "Liar!" and "Maybe you can just avoid her forever."Very helpful.

Further compounding Sam's confused emotions was a message she had received from Shepard last night. With Liara cc'd.

From: ['Shepard, A']
To: [Traynor, S']
CC: [T'soni, L']
20:03:55 GST, 15/04/2186

Subject: Stand Down

You are hereby ordered not to take action on the Normandy SR-1 situation until I am able to look over all the information.
I declare the information to be SpecTRe-level classified.

Await further orders.
Cmdr A Shepard, Alliance Navy

---

...so am I in trouble?

On top of, y'know, just being a terrible person?

Even a lighthearted dinner with Engineers Daniels and Donnelly hadn't been enough to distract Sam from her hollow guilt. She had brushed off Allers' Purgatory invitation to just go to bed early. Tossing and turning all night seemed more appropriate than dancing the night away without a care.

She couldn't escape the reporter forever, though. Diana had cornered Samantha in the mess this morning and demanded they hang out. She wanted to give Sam a tour of the ANN studio then go shopping. And Allers would not take "no" for an answer.

The taxi line had dwindled down to only a salarian couple and Sam. She sighed again as her long-awaited cab finally touched down, though it strangled in her throat when the taxi's passenger stepped out.

Liara.

The asari was (like always) staring at her Omni-tool, but she did glance up long enough to notice the comms specialist.

Dammit.

"Samantha! I was just about to call you!"

Shit.

Wait, I mean: what?

"I—what? What's wrong?"

"I need your help. Our 'friend' is running."

"What? What does that mean?"

Sam felt apprehension when Liara wrapped gloved fingers around her wrist and pulled her back towards the Normandy. She had no idea how in danger she was of just yelling "Shepard and I slept together!" and making a run for the cab. But the distraction was not unwelcome.

"Officer Postle, or his organization, must have had his C-Sec dossier flagged. My agents have spotted him all over the Citadel in the last 12 hours closing his accounts and collecting his belongings. A transport is picking him up within the hour. He's going to try and disappear." Liara's
teeth bared in a bitter snarl.

It was a little frightening. "Okay... what do you need me to do? Shouldn't we call Shepard? She asked us not to pursue this without her..."

Liara continued guiding Sam back to the Normandy jet bridge. "I have already tried. There is either interference or she is outside of operating range. And we cannot waste time. We must prevent Postle from getting off this station."

Stopping in her tracks, Sam yanked her wrist away from the obsessed asari. "Liara. What do you expect me to do?" Sam repeated. "I'm not exactly authorized to carry a weapon on the Citadel. You said you have agents. Can't they help you?"

"They are. They are assembling some mercenaries, but they are not ready yet. You and I must delay Postle from leaving his apartment in Bachjret Ward so that the mercenaries can arrive to intercept him. And I might need your help with any data he might try to erase."

"I did study communication forensics in R&D," Sam said, chewing her lower lip. Liara nodded. "I know. I looked through your history, remember? How could I forget? "I need your help, Samantha. Please. It's important to me. ...and what would Shepard do? Sit and wait for permission? I would rather beg forgiveness than let this man get away." Her glassy eyes were pleading and vulnerable.

...how can I say no?

"How can I say no?" Sam agreed with a sigh. She followed after the hurrying asari with a dull awareness.

Upon entering the large suite on the crew deck, Liara went straight for a locker underneath her bed. She popped the buckles to reveal a light hardsuit and several pistols nestled inside. She handed the armor to Sam. "This might be a little loose, but it should fit."

Sam gulped. "...expecting trouble?" The armor was a silver-white, form-fitting hardsuit with heavy boots and layered shoulder guards. The under armor was a rich black and the whole thing was embellished with blue stripes and clasps.

"Always," Liara said solemnly as she checked a pistol's heat sink. She held out a hand when Sam gathered up the gear and headed for the bathroom. "What are you doing?"

"Getting dressed? Or... am I dropping trou right here?" Sam felt silly that her modesty had returned. Oh, so it's okay to parade around naked for human women. But one little asari wants you to bare all to get a little closure for 21 people and now it's just "indecent." Make up your mind, Traynor.

...22 people. You forgot Shepard.

"There's no time to waste, Samantha. Here, let me help."

Sam squawked "I'll do it!" when Liara's fingertips starting pulling at her shirt and sleeves. Her cheeks burned as Sam pulled the service uniform top over her head and wriggled out of the dark pants and boots. But to Liara's credit, her cerulean eyes did not drift around or appraise Sam in her undergarments. They were cold and calculating. And a little manic.

The armor was a bit loose. Mostly in the bosom area, which made Sam inwardly scowl. The under
armor also bunched up slightly at Sam's waist, wrists and ankles, indicating its actual owner was both
taller and leaner. And don't forget totally stacked.

Yes, thank you. I'm glad to have intrinsic proof that the gorgeous asari is more physically perfect
than me in every way. I was just **hating** not knowing my inferiority for certain.

With help, it took only minutes for the hardsuit to lock in place over Sam's shoulders, arms and legs.
Even she had to admit the high boots looked pretty awesome. Her brief excitement at being a Badass
was short-lived when she remembered the purpose of armor.

"Um... what kind of situation are we expecting? It's just one guy, right? And you have the super
biotics. What am I going to do? Shout algorithms at him?" Terrifying. That'll show him not to mess
with me.

Liara was still examining the secureness of the armor before she answered. "It is always prudent to
be prepared for anything. I do not know if Postle has contacts or mercenaries of his own." Hers eyes
flicked up to Sam's. She presented Sam one of the pistols. "I assume you know how to use this."

Sam made a strangled "Eep!" noise as she was pulled out the door by the striding doctor. When they
reached the Normandy elevator, Sam was confused when Liara selected the Shuttle Bay, rather than
the CIC.

A red skycar was waiting for them in the spot normally occupied by Cortez's Kodiak. Already
cleared to enter the Citadel and no security checkpoints would delay Liara and Sam from heading
straight for Bachjret Ward. Sam was equal parts awed and unsettled by Liara's reach and influence.

**How did she do this?**

**Who is she?**

Sam's mind mulled the possibilities as she shifted the unfamiliar pistol in her hands. She settled in to
the passenger seat. *Secret SpecTRe? Relative of Councilor Tevos? ...umm... some sort of asari
royalty?* The car zipped between high buildings and waved above and below streams of traffic.
Damage from the battle with Sovereign was still evident at the Ward's base; charred skyscrapers
were mixed with ugly obelisks of wreckage.

"Liara? Liara, are you there?" A familiar voice rang in to the skycar's on-board intercom. A vid
window containing Ashley Williams appeared.
"Ashley." The asari was relieved, but she didn't waver from her intense focus on the horizon. "Have you been able to find Shepard?"

"I talked to her. She's tied up with C-Sec. Something happened at that lab she was investigating. Uhhh... Dr. Bryson's."

"Is Shepard—?"

"She's fine," Ashley reassured. "One of his own techs shot him. Shepard was a witness. I told her to get her ass over here ASAP."

"...Ashley is helping with Officer Postle?" Sam asked incredulously as she leaned over. *Secret SpecTRe is looking more and more likely.*

"Is that Traynor? Damn, I just can't escape you today, can I?" Ashley joked.

Liara's smile was rueful. She glanced at Sam. "Well, Shepard *did* say this was a SpecTRe-level operation. I'm just fortunate enough to know more than one."

"Aw, stop. You're gonna make me blush, using me for my status like this," Ashley smirked sarcastically. She sobered quickly. "I knew Chris. He was only too happy to be buddy-buddy when we were first aboard and bitching about the 'damn aliens' taking over the Normandy. ...uh, no offense, Liara."

"None taken."

"But he changed his tune when I started to come over to Shepard's mindset about cooperation. Especially after Virmire when I stopped agreeing with him about what a bad idea freeing the rachni queen was. He just pouted and shut down and said *his* family never would have stood for what the Alliance has come to. I dunno what he's capable of, but if he betrayed the Normandy..." Ashley's husky voice trailed off dangerously.

Liara redirected. "Ashley, what's your ETA?"

"I'm still 10 minutes out. Can you wait?"

"I don't think so. I don't know what he, or whoever's behind him, is capable of. Except killing Shepard."

"Don't do anything stupid, Liara."

"But Ashley... what if he killed Shepard?"

"Then Shepard makes the call. Stay alive, Doctor." Ashley paused before reciting: "Rise, happy morn, rise, holy morn, Draw forth the cheerful day from night: O Father, touch the east, and light, The light that shone when Hope was born."

*What the hell?*

But Liara nodded with understanding. "I shall try to be optimistic, then."

Dark eyes flashed mischief as Ash glared at Sam through the small screen. "Oh, keep Traynor out of trouble, too. And watch your six. Traynor's aim needs work."

*Hey!* Sam huffed in annoyance, though clenching her gloved fingers caused her to drop the pistol.
She quickly scooped it back up. *Shit!*

"I will. ...Thank you, Chief Williams."

"That's 'Lieutenant Commander SpecTRe,' Doc," Ash emphasized wryly. "I've come up in the world. Williams out."

Sam thought she caught a fond smile from Liara as she waved her fingertips to disconnect the call. Sam also thought she heard "You sure have, Chief" but couldn't be certain of that.

"I hate to address the elephant in the room—er, the uh... obvious point..." Sam clarified when she saw the asari's confusion at the human idiom. "But it sounds like the only ones confronting the Normandy traitor are... you and me."

A long silence.

"...Liara! Are you bloody kidding me? What if he's armed? What if he has an army? What if he's a deranged psychopath who drinks the blood of fetching young comms specialists?"

*This does not speak well of your courage in the face of potential battle, Traynor. Just FYI.*

"I have no choice!" Liara barked. Her gloves creaked as she squeezed the steering wheel. "It's this or he gets away. ...please, Samantha. I would not ask if it was not important. I will keep you safe, I promise."

A tiered apartment building appeared a few moments later. Liara set the skycar to an autopilot hovering path around the building. Her fingers dancing over the vehicle's interface, Liara converted the windshield to camera view and began running a facial-recognition scan. Hums and ticks followed as the program code ran. Images of apartment windows began loading, all cross-referenced against the Alliance database.

They could only sit. And wait.

*I should tell her.*

*Are you bloody kidding me? Now?*

*She needs to know.*

*Not when she's responsible for your arse. Try again when your life might not depend on it.*

*She deserves to know.*

*She does. Just not right now.*

"Liara?" Sam asked softly. The asari's blue eyes darted back and forth with the screen. She didn't answer.

Just as Sam started to open her (*Stupid*) mouth again, the screen's rapid sifting came to a halt. A green box encased an image of a rugged man pacing a nearly empty apartment. Details appeared next to his face.

"Ofc Postle, Chris T
Status: Honorably Discharged
Previous commissions: SSV Normandy SR-1, SSV Trafalgar
Closest known relatives: Lt Postle, Robert T (father) - deceased, Pvt Postle, Eric N (brother) - deceased"

Infrared imaging revealed a pistol at his belt, plus four men standing around the apartment with assault rifles.

*Armed: check.*

*Army: check.*

*Blood of a comms specialist: not yet.*

*Best Two Out of Three ain't bad, I suppose.*

*Shut up.*

"Um... What are we going to do?"

Chapter End Notes

Sam’s quote with Ashley is from Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays.*
The "saying" from Sam’s father is actually attributed to Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War.*
Ashley quotes Lord Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam.*
What can I do? I just—how do—what should we—?

Despite bristling with the beginning stages of panic, overall Sam felt oddly detached to the whole situation. But for the scheming information broker in the driver's seat of the skycar, they could have been watching this whole thing unfold on a vid happening to someone else.

Except this was real, and Samantha Traynor was smack dab in the middle of it.

...Okay. Okay okay okay.

"Liara?"

"I'm thinking," Liara T'Soni murmured quietly as she studied an apartment blueprint superimposed over the skycar's windshield screen. She maneuvered them away from the building to avoid detection. Gloved fingers tapped together rhythmically as Liara calmly assessed.

Sam, by contrast, was anything but calm. Her teeth raked her lower lip as she hefted the Acolyte pistol in one hand, then the other. Breathing heavily through her nose, Sam tried to focus her thoughts on her brief weapons training from years ago.


Unfortunately, she was now also keenly aware of how uncomfortable Liara's armor was. The under armor felt tight at the neck, shoulders and hips but loose and slippery at Sam's midsection and elbows. The wobbly chest piece seemed to be constantly shifting along her torso and occasionally made scraping noises as it rubbed against the shoulder guards.

Compared to a quiet skycar and an intense asari, Sam felt loud and clumsy and completely out of her element.

What in the bloody hell am I doing here? How did I get here?

It also wasn't helping that her mind kept blaring "You are hopelessly out of your league!" on an endless loop as she watched gun-toting soldiers shuffle around Liara's target: Chris Postle. The Normandy Traitor.

...Which brings us back to the topic at hand: what do we do?

Oh God. What do I do? ...Can Liara fight off five men at once?

...you just admitted to being useless, Traynor.

Well obviously. Liara's got almost a hundred years and probably over a hundred battles on me. I have two weeks of weapons training in Basic and years of experience sitting at a console connecting people's vid-calls as a glorified operator. And, oh right, and my last weapons training exam was two years ago and I haven't fired a gun since then.

Don't forget the Shuttle Bay during the Earth invasion. Remember? When you almost shot Shepard?
Yes. Thank you. God damn it. I wish people would stop bringing that up. ...Myself, included.

...so what would Shepard do?

Be pissed off then swoop in and save the day?

Here's hoping, Traynor.

Liara finally spoke. "All right, Samantha, I believe I have formulated a strategy."

Oh thank Christ.

Her fingers flicking over the skycar's interface, Liara brought the apartment schematic into focus. She pointed at the front door. A blue NavPoint appeared just outside it. "Ashley is getting into place outside the door to cut off their escape route. You and I will enter through the balcony landing pad area. Hopefully, we can pin them down long enough for my men to arrive to take the former Normandy requisitions officer into custody. Depending on the combat situation, I will need your assistance in retrieving any incriminating data."

That... seems easy enough. Simple, even. "...is there a catch, Liara? Because I think there's something you're not telling me."

The asari nudged the screen to switch to real time video. She pointed at the wide penthouse balcony where a Kodiak transport sat waiting. "We will need to... disable their escape vehicle."

"And how exactly will we do that?"

Liara seemed to be having trouble making eye contact. "We are not equipped with offensive capabilities in this skycar. We will have to improvise."

"'Improvise,'" Sam repeated back.

"Yes."

"Does 'improvise' mean 'ram them with our car' in asari? Or is my translator malfunctioning?"

Liara allowed a moment of silence to confirm Sam's suspicions.

"Liara! You have got to be bloody kidding me!"

Icy blue eyes focused intensely on Sam, forcing the comms specialist to recoil slightly. "Our options are limited, Samantha. If you see an alternative, I would be more than open to it."

It was Sam's turn to be silent.

"I suspected as much," Liara nodded somberly. She flicked back to the blueprint and overlaid it with the infrared heat map. "It appears Officer Postle has a console within the study. Can you hack into it from here?"

Oh thank Christ. Something I can actually do, rather than pretend I'd be useful in a firefight.

Flexing her fingers, Samantha brought up her Omni-tool screen to carefully scan for open channels. [Secure line detected]

Shit.
What if I disguise my signature as a maintenance update to ping the console without actually engaging it?

[Access denied]

Double shit.

"Not without help," Sam admitted. Concentrating deeply, Sam drummed her fingertips on her chin. *I miss my goody bag of algorithms and hacker exploits. I really wish I hadn't left that bloody data chit on Earth... And I wish I had EDI.*

*Wait, why don't I have EDI?*

Sam quickly opened a comm link to the Normandy bridge. "EDI? What's your operating range? Can your cyberwarfare suite extend to mine and Liara's location on the Citadel? I need your help with a... project." Sam's eyes flicked to Liara's before returning to her Omni-tool.

A glowing blue orb appeared above Sam's wrist, the holo projection of EDI's AI consciousness. "Hello, Specialist Traynor. My active range is subject to signal degradation at your current altitude and distance from the Normandy's AI Core. Without a signal tether, my cyberwarefare capabilities are only at 11% effectiveness based on your current location."

*Triple shit. 11% is... what? Maybe a modest increase in hacking success? An extra stream or two for database scanning?*

It was Liara who asked, "Can you provide any assistance? The matter is urgent. Please." Her soft plea was laced with desperation.

A thoughtful silence followed, before the EDI orb pulsed in reply. "While my autonomy and full capabilities are hindered by distance, I can still provide analysis and hacking support via Specialist Traynor's Omni-tool. Real time data-lag can be improved with a power source if one is available."

*Well, that's something at least. I won't be completely high and dry while doing insane, illegal things.*

Liara nodded back at Sam. "That will have to do. Now, Samantha, I need you to open up a comm channel for us. Unfortunately, this might alert them to our presence, so it will have to be as secure as you can make it without being military-grade."

"...Okay!" Sam squeaked as apprehension hit her. *Oh God, this is happening. And not the good kind of happening, either. Shut. Up.*

She tried to put some courage in her voice. "This is a thing I can do." Her *newly* gloved fingers combed through a familiar library of comm protocols on her Omni-tool. It took both thinking and digging to find the right suite with the level of security and discretion Liara required.

*Ah, the Ariake Short Range Securi-tech Pro 7900XT license. It's been far too long, old friend, since I used you to help the Lind Hall intramural women's lacrosse team coordinate a midnight strike against those cocky bitches from Davis Hall.*

*Yea... no. Not the same thing, Traynor. Not by a long shot.*

Plugging in the IPs for "T'Soni, L" and "Williams, A" (and don't forget "Traynor, S")...yes, thank
you.) into her command line, Samantha finished prepping the communication socket. Running a mental checklist of comms protocols also helped silence the pounding of Sam's heart in her ears. Her anxiety had returned, but she tried to shove it under military instinct. *Oo-rah.*

"While I do pride myself on quality and consistency, I'm afraid it's a little risky to do an equipment check for the comm channel. The second I hit 'Broadcast,' we're go."

Liara took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She murmured what Sam could only interpret as some sort of prayer, though the few words she heard were "justice" and "Goddess."

*No pressure.*

*Maybe I should pray or somethi—?*

"Let's proceed, Samantha."

[Broadcast]

"We're live! " Sam croaked before clearing her throat and repeating a little more forcefully. "We're live. Williams, what's your position?"

A husky voice hissed into the two women's earpiece implants. "Making the last hike to Postle's floor now. Haven't encountered any secondary security, though. You've got eyes on him, right?" Ashley appeared as a blue blip on their map, though she was still a dozen floors below the penthouse.

Liara reported the number of hostiles and their locations while Sam tagged each for Williams' and Liara's linked HUD implants. *You too, Traynor. You're supposed to be helping.*

It was so strange seeing that little, round radar map on her own Omni-tool. Just a simplified map with targets marked …*for death.* Now, Sam was responsible for helping take down those red blips directly. Rather than just passively observing.

*What are the odds, huh?*

*Well, three to one you shoot yourself in the—*

*I was being rhetorical.*

Liara had also apprised Ashley of their bold plan ("Ballsy, Doc. Ballsy. I approve.") and was about to give the order to set it in motion. EDI volunteered to sabotage the building elevator, which would force any escapees right into Williams' crosshairs in the stairwell.

Everything was set.

"Initiating landing maneuvers," the asari announced as Sam held her breath. This whole thing was unfolding so quickly. *Is this how these things always are? From arrival to vague plan to "charge forth and smite them"?*

*If Shepard is any example, then... absolutely.*

The skycar view immediately changed to a normal windshield. The horizon dipped when the car lurched into a higher gear. As the apartment balcony surged up to meet them, Samantha found herself pushing back in her seat and gritting her teeth.

Liara barked "Brace for impact!" as their vehicle aimed for the Kodiak idling on the landing pad. Its steaming engines swung into abrupt focus before Sam and Liara plowed into the transport.
Shuddering from the crash, the skycar spun on its axis and ricocheted off the tall apartment wall. Sam screamed as their vehicle rolled over, nausea jumping to her throat.

Just as the car rolled back upright, Sam blacked out. Only for a second! But that second was long enough for the skycar to grind to a halt on the balcony, its nose a full 180 from where it started. Sam tried to blink away the darkness, before she started violently shaking. A dull ringing assaulted her hearing.

"Samantha. Samantha! We must hurry." It was Liara, both shouting in Sam's ear and roughly shaking her shoulder. There was a bitter tang in Sam's mouth; she'd bitten her tongue in the confusion. The pain helped wake her up, though the world was still hazy. Sam didn't so much step out the skycar as she fell out of it.

Get it together, Traynor!

A second after EDI announced into their comm channel for Ashley to engage, a series of pops exploded around them. Liara demanded they both "Get down!" (though Sam was already crouched from her near-fall).

The perspective from the balcony was almost too serene to be a battlefield. On one side, there was a bubbling water feature and leafy ferns tastefully lining the veranda landing area as the setting sun, Widow, bathed everything in gold. However, on the other side of the red skycar...

"Warp Ammo," Liara murmured into her own Omni-tool as she genuflected beside their wrecked vehicle. The asari straightened, glanced over the hood then returned to a kneel all in the span of a fraction of a second. "Ashley, I see two moving toward the stairwell." A readied heat sink hissed into Liara's submachine gun.

"Light 'em up!" The newest SpecTRe shouted into the comm as gunfire echoed in the distance.

Sam hazarded a peek around the skycar's rear. She saw bobbing shadows inside the apartment occasionally obscured by muzzle flashes. A squeak of fear escaped the comms specialist's mouth when she felt metal flecks strike her chin. A bullet had struck only centimeters from her face, leaving stinging shrapnel.

Liara was suddenly at Sam's elbow. Snagging Sam's Omni-tool wrist, Liara jutted a finger through the holo-window to a wide, flat section of the wrist armor itself. "Sentinel tech armor upgrade. Battery is limited, but it should protect you." She pressed thin slivers of buttons along the Sentinel
battery case, which glowed a dull red in response.

Orange-yellow hatch patterns bloomed outward from Samantha's wrist. Holo plates encased Sam's body (and head, judging from the glow in her peripheral vision) within moments. A ricocheting bullet sparked orange as it sheared near Sam's cheek then bounced harmlessly away. The sudden increase in armor calmed the fluttering in her chest a little. She felt safer. Protected.

_Though I wish I'd known about it sooner. This might have reigned in some of my initial pants-wetting._

"Might have."

Shut up.

Ashley warned, "Watch your 3! Hostile withdrew through a side corridor."

Eyes swinging to her Omni-tool, Sam confirmed a red blip approaching from the right. Before the comms specialist could even get her bearings, the asari next to her had leapt up and flung a Singularity at the hidden mercenary. A few pops were followed by a triumphant SpecTRe's voice crowing in their ears: "That's one down!"

_One. Okay. Okay okay okay. There's what, four left? One down within the first 10 seconds. Based on that ratio (number of soldiers left times number of seconds passed), this should be over in 40 seconds. A minute at the most._

_Easy, peasy._

Samantha tightened her grip on her pistol and took a pair of deep breaths. Just as she inhaled for a third time and started to stand up, a hand on Sam's wrist stopped her. "Stay down, Samantha," Liara growled. Her fierce eyes softened briefly. "I need you to try to get into Postle's system from here. This will all be for nothing if we don't find any evidence."

_But I was about to—Maybe I can—_

_Stay to your strengths, Traynor._

Humbly accepting getting benched, Sam gratefully holstered the Acolyte heavy pistol at her side. She quickly returned focus to her Omni-tool to reengage hacking the Normandy Traitor's system. All
the coy probing from before was abandoned, as were any attempts at subtlety.

Sam unloaded every line of attack code in her arsenal, from denial-of-service dumps to firewall decrypters to packets of keylogger algorithms. Anything and everything to bog the console down long enough to break into the hard drive. Sam found herself craving EDI's intervention, but the AI was using her limited processing power to bolster Sam's efforts (and keep the apartment elevator locked down).

An outdated network node proved to be the system's undoing as Sam gleefully latched on to her advantage. Profiles were hacked, connected and analyzed. Her victory was short-lived when Samantha realized Postle's console was running a complete system wipe.

"EDI, I need a Search and Gather protocol on this system. Hit it with everything you've got."

A blue orb reappeared outside of her Omni-tool hacking window. "Understood, Specialist Traynor. However, this channel connection is severely degraded by distance and cannot handle large influxes of upload data. Interruptions may occur which will result in—"

"Okay, I get it," Sam interrupted, though her fingers had not stopped methodically running scans. "Lowest numbered file headings take priority. Cross-check the timestamps. Set filter parameters for hidden file caches. Scrub deletion history log for fragments..."

"Not well," the asari returned. "There is too much cover for them to hide behind. These mercenaries also employ an unusual number of attack drones. It is proving problematic for myself and the Lieutenant Commander."

A third female voice swore into the comm. "Sons-of-bitches!" Huffing in pain, Ashley trailed off in a flurry of creative curse words. From the sound of things, another drone had struck Ashley with a charged current before it met its end on her rifle butt. "These guys are really pissing me off, T'Soni. If you want Postle captured rather than full of holes (just on principle), we need a better, less annoying
plan. How soon 'til your reinforcements get here?"

An irritated hiss from Liara. "Their transport is delayed."

*Shit. …quadruple shit?*

"Just can't find good help these days," Ashley deadpanned after a staccato of gunfire. "Maybe you should make Chris's guys an offer, Doc. Isn't that what you information brokers do? Buy your way out of fights?"

Sam winced at the marine's abrasive ribbing, but Liara took it in stride. "You'd be surprised how often that actually works. Unfortunately, I must have left my credit chit reserved for bribes back on the Normandy."

*Is she joking? She seems so serious all the time.*

*There's so much I don't know about Liara.*

…*there's so much I don't know about Shepard.*

"Suppressing fire!" Ashley suddenly barked. Into the comm, she quietly murmured, "The mercs figured out there's only you guys over there, so they're trying to flank you. A few Inferno Grenades have dissuaded them from doing a headcount on my end. Make some fireworks or something, Doc."

Liara launched a Singularity with a flick of her wrist. Sam's eyes followed the small orb of light over to the double doors leading to the apartment. Three nearby shadows dove to the ground to avoid the blast, though one mercenary had made it through the shattered balcony window. Liara chased the man's fleeing footsteps with gunfire, but he rolled to safety behind a thick column.

*Time's running out,* Sam soberly realized as she studied her feeds. She hadn't been able to find any suspicious encrypted files on the system, and the wipe was 48.5% complete. She just wasn't fast enough at scanning.

*But EDI is.*

*And she'll overload the channel if she—*

*Power source, Traynor.*

Sam swore at herself under her breath. Switching over to her Omni-tool settings, Sam connected to the Sentinel remote hub on her wrist armor. She quickly found the ["Power Transfer"] option within the control panel and inhaled sharply.

*I'll be naked again.*

*Still wearing armor. Unless that disappears, too, and leaves you in your knickers.*

*Oo-rah oo-la-la, then.*

["Transfer Initiated"] dissolved the holo exoskeleton wrapped around Sam's body into orange dust before disappearing altogether. Just then, the skycar at the women's back shuddered from an influx of rifle fire. *Probably wasn't a good idea to do this right this second...*

But at least it worked. The connection integrity with EDI surged from 11% to 59%. Enough for the AI to cheerfully assume control of data mining. Sam switched over to her comfort zone: analyzing data. Switching holo screens, the comms specialist set a wide net of search parameters: anything and
everything that might conceivably be useful. She paused long enough to theatrically crack her knuckles.

Then Sam's heart stopped when a lobbed cylinder clinked its way down to her feet. It came to a stop half a meter from her stylish boots. Sam could only point mutely (and stupidly) as Liara turned to look.

*Grenade!*

Before Sam pretended covering her face would do any sort of good in this scenario, a globe of blue burst at her feet. Strands of white-blue energy encased the grenade before Liara clenched her fist tightly. The bomb, strangled by the asari's biotic Stasis, dropped harmlessly to the ground in a puff of debris.

*I think—I think my heart just barfed.*

…I*This is no place for an asthmatic.*

Liara swore ("By the Goddess!")) and her hands glowed blue before discharging once more over the car hood. She followed up with bursts from her submachine gun. "Hostile down! But I can't tell who I—" The doctor hesitated, briefly panic-stricken.

"Not Postle, Liara," Ashley reassured. "That little bastard is over at your 11 using one of his mercs as a shield. Three left. Piece of cake."

Once Sam's breathing managed to start back up, she returned focus to her Omni-tool. *Oh God, I hope there's (more) good news.*

["System Erasure: 64.2% Complete."]

**SHITSHITSHITSHITSHIT—**

And if that wasn't enough, the mini-map window flashed a proximity warning: ["Incoming vehicle"]. The alert from EDI was followed by a bunch of fun facts. *Kodiak. Heat signatures indicate eight men aboard. Approaching the upper balcony on the north side.*

"Um, Liara? I have bad news and possibly worse news. The bad news is Postle is nearly done wiping his hard drive. I'm grabbing what I can, but I don't know yet if we got anything useful." Sam's fingertips wandered to the download packet she and EDI had managed to recover so far. 30.8% of total data.

*I don't like those odds.*

"And?"

"And a Kodiak just arrived carrying eight men. Please tell me they're yours and we can all go home."

Liara was silent. Sam was afraid to look at her. Her brown eyes slowly worked their way up white boots, a stylish coat and a delicate blue neck to a pensive asari face. Liara's cerulean eyes narrowed with worry.

*Is that a no?*

"…I'll take that as a no, then." Sam set her Omni-tool to auto-filter and slowly unholstered the loaner heavy pistol. She put a lot of effort into sounding nonchalant, though her shaky breaths betrayed her
bravado a little. "Well, let's get this over with."

Boots loudly pounded along the upper terrace while men hustled into position. The hail of gunfire on Sam and Liara's skycar surged into a torrent. A bullet sizzled across Sam's left shoulder, her armor rattling as it absorbed the blow. And it hurt where it reverberated from the loose shoulder guard.

*Quintuple shit.*

*Better than being dead, Traynor.*

*Kinda missing that fancy holo armor about now.*

...*brilliant.*

A flash from her wrist stayed Samantha's trigger (such as it was). ["Scan Complete"] pulsed back, piquing her curiosity. Clutching the weapon loosely, Sam pecked away at the interface with her pinky and ring fingers.


"Liara! I've got something." Sam skimmed over the most promising documents, and even allowed a sigh of relief. "Parts of financials. Dating back three years."

The asari met this news with a stone face. "Anything incriminating?"

A triumphant smile pulled at Sam's cheek. "It looks like... monthly kickbacks. From a variety of sources." Examining further, Samantha scrolled to a data fragment that sent a chill up her spine. A few metadata tags and filters solidified her suspicions. "Liara. I need to interface directly with Postle's console ASAP to confirm, but... one of the first deposits into this account... There's no sender account information yet, but... it—it posted the day after the Normandy was—"...*destroyed.*

Liara's face briefly contorted into rage. She jumped out of cover, her right arm pulled back. Released from the throw was a ball of light that arced over the upper balcony to strike a soldier who was immediately imprisoned in a Stasis field. The asari's submachine gun crosshairs found him a moment later, followed by a half dozen bullets. Sam spotted crackling blue fade away as a man dropped out of sight.

*Damn.*

Glaring back at Sam, Liara ejected the heat sink from her weapon. "I want that human alive. I don't care what it takes. But we are taking Postle in."

*All righty then.*

Samantha resumed her mantra of *Deep breaths. Slow. Steady. Sight your target. Inhale. Squeeze the trigger on the exhale.* But she had to hunker down to safety before even getting to *sight your target* when the lull in spraying bullets abruptly ended. Dull thuds continued to rock the poor wrecked vehicle at the women's backs. Ashley shouted into the comm that she didn't have a good position to assist.

Sam's heart had resumed pounding in her ears. There was so much going on all around them. She didn't know how soldiers dealt with this much stimuli: dull shouting, popping gunfire, acrid smoke, spent heat sinks flying.
They don't, Traynor. Focus. One enemy at a time. ("One day at a time," remember? Same concept.)

Another strike to Sam's shoulder sent her sprawling backward, exposing her to a mercenary up top. The comms specialist quickly rolled back under cover, but not before a stream of gunfire pelted her torso. The loose armor struck her ribs rather than absorbed the blow. Searing pain radiated agony from her chest while dark spots pierced Samantha's vision as she fell heavily against the side of the car.

Useless! Ruddy useless!

Pulling Sam to her feet, Liara studied the comms specialist intently. Sam could only wince, her arms immediately wrapping protectively around her chest that felt ablaze with pain. Sam felt an examining hand press to her back for a moment. "You don't seem to be wounded. Samantha! Are you all right?"

"Can't—breathe..." Sam sputtered as she doubled over. Bright orange glowed in her peripheral vision. Just Liara administering an Omni-tool scan. Sam's eyes followed the round holo interface as it stopped at the dented chest plate. The asari's brow furrowed at the scan's readings before she reached for a compartment on her wrist guard. A sudden coolness swept over Sam's chest as Liara wrapped a thin pack of icy gel around Sam's midriff that seeped through the under armor.

Medi-gel.

"I'm sorry, Samantha. This is the best I can do until we seek medical assistance for the superficial damage to your ribcage. But I need you to stand up. Can you do that?" The earnest desperation in Liara's voice made Sam sigh with resentment. But she complied with the asari's request and straightened as best she could.

Buck up, princess. You're in the military. And you still have data to recover. Or did you forget between all your hiding and bellyaching?

Screw. You.

"Look alive, ladies! You wanna live forever?" Ashley shouted into the comm. "I don't have eyes on the new arrivals. Tell me you and the rookie have it covered, Doc. I can't keep Chris occupied and save your asses at the same time. Marksmanship and grenades only go so far."

"Rookie?!"

If the boot fits...

But they don't fit!

Exactly.

I hate you.

Although her breathing was still shallow and strained, Sam waved Liara away with a wheeze. "Thank you, Liara. I'll be all right." She even managed a feeble smile.

Ashley interrupted their tender moment with a bark. "What was that? Report."

"Samantha's been injured," Liara clarified. "It is not life-threatening, but still serious considering the circumstances."
"Shit," the SpecTRe grumbled. "This is making me wish Garrus was here. That smug, chicken-legged sniper would have Postle knee-capped and all these idiots dead by now. Assault rifles aren't exactly designed for non-lethal crowd control."

Returning fire with her submachine gun, the asari retorted with a wry smile. "That is truly saying something coming from you, Ashley. Admitting your shortcomings and missing Garrus?"

"I know," Ashley admitted. "Hell is freezing over."

Liara held up a sympathetic palm when Sam attempted to raise her pistol. Sam took the hint and returned to her Omni-tool.

*Stick to your strengths, Traynor.*

The console was still approaching the 100%-erased mark in Sam's holo window. And there was little the comms specialist could do in her current state. While the Medi-gel was pleasantly numbing as it coursed through her system, the accompanying biting cold did not make breathing much easier.

Samantha just felt... wrong. The under armor was still strangling her elbows and armpits (and now chest), her ribs throbbed with each breath, a headache hammered her temples, and Sam was just too slow for this. For *all* of this.

And throughout this entire ordeal: Sam had yet to fire a single bullet.

*A relatively brilliant comms specialist. A dreadful information tech. And a downright remedial soldier.*

*The Alliance's best and brightest, my arse.*

Suddenly, an incoming transmission hit Samantha's comm channel.

[Permissions request: "Shepard, A"]

*Oh, bollocks.*

*No, wait! This is a good thing!*

*...Is it? Is it really, Traynor?*

*Only one way to find out.*

[Allow]

A familiar, hard voice rang into the ear pieces of Liara, Ashley and Samantha. With a single request.

"Sitrep."

Sam was a little shocked. No questions, no comments, no emotion of any kind from Commander Shepard.

*Just a situation report?*

*Is that a good sign or a bad sign?*

*Well, ten to one—*
"Not now."

Liara was the one to answer. "Shepard." Her voice radiated breathy relief before switching to cool professionalism. "We're at the Edroki Towers apartments in Bachjret Ward, 46th floor penthouse. We were unable to prevent reinforcements from joining the main force, who now have an upper balcony advantage. We are in danger of being flanked."

"Number of hostiles." Again, that calm, focused tone.

The asari jerked her head over the skycar door, allowing her blue eyes fractions of a second to scan the field before returning to cover. "Seven on the upper balcony, three on the main level including target."

"Two on the main level, including Chris," Ashley clarified into the comm. "Drone Boy got what was coming to him." The satisfying click of a heat sink could be heard in the background.

No reaction from Shepard. "ETA on our reinforcements."

Liara's eyes flicked to her Omni-tool. Her jaw clenched. "Still five minutes out. You?"

"30 seconds."

Samantha returned to studying, mining and decoding what she could of Postle's system while struggling with shallow breaths. But the console's files were going into the trash faster than Sam could recover them. There was still one important thing Sam needed: the origin of the bribe's sender account. *This decryption needs part of the system's direct profile signature to break the firewall. I need to get to that console soon. Or else we've got a whole lot of nothing.*

Ashley chimed in, "Please tell me you stole a C-Sec car with some firepower, Shepard."

"I'm in a taxi. It has a fare meter." Shepard's tone was curt… *but was there a hint of amusement?* Sam glanced over at Liara, who also showed a fond trace of recognition.

*They must know something I don't.*

Shepard switched back her authoritarian gruffness. "Get me EDI. I need a copilot. Now."

Liara nodded at Samantha to make it happen. It pained Sam to lose her hacking helper, but she locked on to Shepard's skycar which was, shockingly, only a few hundred meters below them. And coming up fast.

*It's good to be the SpecTRe.*

"I am pleased to assist," EDI warmly replied before disappearing from Sam's feeds. The comms specialist felt like she should say something to Shepard. Anything. But she only hunkered down and wheezed in silence. It was hard to find a comfortable position to crouch in that didn't wreak havoc on Sam's ribs. Even through the pain, little doubts nibbled at Samantha's mind.

*I disobeyed a direct order to be here. What is it, one person is insubordination while three or more is a mutiny? I need to reread my Alliance regs handbook.*

*Not much you can do about that now, Traynor.*

*But I—*

*One thing (day?) at a time.*
Tagging the new hostiles on her mini-map, Sam forwarded a NavPoint to Shepard and EDI. Seconds later, a dark purple skycar floated up the west side of the building. But the balcony mercenaries were too busy focusing fire on Sam and Liara below. Only a pair of soldiers turned curiously to train their assault rifles on the hovering new development.

Sam gasped in horror when the driver-side door burst open.

Because Commander Shepard had just jumped out to the upper balcony.

Red hair streamed behind Annelise while her splayed right hand stretched out in front of her. Shepard was in her standard Alliance officer's uniform. No hardsuit. No weapon. No protection.

She didn't need any of it.

The closest merc shouted a muffled obscenity and began firing wildly at the airborne Shepard. A spray of bullets struck a wall of blue sparks and dropped harmlessly before the Commander's biotic shield. The woman landed lightly onto the balcony and disappeared with a pop.

A blue streak raced toward the closest soldier. Shepard came out the crackling biotic haze with fists swinging. A series of quick punches knocked the man off-balance, and with a flourish Shepard twisted the assault rifle out of his hands and claimed it as her own. A burst of close gunfire dropped the soldier within seconds.

*Oh my.*

This was not formal, patient brawling like Shepard versus Vega in the Shuttle Bay. This was Commander Annelise Shepard, Death Incarnate. She switched effortlessly between biotic punches, Omni-blade slashes, and controlled gunfire bursts. The upper balcony advantage the mercs had been enjoying was now a wide open Shepard Slaughter Smorgasbord with no cover.

After the third takedown, the final four mercenaries focused fire on Shepard. But the narrow space worked to Shepard's advantage; she was smaller, faster, lighter. The men's garbled comm chatter heightened to panic.

EDI suddenly reported an outgoing signal from one of the upstairs soldiers. The reinforcements needed reinforcements. *Not on my bloody watch*, Sam scowled and switched to running interference. Their comms operating system was a pretty standard Synthetic Insights VI-run channel. *And any comms specialist worth a damn knows that system is vulnerable within the virtual intelligence*
personality core settings.

They really should get that fixed.

But not today.

With EDI's help, Samantha patched in and started threading the Citadel advertising network into the socket. The official Citadel VI, Avina, roared into the mercenaries' comms with a mixture of sales pitches about Rodam Expeditions Terminus packages, directions from the Wards to the Markets, and detailed background information about Hanar culture. Cursing could also be heard underneath the blare of ads. A pilot demanded coordinates and an ETA, but Sam applied a block filter to his signature. Sod off.

Upstairs, Shepard continued mowing through the mercenaries' ranks like a krogan battlemaster. She charged with echoes of biotic sparks before slamming her rifle butt into the fifth mercenary. Shepard was methodical and precise, the result of years of hard training perfected.

It's hypnotic, really.

"Samantha. Samantha!" Liara's nudge brought Sam back to reality. She pointed a finger towards the open door leading to the apartment's living room. "Now is our chance. You need to go first." She raised a glowing blue hand. "I will cover you."

"Oh. Okay. I just… what? Make a run for it?" Peeking over the (now quite heavily perforated) skycar hood, Sam noted the coast appeared to be clear. Flashes of gunfire could be seen deeper inside the apartment, accompanied by distracting taunts from Ashley in the comm. And with Shepard taking care of business upstairs, now was as good a time as any. Liara readied her Shuriken, then nodded at Sam to proceed.

Right. It's maybe… 12 meters? Straight ahead. Ignore the damaged Kodiak to the left there. And… that body… over there. And hopefully any bullets that might try to welcome us from upstairs. Or in the apartment.

This'll be easy enough.

…Right?

Sam took as deep a breath as she could muster with her chest aching the way it was. She mentally visualized herself flying across that short balcony and rolling to safety behind that entryway arch, weapon at the ready. All topped off with heroically recovering critical data (82.4% wiped!) to save the day.

Why don't you throw a bloody parade while you're at it?

The reality was considerably less epic.

Instead of a graceful run, Samantha made it about three meters before the dull ache in her ribs sharpened tenfold. She wheezed into a slow jog, ducking her head the whole way with her hands held up for added "protection." And rather than fearlessly rolling to safety, Sam collapsed into a breathless heap just outside the doorway.

But at least she was safe. The mercenaries that once terrorized the comms specialist and information broker were out of sight above them. And those guys had their own problems, mainly one Commander Shepard on the warpath. Overhead, a man's scream was abruptly cut off and replaced by a gurgle. Another one down.
Craving relief for her lungs, Sam felt around her pockets for her asthma inhaler... then remembered it was in the trouser pocket of her uniform in Liara's cabin back on the Normandy.

.SHITshitSHITshitSHITshit., Sam inwardly cursed as she tried to get control of her labored breathing.

_Deep, slow breaths, Traynor. Through your nose. Don't be a mouth-breather. That's a one-way ticket to Asthma Town._

Liara, only a few steps behind Sam, was **actually** graceful. She deftly bounded into a crouch at the opposite door frame edge. Blue eyes flashed concern at Sam, but the comms specialist waved her off with a feeble thumbs up. "I'm—" Gasp. "—I'm good."

Sam squinted at her Omni-tool. ["System Erasure: 89.5% Complete."] **Gotta get in there.** The asari hazarded a few steps forward, then beckoned for Sam to follow. A narrow, dimly lit hallway led to a pair of archways. Two red dots and one blue on the mini-map were slowly weaving within the left room, while a white marker indicator flashed from the right. _The console. It's so bloody close._

"Need a little help in here, guys," Ashley growled into the comm. Gunshots, once dulled by distance, cracked loudly in the next room. "They're dug in like ticks. And I overheard Postle saying something about getting to a Panic Room. I'm going to be embarrassed if a hired gun and an asshole can outmaneuver me. Especially when I'd rather just shoot them than take them alive."

Both women quietly slunk over to the living room. Crouching low behind a plush sofa, the comms specialist could finally see Ashley Williams in the next room. The Lieutenant Commander nodded at Sam from her cover behind a kitchen island and made a series of hand gestures.

_Shit._ Sam had to wrack her brain to find a long glossed-over chapter of her very brief combat comms training: nonverbal tactical signals. **Okay, clenched fist... "Freeze." Cupped eyebrows then three outside fingers. Ummm... "Look at 9 o'clock?" ...what does that swipe over her wrist... and two fingers? And that lowering motion? Shit!**

Sam spotted a muzzle flash deep inside the apartment and dropped to the ground with a gasp. A hail of bullets struck the space Sam had just occupied, but petered out after a few seconds. Two male voices cursed in the distance. Bits of fabric and fluff wafted down from the air.

..._I believe what our helpful Miss Williams was trying to communicate was "Get down. Two hostiles at your 9 o'clock._"

For a minute, all was quiet.

Sam couldn't figure out why the silence was unsettling, until she realized that it was quiet upstairs, too. _Does that mean...?_

A cold, commanding voice drifted down from above.

"This is Staff Commander Annelise Shepard with the Alliance Navy. I order you, Officer Chris Postle, former requisitions officer of the SSV Normandy SR-1, to stand down. Along with anyone who might be with you. Surrender your weapons immediately. Or else."

"Or else."

_Damn. I think I have chills._

"'Or else' what?" Postle shouted back derisively. But his voice wavered. "The Alliance has no authority here." A low garbled sound could be heard; the remaining mercenary was trying to signal
Ashley Williams piped up. "The Council sure as shit does. And you've got two Council SpecTRes here right now." She softened slightly, determined to play Good Cop. "Chris. Give it up. We won't hurt you if you lay down your weapon."

A long silence.

"Et tu, Williams?" He seemed almost sad. Chris Postle had a warm tenor. *He actually sounds kind of nice… if he hadn't just spent the last 5 minutes trying to kill us.*

"And me, Chris," Ashley repeated back. Her voice hardened and she ordered, "Stand. Down."

Sam peeked over the sofa and saw him gesture to a heavily armored mercenary, who started creeping slowly for the side door.

*He's going to flank Ashley.*

*Shit!*

The sadness hardened to bitter disdain. "I didn't think you were one of 'em, Williams. I thought you were different. And now you'll kill me like Commander Shepard usually does humans."

*What the bloody hell is he talking about?*

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ashley Williams barked. Just as Sam was about to shout for Ash to watch her six, there was a loud grunting sound. The mercenary sneaking up on Ashley was lifted into the air with a biotic Pull, his legs comically flailing. Lancing strands of blue revealed their owner at the top of the kitchen staircase.

*Commander Shepard.*

A heavy thud followed as Ashley's Concussive Shot struck the soldier and sent him flying through the kitchen window to the streets far below.

"Yes, please elaborate." Liara T'Soni was standing up from cover next to Sam, a submachine gun trained at the human traitor's back. The noise sent Postle scrambling to point his weapon at Liara. He hissed a profanity, but hesitated when he realized how exposed he was. And alone.

Slowly standing up, Chris Postle held up his hands in surrender with a pistol hanging loose on his thumb. Ashley quickly padded over to the man, keeping her assault rifle level before tucking his gun into a weapon slot at her own back. Ash efficiently patted down Postle's simple suit, and smirked when she found a Phalanx hidden at his back.

The comms specialist came up from her hiding spot behind the couch to study the Normandy Traitor for a moment. He was completely average-looking. Groomed chin stubble, sallow cheeks, and close-cropped sandy brown hair. Deep lines scored Postle's brow and he seemed to have a permanent sneer on his face. His brown eyes, surrounded by tired, dark circles, returned Sam's scrutiny with a glare.

Slow footsteps could be heard coming down the staircase. Turning to look, Samantha found herself shrinking under Commander Shepard's hard gaze. The SpecTRe was calm and collected, as though she hadn't just cut down seven mercenaries in about two minutes. The only subtle indicators to the contrary were the black assault rifle in her hands and the dark smudges of blood on her uniform.
There was a small flash of disappointment when Annelise flicked her eyes over to Sam before returning to Postle. Again, Sam wanted to say something. Her mouth even opened this time, but still flapped soundlessly. *I don't even… do I—do I say I'm sorry? That I wanted to do the right thing? "It's what she would have done?"

*Traynor. Data first. Apology later.*

"Shit!" Sam exclaimed before spinning on her heel to bound to the next room. She thought she saw Shepard's disappointment turn into suppressed amusement, but the Commander didn't try to stop Sam. She heard Liara call her name, but didn't answer.

*Where is it where is it where is it?*

The study, lined with ornate shelves and ridiculous art sculptures, had a large desk in the corner that Sam zeroed in on. A holo window was open above a computer console with lines of code running.

["System Erasure: 95.1% Complete. Override disabled."]

The pain in Sam's chest faded before a problem that needed solving. She opened a direct line for EDI to engage, while connecting her own Omni-tool into the system interface. The data she and EDI had recovered had jumped to 48.6%, but most of it was still locked under a complex encryption. She could only pray the data key was the last thing to be wiped.

*How does a man half-ass the privacy on his financials but his damn address book practically needs a military-grade VI to decode?*

*Bloody ridiculous priorities, I tell you.*

"EDI, I need a profile scrub. Focus everything in your arsenal to crack his firewall. We need his password and cipher key to actually read any of this bloody intel."

"Understood, Specialist Traynor," EDI kindly replied. The blue orb above Sam's wrist dissolved into the system. The cascading lines of deleting code started to slow dramatically as the AI's cyberwarfare suite took over.

Sam went back to gather and analysis. The once blank contact list started to fill in slowly, and each exposed name Sam ran through the Alliance master database for comparison.

*Mercenary leaders. Corrupt politicians. Information brokers. Quite the social circle of right bastards in here.*

*And there's something missing here. But I can't think what it is.*

Chewing on her lip, Sam's nimble fingers applied filters to peel away at the layers. She had found an interesting administrator file leading to Postle's work at the Zakera ward arm docking bay. Dates and ship signatures were logged, but again the owners/contacts were encrypted.

EDI pinged her Omni-tool with success at the password log, but the cipher key to unlock it was still missing.

*Think, Traynor, think.*

["Input password: **********"]
Scrub the link-up to Postle's Omni-tool. Filter most recent upload headings, check for last used keylogs, execute Ariake smart-processor algorithm for common security protocols, and…

"Specialist Traynor, the console hard drive has been wiped. It is requesting to be reformatted," EDI informed Sam.

The comms specialist was almost afraid to ask. "Did we get it?"

A brief silence almost made Sam scream.

"I have acquired the necessary files to reconstruct the firewall encryption key." Oh thank merciful Christ. "Please wait while I run a compiling algorithm. Once consolidated, do you have a recommended starting place to apply this decoder?"

You bet your sweet synthetic arse I do. "I need the names and IPs of everyone who wired this twat credits. I also managed to recover his business logs, so run a cross-check of names and IPs against the Alliance database. I want as complete a picture as we can get of what Chris Postle has been doing for the past three years."

EDI retired back to the Normandy AI core with a simple "Understood."

Breathing a cautious sigh of optimism, Sam stood up to stretch and winced. Right. My stupid ribs. She turned to look out the window towards the balcony. From this angle, their once lovely skycar looked positively dreadful. The entire starboard side was decimated by gunfire. Twisted metal and bits of seat leather was strewn all along the ground. The distant Kodiak still smoldered from Liara's hit to its engines, swirling smoke trailed upward to a darkening sky. A beautiful sunset spilled gold and orange hues over the ward arms.

And there was another transport vehicle hovering just beyond the balcony ledge, with armed men streaming over the railing. Strangely enough, Sam's first instinct was to actually reach for the sidearm on her hip. But she was more than a little reassured when Liara strode up to a man in black and blue armor to talk.

Must be the long overdue reinforcements. Thanks, but no thanks. Wankers.

…Because you totally got this, Traynor?

Heading out to the balcony, Sam picked her way through broken glass to where Ashley had Chris Postle. The man's wrists were bound in front of him with wire scraps. Following his eyes, Sam saw him glaring daggers at Shepard on the upper terrace. The Commander's Omni-tool was out and scanning the bodies of his men littered along the catwalk. Postle's eyes then met Sam's and his scowl deepened.

Not quite ready to talk to Shepard yet, Sam headed over to where the asari stood. "What's going on?"

"Samantha." Liara's smile was of pure relief. "I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried. But we got him. And thanks to the Goddess in no small part to you."

"I—I really didn't do anything," Sam sputtered at the compliment. She could feel her cheeks reddening. "Seriously. I couldn't have done less if I'd been trying. Thanks for pulling my worthless bum out of the fire back there. At least you and Williams looked like you knew what you were doing."

Samantha was confused when she saw Liara directing her men to move the mercenaries' bodies.
"Speaking of which… what are you doing?"

Liara's Omni-tool was out and her tone switched to her usual formality. "C-Sec has been called. They should be here in five to ten minutes. Rather than advertise our presence here, my men are rearranging the scene to look like a turf war between mercenaries."

"Oh… um… all right then."

"What did you find?" Shepard was suddenly at Sam's shoulder. Samantha finally made eye contact with the SpecTRe, but Shepard was all business. Green eyes reflected Annelise's usual focus, but there was something masked underneath. *That's also pretty "usual" for her, come to think of it.*

Feeling the need to salute, Sam offered a polite "Ma'am." She also had to clear her throat, and hissed slightly from the pain in her ribs. "EDI is still reconstructing Postle's contact database and activity log. But he's—he's dirty. He's been receiving payoffs since the day that…"

"The day that the Normandy was destroyed?" Shepard asked.

Sam nodded solemnly. Without another word, Shepard stalked toward the prisoner, stepping over bodies in the process. Glancing back at Liara with trepidation, Sam followed a few meters behind her Commander, uncertain about what to do next. She heard the asari shadowing her own footsteps.

With a biotic charge, Shepard darted past Ashley's welcoming handshake. Postle cowered, holding up his bound hands, but Shepard was on him in an instant. Her right hand snagged his collar and dragged the man to the balcony ledge. She let go, shoved him to the edge and took a few steps back.

"You have something to tell me?"

"Fuck you, Shepard."

The air popped with gunfire as Shepard sprayed the ground at Postle's feet with her assault rifle, forcing him to jump back. Closer to the balcony rim and the abyss beyond. Sam gasped in fright.

"I won't ask again."

Postle started repeat his earlier profanity, but shut his mouth when he saw Shepard's rifle barrel rise. He rubbed at his neck where she'd grabbed him. "What do you want me to say, Shepard?"

"The truth. About what you did to the Normandy," Liara commanded. The asari stood a few steps behind the Commander, her fists glowing with biotics. Ashley was the only "friendly" one there, choosing instead to keep a loose grip on her rifle.

"I didn't do anything," Postle growled back. "You did it to yourself. You and your alien friends."

A blue spark struck the man's jaw. It pushed him backwards, forcing his head and shoulders over the edge while his feet dug desperately into what remained of the ground. But Shepard held him there with her biotics.

*She only has to let go and he'd just—just fall.*
Annelise's cold voice rang out. "I don't want your excuses. Tell me why you betrayed the Alliance."

"I didn't betray the Alliance! You did!" Chris shrieked with raw fear, his leashed hands clawed at air to try and regain his balance. "You killed thousands of people and didn't even have so much as a hearing! Is that justice?!"

The ball of blue at Postle's throat forced him backward at a deeper angle. Shepard barked, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The Citadel! The Destiny Ascension!" Postle shouted. His already-red face darkened when Shepard didn't respond. "…the 63rd Scout Flotilla."


Annelise's glowing grip slackened, pulling Postle forward a few centimeters. Shepard's voice was hushed. "...Who did you lose?"

"I didn't lose shit! You took them from me! My father! Brother! And for what? That fucking asari piece-of-shit ship? A bunch of useless alien diplomats?" Postle clutched at the invisible hand on his throat, but remained precariously trapped on the balcony ledge.

*That's what was so weird about Postle's contact list, Sam's mind suddenly reminded her. It was all humans. No turian names. Salarian. Asari. Nothing but humans. He's just an angry humanity-first racist.*

Ashley started to reach out to intervene, but Liara stopped her. Instead, the Lieutenant Commander chewed her lip and asked, "So you alerted the Collectors to destroy the Normandy? For what? Revenge?"

This was where Postle wavered. He was silent. Before he had been practically foaming with rage. *He had killed Commander Shepard and wasn't elated about it?*

Shepard pushed him back to a deeper angle over the balcony ledge. "Tell me why."

"I didn't... I wasn't—I wasn't trying to kill you! I was loyal to the Alliance. But not after the Alliance failed to so much as bring you up on disciplinary charges. I was... They said they were just going to
"They?' You were in contact with the Collectors?' Liara asked incredulously. "The Shadow Broker was the last one to make a deal with the Collectors... and that didn't work out too well for either of them... And yet somehow you did, too?"

*Wait, how would Liara know that?*

The Normandy Traitor spit at the asari in disgust. "Shit, no. I didn't know anything about no Collectors. I wouldn't have reached out if I thought fucking *aliens* would have been involved. No, it was my contact I'd made a deal with: I show them our location in the Terminus, then they'd board the ship and put you on trial. On the extranet for everyone to see. That was supposed to be the deal. …I didn't know they were going to try to kill us." Postle trailed off sadly, his eyes looking elsewhere.

"But they did," Shepard hissed. She walked closer until her own fist replaced her biotics at Chris's throat. She seemed to be studying him. "22 people died that day. Because of you."

22 people. Shepard… *she counts herself as among the dead.*

Sadness flashed across the man's eyes. "I know. And the people who helped make it happen have owned me ever since."

*Wrong answer.*

Shepard pulled Chris level with her eyes. "22 people died and you're worried about your own ass. Betraying your oath, and humanity, was an inconvenience to you."

"No, I—Ahhh!" The man screamed as Shepard shoved him violently over the edge. Postle dropped but his tied hands caught on an exposed girder. The wire dug red trenches into his wrists. He screamed louder when Shepard's boot ground into his hand.

Sam felt nausea rising to her throat. She reached out for the woman's shoulder and clutched at the stiff fabric. "Commander. …Shepard. Please."

The Commander snarled as she jerked in Sam's direction. Sam flinched when she saw rage swirling in those green eyes, but the tempest calmed. "Step back, Specialist Traynor," Annelise warned softly.

For some reason, Samantha was reminded of Garrus. "*Give people hope. Justice could finally come to the lawless. …If I forgot that, it would have made all the sacrifices my team made just …nothing.*"

*That's Commander Shepard, Traynor.*

"Please," Sam echoed, moving her hand to Shepard's wrist. "Garrus said you taught him justice. And to make sacrifices worthwhile. And… this man's just a pawn in this game. A bishop at best. But whoever's behind all this: they're the *real* threat, ma'am."

*Ugh, did I really just use a chess analogy to try to spare a man's life?*

Stepping forward, Shepard pushed dangerously into Sam's personal space. The comms specialist could practically feel the accusations reflected in Annelise's narrowed gaze. That Sam didn't know anything. Didn't understand.

But that didn't mean she was wrong.

And Annelise knew it.
There was a flash of understanding, but it was quickly buried back under a stoic mask. The Commander stepped back and cleared her throat. Her eyes flicked over to Ashley, then dropped to the ground in resignation.

The Lieutenant Commander took the hint. Blue armor passed to Sam's right as Ash stretched a hand out to the dangling Normandy Traitor. Ashley grunted with the effort of dragging Chris back from the abyss. The man whimpered, but even muttered a thank you.

*You're God damn right, "thank you."

When Shepard finally spoke, her quiet voice sharpened with restrained malice. "Who bankrolled you?"

"I can't… she'll kill me." Chris's voice wavered, and he visibly shook with fear.

"*She?* A woman had access to the Collectors?

*Obviously a human woman. A human woman with reach. Funds. Motive?* Sam's mind swirled with possibilities, but came up empty.

Shepard glanced at Samantha with a sigh before turning back to Postle. "We can protect you." When Chris scoffed, the Commander quietly elaborated, "If I was going to kill you, Officer Postle… I would have done it already. All I'm asking for is a name. In exchange? Council custody. Get you offstation ASAP. Who. Bankrolled. You."

The man mulled the offer for a moment before taking a deep breath.

"Hope Lilium."

A wet gurgling sound followed a dull thwack. A dark hole appeared in Chris Postle's neck. The man spasmed before collapsing to the ground. He struggled with a few thick breaths before laying still.

*Oh God oh God oh God oh God!*

Shepard flung an arm over Sam ("Get down!") to push her low to the ground. Sam took the hint and flopped face down onto the metal and stone floor. She covered her head with her hands, though the cynical part of Sam's mind wondered what good that would do.

Liara and Ashley dove for cover as pops of rifle fire chased their footsteps. The low lip of the balcony railing was just enough to shield a crouching Liara, who seemed to be a secondary focus of the sniper's ire. Divots of concrete rained down on a hunkered Sam and Shepard, but ended just as swiftly as it began.

The hard ground dug into Sam's chin, but she was too afraid to move or even breath. She could only stare at the glazed eyes of the confessed Normandy Traitor as blood pooled around his head.

*I haven't seen a body like that since—since… Horizon.*

*But they weren't dead, Traynor. Just frozen.*

*They didn't come back, though. So they might as well have been dead. They are dead.*

Subconscious tears pricked at Samantha's eyelashes, but she blinked them away.

Armored boots and Alliance dress shoes crossed Sam's line of sight. Ashley and Shepard pivoted on their heels with rifle barrels raised, ready to return fire. A muffled shout from behind indicated Liara's
team were also scanning nearby buildings for the sniper.

Ashley approached Postle's body with a crouch before abruptly standing up. "Trajectory indicates the southwest."

Shepard gestured to a tower several city blocks away. "It had to be from that rooftop. Look, there!" A dark skycar could be seen in the distance lifting off and speeding away toward the dense lines of traffic below. Just another commuter lost in the crowd.

"Shit! Good sniper nest. Easy access, easy escape. Probably set up when the reinforcements arrived."

"Weapon?"

"Based on range…" Ashley pondered a moment. "A Javelin or maybe a Viper-class sniper rifle has that kind of accuracy. A Black Widow would have blown his head off. Likely military."

"Ex-military," Shepard corrected. "I did a biometric scan of the guys upstairs. Most of them were Category 6."

Nearly a minute ticked by before either SpecTRe was satisfied that the danger had passed. Liara offered a helping hand to Samantha, who grunted her way to her feet. Laying on her chest wasn't doing her ribs any favors, and they throbbed angrily in response. Sam sucked in mouthfuls of air and readjusted the armor that had dug in to her chest and hips.

Liara's men returned to ask for an update, and to report they'd received confirmation C-Sec was inbound. The asari urged them to finish their work before walking over to speak quietly to Shepard.

Sam felt awkward just standing there, but she had no idea what she could do. And her eyes wouldn't leave the Normandy Traitor's lifeless eyes. Ashley Williams knelt down at Chris's side and offered a small verse.

"Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid."

*Henley.*

*Good thing your time at Oxford wasn't an utter waste... And it seems the Lieutenant Commander is a poet.*

*Huh. I never would have guessed.*

*...Why don't you make yourself useful?*

*[Run search filter on "Hope Lilium"]*

*Why does that sound famil—oh bloody hell.*

*Spero inter lilia. "Hope among lilies."

*...Well, that's arrogant.*

Sam wanted a less stressful situation to pore over her newly acquired data, though her initial filters did find a very interesting coincidence: the first deposit into Postle's bank account had left a heavily encrypted IP signature fragment. Which had a 32.7% match with some known Cerberus signatures.
The closest match (20.8%) Samantha had in her registry was for Miranda Lawson.

*The plot thickens?*

"And now we have nothing!" Shepard shouted, rousing Sam from her Omni-tool studies. A few meters away, Liara and Annelise were in a heated argument.

Liara stood before the Commander, her head tilting sympathetically. "That is not true, Shepard. We have information. A name. With time we can track down this Hope Lilium and maybe—"

"Maybe what?" The Commander demanded. "Chase more leads with all that free time I have chasing everyone else's damn leads? Make more deals with the devil? I'm still recovering from your last deal, T'Soni."

Liara jerked as though she'd been slapped. But she recovered quickly with cold anger. "That is not fair. You continue to punish me for bringing you back. Do you want me to apologize? Because I won't. I'm not sorry you're back. Even if you are, Annelise."

*Oh shit.*

"And you brushed my information aside yesterday, forcing my hand to seek alternatives," Liara continued, raising her chin defiantly. "Was I supposed to sit idly by and let Postle escape while you sulked in your cabin contemplating if my lead was worthy of following? Would Commander Shepard have sat and waited for permission?"

Shepard's jaw clenched. "Did it ever occur to you I was following my own leads? I know the high and mighty Shadow Broker has the galaxy at her goddamn fingertips, but I still have the SpecTRe network. I was looking into my former requisitions officer's military history, what C-Sec had on him, what assets he had at his disposal."

*Wait, what?*

*Are you bloody kidding me?*

*Liara T'Soni is the Shadow Broker?* Sam knew her jaw was agape and that she was shamelessly staring. But she couldn't help it.

The asari waved her hand at the apartment chaos. "Does this answer your question about his assets? Maybe if you hadn't stormed off like a pouting child, I could have gone over my findings in detail. But no, it's Commander Shepard's way or no way at all."

"Oh, I'm the stubborn one," Annelise threw back sarcastically. "This from the woman who wrote the book on Obsessive Behavior. Who was so dedicated to selling my body to the highest bidder but couldn't be bothered to send me so much as a message when I came back. Skipped right to wanting me to run your errands and handle your grudges. At least Cerberus didn't pretend they once gave a damn about me before tossing me to the wolves as a glorified tool."

"Hey hey HEY!" Ashley snapped, shoving herself between the two women. "Wrap it, you two! Clock's ticking."

Williams turned to Shepard and crossed her arms. "I double-timed it up 20 flights of stairs to reach you guys. You know why? Because Liara asked me to. And this is important, even if you didn't think so, Shepard. That's why I'm here." Ashley glared back.

"You're over the line, Lieutenant Commander," Annelise growled.
"Because you were under the line, Commander. I made the call. I okayed the assault. You may not have thought this worth following up in a timely manner, but I sure as shit did." Ashley tossed her head in Liara's direction. "Now that asari is a lot of things... 'Obsessive' being kind of a big one... But 'wrong about stuff like this' ain't one of 'em. And I wasn't about to sit on my hands when I had the power... the responsibility... to act. So if you're gonna throw a hissy-fit about coulda-shoulda-woulda, Shepard, you talk to me."

The two SpecTRes glared at each other in silence for a moment. Liara seemed as stunned as Sam was over Ash's intervention. But the asari's expression softened to gratitude.

Wait wait wait.

So Liara is the Shadow Broker. And helped bring Shepard back from the dead.

And Williams took credit for this entire operation that she just showed up for.

...And you and Commander Shepard shagged two nights ago.

Yes. Thank you. Anything else I'm missing?

Shepard is kind of cranky and broken?

...Anything else I didn't know?

Samantha suddenly realized how numb and exhausted she was. This whole ordeal was so far over her head. And the dull ache in her chest was throbbing with each raspy breath.

"So, Operations Director Williams," Shepard suddenly interrupted with sarcasm. "Why the hell did you bring Samantha into this? Was dragging a Normandy comms specialist into a hot zone part of your master plan? She's not cleared for combat. Or to even carry a weapon on the Citadel. What the hell were you thinking, bringing her along?"

Hey! Sam thought in protest. She had to clear her throat twice to defend herself. "Well, I didn't actually use the bloody pistol so technically... I didn't break any rules?"

Wrong answer, Sam realized when Shepard's hot glare found her. Shutting up.

Annelise peered past Samantha to Liara. "She's not one of your agents to pick up and toss aside as
you please. My crew is not an extension of your network, no matter how many credits you have."

In addition to being scolded into submission, there was something about Shepard's quiet rant that bothered Sam. It was several hits to her ear drums later when she realized what it was.

Shepard had used Sam's name. Her first name. Not "Specialist" or "Traynor." *Or hell, "rookie" would have been apt.* It was such a small detail Sam wondered if Liara had noticed—

She'd noticed.

The asari continued to submit to Shepard's (actually legitimate) reprimand, but Liara allowed herself one, small, nonverbal exchange with the comms specialist.

Liara's head turned to meet Sam's. Chin raised, eyes narrowed, nothing said. The temperature outside the apartment dropped several degrees, or maybe it just felt like it to Sam. It was over in an instant, but it was enough to catch the asari's meaning:

*How could you?*

Ash suddenly sighed and tucked her hair behind an ear. "We need to wrap this up. C-Sec is gonna be here any minute. We can continue the pissing contest later." She gestured with her thumb. "Liara and Traynor, you guys need to get the hell outta here. I can't sell this turf war/grudge match/anonymou tip story if it's a damn Shadow Broker party. Your guys are already done and packing up, Liara. Take Traynor in Shepard's taxi and make yourselves scarce."

"Understood," Liara murmured before striding purposefully for the hovering purple taxi at the northwest side. She didn't even so much as glance backward. Samantha awkwardly saluted Williams and Shepard, unsure of what to say.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry I disobeyed orders, ma'ams. But... I'm glad I could be of some small use."

Ashley slapped Sam on the back amiably before apologizing. It felt like one of Sam's ribs had jostled loose, and she sputtered in response. Each small cough of air was fire to her lungs. The Lieutenant Commander took off for the apartment interior to get settled before C-Sec arrived.

Shepard offered only a terse nod. She looked pensive, and her eyes flitted to the retreating asari with sadness and regret. Annelise then leaned forward.

"I'm glad you're all right, Samantha."

The woman gave Sam a light smile before it immediately switched to melancholy. Shepard then turned on her heel to wait at the balcony entrance.

Satisfied at her dismissal, Sam walked as fast as she could to the taxi without hurting herself. She hissed in pain as she crawled into the passenger seat.

Her Omni-tool flashed a proximity warning just as the car zoomed away. C-Sec finally showed. To make sense of things.

*Get in line. It's bloody impossible at this point.*

The two women rode in silence. Which was fine by Sam. She was too focused on trying to find just the right tempo for breathing so she wouldn't burst into tears at every inhale. It wasn't going well, especially since the Medi-Gel seemed to be wearing off. Sam was close to hyperventilating,
especially when she noticed that the Nav system wasn't leading them back to the Normandy.

"Um… Liara? Where are we going?"

The asari stared straight ahead. "The Upper Wards. To a Med Clinic to get treatment for your injuries. I have already confirmed that Dr. Chakwas is on shore leave and unavailable."

…what about Huerta Memorial?

As though answering Sam's thoughts, Liara continued, "Your current apparel is likely to draw attention at a busy place like the hospital. …I know this human. She will be discrete."

There was something painfully formal about the way Liara was talking. But Sam politely thanked her.

Does she know? I mean, it's just my first name. A harmless slip-up. …right?

"I apologize that you had to witness that," Liara murmured. "It was an argument long overdue between Shepard and I. She can be so stubborn then turn around and be so understanding. Frankly, it is confusing and exhausting."

I can relate.

The skycar dropped down between two close buildings. It hovered to a standstill as the whirring hum of the engine quieted. Flexing and squeaking, Liara's gloved hands remaining gripped to the steering wheel. It was a moment before she stabbed a finger at the center console. The door next to Samantha lifted open.

"We're here."

Translation: Get out.

Sam took the hint, though she couldn't suppress a whimper as exiting jostled her fragile ribs. She staggered a few safe steps away, turned, and hunched down to peer at the asari still in the driver's seat. Samantha's mouth was dry and her mind was empty of any distinct (useful) thoughts.

Liara sat in silence, her cold eyes focused ahead. Her voice was distant, but laced with quiet anger.

"I thought she and I were just... waiting for the right moment. To figure things out. I wish... I wish I'd known I was the only one waiting."

"Liara, I—" Sam pleaded as she leaned into the window of the closing passenger door. She had to say something, but her asthma was making a creeping comeback. "I—" Gasp. "—let me—"

Wheeze. "—explain."

And now you're an honorary volus. Congrats, Traynor.

Shut it.

…You mean "Shut it, Earth-clan."

"Thank you for your assistance, Specialist Traynor."

The skycar door slammed shut in Sam's face.

Sighing, Samantha hobbled over to the brightly lit Med Clinic door. Gurneys were littered around the
room and piled high with supply boxes. A vaguely familiar woman trilled a kind welcome from
behind a low desk (also full of boxes). "'allo! I am Dr. Chloe Michel. Dr. T'Soni called and
mentioned a patient?"

The comms specialist nodded shyly.

Dr. Michel smiled warmly. "I apologize for the mess. Since the war started, this clinic has mostly
remained closed or for allocation of medical supplies to Huerta Memorial. I just happened to be on a
delivery when Dr. T'Soni called. But we should have enough to get you checked out, yes?"

Grateful for the attention, Sam allowed herself to be led into a nearby exam room.

Her brief optimism faded when her Omni-tool sparked with an incoming message.

From: ['Shepard, A']
To: ['Traynor, S']
19:31:20 GST, 16/04/2186

Subject: Crew Assignment, 17/04/2186

You are hereby ordered to report to the SSV Normandy SR-2 War Room conference room at 0830
for disciplinary review in lieu of your recent performance. Staff Commander Annelise Shepard will
preside over your review. Your actions on 16/04/2186 have also been deemed classified. Any
discussion of events on the aforementioned date with persons without proper clearance will result in
court martial.

At 1300, report to Dr. Bryson's Laboratory on the Citadel Presidium with EDI mech in attendance.
Any and all demerit protocols assigned during disciplinary review must be observed at this time.
NavPoint to follow.

Cmdr A Shepard, Alliance Navy

Chapter End Notes

Ashley's poem is quoted from "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley.
Samantha massaged her soft eyelids slowly, savoring how good the pressure felt. For a few calm seconds, she felt better. Relieved. Peaceful.

Opening her eyes, however, was another matter entirely.

For one, the harsh light in the conference area outside the War Room assaulted Sam's burning, grainy vision. Secondly, her reflection in the wide window reminded the Normandy comms specialist of both the painfully early hour and the reason why she was there. Staring back was a tired Lieutenant Samantha Traynor in formal dress uniform waiting to know her fate.

Sam started to smooth her black, wavy hair out of fidgeting habit, but then tsked with disapproval when she saw her fingertips smudged with mascara and eye liner.

Brilliant, Traynor. Bloody brilliant.

Sam licked her thumb (Ugh. Gross.) and tried to rub the eye makeup off with modest success. Sighing, Sam rested her forehead against the cool glass and stared out the window. The system's major star, Widow, threw morning light on the bustling ship traffic streaming through the Citadel's docking lanes. A few ships drifting by were raked with hull damage; jagged strips of loose metal peeled back to reveal charred holes within. Or worse, entire decks were missing from the larger frigates.

The war is not going well.

The Omni-tool on Samantha's wrist chirped, but she didn't bother to look down. She knew it was just a reminder that her disciplinary review was due to start in five minutes.

Do I dare calculate the odds?

Oh, why the bloody hell not? Do you have something better to do?
15 to one I get tossed out an airlock (if Javik had his way). Nine to one I'm banished to the Normandy's crawlspaces for the remainder of my tour of duty, with secondary odds of six to one that I become a stark raving duct rat inside a week. Three to one I just get kicked off the ship and fired. With a one to one guarantee I die alone in a ward alley.

Good morning to you, too, Sunshine.

"Oh shit. You too, Traynor?"

Sam pushed off the glass and turned to her right to find Ashley Williams coming around the corner. The Lieutenant Commander was also in her Alliance best. Gold trim hugged curves of navy blue. Sam straightened abruptly to salute a superior officer, which sent pain lancing through her midsection.

Easy there, soldier. Try not to rip your Medi-gel wrap off. Unless you fancy heading to Dr. Chakwas for the third time this morning because you can't have nice things. Nice, drug-filled things.

Mmmmmm... drugs.

It took a second for Sam to register what Williams meant. "'Me too?' Are you—are you not here to oversee my review?"

Ashley returned the salute then shook her head. Her once long hair, now tightly coiled into a bun, bobbed at her neck. "'Fraid not, Traynor. I just got out of my own 'captain's mast' about our little misadventure yesterday."

"So... it's just Shepard in there?" ...De... Does that make me feel better? Or worse? Sam threw a glance at the conference room wall, but the normal glass was frosted opaque for privacy.

"No, it's Shepard and that mech—uh, EDI." ...De...Does that make me feel better? Or worse? "...It's pretty surreal being read the riot act by the robot that bashed my face in a couple months ago. Way too much character-building irony for one day," Ashley mused with a scowl.

"You're an inspiration to us all, ma'am," Sam added with dry reverence. Ash just smirked. "...may I ask what happened? I mean, I count it a good sign that you're not in restraints. Gives me some small hope for myself, though my imagination is talented enough to think of worse things."

The SpecTRe gave a deep sigh. "Oh, I'm lucky as hell, if you can call it 'luck,' that there's a war going on. And that the Normandy doesn't have a brig. Especially for an 'endangering an officer' charge."

"No."

"Yes."

Sam sputtered in indignation. "What?! Who did you even—? ...me." Sober realization washed over her as heat rose to Sam's cheeks.

What, did you think you were the only one in trouble over the whole Normandy Traitor thing?

I—I didn't think...

That's exactly why you're here, Traynor. A severe lack of thinking went on yesterday.

Nodding, Ashley threw a slanted, sympathetic smile. "Yep. You. Ranking officer on an op equals
assuming responsibility for everyone involved in said op. Especially when they're rookie comms specialists getting caught in the line of fire. I should have kept your ass out of it. I knew better. It's on me."

"Bloody hell, Williams. I'm—I'm so sorry. You're in trouble because I wanted to help Liara. I should've—"

Ashley waved her hands in front of Sam and cut her off. "Shh—shh—shhhhh. Shut up, Traynor. I wanted to help Liara too, remember? She asked for my help. I was there. End of story. And Shepard knew I was covering for you guys anyway. I didn't even bother denying it. I told Shepard she was wrong to make that call about Postle. He could be on a transport off to God Knows where if we hadn't stopped him."

"Wow. And you're still here to tell the tale. Ballsy, ma'am," Samantha murmured, her voice thick with awe.

The soldier shrugged the compliment away. "I call it like I see it, Traynor. And I'm glad Liara called me. I'm glad I could be there. Because I haven't always…" Ashley cleared her throat and her gaze hardened. "I owed her. I still do. And I'm glad Shepard came to her senses and came runnin' when I paged her through the SpecTRe channel. That op could have gone sideways really quickly, even with the Normandy's best and brightest. …And you too, Traynor."

Chuckling at the oblique insult, Sam suppressed the wince that trickled down her abdomen. *But she does raise an interesting point.* "Um, this might be a stupid, insubordinate question…"

"My favorite kind."

"…but why would you let the Commander reprimand you, then? Aren't you both equals as SpecTRes?"

"Yea." Ashley rubbed her chin and sighed. "It's kind of a gray area because the op involved former Alliance personnel over an Alliance incident… but Shepard invoked SpecTRe status on it which made it fair game. Technically, I probably could have told Shepard to shove her NJP up her ass and gone on my merry way."

"So… why—?"

"Why didn't I?" Crossing her arms again, Ashley gave Sam a sad smile. "Because I fucked up, Traynor. I'm Alliance first and foremost and I had a duty to keep you safe and out of it. I acted like a SpecTRe, not a soldier. 'If you want to be XO, start acting like it.'" Ash growled in a mimic of Shepard's voice.

"So I'll just take my lumps like a big girl and not waste my third—fourth?—chance to make a good first impression. Shepard needs to know she can trust me to follow her lead, that I won't second-guess her on her ship as her XO. And that I won't allow non-combat personnel where they don't belong." Throwing Sam a pointed look, Ashley's shoulders bounced with her small shrug.

*Well … that's one way of looking at things.*

*And four first impressions? Really?*

*I wonder how many I'll get.*

…I wonder how many Liara got.
"Would it be terribly impertinent to ask… what you got? …just—just so I sort of know what to expect. Maybe I can steer the conversation over to 'how much I love scrubbing toilets' and away from 'boy, how much do I love being imprisoned, huh?' …You know, stuff like that." Sam grinned sheepishly. The self-aware part of her brain (so, the opposite of Stupid Sam) flashed a warning that Samantha was pressing her luck with a superior officer, but she didn't care.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Traynor family motto.

Especially if I'm about to get fired.

The Lieutenant Commander reached behind her head and slid the hair tie off, allowing her long, dark tresses to spill freely down her back before answering.

"I still get to stay XO, which shocked the hell out of me. No rank reduction, either."

Well, that's a relief.

"But damn is Shepard makin' me earn my keep." She extended her fingers and started counting off with a tap to her index finger. "I was supposed to get my own quarters on the Normandy, but that reporter… Allers?" Sam nodded in confirmation. "Right, she gets to keep her plush suite in Engineering while I'm banished to the Starboard Observation Deck for the duration."

Middle finger tap. "Um, forfeiture of 50% pay for two months." Touching her ring finger and then pinky, Ash wrinkled her nose. "Double shifts in the armory for the next month to get our weapons upgraded, modded, and in-line with Alliance regs. And double PT in the Shuttle Bay before I'm cleared for missions. Part of my 'return to duty eval,' she says."

Poking at the pad of her thumb last, Williams sighed. "And I'll be doing extra paperwork for probably a decade after I die. Taking over all the day-to-day shift assignments and everyday evals, too. To prove that I can lead from the sidelines 'better than I led from the frontlines.'"

Bloody hell.

Five. Not just one punishment but a bloody stack of 'em.

And if this were peacetime and groundside, she'd be confined to quarters for God Knows how long, or court-martialed and discharged at the worst.

Always looking for that silver lining, huh Traynor?

"Which is the worst part?" Samantha cautiously asked.

Ashley's fingers thoughtfully patted a beat on her lips. "Knowing Shepard? Probably either the PT or the paperwork. I had enough trouble keeping up with Shepard on the SR-1 in peak condition. After two weeks in a coma plus rehab? I'm gonna get my ass kicked. Or she can just kill me slowly with bureaucracy."

She shuddered and shook her head. "Bunking in the Starboard Observation Deck won't be that bad. I've pitched a tent in more than my share of shitty terrains back with the 212. Plus, I've seen Vega's mechanic skills in action. Taking over the Armory is a blessing, both for my sanity and the crew's weapon standards. And what am I gonna do with credits? Take a vacation?" Ashley exhaled in a soft scoff.

"I had no idea you were such an optimist, Williams."
That evoked a deep laugh. "Trust me, I wasn't always. I've been called a pessimist more times than I can count. ...I prefer 'realist.'"

"All's well that ends well, then?"

Ashley tilted back. Her voice rose to a higher, impressed pitch. "Surprisingly, yes. It could have gone either way. And in a small way, it's all kind of a relief."

"How so?"

"I'm going to be too busy training or scheduling shifts to think about the war. The distraction is pretty welcome. Which means ... that's all on Shepard." The Lieutenant Commander's head tilted. "Is this your first disciplinary review, Traynor?" Her eyes narrowed with challenge, though she grinned cheekily. "You seem like a 'by the book' kinda gal."

Scowling, Sam crossed her arms. "I'll have you know I was quite rebellious in boot." She leaned forward conspiratorially, "Once, I had lopsided hospital corners. My flaunting of authority was the talk of the base for minutes that day."

"Holy shit, you loose cannon you," Ashley deadpanned.

"No, I was late returning from shore leave once. They chewed my ear off and had me doing bloody drills for hours. My legs never forgave me and demanded a cushy tech job as restitution. But at least it wasn't on my record, which was spotless before today." Samantha frowned and shrugged.

She then swallowed apprehensively as her wrist sparked again. *It's time.* "Well, um... Thank you, ma'am. For the intel. One last thing: is she... in a good mood?"

"For Shepard? No. ...but nowadays, is she ever? Especially after losing two, almost three, of her old crew in less than a week? I'd be a mess."

"Almost?" ...*Urdnot Grunt?*

*And Mordin.*

*Thane, too.*

Ashley placed a consoling hand on Sam's shoulder. "Godspeed, Lieutenant. If you survive, I'll probably be in charge of kicking your ass from here to dark space. Try to stay on my good side."

Lieutenant Commander Williams strode toward the security area as Sam turned to the conference area and took a deep breath. She cursed the flash of pain to her ribs, but stepped resolutely around the corner.

She'd been dreading this moment since she'd gotten That Email yesterday afternoon. Even finally meeting up with Diana Allers at Zakera Ward later for some gossip and drinks had been tiresome. Mostly because the adrenaline rush had worn off from the Normandy Traitor stand-off, so Sam's body was in full rejection of both breathing and being awake.

Medi-gel and alcohol also didn't mix all that harmoniously. If Sam's head wasn't lolling forward with lethargy, she had been manically alert and asking stupid questions. That damn reporter quickly figured out something was off with Sam. Allers managed to coax an injury confession out of Samantha, but the comms specialist at least had the decency to lie about *that.*

"Took a tumble down one of the Presidium stairwells. Frightfully embarrassing, really."
Supplementing Sam's consternation was the arrival of a follow-up email in the middle of dinner. Very official. Very Alliance. Very terrifying. And complete with transcripts and audio logs to back up the serious allegation against the comms specialist. She managed to skim most of the forms when Allers fetched "just one more" drink, but it was better left to cooler heads and clearer minds to peruse later.

Except she only felt worried and fuzzy when she woke up. And when she showered. And when she read over all those transcripts about her foolish behavior from only hours ago. Even standing here in her Alliance best, it didn't feel real to Sam.

This is happening.

Samantha sighed and reached for the holo interface, until she noticed the double doors were already wide open. She stood just outside the doorway in stunned silence.

*Shit. Shit! She probably heard that whole bit.* A mental scan went off in Sam's brain, replaying the last five minutes in double time. *No. No. Smart arse quip. Nosey question. Nosey question. Smart arse quip…*

Pretty par for the course, honestly.

Nothing incriminating? Or terribly insulting?

You've said, and thought, worse, Traynor.

Exhaling in defeat, Sam logged in at the door and ventured forward. EDI stood impassively at the right-hand wall, waiting underneath bold, white NORMANDY lettering. The conference room was tidy with nearly every chair pushed in. Only the one closest to Sam stood askew, inviting her to sit down at the large, rounded table.

Annelise Shepard stood silhouetted at the far window, straight-backed and authoritative as she stared outward at the Citadel. The brightening sky mostly obscured her crisp officer's uniform, but Sam could see Annelise's hands clasped behind her. One free hand rubbed circles over an empty palm.

*Is she nervous? Anxious? And would either make this go better? Or worse?*

"Did you… overhear all that?" Samantha blurted out.

No saluting. No respectful throat clearing. Just an awkward question right out of the gate.

Bloody brilliant.

The Commander turned around sharply to study Sam. Hard, green eyes stared back, but a crinkling around the edges and a pull to Annelise's cheek betrayed the woman's reticence.

"Which part? The part where you like scrubbing toilets, or the infamy of your hospital corners?" Shepard's chin dipped in acknowledgement.

"So… all of it, then." Sam wrinkled her nose with silent expletives. "If there's a free pass about not incriminating one's self, I'd like to take it now and retroactively apply it, please."

"Consider your love of toilets stricken from the record, then." Shepard's tone was serious but warm.
Sam then took a deep breath (ha! Didn't flinch!) and saluted respectfully. Despite her bravado, there was an anxious flutter inside Samantha's rib cage. Fingers of dread started to creep back in, but Samantha held her head high. Shepard saluted back before gesturing to the open chair.

EDI's joints whirred lightly as the mech stepped into place at the head of the table on Sam's right.

"Good morning, Specialist Traynor. Commander Shepard has asked me to oversee this review on behalf of the Human Systems Alliance. Article 30.884c of the 2149 Systems Alliance Charter grants the commanding officer of a vessel authority to establish a non-military proxy to assist with bureaucratic affairs if the executive officer or ranking personnel of a vessel are unavailable."

The mech paused significantly before continuing.

"Due to Lieutenant Commander Williams' involvement in the incident that is the topic of this captain's mast, she has been recused from this meeting. Therefore, Article 30.884c has been invoked by Staff Commander Annelise Marie Shepard for the purposes of the disciplinary review of Lieutenant Samantha Karuna Traynor, Senior Comms Specialist of the SSV Normandy SR-2, on this eighteenth day of April, 2186."

Right.

"Marie," huh?

Focus, Traynor.


Commander Shepard assumed the chair opposite the comms specialist. Steepling her fingers together, Shepard's expression was stony and reserved once more. Her right knuckles only showed faint bruising now from Annelise's fight with the wall of her cabin from that night.

EDI was the perfect candidate for this task. The lilt of her voice made Alliance military procedure sound smooth as silk.

"Specialist Traynor, this is a non-judicial proceeding under Article 18 of the Uniform Code of Human Systems Alliance Military Justice. The procedure in considering a report of misconduct made against you is as follows:
"First, you will be informed of the offense for which you have been placed on report and the name of the individual who placed you on report. Second, you will be asked if you admit or do not admit the allegation. You will be given the opportunity to present evidence or make a statement supporting extenuation or mitigation, before punishment is imposed by the commanding officer, Commander Shepard."

Sam had been listening politely, but mention of Shepard had her eyes drifting to the woman across the table. The Commander's eyes also flicked to Sam's, except she was all business.

Samantha's attention returned to EDI as she continued. "As of this morning, you had not filed any requests for additional information or witnesses to be provided at this hearing, or any requests to delay or suspend the hearing. You have also declined assistance of a representative to attend this captain's mast on your behalf. Is that correct, Specialist Traynor?"

"Yes." A little too soft, but at least Sam's voice didn't crack.

The mech began a long, official recitation of Sam's rights as an accused. Boilerplate "opportunity to defend oneself" here, a "right to remain silent" there, all wrapped up in the usual "anything you say can and will be used against you" package. Truly the military at its finest.

"Specialist Traynor, according to Human Systems Alliance Form DH-9401, you have been charged with the offense of disobeying a direct order from a superior officer. You were placed on report by Commander Shepard on the seventeenth day of April, 2186 at approximately 19:20:33 Galactic Standard Time."

Hearing that charge spoken aloud… it made Samantha feel small and jittery.

You had one job, Traynor. One job: follow orders. And you couldn't even do that.

EDI continued her practiced recitation. "Communication transcripts from monitored Alliance channel S1-NB.00563 have been submitted as evidence, with Dr. Liara T'Soni of the Asari Republics, Lieutenant Commander Ashley Williams, and Staff Commander Annelise Shepard listed as witnesses and/or involved parties. Additional testimony provided by Dr. T'Soni has also been transcribed and submitted. Have you examined this Report of Offense, the information contained within, and the transcripts provided?"

Boy, have I ever.

The shenanigans with Allers had left Sam too tired (i.e. drunk) to study the packet of audio logs and transcripts right when she returned to the Normandy last night. And after passing out in one of the top bunks of the Crew Deck, it was a Christmas miracle that Sam had managed to wake up early and review them at all.

It had taken some serious effort. Sam vaguely remembered dozing off in the shower this morning while standing up, which probably accounted for a nightmare featuring Shepard's cold anger then Javik's leering face staring back at her.

She'd also nodded off at the kitchen table after brewing a pot of coffee. Even drooled on her Omni-tool and dress uniform sleeve a little. But Samantha persevered long enough to pore over the documents and feel sufficiently prepared.

Or, rather, feel sufficiently screwed.

"Yes, I have reviewed all those items," Sam said, raising her chin. She felt the need to look at Shepard again, but resisted the temptation. She steeled herself.
"At this time, do you choose to admit or to not admit the allegation made against you, Specialist Traynor?" EDI asked.

Admit or deny? Throw myself on Shepard's mercy and let her render judgment? She can still end my bloody career with a wave of her hand. Or I could deny it, fight it, request a court-martial later, plead for extenuating circumstances... that whole thing. Draw it out and hope for the best. And possibly have "disobeys orders" on my record for the rest of my life... however long that might be.

Sam closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and flicked her gaze over to Commander Shepard. Annelise's fingers, still touching in almost-prayer, were attentively pressed against her lips. She returned Sam's staredown.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"I admit the allegation. I disobeyed an order from a superior officer."

No reaction from Shepard other than a few blinks.

Taking a step closer, EDI tilted her head curiously. The glowing hologram visor over her eyes flickered a moment. "An admission has been logged into record. At this time, you are permitted to make a statement. A statement is not required, nor will silence be counted against you in this proceeding. Do you wish to make a statement, Specialist Traynor?"

Damn right I do. "Yes. I do."

Samantha pushed back from the table and rose up slowly (after wincing from jostling her sore ribs). She wanted to be standing for this; feel large and in charge. Clasping her hands behind her, Sam stood calmly at parade rest. Her fluttering heart switched to pounding. How I hate you, Public Speaking.

Luckily, she'd been preparing for this occasion since early this morning. Sam threw a short prayer to the heavens that she got it right.

"Good morning, Commander. EDI. I—I have no evidence to dispute this allegation. It happened exactly as said. But I would like to try to explain myself, if I may. So that I might be shown mercy for what was admittedly a stupid error in judgment."

Sam allowed a pause, mostly because her palms had started to sweat and shake a little.

Get it together. This is important.

"Dr. T'Soni—Liara—bumped into me at the rapid transport area and asked me to go with her, just as she said. I was not coerced or forced to do so, and I knew it would violate your order from the previous night, ma'am. I had a moment to think, weighed the odds, and still made the conscious decision to go with Dr. T'Soni. But—but, if the situation were different, I would have flown to wherever you were, ma'am, and begged you to intervene. It was not my place to volunteer my services. I thought it was just going to be—"

You're supposed to be convincing Shepard why you should not be fired, Traynor. Not helping.

"It... It doesn't matter what I thought was going to happen. I was wrong. I shouldn't have been there. The whole thing was—was singularly terrifying. But I survived with minimal injury and managed to be useful in confirming that Officer Postle sold out the Normandy SR-1 to the Collectors. And I wish you had been there from the beginning, ma'am."
It must have been a reflex response to remembering the gunfight, but Sam's ribs throbbed at the mention of "injury." She flinched briefly, and Sam thought she saw a flash of concern behind Shepard's eyes.

"The reason—the reason I even considered doing this was… I made a promise to myself that the next time I had the opportunity to act: I wouldn't hesitate. That being on shore leave would never be a good excuse for inaction ever again. …Did I ever tell you where I'm from, ma'am?"

Shepard's brow furrowed while her lowered gaze swept left and right. Mental scan in progress?

After a few seconds, Annelise's gaze met Sam's once more.

"A colony out in the Terminus?"

She remembered.

"Yes, ma'am. Horizon, to be exact."

Shepard's eyes widened. "You don't mean—?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was on Horizon that day the Collectors attacked." Pausing for dramatic flair, Sam didn't enjoy revealing this detail as much as she thought she would. She'd hoped for a different situation, one that could be celebrated over a drink about how the Commander had unwittingly saved a small town comms specialist and her family nine months ago. Rather than as a footnote to try to save Samantha Traynor's Alliance career.

But at least it had the intended effect. Annelise chewed on her lower lip as she nodded for Sam to proceed.

"I was visiting my family at home. When the Collectors arrived, I hid. I should have gone to the Alliance outpost, only a short kilometer away, and got on the comms. Done something. But I hid with a friend in a skycar. She couldn't take it anymore, ran to her family, and was captured. I was discovered shortly after. Frozen in place only to watch them methodically take away almost everyone I'd ever known and loved…"

She surprised herself at how raw the memory still was. It made Samantha miss her mother suddenly, especially knowing that her mum had actually been stuffed into a pod ready to be hauled away to certain death before Commander Shepard had driven the Collectors away. She vowed to call her mother the minute this damn hearing ended.

Or I might be calling her anyway to come home.

That's what we're trying to avoid here, Traynor. Make it count.

"If I'd done something sooner, maybe I could have hailed someone. Done more. It was divine intervention that you happened to be near Horizon, ma'am. While the Alliance was running studies, you were saving me and my family."

Shepard accepted the praise with a solemn nod but said nothing.

"So I believed Liara when she said we needed to act quickly. I had the choice between doing nothing to follow orders or disobey to help Dr. T'Soni, and you and Lieutenant Commander Williams, find the person who betrayed the Normandy to the Collectors three years ago. The thought that this war might have been avoided if the Normandy—if you hadn't—"

Trailing off, Sam had to swallow that final thought: "If you hadn't died." Mostly due to Annelise's
expression, which had turned downright somber. Clearly the Commander hadn't expected this sort of statement.

*Is that a good sign or a bad sign?*

"There's a quote from the 18th century that says 'the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.' If watching you fight Reapers the last few months has taught me anything, it's that no one can afford to sit idle when there's good to be done. If I'm guilty of anything, ma'am, it's of being moved to action through your example."

*Flattery. A fine note to end on.*

"But… there's a proper time and place for that. I should have hung back. I should have said no. I should have followed orders. I'm truly sorry, ma'am. It will never happen again."

Sam wracked her brain to see if there was anything she'd forgotten to mention. But the sheer energy of talking so much had left her weak in the knees. She balled up her fists at her sides, but she could still feel her fingers spasming with anxiety. Deep breaths, slow and shaky.

What now?

Commander Shepard stood up calmly, her chair rasping against the floor. "Please be seated, Specialist Traynor." Bringing up her left wrist, Shepard's Omni-tool glowed to life. Annelise was silent for a few moments as she studied the scrolling orange screen.

*Oh God oh God oh God I fucked it up*

The last time Sam had been in this situation, the tone was wildly different. Her curfew violation during boot had been filled with yelling. The executive officer railed on her for a good 20 minutes about her flaunting of authority, gold-bricking attitude, and lack of dedication. *An exaggeration*, Sam had thought (but not voiced) at the time since, before that incident, her marks had been decent and tech skills excellent. But all the contrite nodding in the world hadn't stopped Lieutenant Steele from punishing her with a week's worth of grueling parade drills.

*At least I knew where the Lieutenant stood. Shepard… she keeps everything locked up so tight. I don't know what she's going to do until she does it.*

*Part of the terror, really.*

*But… also part of the thrill.*

*Oh God shut up.*

The Commander's chin rose, then she exhaled slowly through her nose with a sigh.

…*here it comes.*

"Based on the information before me, I find that you have committed the offense of disobeying direct orders." Annelise's eye contact was distant, hooded. Sam did her best not to outwardly react, but she still felt her shoulders sink.

"Not only did you disregard a direct order, but you were also injured due to gross negligence. As senior officer in charge, Lieutenant Commander Williams put your life—and Dr. T'Soni's—at risk in an unknown combat situation. Mine as well."
It was a dull, empty feeling that consumed Samantha's previous dread. Sam murmured a soft "Yes, ma'am" when what she really wanted to do was slink under the table. Anything to avoid that cold, disappointed stare.

"Your good intentions notwithstanding, Specialist, you had neither the training nor clearance to set foot on the Citadel with a weapon. And it is only by Lieutenant Commander Williams' SpecTRe authority that shields you from additional charges from Citadel Security. But I will not have my communications specialists waving pistols around civilians, regardless of how pure their ideals may be."

Rolling her shoulders, the Commander's jaw was set. "Under normal circumstances, you would be sent to the Fifth Fleet in irons. There's no place on my ship for a crewmember who can't follow orders, no matter how distasteful or inconvenient you might find them."

It was just as painful and scathing as in Sam's nightmares. She felt heat on her cheeks, but Sam gritted her teeth to force back any immature tears that might try to make an appearance.

Did you think she'd go easy on you just because you shagged?

Shut. Up.

…wait. Wait. "Under normal circumstances." That's… what does that mean?

Shepard tilted her head, her expression still clouded with cold anger. "However, this is a war. And I need every member of this crew serving at their best. Despite your poor judgment, Specialist Traynor, you are still an excellent communications specialist. But I won't allow you to play at being a marine on my time. If you can't follow orders, you are of no use to me." There was a slight twitch in Shepard's cheek.

"Yes, ma'am. I understand, ma'am."

Shepard threw a nod at EDI, who stepped forward. "Please stand, Specialist Traynor, while Commander Shepard renders punishment." The comms specialist reluctantly obliged. EDI launched into another official spiel that Sam could appeal the decision, request a court-martial instead, and several other important-sounding things.

If only Sam could hear any of it over the pounding of her heart in her ears. Or over the hostile part of her brain blaring Stupid stupid stupid stupid ad nauseum.

Stiffening, Shepard launched into a rehearsed speech. "Specialist Traynor, I impose the following punishment. First, your pay shall be reduced by 50% for two months."

Samantha didn't even have the air in her lungs to sigh in disappointment.

Silver lining, remember? You're still here, though considerably poorer. You haven't been fired.

Oh my God You're right Oh my God Oh my God Oh my God

Keep it together, Traynor.

"Furthermore, due to your recent performance..." A stilted pause. "...I have reevaluated your off-duty time aboard the Normandy. If you want to be a marine, you will now train like one. You will report for weapons training and daily physical training drills, to be evaluated by Lieutenant Commander Williams. However, due to your... extenuating circumstances..." Shepard's eyes wandered down Sam's chest, then darted away. Rather than blushing, Annelise paled for a moment.
Did she just—? …Oh, wait. No, she didn't, Sam scolded herself as her ribs throbbed in answering pain.

Shepard cleared her throat before continuing. "Physical training is suspended until you are cleared by Dr. Chakwas. Weapons training will be effective on transit days for two hours per day in the simulator in Life Support."

Samantha nodded contritely while inwardly cursing. "Yes, ma'am."

Flicking a finger over her open Omni-tool window, the Commander paused to read her notes before resuming. "And since you were so eager to volunteer for extra work with Dr. T'Soni, it's clear you don't have enough to do aboard the Normandy." It was a cold (jealous?) accusation. "Also effective immediately, you will be responsible for coordinating all acquired war assets with the Crucible Project. I am assigning you exclusively to the War Room until further notice."

The War Room. That's just pure data analysis. No combat comms. …And holy sodding shit! How many assets has Shepard acquired since the war began? Hundreds?

…Admiral Anderson did want the Normandy to be a mobile command center.

Who was coordinating assets before?

…The one who discovered the Crucible plans: Liara.

Or, rather, the Shadow Broker.

Oh God.

"That's not all, Specialist."

Oh God Oh God Oh God How can there be more "…Yes, ma'am?"

"Also during transit days, you will report to Engineering to assist with EDI's mech platform. For hardware maintenance, software improvements… whatever she needs."

Glancing over at the mech, Sam failed to suppress her confusion. EDI tilted her silver head. "You have revealed operating limitations to my mobile platform, Specialist Traynor. You are the best candidate to correct and improve upon these deficiencies."

Oh… okay. Sam was mentally screening this punishment for an added, insidious layer. But it was oddly straightforward and simple. There must be a catch.

"You will also be taking over any …philosophical inquiries… EDI might pose during active hours. And these inquiries will not conflict with or supersede the Specialist's regular duties, I might add," Shepard finished with a glare at EDI. "Understood," was all EDI replied.

And there it is. I'm the new moral sounding board for the resident AI. Whose interest in human behavior gets dangerously close to defcon HAL9000.

You would have loved this opportunity on retrofit duty. More time with that delicious voice.

…That was before.

The Commander straightened and saluted, which triggered Sam's ingrained military instinct to immediately salute back. "That is all, Specialist."
That's all.

Samantha didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she had to release it suddenly. Her mind kept waiting for Shepard to tack on a "And you've been discharged" that never came.

Am I—I'm okay. I'm still here. A lot of extra work—longer shifts plus training plus war assets plus EDI—will be bloody awful. But, other than being banished to the War Room, it's surprisingly bearable.

Though she did suddenly remember Ashley's words about "I'm gonna get my ass kicked" in regards to the PT, and swallowed in apprehension. Her ribs throbbed in solidarity.

EDI nodded acknowledgement as her visor flickered once more. "Commander Shepard's decision has been logged." The mech continued on about a three day appeal rule and that "punishment is not deferred even if appealed," then demanded acknowledgement. Sam nodded impatiently, finally allowing herself a little bit of relief. She replayed the hearing in her mind a few more times, just to be sure.

I didn't—I didn't get fired.

"Dismissed."

...is that better? Or worse?

"This captain's mast is now concluded." EDI excused herself before striding serenely over to the exit, the privacy glass unfrosting as she went. Shepard nodded at Sam before turning back to look out the window. Samantha felt like she should say something. There were a lot of things to say. Questions, mostly.

Except it's hard to feel conversational after being told what a fuck-up you are.

Looking at Shepard's back, Sam could only sigh with a mixture of relief and discouragement. She turned to leave, but over her shoulder Samantha threw out a quiet thank-you:

"Thanks, Shep—Commander. For... keeping me around."

She thought she heard a whisper-soft "Thanks for staying alive" but the conference doors swished shut before Sam could be sure.

A few hours later, Samantha sat at the Port Observation Deck bar. Hunched over the counter, Sam disinterestedly spun the holo chess interface with a hand. Her head was barely propped up with her right hand, her fingertips digging into her cheek.

Sam had just gotten off a call with her mother, who was still determined to leave Horizon. Dad wanted to stay and live some semblance of a normal life. Sam had spent most of the phone call trying to mediate between the two, which (despite being profoundly irritating) did take her mind off her morning reaming from Commander Shepard.

Her mum picked up on her melancholy tone, though. Sam didn't want to talk about it, so she evaded. "Just some trouble at work," Sam had mumbled. "Made a big mistake. Got on the Commander's bad side."

"You'll be fine, Sammy. No one can help but be charmed by you. Just sincerely apologize and try to make it right."
"I'll try, mum."

She still had a couple hours before she had to report to the Presidium at a "Dr. Bryson's" laboratory, so she'd been killing time playing herself in chess and running a filter on the Normandy Traitor's contact list. EDI had also forwarded her a very brief intel packet about Dr. Garrett Bryson. A data analysis job, apparently. Alliance and C-Sec joint-op. Seemed pretty cut and dry.

["Find the location of the alleged ancient Reaper-killer known as Leviathan."]

But even the prospect of being off-ship, useful and solving a mysterious puzzle didn't lift Samantha's mood. It was just such a pervasive, empty feeling. She felt this quailing, immature thing deep in her gut, like after she'd disappointed her mother by "stealing" the car and getting in a fender bender outside Victor's house that one time in high school.

And of course the best coping mechanisms (work, chess and a good bit of silent fuming) weren't working today. After checkmating the AI opponent, Sam continued her mental mope fest. Her mind was desperately fighting to rationalize her actions, but also feel self-righteous and superior to her punishment at the same time. You know. The mature response.

_Shepard was wrong_, Sam would childishly think one moment. _I helped! If I hadn't been there, on-site, that data would have been lost._

_At what cost? Sam's Sensible mind would counter. You shouldn't have been there. It wasn't your battle to fight._

_Liara bullied me into it. It's her fault._

_Grow up. You have a brain. And willpower. You wanted the thrill. It was flattering to feel essential, needed._

_But it was necessary! I would do it all over again if I could!_  

_Would you? You could have been killed. Liara or Ashley could have gotten killed trying to protect your stupid, untrained arse. And Shepard…_  

_"You really shouldn't slouch. With a rib injury, it puts pressure on the bones that need to heal."_  

Jerking to her left, Samantha spun around on her stool and stood up straight. _Christ_, her ribs hurt
worse than ever with that stupid twisting. But… Officer on deck.

Particularly this officer.

Annelise Shepard stood in the doorway, one hand casually leaning on the doorframe. She was back in service uniform, the same as Sam. There was no trace of disappointment in Shepard's eyes, only calm clarity. As though the last 12 or so hours hadn't happened.

Which should have made Sam feel better, but honestly was just confusing. She had to bite her tongue and remain rigidly still. That immature part of her mind kept making snide comments. Look how good I'm being. Such a non-fuck-up of a recruit.

"Rest, Traynor. You're still on shore leave for another…" Shepard trailed off and glanced at the ceiling.

"One hundred twenty-nine minutes and twelve point eight seconds," EDI cheerfully chimed in via the intercom.

Walking over to the bar, Shepard parroted back. "One hundred twenty-nine minutes and twelve point eight seconds, apparently."

Her natural reaction being sarcasm, Sam pressed her teeth harder to her soft tongue. She hated that she felt like she had to screen herself now, that being sarcastic or quippy might get her in trouble. Sam missed the way things were. The banter. The ease.

The shagging, what little there was.

Not. Helping.

Shepard stopped at the end of the counter to look back at Samantha, who still stood rigidly straight. "You can rest, Traynor. But I'm serious about the posture. It really helps. Especially with that damn suffocating Medi-gel compress they always prescribe." There was a strained smile pulling at Shepard's cheek, and her inflection was awkward.

Is she… trying to make small talk? Good lord, she's bad at it.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained?

"Yes, ma'am. I know. I'm an old hand at this," Sam offered cautiously, though she couldn't suppress a slight edge to her voice.

Shepard's head jerked back in surprise. "You're an old hand at getting shot in the ribs?"

"What? Oh God, no. This is a first. And hopefully last. No, I'm an old hand at knowing the posture trick. As an asthmatic, you'd think I'd be better about it. But… here we are." Sam waved her hand airily before a deep cough rumbled in her chest.

Glancing over in concern, Shepard began sifting through the cylinders of liquor stashed along the wall. Only the clinking of glass broke the oppressive silence. The slow, deliberate motions of the Commander both confused and irritated Samantha. Sam had come here for some private time, to gather her thoughts, and to think about what she'd done.

And here this woman was, invading it.

And I think she's doing it on purpose. But why?
"Permission to speak freely, Commander."

"Granted," Shepard threw behind her just as she stopped at a tall, frosted container on a middle shelf.

"With all due respect, I don't believe for a moment you just happened by to offer medical advice. Why are you here?"

"I'm also here for a drink." A light hiss was followed by the sound of sloshing liquid.

"And you could have gone to the Mess for one. Why come here?"

Shepard's shoulders squared and she exhaled before turning around, an amber-colored drink in hand.

"I was… checking up on you. I wanted to know how you were doing."

The Old Samantha Traynor, the one from Horizon grateful to the Commander for saving her life, would have been thrilled at that admission. Honestly, the Samantha Traynor from a week ago would have been pretty ecstatic, too.

But the one who spent her morning fretting about her job, fretting about disappointing her Commander (and friend and… more than friend?), and fretting about being punished for a mistake she'd made… that Samantha Traynor wasn't in the mood for it.

"Am I complimented or insulted?"

The look of confusion on Annelise's face… it almost made up for this whole miserable situation. That noise-wrinkling, squinty-eyed, nostril-flaring thing… Priceless.

"Are you—are you what?"

Placing her hands behind her back in a loose parade rest, Sam patiently continued. "Am I complimented that you were genuinely concerned for my well-being in a kind-hearted gesture? Or insulted that you think I'm so weak and fragile that you're here to prevent me from throwing myself off the Citadel Tower in shameful defeat?"

Annelise's mouth flapped open with a few silent "Uhs" before taking a hasty swallow of whiskey. Clearing her throat, Shepard corrected seriously, "You can't throw yourself off the Citadel Tower. Outside the Tower is an almost zero g environment. Technically, you'd just float away in shameful defeat."

"How do you know that?"

"Because 3 years ago I walked up the side of it in mag-boots when Saren and Sovereign took over the Citadel. Tali and Wrex walked it, too, though Wrex whined like a varren pup the whole time."

The mysterious Tali aside, the thought of that imposing krogan war chief crying over vertigo did make Sam inwardly giggle. Outwardly she scowled. "Right. …and you're evading, Commander."

Annelise muttered vaguely into her glass, "Can't it be both? On top of getting a drink?"

Still evading.

Christ.

Fine then. Nothing ventured…
"In that case, may I ask what I'm most in trouble for? Being a good comms specialist? Or a bad one?"

Nothing gained.

The glass in Shepard's hand made a high frequency tinking sound as a noticeable crack appeared along the edge. The look Annelise fixed on Sam… it was one of haunting sadness. Bright green eyes were glassy, her complexion paled, her mouth became a small line.

"Even good, capable people die, Samantha."

…Oh…


Heat rose to Sam's cheeks. She felt deflated and stupid and petty and small. Sliding back onto her barstool, Sam gathered her hands together and tried not to let them give away her discomfort by wringing. She had been so focused on being indignant and self-righteous about being reprimanded that she hadn't stopped to truly think about why.

Who is that a bigger insult to, Traynor? You? Or Shepard?

Annelise hardened, her vulnerability swiftly returning to anger. "Chris Postle was not worth your life. Or Ashley's. Or Liara's. Three years ago? I would have dropped everything to pursue this. To get justice for my crew and—and me. And when I was working for Cerberus a year ago? I would have dropped just about everything to hunt that man down then. But now?"

Shepard waved her hand at the wide Port Observation window. Smoke still billowed in the distance on the Presidium. Ships limped by in traffic with battle scars. Even the visible wing of the Normandy showed signs of wear and tear.

"This war is too important to run off for revenge. Priorities change, Traynor. This could have almost been another stupid waste of life. Your life." Annelise sighed. "I can't have that going on under my command. If I had to pick between closure for my old crew and the lives of my new crew, I'd choose now over then. Every time."

Stretching out her other hand, Annelise's fingertips gently touched the top of Samantha's clasped ones. It was a soft, soothing gesture, but it was quickly replaced by a strong grip.

"So to answer your question, Samantha: Both. Bad at being good but also good at being bad. And both are dangerous… especially if you don't know what you're doing." Reluctantly releasing the comms specialist's hand, Shepard casually straightened and glanced back out the window.

Sam stared at where Shepard had touched her, her skin cooling from the brief warmth. She chewed the inside of her cheek in consternation as thoughts started spiraling. Her eyes flicked back to Shepard and she made a hasty decision.

Well… speaking of bad masquerading as good…

…And vice versa?

"Permission to speak freely, Shepard?"

"It's already been granted, Traynor."
"No, I mean permission to stupidly, honestly, regretfully speak freely?"

Confusion sparkled in those green eyes, but also intrigue. Shepard's shoulders rolled and she raised her chin. *Challenge accepted.* "…granted."

Samantha took a deep, shaky breath. For whatever reason, all this honesty made her feel daring. Bold.

*Stupid.*

"Why—why didn't you charge me with fraternization, too?"

Choking on a fresh swallow of whiskey, Annelise almost dropped her drink. It fumbled between her fingertips before she set the tumbler down on the bar counter across from Sam. Shepard fixed Sam with a probing glare.

"Are you questioning my decision?"

It took a lot of energy not to hastily backpedal, but Sam wanted—*needed*—to know. She tried to soften her cadence. "Oh no. Not at all. I'm just trying to understand you. Where you draw the line. Or… was it not worth mentioning?"

…Okay, Traynor. *That was kind of a passive-aggressive, shitty approach.*

*Oh, is there a tactful, dignified way to bring up shagging that I missed somewhere?*

…probably not.

*Well sod it all, then. I just… I wanted to know. Get it over with.*

Annelise's gaze grew darker and her cheeks colored slightly. Closing her eyes, Shepard quickly drained the rest of her whiskey. Her voice was low as she stated stiffly, "The purpose of the captain's mast was to discuss errors in judgment during missions and rectify potentially endangering behavior."

Sam waited, but Annelise did not elaborate further.

*Um… what? So if fraternization isn't—*

Sam's head threw back in surprise. Annelise just stared back curiously, her blush deepening.

Samantha asked softly, "Are you saying… the other night… wasn't an error in judgment?"

Shepard took a small step forward, brow furrowing and eyes blazing. Her response was soft and husky.

"It wasn't for me."

"…it wasn't for me either." Sam's cheeks were suddenly scorched with a blush of her own, and she felt herself stammer quite against her will. "I mean… I would completely understand, Shep—Annelise. Emotions, and adrenaline, were running high. You were—you were under a lot of stress. And I was…” Sam trailed off.

…*what was I, exactly?*

"You were what?" Shepard's intense gaze became hooded with worry.
"I was… I don't know what I was. Foolishly optimistic, I suppose?"

Annelise exhaled through her nose and the corners of her mouth curled. But the woman sobered quickly. "It was… it is still potentially endangering behavior. …But reporting it would require a court-martial and probably get one or both of us reassigned. I can't lose—I can't do my job without the Normandy." Shepard's eyes didn't quite meet Sam's.

"I'm rather fond of my job as well. And I'm quite glad I get to keep it. Even with the pending arse-kicking in store once shore leave ends," Samantha sighed after remembering the laundry list of tasks she'd acquired. But at least she had the good sense not to complain. "…In any event, I didn't plan for this—any of this—to happen. Fraternization nor insubordination. I swear, before I set foot on the Normandy, I was a model recruit."

"What happened?"

"You, apparently."

Another exhale-laugh, though with a slightly bitter edge. Annelise's smile widened. "…am I complimented or insulted?"

Sam returned the smile. "Both," she nodded solemnly.

The SpecTRe smirked and reached back for the bottle of whiskey to refill her own glass. She wiggled the decanter at Sam in offering, but the comms specialist declined with a small headshake. "Can't. If you might recall, I've got work in an hour or so."

EDI suddenly chimed in over the intercom. "Commander Shepard, your presence is requested on the Citadel immediately by C-Sec Officer Jordan Noles regarding illegal batarian codes. NavPoint coordinates have been forwarded to your Omni-tool."

Shepard's wrist glowed to life briefly before winking out. Annelise only sighed.

"And so do you, apparently," Sam deadpanned.

Isn't there something you should be doing?

Oh! Right!

"May I have your permission to do something, Shepard?"

"If it's to speak freely again: no." Annelise's narrowed eyes crinkled around the edges. She waved for Sam to continue.

"Tempting, but no. Something else." Raising her wrist, Sam opened her Omni-tool. A window popped up showing a rapidly scrolling feed of data analysis in progress.

"If it doesn't interfere with my duties, or the new ones I now have going on…" Sam actually managed to keep bitterness out of her tone. "…may I have your permission to analyze the data I recovered from Chris Postle's apartment?"

Upon that skeptical eyebrow from Shepard, Sam hastily explained herself. "I just… Cerberus has proven to be dangerous. Typically at the most inconvenient of times, too. …I guess I don't like the idea of another potential group out there with the goal of trying to kill you? Or destroy the Normandy. Again. I would like to help prevent that. With your permission this time. And I swear to not take any action without consulting you first."
It was a long, uncomfortable silence. Annelise sipped at her whiskey for a few moments, then reluctantly nodded. A mumbled "Granted" could be heard under her breath.

Suddenly, Shepard's shoulders squared and she stated matter-of-factly, "Traynor, I need you to understand that what happened yesterday will never happen again."

I—what?

Sam was speechless, the air stolen from her lungs in an icy wave.

"You will never need to go behind my back again, because I will never again give you a reason to."

I—what?

**THINK BETTER, TRAYNOR.**

She—what?

**Oh sweet bollocks.**

Her brow furrowing, Shepard gritted her teeth. "I was… not at my best the past few days. Unfocused, to say the least." She felt around in a pants pocket and pulled out a small book. Between pale fingers, all Sam could read was "prayers" and "original Drell". She waited for Annelise to explain, but the woman only tucked the book away and crossed her arms. "But I got some sense knocked into me by an old friend."

"By who—? …Garrus?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Oh… lucky guess."

It wasn't a lucky guess. Sam realized she knew because of what she'd overheard this morning. When she left the shower, Sam had only gotten a toe out the door when she remembered noticing Garrus and Shepard quietly arguing outside at the memorial wall.

**So that wasn't a nightmare. It just seemed like one at five in the morning.**

"You asked for my advice, Shepard. There it is."

Toweling off her hair as she left the bathroom, Sam had jerked back at the sound of Garrus's voice. But her fingers flew to the door control to crack it just enough.

"Just… let it slide." It was more of a sarcastic question than a statement from Shepard.

Garrus growled back in amusement. "Damn! I wish I'd been there. Remind me to give Liara hell for keeping me out of the loop. And I always thought that requisitions officer was a little weasely around me. Maybe because I was C-Sec and he was practically fencing black market goods right in front of me. But yea: let it slide." His rumbling tenor was stern. "Pick your battles, Shepard. Will busting some balls get Postle back? Will it get Thane back?"

"Don't."

"Don't what? Lecture you about revenge? I got the message back on Omega. …Did you? You've been reckless the past few days. Unfocused and tense. We've all seen it, but we follow your lead
because you still somehow made it work to your advantage. Until now. ... Are you going to follow your own advice? Or just 'rogue SpecTRe' your way through everything that pisses you off? Like Saren?"

"I wasn't—I'm not—Soldiers follow orders. And I'm a soldier, not just a SpecTRe."

"Then act like it. We're your crew. Everyone here would take a bullet for you, Shepard. Thane would have. Apparently, our young comm specialist would, too." Garrus paused significantly. "You need us, too. I know it doesn't always seem like it when the rest of the galaxy has its head up its ass. I certainly believe there's no Shepard without Vakarian."

"Never," Shepard breathed with conviction.

"But there's also no Shepard without T'Soni or Williams, either. Trust us the way we want to trust you. And just let the punishment befit the crime."

"Which is?"

"A few old friends, and one new one, went over your head at a really bad time. And you get to make a big deal out of it as their boss to make sure they nevrrrr do it again."

Sam had to keep from chuckling at Garrus's slow, sarcastic drawl.

"But if you're doing this just to get back at Liara—or Postle, or Cerberus—you're not a very good SpecTRe. Or Commander. And we both know that's a lie. So step up and admit it, or shut up and fix it. Either way: it's your call, Shepard. It usually is."

Sam hadn't heard anything after that other than a dull swishing of doors, but she still waited a few minutes (okay, 30 minutes) before attempting to leave the women's bathroom. She'd been dozing off at her feet again, nodding forward dangerously until wet hair on her cheeks woke her up. When Samantha finally tried to leave, angry yellow eyes met her in the doorway.

It was this weird, strangled scream that left Sam's throat. She slapped her hand over her mouth, remembering the early hour.

"Step aside, meek Specialist. I require use of this ... facility," Javik growled back, his four eyes narrowing.

"This—this is the women's lavatory!"

"Primitives and their foolish gender divisions. In my cycle, we did not make such pointless and costly distinctions. A soldier was a soldier. And I prefer this 'restroom' over the male designation due to its better tactical layout. It affords more opportunities for cover."

I'm not even going to touch that one, Sam vaguely remembered as she had stepped aside.

Why the bloody hell didn't I remember this earlier?

Oh. Right. Hung over.

"Traynor? Samantha." Shepard had taken a step back and was waving a hand in front of Sam's face.

Sam had been staring off into space. She blinked a few times and refocused on Annelise, who was finishing the last of her drink. The woman's Omni-tool flashed again, eliciting an impatient sigh.
Samantha hastily jumped back into the conversation. "I read you loud and clear, Shepard. Ma'am. You jump, I say how high. Back to basics."

Murmuring a soft "Good," Annelise set her empty tumbler down on the counter and smoothed out her uniform top. She started to make for the exit.

Sidestepping in front of Shepard and stretching out her hand, Samantha smiled kindly. "Well, it's... been mostly a pleasure, Annelise. I hope that, despite everything that's happened—good and bad—we can still remain cordial. Friendly, even."

There was a small sinking feeling in her (injured) chest, but... this is for the best, right?

*It's the adult thing to do. The professional thing.*

Annelise stared for a moment before nodding resolutely. "I'd like that, Samantha."

It was a warm, strong handshake. Sam could feel little tingling tendrils of pressure in her palm from Shepard's grip. She found herself hesitating to let go.

A lingering reluctance that wasn't lost on Annelise, either. Her green eyes widened. Before Sam knew what had happened, Shepard had quickly leaned forward and kissed her.

*I—what?*

**STOP THINKING, TRAYNOR.**

*You're the boss.*

Before Shepard could pull away, Sam pushed back with a deep kiss of her own. They stood there for a few moments, held together only by delicately joined hands and lips. All thought had *blessedly* stopped.

It was Annelise who backed off first, her freckles darkening along with her cheeks. She held Sam's hand loosely before finally dropping it.

Breathing huskily, Sam teased, "I'm getting some mixed messages. I really need to teach you how to communicate like a normal woman."

Annelise's reply was a throaty laugh. "Confusingly and meaning the opposite of what I say?"
Sam stepped away and shot Shepard a finger gun. "Touché, but preferably not."

"I'll have to work on that, then."

"You damn well better," Samantha smiled lightly.

Her wrist glowing for a third time, Shepard scowled at it and raked her fingers through thick red strands. "I should go."

_I wonder if that's the Shepard Family motto._

_Or it could be "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," too._

_Indeed._

Sam straightened formally, clasping her hands behind her back once more. "Yes, ma'am. I'm—I'm glad we had this… talk. It was quite illuminating."

"See you on the Citadel, Traynor. I expect your best foot forward from here on out."

"You can be assured of that, Commander. …Shepard."

...Annelise.  

Chapter End Notes

"HAL9000" alludes to 2001: A Space Odyssey (a sci-fi classic). As far as lingo, "NJP" stands for "non-judicial punishment" for us civilians. I'm also fudging architectural canon by putting a window outside the conference area on the Normandy SR-2. It's a pretty ugly room to hang out in, otherwise.
Get it together, Traynor.

It wasn't the first (or even the third) time Samantha had to remind herself to get serious during the short trip over to the Presidium. But as she exited the skycar, the small smile on Sam's face just wouldn't go away. It was attached to this growing bubble of giddiness inside her.

Sure, her mind had to fast-forward through a good chunk of the morning. Past the angry, then awkward, then downright stupid bits… basically just skipping right to the end.

But what an ending, indeed.

▷ "Shepard and Traynor

Sitting in a tree

K-I-S-S-I-N-G…" ▷

EDI's presence restrained Sam a little. Mostly because the AI would be too straight-faced and inquisitive to make the gossip fun.

And, more than likely, EDI would change the conversation over to Joker, Sam inwardly smirked. I don't think a) my ribs could take the laughing or b) my stomach could handle the nausea (if the conversation turned to robot sex).

Which fed back into the Smiling Loop of Stupidity that Sam had been on for the past hour.

…Although…

What? Back to thinking about sex again? I'm shocked, Traynor. You went 3.8 seconds last time.

…But that kiss, though.

You're completely hopeless, Traynor.

Bloody full of hope, remember?

Even counting footstep could only barely distract Sam's grin as she crunched over fallen leaves on the landscaped apartment balcony. Sam also tried to smooth out the creases in her service uniform so she had some semblance of professionalism in front of the squad of C-Sec investigators.

You're a military officer on a military mission, Traynor. Oo-rah or something already.

She did manage to straighten up long enough to pass the last C-Sec officer milling around the lab's outside walkway with nary a sideways look. They were all too focused on coordinating their second round of canvassing leads to notice a leering communications specialist and her AI mech partner. Plus, Sam and EDI had Shepard's SpecTRe credentials to flash around for private, "important government business"-level access.

A rumbling voice called behind her, "We've completed our interior scans and mock-ups of the crime scene. You've been granted full access."
A turian cop with scratches of red and yellow painted across his cheeks waved after her. "But still, we ask that you remain in the cordoned areas until Commander Shepard arrives. To avoid cross-contaminating the scene."

"Understood," Samantha gruffly nodded and turned back to where EDI had disappeared into the building.

The phrase "crime scene" had the sobering effect Sam had been sorely lacking on the drive over. She'd briefly forgotten that this puzzle she'd been assigned by Commander Shepard had started with a man's death. A death Shepard had witnessed firsthand only yesterday.

You know, just before she showed up to save your arse on that penthouse balcony?

As double doors swished shut behind her, Sam's gaze immediately began roving the floor. She just… she needed to know where this Dr. Garrett Bryson had been murdered. It felt important to know. To understand and comprehend what was at stake.

In the adjoining room, a thin strip of holo tape flashed around a small section of floor. EDI stood next to the outline, peering curiously. The slate-colored synthetic carpeting still showed a dark, circular stain.

Oh…

Flashes of red lips and green eyes were driven completely from Samantha's mind with that stab of empathy.

Okay. Okay okay okay.

This was not something she'd really mentally prepared for during her career. R&D had hardly been frontline service. Even aboard the Normandy, Sam was generally cushioned from the serious dangers going on around/below via sitting behind a console. Mostly because Commander Shepard and Company were always on the ground taking care of business.

Sam cleared her throat and tensed the muscles to fire up the Omni-tool implant on her wrist. The official Alliance request from Admiral Hackett was to "support Dr. Bryson's efforts."

Although… based on all the research and tech filling every inch of wall and table space in the apartment, "support" was looking more and more like "single-handedly solve." …And that was on
top of tracking down this Alliance secret project's last remaining field researcher: Dr. Alex Garneau.

Considering Taskforce Aurora had been at it for months (years?) with no discovery, Sam wasn't entirely sure what she was expected to accomplish in a few hours before the Normandy departed the Citadel.

But the Commander had ordered it. And Samantha was keen on proving herself.

*Particularly since this morning—*

*Get it together, Traynor. "Challenge accepted," and all that.*

"Divide and conquer?" Sam asked EDI, who still stood patiently at attention. Awaiting orders. "I'll check out the galaxy map, you try and make sense of the team's field records?" Eyeing the veritable wallpaper of images and notes in this room alone, Samantha had to resist sighing.

"Understood."

Sam gingerly stepped towards the galaxy map taking up most of the room. She gave the body marker on the floor a wide and respectful berth. Running her mind through the data packet on Taskforce Aurora's goals she'd read on the drive over, Sam faintly hoped the map might hide an obvious clue.

It took some fiddling under the control panel just to get the bloody thing back up and running. Sam tried to make some adjustments, but, unless she rewired the whole damn thing, it was as good as it was going to get. Crawling out from under the desk, Sam swore when she hit her head.

A loud sizzling sound accompanied a thumping whir as the galaxy map finally booted up. The large power box under the holo console needed a few swift kicks to keep it going, though the connection remained sketchy at best.

Her fingers flying over the familiar keypad, Sam started skimming through the map's data logs. Despite being an older model galaxy GUI, the console was similar enough to the Normandy's that Sam had little trouble navigating the subtle operating system differences. Mostly just variations in file structure headings.

*Annnnd it's wiped clean. Must have rigid security settings in place to prevent unauthorized access. Or they were so paranoid they didn't want traceable data left behind for any idiot to stumble into.*

*Enter one idiot?*

*Correction: enter one idiot with a brilliant artificial intelligence.*

"What do you think, EDI?" Samantha called over to the mech, who was now inspecting a desk over by the bank of servers opposite the galaxy map. "Anything here that might, oh I don't know, point toward a location with 'LEVIATHAN' or 'REAPER KILLER' written across it? Possibly marked with an 'X'?"

*…Or explain how a tech got indoctrinated and shot his boss,* Sam thought as she threw a glance toward the blood stain on the floor. She felt a tremor of worry. Examining the galaxy map's operating system, Sam searched for possible hidden code that might have planted subliminal messages in someone's head.

"No, Specialist Traynor," EDI replied. "These images appear to be categorizing recent sighting rumors beside Council race mythologies. There are no obvious signs of overlap or notations of significance."
Damn. And nothing in the galaxy map code either that might conceivably explain how someone got brainwashed.

How would you know? Maybe you're being indoctrinated right now!

Eep!

"EDI, can you do a scan? Of some sort? Do you detect anything in this room that might cause indoctrination?" Samantha asked, her voice cracking slightly.

Get it together.

The mech's visor switched to a blue grid. Slowly turning on her heel 360 degrees, EDI swept a beam of light around the large work room. Sam had to blink away the bright light that flashed in her eyes as EDI finished her analysis.

"Scan complete. I detect no active electromagnetic field, nor waves of infra- or ultra-sound, typically associated with Reaper indoctrination. However, an artifact or device causing indoctrination could be dormant or shielded. Over the course of our investigation, my sensors will track any electromagnetic fluctuations, Specialist Traynor."

EDI added, "I shall inform you immediately of such sensor changes. Or at my earliest convenience where you being indoctrinated is no longer scientifically interesting."

Sam stared back.

"That was a joke."

Swallowing with apprehension, Sam glanced back at the bloodstain on the floor. She found herself scolding the mech. "Try to be respectful, EDI. A man died yesterday. And plenty more people are dying right now." She couldn't keep a sharpness out of her tone, one that distinctly rang of Commander Shepard.

"Understood, Specialist Traynor. I am still adjusting my personality core for situational humor. Would you categorize the preceding joke as 'distasteful' or 'inappropriate'?"

You have to answer EDI's questions, Traynor. Punishment #5, remember.

Bollocks.

Sam thought a moment. "Um, probably 'inappropriate.'"

She felt a little ashamed over getting hostile at an AI who didn't know any better, so she tried to elaborate. "I suppose… a normal situation would result in someone saying: 'too soon.' Jokes about tragic events are difficult to pull off. They have to be equal parts well-timed and apt. Too soon after the tragedy or too close to a nerve has the opposite effect."

"'Too soon,'" EDI repeated back, "lowers a joke's chance of success. Interesting. I shall create a parameter to measure future jokes against tragedies to calibrate the maximum distance-to-relevance amusement ratio."

"You do that," Sam agreed. "Science needs to know these things. …otherwise, thank you for keeping an eye… ear… sensor?" Sam shrugged at herself. "…out for threats. I feel safer already."

"I am pleased to assist."
The comms specialist studied the room to figure out the most efficient method of recovering Taskforce Aurora's presumably hidden data on Leviathan's supposed location.

Surveying the laboratory, Sam noted four other consoles in this room alone. There were also datapads and chits littered over numerous desks lining the walls. *No shortage of possibilities to pointlessly slog through.*

*Well, the best place to start is... at the very beginning. It's a very good place to staaaaart.*

...Mary Poppins? Seriously?

Wandering clockwise, Sam's immediate right next to the galaxy map held a recessed display area devoted to artifacts. Sam walked by Prothean relics, ship parts, even the head of a krogan statue tucked away behind the tall pane of security glass. While most of the treasures seemed to be piled haphazardly inside, one artifact was proudly on display.

A large orb sat on an impressive pedestal as waves of blue and purple danced over a deep black surface. It seemed almost... *alive.*

*Like a deep, endless ocean. Like when the transport skirts low over the Arctic Circle or Atlantic Ocean after breaking atmo on the way to London. So much hidden under all that water... A darkness rarely breached...*

But before Sam could get lost in the orb's endless depths, her peripheral vision spotted something far more intriguing:

"Oooh! A Synthetic Insights 4400Xe Multi-TEK interface!"

On a small desk adjoining the server banks, several smaller screens mounted to the low ceiling were running diagnostics and security checks. Sam side-skipped over, hungry for some sort of lead into this absurd task. Sitting on top of the console interface was a blinking datapad.

*Smashing! A new audio log entry!*

A man's voice pattered nervously. Sam almost squeaked with excitement when she opened the file and heard a familiar name.

["Dr. Bryson, it's Garneau. I'm sending you an artifact I found. ...about the only thing I found there, in fact. ...Maybe it's nothing, but I swear Leviathan came through here. I'm going to crunch some numbers, burn up the rest of this project travel allowance. Maybe I can project our Reaper-killer's movements. I'll check in when I get to the next site."]

*Interesting.*

"Garneau appears to be our best lead to track Leviathan, but he does not state a destination," EDI called over to Sam from behind her. The mech had moved on to studying a work bench piled high with tech parts.

"Hm... Let's focus on what he does say, then," Samantha murmured. Her eyes flicked along the western wall by the door. Datapads and images were crammed along every centimeter of wall space. Some had note chits attached while most of the images had strings and pins tracing a path of some kind between them.

Images of husks also leered menacingly at odd gaps in clutter. They made the comms specialist uncomfortable, seemingly looking like veiled threats. She wondered if they had motivated Taskforce
Aurora not to fail.

The crackpot-conspiracy-theory-paranoia ambiance makes me feel right at home. Just lovely, really.

Samantha tapped her fingertips just below her lips in concentration. "He mentioned extrapolating Leviathan's path. And crunching numbers. He wasn't flying blind—he had data." Sam glanced around the room again to now appreciate the amount of conspiracy-fueled energy needed to cover these walls in rumors. "A significant amount of data, judging by this office."

EDI's visor flickered. "The positioning tag on the audio message has been encrypted. However, there are code fragments within this message that correspond with the galaxy map's planetary index headings. These may help us track Garneau."

"Worth a shot." A quick upload from the 4400Xe Multi-TEK console had the galaxy map spinning to life with data. Sam found that Alex Garneau's audio report brought up 16 marked planets stretched across the galaxy. But beyond that, the data was encrypted or missing.

Well, nerd? This is tech specialist heaven: analyzing available data to extrapolate a likely location.

I'm the queen of this.

"All right. Let's spread out," Samantha ordered. "Anything and everything that might be significant, let's create a filter for it for the galaxy map. We can try to pinpoint Garneau's location based on statistical probability and data overlap."

And if there's too little probability and too much overlap... Shepard can just flip a bloody coin when she shows up.

"Understood," EDI nodded.

Sam ventured over to the work table along the wall by the door. She made a disgusted noise when she realized the "tech parts" she'd noticed earlier were actually dismembered Reaper husk limbs. In the center of the table, next to a microscope, sat the head of a human husk on a glowing plinth. A large cable ran from the base of its spine to a power source.

When Sam approached it, the husk head made a loud, gnashing wail. She shrieked in response and jumped back.

Blushing furiously when she noticed the turian officer from outside looking back at her in concern, Samantha flashed an awkward thumbs-up at the window. She returned to studying the tech notes pinned along the wall, but through the window she noticed the C-Sec investigators chuckling about something.

You're definitely the queen of something.

Oh shut up.

On the far right, there was a wide desk with equipment and data pads strewn all over. A tall set of shelves jutting out from the middle of the desk reached almost to the ceiling. The shelves also doubled as a ladder where someone had pinned images to the higher areas of the wall. Two large black screens were running a data compiling algorithm that didn't seem to have any end in sight. Sam tapped in for a closer look.

This corner console was churning out records of strange murders where the accused suffered memory loss. Sam wondered aloud if Garneau was following this trail of blackout crimes (which
bears a striking resemblance to what Dr. Bryson's assistant claimed happened to him, no?"

"That can't be a coincidence."

EDI began scanning for dates and crimes that might match this behavior. Her filters found several points of overlap within Garneau's galactic locator data.

We're getting somewhere.

Sam waved for EDI to follow. "Let's try the next room. This could be promising."

Upon entering the secondary laboratory, Samantha felt a stab of nostalgia. It looked like a number of people had once worked here. Coworkers. Friends. It reminded Sam of the R&D wing of Arcturus Station. Even the layout of the room was similar to home—


The immediate right housed a small kitchenette. A comm holo platform sat in the closest corner, presumably so Dr. Bryson could communicate with his superiors and agents. On the far side, there was a large work space heaped full of rock samples and heavy equipment. Sam could mentally picture the Arcturus geologists, Dr. Cooper and Dr. Hofstadter, arguing over chemical composition properties for the fifteenth time at a similar work table. And arguing about everything else, honestly.

The opposite corner from the geology station held a large alien artifact, complete with a shielded case and protruding nodules taking measurements. Soldering equipment and electronic components were close by. It resembled Specialist Corday's work table back in Sam's lab. It had been weeks since she felt a pang of longing for her old research team.

I still can't believe Arcturus Station is gone. Corday and Emerson, too. Dietrich was the only one who survived, and only because she was on maternity leave.

And all of Taskforce Aurora is gone except for Garneau, Traynor. Get it together.

Clearing her throat awkwardly, Sam shook her head and continued on her circuit of the lab. Above her, a giant plesiosaur skeleton suspended from the ceiling rattled lightly on its cables. A long ribbed spinal column sloped into large dorsal fins at the back and to a flat-nosed animal skull at the front. Meter-wide fin bones spread above Sam's head, ready to swim away.

We did not have one of those in R&D.

The small neighboring kitchen's counters were also packed with datapads and tech. What Sam thought was a light switch actually turned on a hidden holo map overlay on the wall. Covered in notes and speculation, nearly every centimeter of the back wall was criss-crossed with neon lines linking creature rumors.

"He's not just tracking sightings," Samantha realized when she recognized familiar annotations. "Bryson was attempting to extrapolate a course."

"And Garneau could have been following that course," EDI agreed.

Brilliant.

"I'll add a search filter now." Sam tapped at her Omni-tool's remote connection to code the new rumor filter parameters. As she was keying in the filter formula, Sam's eye was drawn to a scrolling datapad on the kitchen island counter: a datapad mentioning Commander Annelise Shepard. And her
encounter with a creature called the "Thorian."

Attached declassified Alliance files indicated that the Thorian, like the Reapers, was quite capable of turning people into mindless husks (but through organic rather than technological means) as it did on the Exo-Geni colony of Feros three years ago. A now-thriving colony that had been rescued by Commander Shepard, Feros' colonists even managed to repel a small Reaper invasion on its own.

Dr. Bryson's notes also speculated on what this creature could mean for the mythical Leviathan. He theorized that the Leviathan creatures must also use a kind of mind-control technology, akin to the Thorian's or Reapers' abilities, to maintain their secrecy.

Which potentially makes one very, very dangerous.

...And also sounds an awful lot like what happened with Dr. Bryson and his assistant, yes? "To maintain their secrecy," what's more effective than killing off anyone looking for the Leviathan?

Oh bollocks.

She found herself uneasily eyeballing the room for something potentially menacing. She quietly asked for EDI to refresh her indoctrination detector, but the AI's results were negative.

Next to the kitchenette was the geology section of the lab. Tables and open shelves were piled high with rock samples ranging from vials of sand to boulders on pallets. Much of it was just dumped in the corner unorganized. The desk console had the beginnings of a spreadsheet for catalogued samples, but no obvious conspiracy notes from Bryson or Garneau.

Sam checked the clock on her Omni-tool.

Only a few hours until the Normandy casts off. I can't possibly examine all these rocks before my ship leaves without me. Mostly because I don't even know what to look for.

Extrapolate what you can now, beg forgiveness later?

Oh thanks, that's a huge help.

Sam turned to EDI, who was already running a scan of her own on the piles of ore. She asked (prayed) if there was anything significant.

"I am detecting trace amounts of element zero," EDI announced as she moved on to a larger collection of samples lining shelves.

"Would Leviathan need eezo?" Sam asked hopefully.

"While it is not consumed as fuel during faster-than-light travel, element zero will decay after several centuries of active use. If Leviathan is old enough, it would need to replenish its supplies," EDI theorized.

Relieved at her potential dumb luck, Sam brought her Omni-tool back up. "I'll add a search filter to cross-reference sightings with element zero-rich locations. Maybe we'll get lucky."

As she picked her way over to the center of the room, Sam zeroed in on a small desk that seemed to be a personal one for Dr. Bryson. It held a crude drawing signed by a nine-year-old Ann Bryson and some private audio logs hidden under other paperwork.

One of the logs discussed the rachni's movement during the Rachni Wars. Dr. Bryson postulated
alien influence/indoctrination at work here as well. But the timing was all wrong, meaning rachni couldn't have been implanted with Reaper tech. And Dr. Bryson's theory on the matter was a doozy: the reason the Rachni Wars started was because Leviathan was preparing their species to fight Reapers.

"Could that really be possible?" Samantha asked EDI incredulously. The comms specialist's experience with rachni had been limited to spooky hard-cam shots from the comfort of her console… or textbook descriptions of their ruthlessness during the Rachni Wars from university. Hardly objective experience.

The AI intoned thoughtfully, "While only a theory with no hard evidence to support it… It is still statistically possible. Leviathan might have been aware the next Reaper cycle was pending and attempted to intervene to try to end it. The relay in rachni space was made dormant, also. It is possible Leviathan was trying to shield the rachni from the Council races until their indoctrination was complete. Unfortunately, there is no way to prove this theory unless we find an actual Leviathan to confirm it."

Sam sighed as she added in a filter to track ancient rachni fleet activity. "First the Leviathans trying to turn them into shock troops, then the Peak 15 incident, plus Cerberus, then finally the Reapers converting them to husks. If I were the rachni, I'd want to be bloody well left alone for eternity."

EDI chirped out a notification. "The currently applied galaxy map filters have reduced our potential location pool from 16 to five, Specialist Traynor."

"Brilliant."

Samantha proposed sweeping the rest of the lab for potential clues, then sitting down to crunch the numbers and assess probabilities on the most likely candidates. Which would be almost as exciting as the leg work, honestly. …At least to me.

Near the side door, a tall steaming cylinder sat between a chaise lounge chair and a wide sofa. The window and wall behind it was covered in photographs of the encased artifact. Blue holo rings orbited around a twisted, cross-section of metal tucked inside the cylinder. An attached console seemed to be running constant analysis on the fragment.

EDI logged on to the console and found a recent correspondence saved in a hidden folder. A holo of a thin, older man in a science officer's uniform appeared, reporting in.

"Sir, this is Bryson," a warm, deep voice rumbled from the officer. "We know the Reapers are after the Leviathan. Studying Reaper hunting patterns could be vital to tracking it down."

An unidentified male voice, old and gravelly, sounded worried. "That data is classified Top Secret, Dr. Bryson. If it falls into the wrong hands…"

Bryson was stern but reassuring. "It won't. The data's encrypted. I'll keep the decryption key safe… Close to my heart." The feed cut out.

So. That was Dr. Bryson. Sam's eyes flitted over to the hallway leading to the other lab. She finally had a face rather than a—a… bloodstain. His words clarified in Sam's mind, suddenly filling her with apprehension.

"Reapers are after the Leviathan."

Oh God… now we're racing Reapers to Leviathan? As though this task wasn't bloody difficult enough!
Bryson had kept the decryption "close to his heart." …What could that mean?

Circling the large cylinder, Samantha leaned in closer to study the encased object's violet surface. The artifact was scored with tiny pins of light, delicate circuitry barely detectable to the human eye. It was also strangely beautiful… the lines and curves filled Sam's mind with an appreciative calm.

So captivated was Sam that she couldn't hear the distant warning that EDI had just detected a small electromagnetic pulse.

"Get back!"

That loud warning bark triggered Sam's military instinct almost instantly. The comms specialist jumped away into a straight-backed parade rest position. EDI was at her side a moment later, inquiring if she was well.

At the side door to the lab, Commander Annelise Shepard had appeared. Her Omni-tool was out and directed at the artifact Sam had been admiring. The woman's face was taut with worry, her green eyes studying the fragment.

"EDI. Report," Shepard ordered sternly as she strode toward Samantha. Suddenly, Sam felt Shepard's fingertips grip her face. It was then the comms specialist realized that the large orange blur filling her vision was not Annelise's Omni-tool, but her Omni-blade.

Frozen in place, Sam squeaked out, "Uh? Ma'am? Something you'd care to discuss?"

Those firm hands on her cheeks swiveled Samantha's head slowly to the left and right, then up and down. Annelise's fierce gaze roved across Sam's face.

"Checking for blood in your ears. Or a nosebleed."

"…why?" Sam asked very slowly, afraid to move.

EDI's face tilted into Sam's field of vision as the AI tapped at the artifact's console. "The Commander is examining you for common physiological symptoms of Reaper indoctrination due to our proximity to a piece of the Reaper known as Nazara."

Are you bloody kidding me? What are the odds?
Well, in terms of averages—

Shut. Up.

Before Samantha could start panicking, EDI reported that the Reaper fragment's shielding was experiencing mild degradation because its power was being diverted to the galaxy map. The mech also noted that the maximum range of the artifact's influence was only 0.203 metres and its potential harmful radiation was (now) well within a safe distance.

Releasing Sam, Shepard finally gave a grim nod and allowed the bladed glow on her wrist to fade. She cleared her throat awkwardly and ran a hand through her bangs before placing it casually on her hip.


"Sovereign?!" The Reaper Shepard wrecked three years ago??

Sam recoiled and felt a darkness at the corners of her vision push violently away. Her fingertips massaged her temples where a dull pain had suddenly spiked.

Holy sodding shit. Was I just—was I just indoctrinated? ..."Shielded" my arse!

Feeling a weight on her shoulder, she turned to find a concerned Annelise looking back. The Commander nodded encouragement, nonverbally asking "Are you okay?"

Smiling weakly at Shepard, Samantha blinked back the small headache. Gone just as quickly as it had come.

"What the bloody hell was that?"

"Sovereign. Vanguard of our destruction," Shepard turned and sarcastically smirked at the artifact. "How's that working out for you, big guy?"

The woman stepped over to the work stool at the nearby desk, offering Sam a seat. Sam waved off the gesture and threw her second awkward thumbs-up of the afternoon.

"Thanks. I'll be fine. Just didn't fancy getting mind-controlled today."

EDI interjected, her holo visor flickering as she scanned Samantha's head. "'Mind-controlled' is a hyperbolic sentiment, Specialist Traynor, for I do not detect any of the delta brain wave alterations typically associated with exposure to Reaper artifacts."

"I don't care what the scan says," Shepard growled back at EDI. "For the next couple weeks, I want all of Specialist Traynor's outgoing correspondence run through secondary authentication. She sends out anything, it damn well better be triple-checked."

The Commander's sharp glare silenced the protest on Sam's tongue. The comms specialist sighed despondently. "I—Aye aye, Commander."

Brilliant. In trouble again. This has to be some sort of record. ...And it wasn't even my fault this time.

That comforting hand returned to Sam's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Samantha. After what I've—" Annelise hesitated and her stern expression softened. "After what I've seen and heard today, I can't take any chances."
When Sam looked back questioningly, Shepard shook her head. "We'll discuss it later. But first… What was it like? How do you feel?" Annelise asked, tilting her head. A line of concern formed between dark red eyebrows.

Sam had to stop and really think about it (considering it only lasted seconds). "Nothing. I mean, I've only been here for a moment at the most. At first, I started to think how beautiful the artifact was, how peaceful it made me feel. I wanted to get closer, touch it…"

Samantha's eyelids fluttered in confusion when she heard the echo of what she had said. It sounded utterly absurd.

"…Then, when you pulled away," Shepard interjected. "…a black fog tried to devour you. It made you feel weak… and then hurt like hell when it left completely."

The biting edge on the word "weak" gave Sam pause. She reached out to touch Annelise's wrist. "…You too?"

Shepard nodded solemnly. "Even almost a year later… I still remember what it felt like. To have a Reaper trying to get into my head… And at the worst possible moment…"

EDI helpfully chimed in. "It has also been documented that Reaper indoctrination requires constant, close-proximity exposure to be both effective and maintained. Specialist Traynor's estimated exposure is around .000016%, well below the minimum dose to be clinically diagnosed as indoctrinated."

Oh smashing.

Can we talk about something else?

The comms specialist cleared her throat and powered up her Omni-tool. "Anyway… before all this unpleasantness, I'd actually been rather productive, ma'am."

"I expected nothing less," Shepard warmly remarked. She gestured for Sam to continue. "What have you found, Traynor?"

The comms specialist quickly ran the Commander through her current scavenger hunt progress to locate Dr. Alex Garneau, the last remaining researcher of Taskforce Aurora.

"Ideally, if we find Garneau, he should be able to help us find this Leviathan creature. And… I guess… recruit it for the war effort?" Sam asked rhetorically with a skeptical shrug.

She brought up an orange screen on her wrist with a small approximation of the galaxy map in the other room.

"EDI and I have cobbled together a few filters that might help us pinpoint Garneau's last known whereabouts. We've been cross-referencing locations with sightings and theories… Theories range from the simple to some that are downright outlandish."

Samantha started casually counting off on her fingers. "Possible links to eezo, rachni, unsolved murders… this Dr. Bryson had no shortage of speculation on what Leviathan has been doing over the past millennia. Honestly, I'm not sure if I can—or want—to believe them all."

Sam felt herself starting to ramble about all the potential theories Dr. Bryson had proposed and what they meant for the galaxy, but stopped herself when she saw the worried expression on Shepard's face.
"And you think Sovereign might be linked to Leviathan?" Shepard gestured to the Reaper artifact.

"In a manner of speaking..." Sam asked EDI to replay the recording of Dr. Bryson for Shepard, who was still studying the piece of Sovereign ("Nazara"). "See, it's the Reaper fleet's invasion pattern we were looking for when you arrived. Rather than throw caution, and fuel, to the wind by traipsing around half the galaxy, I was hoping at least one more filter might narrow down our search to one or two planets. This seemed as promising a lead as any... though I haven't figured out the 'close to Bryson's heart' riddle yet."

"We need this intel, Samantha," Annelise lightly ordered over her shoulder. "Not just to find Leviathan, but to stay ahead of the Reapers. As much as we can, for as long as we can."

Sam threw a casual, two-fingered salute. "On it, Shepard."

While Annelise stood behind them imperiously to survey the laboratory, Sam and EDI examined the large workstation desk. The console was heavily encrypted, even for EDI. A few moments of digging revealed the aforementioned intel packet tracking Reaper fleet movements, but it was locked down tight.

Studying the decryption cipher, Samantha picked out a cycling string of numbers. Her fingertips stroked her chin. *We're likely looking for a numeric sequence hidden somewhere... An IP address maybe? A birthdate? Something of personal significance to Dr. Bryson.*

Sam directed EDI to comb through Bryson's personal history and start applying to the encryption any dates or numbers the AI could find: old addresses, ID numbers, colony coordinates... Anything and everything, plus whatever data EDI had recorded during their initial sweep.

The comms specialist gestured towards the room by the door and the stairwell to an upper level. "We've checked everywhere except these two areas. Commander Shepard, would you care to assist? Fresh eyes and all that while EDI crunches the numbers?"

Shepard's eyes flicked to both areas before returning to Sam. A challenging smirk curled her lip. "This is your investigation, Traynor. I defer to you. Think you can handle the stairs? Or is that too much PT for one day?"

An airy scoff-cough escaped Sam's throat, but she grinned back at the dare. "I'm not a bloody cripple, ma'am. It is rather curious that Commander Bloody Shepard picked the easier room, though... I wouldn't say you're going soft, exactly..." She let the veiled insult trail off as she headed for the stairs.

After a few steps up, Samantha turned to see Annelise still standing in the doorway to the side room. Eyebrows arching when she met Sam's gaze, Shepard quickly slid through the door as it hissed behind her.

What was that about?

Smiling inwardly, Sam continued up the second flight to find a small loft bedroom at the top. Admittedly, she did feel a tightening in her chest from that short climb. Just as she pulled out her inhaler to steal a puff, Sam heard a squawk of dismay below.

Sam started back down, calling out if Shepard was all right.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it," Annelise yelled back but did not immediately appear.

A long pause. Sam took a few more cautious steps down. "Are you sure? Shepard? What is it?"
Wracking her brain, Samantha tried to remember what that room might be.

She needn't have bothered.

Shepard finally emerged… and she was sopping wet.

Sam giggled while Annelise only glared back good-naturedly, her cheeks darkening. After pushing her wet bangs off her forehead, Shepard extended two fingers.

"So, two things. One: the light switch for the bathroom is on the far left. And two: the shower apparently works on a motion sensor. And I saw nothing that looked like a decryption cipher in the bathroom."

One hand sliding to her hip, Samantha rubbed her chin with the other. "I simply can't process the number of terrible jokes springing to mind at this very moment." Not helping the matter was the blush on Annelise's cheeks, the wet, tousled hair, and the way her skin—

Get it together already. Jesus.

Amused disgust wrinkled Annelise's nose. She overdrastically pursed her lips as she ascended the stairs. Gently pushing at Sam's left shoulder to turn the comms specialist around, Annelise nudged her onward and upward.

"And I'm sure you'll tell 'em to me, Traynor... Later. Work first," Shepard said flatly, though Sam could have sworn she heard a small exhale-laugh behind her. "I still have a full mission log waiting under the vague hope we cast off tonight. And, frankly, I'm tired of the Citadel Port Authority fining the Normandy for missing our embarkation window."

"We can't take you anywhere, ma'am," Sam snickered, though her mind briefly wandered back to Other Showers that a more Stupid Sam was keen on revisiting.

Oh my God, that's a Thing that might happen again! Soon! In the near future! Because we're a Thing!

…Oh my God, what the hell am I doing? I'm supposed to be working. I slept with someone I work with!

…Oh my God who cares? How often does this happen to me?


The upstairs loft was the only true living quarters on the entire sprawling floor. A double bed sat against the wall. Full bookshelves were just above the bed, spines showing a strange hodgepodge of mythology fables, children's nursery stories, and science texts.

"There has to be a clue around here somewhere," Sam suggested hopefully, zeroing in on the bookshelf for the most well-worn books.

'1984' and 'War of the Worlds'? Depressing. Classic, but depressing.

Flipping through a few books, Samantha couldn't find any dog-eared pages or notes in the margins. A couple had author signatures, but no dates or numbers that might help with the decryption key.

Hmmmm… what if it's a book cipher like spies used back in old action vids? Maybe a Bible or Beale
cipher? Or a homophonic substitution cipher?

Then you can either save yourself the trouble now and get that coin for Shepard to flip, or get cozy on the bed to go through all these damn books. And you didn't exactly bring your reading glasses.

Getting cozy doesn't sound so— **REAPERS ARE COMING, REMEMBER?**

Ugh. Fine. What else?

A long, narrow bureau sat along the wall next to the bed. The drawers revealed men's clothing but little else. The top of the dresser was empty save for a small lamp and another datapad.

"Ann Bryson, age nine," Shepard read aloud just behind Sam. Turning, Samantha spotted Shepard at an end table over by the loft area entrance. Another framed piece of child art was in her hands.

"There are a few of those around the lab. I guess the good doctor really loves—**loved** his little girl…" Sam trailed off. Something about that nagged at the comms specialist. His older, gaunt face flashed into her mind.

Annelise must have had the same thought, for she called down the landing to the AI mech below. "EDI! How old is Dr. Bryson's daughter?"

"Records indicate Ann is now 28. She works for the Alliance."

The smile Annelise flashed Sam was triumphant. "You said Bryson was keeping the Reaper fleet encryption key close to his heart, right? What's closer than family?"

Flipping over the drawing, a sequence of numbers were scribbled in crayon. Samantha smiled and powered up her Omni-tool. She inserted "65,81,6,97" into her decryption algorithm and took a deep breath before hitting [COMPILE].

Within seconds, the intel packet was surging with numbers and coordinates. A "Thank you, Specialist Traynor" could be heard below as EDI began downloading the Reaper fleet information to the Normandy's database.

_**Oh thank you sweet, merciful God.**_

"Brilliant, Commander," Sam praised with a grin of her own. The Omni-tool at her wrist updated that a single location remained once all of the filters had been applied. "It looks like Alex Garneau's last known location is the Mahavid asteroid in the Aysur system out in the Caleston Rift. Maybe that's where Leviathan is hiding?"

Annelise's slanted smile grew wider before she wiped it away by clearing her throat. "Only one way to find out, Traynor. Good work."

As Shepard started back down the stairs, Sam threw a curious look at the datapad on the dresser.

_**Leave no stone unturned, Traynor.**_

At first glance, the datapad appeared to just contain information on the batarians and a timeline of the Reapers' decimation of their homeworld. But one audio log caught Sam's eye. The replay count on it had reached double digits.

_**Something Bryson clearly listened to over and over. But why?**_
Sam hit play. An unnamed Alliance officer set up the log, then rumbling batarian voices took over.

[BATARIAN OFFICER: "Commander, the dreadnought is in custody, but the salarians may have surveillance footage."]

[BATARIAN COMMANDER: "Our ambassador will issue a full denial. Give me your preliminary analysis."]

[BATARIAN OFFICER: "Several million years old, at least. And its technology outstrips anything on the Council."]

[BATARIAN COMMANDER: "Excellent. Our scientists will work day and night to bring its secrets to the Hegemony."]

[BATARIAN OFFICER: "One concern, Commander. The real Leviathan of Dis, the thing that destroyed this ship, is still out there unaccounted for."]

[BATARIAN COMMANDER: "Irrelevant. The ship is our priority. And as far as the rest of the galaxy is concerned: there is no Leviathan of Dis. There never was."]

Well, I can see why Bryson listened to it over and over: it makes no bloody sense.

Dropping the datapad back on the bureau, Sam found herself mumbling aloud, "If the batarians never found a Leviathan, then what—?" Her train of thought derailed when she saw Shepard.

Annelise Shepard's pensive face stared back at Samantha from the top step of the stairs. She looked even paler somehow, her freckles on her cheeks darker.

"Shepard? Are you all right?"

"How old is that recording, Samantha?"

"I—uh—" Where is that bloody timestamp? "...2163? So, 23 years ago? Why?"

Sam thought she heard Shepard mumble "...So they were already..." but the woman had turned away and was striding down the short flight of stairs.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Traynor. Now."

"Roger that, Shepard," Samantha replied, trailing her Commander back down to the lab entrance. While Shepard stopped to chat with the C-Sec officer stationed outside, Sam turned to EDI. The mech was still tapping away at the Reaper artifact console near the door.

"Coming, EDI?"

EDI did not stop or turn around. "Negative, Specialist Traynor. I am notifying Alliance Headquarters about this artifact and petitioning for an extraction team to take custody of it in lieu of Taskforce Aurora's lacking manpower. I will also lock down the galaxy map and laboratory consoles per Alliance security regulations." A short pause. "Jeff has also been messaging me for the past 15 minutes to join him on the Presidium for a 'date.'"

"Oh-ho now!" Sam crowed with delight. "About time that stodgy git got over his hang-ups and asked you out properly. I trust he's been treating you right? Because if he isn't..." The comms specialist balled up a threatening fist that the AI couldn't see.
The mech's busy fingers finally stopped. "He seems… happier. Shepard told us to 'enjoy it while it lasted.'"

"Shepard said that?" Sam couldn't contain her shock. She threw another glance at the woman still outside. Her audience of C-Sec officers had grown from one to four.

*Is that—is that how she feels about… us?*

*Are you happy or sad about that?*

*Little of column A and a little of column B, honestly.*

*Not necessarily a bad thing, though.*

*Too true.*

EDI nodded as she continued her work, scrolling code flashing by on the monitor. "She did. She wished us well, in fact… Despite Jeff's and my differing lifespans which would make a long-term relationship problematic. I have not spoken to Jeff about his potential untimely death, however."

"Um, probably for the better," the comms specialist agreed with a cringe, her face contorting into what Sam hoped looked like empathy. "I doubt Joker needs the reminder that these are dangerous times. It's a bit obvious, yea? Best to enjoy it while you can."

"I asked Liara how the asari deal with the problem," EDI said. "She said to bottle up my feelings until the inevitable occurs, then cry."

Sam stared at the busy mech for several seconds, a cold sensation (guilt?) working its way down her spine.

"…Seriously?"

"That was a humorous exaggeration, Specialist Traynor."

*Of course it was,* Samantha scowled inwardly. She couldn't ignore the hollow feeling still in her chest though.

EDI continued, "Unfortunately, Liara did not provide emotionally supportive answers on disparate longevity. And I know no other asari to ask, for Justicar Samara has been unavailable according to the asari government. And Aria T'Loak has blocked my queries from her personal messenger IP."

*Aria T'Loak? The pirate queen of Omega? EDI knows her?*

*…Well, obviously not. Otherwise she wouldn't be blocked.*

"I, uh, I think it's something you'll have to figure out for yourself, EDI." Sam stepped up and patted EDI's shoulder with encouragement. "Just don't forget to live in the now. Otherwise you might miss it."

"Is that how you and Shepard cope with your relationship?"

The question stopped Sam in dead in her tracks. "…I—I don't know. We haven't really—" The comms specialist cleared her throat and retreated back to her favorite trite advice. "One day at a time, EDI. We're still figuring things out, too. Once we get a bloody moment to sit still and really talk about it, anyway."
"I believe the idiom 'no time like the present' is situationally relevant," EDI nodded as she thrust a forefinger towards the window. When Sam followed the mech's line of sight, she saw that Annelise appeared to be wrapping things up outside. An empty skycar had also just landed on the balcony, presumably their ride.

**Eep!**

Mumbling a quick "See you aboard the ship," Samantha speed-walked over to the edge of the terrace where Shepard sat waiting in the hovering taxi. The jostle to her ribs winded the comms specialist a little as she climbed into the passenger side. Within moments, Dr. Bryson's terrace was indistinguishable from the wall of other near-identical buildings on the Presidium.

A minute passed before Sam stole a glance at Shepard. The woman was preoccupied, her eyes flicking disinterestedly between the window view and the navigation console in front of her. Annelise was quiet per usual.

The chat with EDI swirled through Sam's mind. Part of her wanted to just bite the bullet and initiate that dreaded conversation of "Where are we going with this?" …But, all things considered, Sam was rather inclined to try and savor the unknown for a change. At least for a little while.

Until her Stupid brain got in the way, anyway.

…Jesus, Traynor. It's been literally four hours. Cool your jets. Try giving it a day for a change.

Sam scowled at herself and cleared her throat.

"Annelise? Is something wrong?"

Shepard's thin, curl of a smile was hollow. "We have a new war asset against the Reapers."

"What? Already? …It's not Leviathan, is it? Because I'm not saying I'd be terribly surprised if it was, but it'd be rather helpful to know. And if you've been holding out on me, 'Commander Rubbish' is about to be your new email signature."

A very small exhale-laugh, but it was there. Annelise shook her head.

It encouraged the comms specialist to press harder. "It's only been—what—two hours? Three? Of course you busted arse in the interim. It's what a Commander Bloody Shepard does."

*Ah the old standby: flattery.*

That did actually earn a genuine smile from Annelise. Her entrance to Dr. Bryson's lab flashed into Sam's mind.

"…does this have anything to do with why you greeted me back there with an Omni-blade? Free advice: ladies prefer flowers over nano-fabricated wrist-daggers."

Annelise quipped back, "Depends on the lady."

"That it does." Proud she now managed to win eye contact from Shepard, Sam nodded at the woman to open up. She made a rotating gesture with her wrist.

"Our new war asset is… what's left of the entire batarian armada." Shepard's sigh was explosive.

"The batarians?" Sam's head jerked back in surprise. She had to do a mental scan to search for the last time she remembered hearing about the batarians. Other than back at Bryson's lab, obviously.
Before the invasion of Earth? Even earlier?

…oh right. They were being reaped for six months before the Reapers spread to the rest of the galaxy. That's what the Alliance government had been keeping under wraps while I was on retrofit duty on Earth. "Prepare for war with the batarians" was easier to swallow than "Prepare to fight thousands of giant robot monsters."

"Why would they join us? Isn't their homeworld—aren't they—?" Shaking her head, Sam cleared her throat. "You should probably start at the beginning."

Shepard rubbed at the back of her neck and fiddled with the taxi's nav. They settled into a traffic flow circling the Citadel Tower, which streamed out far in the distance above endless rows of buildings. "Before I arrived at Bryson's lab, I was investing some hacking incidents around the Citadel at C-Sec's request. Turns out a batarian terrorist was revenge-killing humans. Because of me."

"Oh my God, Shepard. Why?"

"Have you ever heard the name Balak, Samantha?"

"The batarian who tried to crash an asteroid into Terra Nova?"

"You know your history." Annelise sounded impressed.

"I know my family," Sam retorted. "My Uncle Kirk and Aunt Maggie live on Terra Nova. Uncle Kirk even did some surveying of the X57 after the incident for Hoshichiri Heavy Industries. Another Traynor relative helped by Commander Shepard. We're starting a fan club any day now."

"Please don't," Annelise jokingly warned as the Presidium drifted by outside.

"What happened with the terrorist, Shepard? Balak?" Samantha encouraged. "…I can't promise I'll know the right thing to say. But I can listen. And try to understand. Please let me try."

It was slow at first. Annelise told Sam of the X57 incident from three years ago. How she had to choose between saving hostages or stopping Balak. About the humans Balak killed on the Citadel this week because Shepard let him go free to save those engineers so many years ago. The men and women he unplugged from life support or died from ship crashes due to navigation hacks on the Citadel docks. 129 people within the last few days alone.

Annelise was unforgiving of herself like usual. "I traded a dozen hostages three years ago for 130 people this week and who knows how many in between. I'm just… I'm so tired of the 'right choice' at the time being the wrong call in the long-term. And everyone else pays the price."

Chewing her lower lip, Sam couldn't think of something reassuring to say. She felt her fingers start to fidget, but resisted the urge to wring her hands.

There was a long pause before Shepard spat bitterly, "I should have killed him when I had the chance all those years ago. …and he should have killed me today."

"He—what?" Sam's jaw dropped in horror.

"He had me dead to rights, Traynor. Guard down, back turned. I felt the muzzle on my neck before Officer Noles could even register our connection was lost. No way to get a barrier up in time if he decided to pull the trigger. He could've—should've… especially after what happened on the Alpha Relay." Shepard's shrug was far too casual.
"The one that blew up?"

"I blew it up, Samantha. Me. I should have had two days to evacuate the system, to save that batarian colony, but then some indoctrinated human scientists got the drop on me. I woke up hours instead of days before the Reapers were supposed to arrive. I had no choice. It was either blow up the Alpha Relay, and by extension the colony, or the rest of the galaxy would fall when the Reapers hit that mass relay." Annelise glanced over at Sam, her expression apprehensive.

Desperate to keep the woman from drifting into melancholy, Sam reached for the Annelise's forearm.

"I can't say anything you don't already know, Annelise: you did what you had to do. We wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for you. If you hadn't made that impossible call."

A familiar line of concern scarred Shepard's brow once more. Annelise started to shake off Samantha's hand, but stopped herself with a defeated sigh.

"So… how did you—you know—not get shot?"

"I bullied him."

"Does that work?"

"Apparently." This time a smile started to return to Annelise's cheek, though it was a grim one at best.

She continued, "…Killing me would tear all the tentative alliances I've scraped together apart. He knew it. I was—I'm so tired. Part of me wanted him to. Dared him to. At least then I'd get some rest." A pause. "But the rest of me was used up by something other than exhaustion."

Sam was eager to redirect the conversation away from Commander Shepard having near-suicidal thoughts. "Which was?"

"Pity."

"Interesting choice, all things considered," Sam agreed.

"I pitied him. His entire race. Because of their blind faith in the Hegemony, they've been dead for 23 years. They just didn't know it."

At Sam's confused head tilt, Annelise hastily explained.

"The batarians never found the Leviathan of Dis, Samantha. 23 years ago they found a Reaper corpse that was killed by a Leviathan millennia ago. All their top scientists studying it and officials reporting on it were indoctrinated, their defenses sabotaged from within by decades of Reaper indoctrination."

Oh… Oh! …Oh. Oh shit.

"Javik was right," Annelise muttered, shaking her head.

"About?"

"There's no honor in war. There's no dignity in death. I told Balak the Alpha Relay was a mercy. The people on Aratoht were spared what happened to his homeworld, his entire race. They were spared the slow, drawn out harvest."
Sam felt an ache in her temples from frowning so hard. "Is that—is that how you feel about Earth?"

Annelise's laugh was bitter. "What? How horrible it must be to look out your window in Vancouver? Madrid? Tokyo? New York? And see Reapers everywhere destroying everything you know and love? How merciful and quick it would be to just eat your gun and not give the Reapers the satisfaction? I don't think that will exactly inspire the galaxy to fight back."

"Shepard," Samantha finally interjected. "We're not the batarians. We don't have a Hegemony keeping us deliberately in the dark. We have people like Allers motivating people to fight back, to keep hope. We have alliances working together. We have you."

The Commander growled back bitterly, "The batarians never stood a chance, and because of their stubbornness they had no allies to call on when the Reapers finally showed up at their door. They bought us six months with their lives. That's what their entire existence was worth: six fucking months."

Chewing her lower lip, Samantha was at a loss for words. It was a horrific equation to solve for: units of time measured in lives harvested by the Reapers.

Isn't—isn't that what we're doing now? With Earth? With Palaven? Humans and turians buying time for us—for Shepard—to rally before we all go extinct? Soon the asari and salarians will be added to the formula, adding lives to the timetable while subtracting resources to fight back...

Annelise continued, resentment ripe on her tongue. "Balak said he couldn't save his people, but he could end me. He was right. I couldn't have stopped him. Pity became anger. I told him he could either shoot me and watch the Reapers wipe out the last of his people and mine, or join me and have his people's lives mean something. Go down a general and hero to his people in one last glorious battle, or let the weak, indoctrinated Hegemony's final legacy be batarian extinction. He had the power. His call."

"That's quite a bluff to call, Annelise," Sam breathed incredulously. "Betting your life on Balak choosing honor over revenge. Especially after three years of holding a grudge."

The Commander's lip pursed as she pondered. "It was the way he talked about Khar'shan, the pain and anger in his voice over his people betraying their own. I had to gamble on that being stronger than his rage at me over Terra Nova or the Alpha Relay incidents." Another nonchalant shrug.

The incident back at Bryson's lab crossed Sam's mind. "Is that how you know what indoctrination feels like? Those indoctrinated Alpha Relay scientists tried to assimilate you into their Reaper collective?"

The Commander only nodded, her hand tensely gripping the armrest between them. Their taxi was nearing familiar landmarks. Other docking bays starting to stream by instead of highrises.

Sam's fingers smoothed along Annelise's soft wrist before settling on top of her hand, interlacing gently between her knuckles. That stiff hand relaxed.
"Was the Omni-blade—would you have killed me if I was indoctrinated by that piece of Sovereign?"

Sam cautiously asked.

Head swiveling, the glare that Annelise shot her gave Sam chills.

"No."

Not a statement, a declaration.

"…Is that what you thought?"

Samantha admitted sheepishly. "I don't know. I didn't know what was going on. Plus, after all you said about the batarians' scientists destroying them from the inside… I guess it is possible I could do such a thing to the Normandy without knowing it." The intensity of Annelise's words… she was starting to feel ashamed for asking. …But in a good way? Is there such a thing?

"Samantha… if you'd been indoctrinated by Sovereign, I would have taken that Reaper fragment apart piece by piece with my bare hands. The Omni-blade would have just made it go faster." The hand under Sam's squeezed hers intently.

Annelise cleared her throat. "That's why I greeted you with an Omni-blade, Samantha. You're the heart of the Normandy's communications. Plus, you have codes to the krogan, turian and salarian comm networks now. Losing you to the Reapers could cost us the war. You'd better believe if my—if one of my crew is threatened, I eliminate that threat."

Grinning back, Sam could barely restrain her glee. "That's… good to know. Ma'am. That your crew is so important to you." She clasped those fingers tighter, relishing the squeeze in return. They sat in comfortable silence, watching the civilian traffic dwindle down only to be replaced by larger military frigates drifting by.

A doubt started to creep in to Samantha's mind. It nagged and nagged until she quietly blurted out, "…What if—if I did do something terrible? Without knowing?"

Sam's eyes stayed resolutely on the windshield, but she noticed Annelise's head turn in her peripheral vision.

"That's why I tacked on the added security to your outgoing messages for the next few weeks." Shepard paused, her tone softening. "…Samantha. If you did something like tank our comm
networks… what could I even do? The war would be over. We lost. So, what would you do if you found out you were indoctrinated?"

*Probably commit suicide.*

*Jesus.*

*You're the one who started this bloody line of thought.*

*Give me a little credit here.*

"I don't know. Hopefully my damnedest to right whatever wrong I'd committed? If that were even possible?" Sam finally allowed her eyes to meet Annelise's, and was surprised to see them crinkle with warmth.

"That's all any of us can do, right?"

"…Well, this got bloody depressing, yea?"

"Yep."

Sam finally gave a small, chest-rattling cough that she'd been holding in for several minutes. There was a surge of cold in reply as the wrap on Sam's ribs administered a pleasant boost of Medi-gel.

*Between yesterday and today, our little Traynor is just growing up so fast.*

*…the entire past week has been downright absurd in terms of character growth, actually.*

*Oh get it together.*

A large "D24" filled the view from the skycar. The familiar docking bay stretched out to the open sky beyond, where the Normandy SR-2's distinct profile contrasted from the setting system star, Widow. The thrum of the engines cut as the taxi settled in to the Rapid Transport Station to wait for its next customer, a distracted asari couple with a young daughter.

Both doors popped up at the same time with a whish. Both women allowed small smiles as their hands finally released the other and they climbed out of the car.

"Time to buckle up, Princess," Sam lightly ordered with a grin when Annelise strode down the hallway next to her. "We've got a Reaper Killer to find. And one whose name isn't Commander Shepard for a change."

"Roger that, Traynor." Annelise exhale-laughed as her curled lips straightened to be serious once more. "Get some rack time. It's about time we got off this goddamn space station."

"Aye-aye, ma'am. …though it hasn't been a total waste. Wouldn't you agree?"

Only an exhale-laugh in response.

A comfortable distance apart, Samantha could still feel the ghost of Annelise's warm hand in hers as they returned to their ship.

Chapter End Notes
Yes, I'm taking a chunk of Shepard's Wandering Around in-game events and just handing them over to Sam for the investigation of Leviathan. I'll try to limit my stealing of Shepard Activities to things that would be relevant to Sam and her skillset as a comms specialist. Shepard really needs to learn to delegate. I mean really: worst micromanager ever (aside from the Inquisitor).
"What the hell's been going on, Traynor? It feels like I haven't seen you in forever."

Diana Allers leaned back in her chair, her fingers absently spinning a small data chit on her desk. The reporter's cabin space seemed more cluttered since Samantha Traynor had last visited. Photos of missing platoons and human colonies filled the back wall, now including turian and krogan reports. Vids of Reaper attacks flashed by on Diana's group of holos, while one lone screen showed a progress bar of her latest Battlespace upload.

"Well, I was in stasis for a good chunk of that, Allers. Unless you fancy chatting up unconscious women. In which case, I can recommend a good therapist," Sam quipped. "You can beat this, Diana. One day at a time. I believe in you."

Allers rolled her eyes. "Before that, smart ass. I barely saw you on the Citadel, then when we leave port you go straight to bed without a word? I don't buy it. What's going on?"

The comms specialist was settled on the reporter's large bed, her back pressed against the wall. The thrum of the Normandy's drive core could be heard in the hallway of the Engineering Deck per usual. Also barely audible was Donnelly's and Daniels' familiar bickering near the elevator.

Home sweet home.

As Sam sipped her cup of coffee, she shrugged and evaded. "Just tired from all the excitement. You know."

"I don't know, actually. It's why I asked." The reporter squinted at Sam, looking her up and down. "You seem… different."

It took a great deal of effort for Samantha to take another slow, measured slurp. Rather than spit-taking and spill all the craziness from the past week.

"Well… you might recall I did crack my ribs on the Citadel."
Waving her hand dismissively, Allers smirked. "That's not it. I already knew about that. And unless you saunter around topless, it's not like anyone can notice anyway. Try again."

A cough rattled its way up Sam's chest, radiating pain through the aforementioned rib injury.

You know you want to gossip. You're dying to tell someone, Traynor.

Yes, and that is precisely why I shouldn't.

Sam just shrugged again in response.

Diana's twirling fingers stopped.

Wrong answer?

"...Nothing?! I hand you flirty banter on a silver platter and you aren't all over it? ...It's like I don't even know you anymore. Where did we go wrong?" Allers asked sarcastically, cocking her head.

"Oh please," Sam scoffed. "Now you're just creating drama where there formerly was none. I thought you were supposed to report news, Allers. Not make it up."

Sighing, the comms specialist swished her coffee absently. "...I've just been bloody busy, mate. You might have noticed that everything has kind of gone to shit?"

Another dismissive wave. "Everything is always shit. You weren't this cagey when things were shittier, either. I'm going to find out sooner or later, Traynor. Just tell me what the deal is."

"Jesus, Diana. Maybe I liked to be romanced a little. How about 'did you have a good sleep?' Or 'how was your first day back, Sam?' At least pretend you care about the real me. Girls like that, you know."

"Oh, so there is something!" Allers crowed, eyebrows arching.

"I didn't—that's not what I was—" Sam's mind raced.

Fix it fix it fix it fix it fix it fix it fix it

Diana's head flopped against her chair back. She exhaled a loud, impatient groan at the ceiling.

"You're fucking impossible. ...Fine. How was your first day back at work?" Allers asked (rather insincerely). The data chit resumed spinning at her fingertips.

"So sweet of you to ask. Well, I had a lovely breakfast with Rashad and Douglas. Eggs and hash browns and everything! Mess Sergeant Beaumont is really outdoing herself."

Allers scowled, muttering under her breath. "...I hate you so much right now..."

"Sorry?"

"I said 'how interesting, please continue' with no hint of sarcasm whatsoever."

"That's what I thought."

Blinking awake, Samantha remembered sighing at the loud alarm blaring in her sleeper pod. She had run her fingertips along the pod's holo interface, jabbing blindly for the snooze.
EDI's voice came over the intercom, a little louder than normal.

"You are scheduled to report for duty at 0930, Specialist Traynor. It is 0831. You have received the requisite stasis sleep as prescribed by Dr. Chakwas: 96 hours. You are cleared for light active duty in the War Room. Your attempts to override stasis will result in a dereliction of duty."

_Holy sodding shit! I've been asleep for four days?_

Jerking upright, the comms specialist had sputtered, "Gah! I'm up! I'm up!"

Sam pushed the glass lid back and stumbled out of the pod to stretch. There was still a distinct creak to her ribs, but overall she felt a lot better. Deep breaths were met with only dull aching rather than searing pain.

_**Doc Chakwas knows what she's talking about.**_

"Hey! Traynor! About time you got up!" A sneering male voice.

"We thought you were dead." A familiar female voice, soft and serious.

Across the Crew Deck in the Mess Hall, a group of Normandy engineers and specialists were just sitting down to breakfast. Specialist Ian Douglas waved an egg-speared fork at Samantha, while Engineers Morena Rashad and Greg Adams resumed talking shop about thermal pipes.

Delicious scents of fresh breakfast wafted in from the kitchen. The Mess Sergeant, Jennifer Beaumont, was cheerfully spooning heaps of eggs, bacon and hash browns into plates for the line of waiting Normandy crew. Sam's stomach growled in response.

However, she had to weigh the virtues of 'breakfast with friends' against 'proper hygiene.'

_**And after four days in a sleeper pod, your armpits are a touch whiffy, Traynor.**_

_Hygiene it is, then._

Sam had set a personal record for showering and changing, swearing at the crap faucets under her breath. Rashad and Douglas were just finishing up the last of their breakfast before Sam swooped in beside them at the mess table, her own tray piled high with still-steaming eggs and fried potatoes.

As Samantha shoveled food in her mouth with nary a breath between bites, Douglas watched her for a moment before drawling out sarcastically, "I've never wanted you more, Traynor."

Sam rolled her eyes and some of her head, but continued eating. "Oh piss off, wanker. You'd be hungry too after four sodding days in stasis."

Douglas had laughed good-naturedly and clapped Sam on the back, earning him a glare (and a wince) from her. "Saw the medical leave note on your sleeper. How the hell do you crack your ribs on the Presidium? Please tell me it was from doing something sexy. In detail. With pictures I can sell to Joker later."

_Perverts._
Repeating the same lie she'd told Allers, Sam had muttered an embarrassed "recap" of her "tumble down in the Wards." It was received with a mixture of disappointment and empathy from Douglas and Rashad, respectively, but they seemed to accept the story with no question.

"And we all saw the new schedule, Traynor," Morena changed the subject with a cringe. "Double shifts in the war room and flagged for PT? Who did you piss off?"

"Xian was over the moon when he saw he'd be fulltime CIC comms for awhile, too. Hopefully he won't be swooning over Shepard the entire time." Ian added with a sly grin, "I think he said he's planning on decorating your spot by the galaxy map, Traynor. A picture of his wife… maybe a potted plant… a few throw pillows…"

"Over my dead body," Sam growled back. "I worked my arse off during the retrofits to turn that console into data-mining perfection. No one else on this ship can make that system hum like I can. Even Xian knows it."

Snickering, Douglas took a last swig of his Tupari sports drink. "You comm specialists are such territorial babies about your consoles. Never hear us tech specialists whining."

Sam knew what he was doing. He'd done it a million times during their four months together retrofitting the Normandy. First he would make some snide comment about comms or data specialists, then it would descend into an insult match over Whose Job Was Harder.

And Sam was not in the mood. Especially in between the six minutes she had left to inhale her breakfast.

Instead, Sam tilted her head and tapped her earlobe. "Sorry? I can't hear you from all the way up in the War Room, Douglas. Besides, I think the Thanix might need another good buffing."

His face reddened slightly when Sam made a suggestive hand motion along the length of her knife. Even Rashad laughed.

"Touché," Douglas conceded as he stood up to bus his tray. He paused to rest a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Get better, Traynor. It won't be the same in the CIC without you."

Smiling, Sam had been touched by his unusual concern.

"And it definitely won't be as pretty."
"Ugh. Go calibrate yourself, Douglas," Sam hissed as she shooed Ian away. His laughter echoed down the mess, diminishing Sam's enjoyment of her breakfast a little.

**What. An. Arse.**

Rashad put a hand on Samantha's wrist. "Seriously, though. What happened, Sam?"

"Um… well…"

**Ugh. More lies.**

_To be followed by many more, Traynor. Unless you fancy everyone knowing you were in an ill-advised firefight on the Citadel that you swore not to discuss._

…Not so much.

_Then put on your big girl britches and start lying through your teeth._

The engineer's bright eyes shone back at Sam, worried.

"Shift change in progress," EDI announced overheard. "Please report to your work stations."

_Saved by the bell._

"I'll tell you later, Rashad."

When the woman started to protest, Sam stood up and sidled over to the kitchen to bus her tray. "It's terribly dull, honestly. Was late coming back from shore leave and the Commander wanted to pull rank and make an example of me. Nothing to worry about. Wicked boring, that."

Morena raised a skeptical eyebrow, but she wasn't pushy like Allers. She muttered a quiet "Okay. If you say so…"

They walked together to the elevator, though a cluster of engineers were already gathered in the lift waiting to go down. Rashad slipped in to join them, giving Sam a small wave.

As the doors started to close, Morena snapped her fingers at Samantha. "Oh! Hey! Ensign Richter in the Shuttle Bay said he found a package addressed to you. He left it in that utility 'closet' over by the galaxy—!"

The last word cut off as the doors shut.

"Wait, what?" Sam had asked the empty hallway in bewilderment.

She pondered her own, empty elevator ride up to the CIC in silence, wracking her brain about what she possibly could have received. Any thought of checking it out was dashed by EDI's repeat reminder on the intercom about shifts starting in two minutes.

Joining the line of tech specialists waiting at the security checkpoint, Sam had thrown a jealous glance at Specialist Xian's back in her spot next to the galaxy map. The map had a blinking dot above the Horse Head Nebula, indicating the Normandy was in orbit over Noveria. Commander Shepard and crew were already hard at work down below.
"A package, huh?" Allers piped up with interest. She scratched at her chin with a single, slender nail. "What could that be…? …Knowing you, probably some nerd shit…"

Samantha opened her mouth to reply, but Diana shushed her into silence. The reporter tapped her thumb with two fingers to signal Shut Your Mouth.

"Tsst! This is the most interesting thing you've got going with this damn story and you aren't taking it away from me. Let's see… New chess set? No, I've seen you and Shepard playing and you probably sleep with that damn thing."

Among other things.

"How big is it?" Diana asked.

Rolling her eyes, the comms specialist spread her hands apart about a meter. When the reporter rotated her wrist to prod for more detail, Sam stacked her hands to demonstrate a half meter in height.

"Is that enough information?" Sam asked sarcastically. "Or do you want me to just bloody tell you —?"


Samantha took a long sip of her coffee. "Allers, you are aware that you and I are not the same person, right? Like, not even close. Plus, I can't afford any of the shit you're talking about on my salary, let alone store it on a frigate in the middle of a war."

Especially since now my salary is reduced by half.

What would you do with credits anyway, Traynor? And when would you even find the time to spend 'em?

Hmph.

Allers cracked her knuckles absently. "…Too big for a video game, unless you bought some involved retro box set to inflict on me later… Please God tell me that's not it."

"It is not."

"Thank Christ. I was about to end our friendship right here and now."

Sam exhaled a light laugh. "I had no idea it was so easy. I should have done that ages ago."

Allers tsked back. "Don't lie. You adore talking to me and you know it, Traynor. …Now hush. Mommy's thinking."

For the next two minutes, Sam made a point to take loud, wet slurps of her remaining coffee to be as annoying as humanly possible. It only made Allers mutter to herself rather than guess aloud while occasionally cutting her eyes at Sam.

Firing up her Omni-tool, Samantha played one battle in Wyvern Epoch 3 before swiping it closed. "I only have like 10 minutes left on my break, Allers. Your deductive skills are shite. Just let me continue my bloody story already."


"I am breathless to hear it," Sam drawled as she reached for the final sip of lukewarm coffee.
"It's not for you. It's for someone else."

It took a great deal of effort for Sam to avoid a spit-take across the reporter's bed. Only one drop dribbled out her mouth, which Sam wiped away with her thumb.

Clearing her throat, Samantha raised her empty mug to a still-grinning Allers. "Color me impressed. Correct, if extremely vague. You get partial credit."

Allers made a sliding victory clap. "Nailed it. And, since I don't see you with a present for me…" She looked Sam up and down in disapproval. "…you're going to have work extra hard to make me care. Proceed, Soldier. Double time, if possible. I have shit to do."

The data chit started rolling over slender knuckles as Diana leaned back in her chair expectantly.

Sam's eyeroll accompanied a withering sigh. "I do so love our chats, Allers. Equal parts annoyance and suspense."

The War Room area had already been bustling with activity since the turian-krogan alliance took effect, and the Cerberus coup on the Citadel only strengthened that intensity.

Sam remembered how empty this room had been during the retrofits… Just her and Xian stress-testing data flow cables and combing through terrabytes of checklists and bugs. A time when Sam's biggest worry was making sure Lieutenant Vanessa Ventura stayed off her back and whether Isabella was going to call her back that night.

How things change when the galaxy as we know it is about to end.

Now, the tiered War Room had a revolving crew of tech analysts bouncing from console to asset table back out to the CIC. Nearly a dozen specialists were swiping away at holo consoles amassing comms, coordinates and intel for senior specialists like Samantha to comb through and assess.

Settling in next to Specialist Jason Gentry, there was already a huge backlog of comms data waiting at Sam's console when she had logged in. On a normal day, Sam would actually relish a full queue of data. It meant applying filters and algorithms, then assigning priority for analysis to figure out what problems needed solving.

Nerd's gonna nerd.
However, that mysterious package literally down the hall was very distracting. Her comms specialist brain, which should have been calculating trajectories and time delays for the War Asset GUI, was instead focused on the far more important task of "Who Sent Me A Thing?"

**Likely candidates?**

Let's see… my parents maybe? Though they didn't mention it and it's not my birthday anytime soon. But that doesn't mean they didn't send some sort of Worrywart Care Package… except with the whole Reaper War going on, it would have had to have been sent far in advance to coincidentally arrive at the Citadel.

**Chances?**

About 150 to one, and I'm being generous.

**Who else?**

A blush crept across Sam's cheeks and she had to double over her console to clear her throat quietly. And hide a smirk that no one in the room would understand.

…Shepard?

**Really, Traynor?**

Is it so unreasonable? She has given me one before. And a rather thoughtful—if practical—gift at that.

True. But, assuming you're correct, it could be something to do with your punishment(s). Horrid weights for PT drills or a leash for the EDI-bot or—

Or something sweet and lovely and magical.

**How about agree to disagree on potential contents. Likelihood that Shepard is the sender?**

20 to one? Odds increased based on previous gift history?

Fine. Though you're deliberately leaving out one last candidate.

Wrinkling her brow, Samantha halfheartedly sifted through a couple batches of files before an error message popped up.

["Access Denied. By Authority of T'Soni, L."]

Oh shit. Right. I need her biometric login to coordinate some of these war assets.

…Oh shit! I haven't spoken to her since she dropped me off at that med clinic… After she figured out something's going on between me and Annelise.

…Oh shit bugger sodding hell. She's the Shadow Broker. And probably pissed. What if the package is from her?

There's that ol' Traynor paranoia coming out to play.

Shut up. …That can't seriously be it. If Liara T'Soni, Shadow Broker, wanted to kill/maim/blackmail/humiliate/do anything to me, she could do that without a traceable delivery to the Normandy.
Unless it's a trap.

Odds?

"Obsessed much, Traynor?"

Samantha nearly jerked out of her chair, causing a dull ache to flood her ribs. She said a little too loudly, "What?!"

Specialist Gentry's face was leaning in next to her, an amused smile on his young face. "Clearly I was on point." He pointed a dark finger at the timestamp on her upper left screen: [13:17:44 PM]. "You've missed the last two breaks. And I've barely seen you blink in the past hour. You might want to pace yourself before you go blind."

"I—thanks. Uh yea, just crunching the numbers. Got a war to win and all that," Sam muttered before massaging her rather dry eyelids.

He settled back into his chair, rubbing his own eyes before exhaling loudly. "Well, take a break, Traynor. Shepard is." Gentry gestured at his sit-rep console, where he was rewinding the recorded battle from just an hour previous to send to Alliance HQ. As always, three blue dots against a sea of red, this time on Noveria. "The Commander took down an entire Cerberus platoon plus an Atlas. Sitting pretty waiting for the N7 cavalry to arrive."

"Well, if Shepard is taking a break, then I've mostly certainly earned one. A long one." Sam stood up to stretch.

"Better here than freezing your ass off on that Firebase," Gentry agreed. "I bet our tea's better, too." He reached for the steaming mug tucked aside on his desk and Sam caught a whiff of something delicious.

*Earl Grey.*

*Want. Now.*

*First thing's first, Traynor.*

*What? …Oh shit. Right.*

Casually making her way down (then up) the short War Room steps to the exit, Samantha tried to decide if dread or excitement was a better reaction to her waiting package. It was still a tossup.

In the CIC, Specialist Xian was hunched over his (*my*) console. Sam desperately wanted to sidle over and make sure he wasn't messing up any of her parameters, but the window of opportunity was too perfect. Not a single specialist was on this side of the CIC to notice a comms specialist sneaking into the storage closet by the elevator.

It was nearly the same as Sam remembered it from the retrofits; crates of various sizes were still stacked haphazardly both on shelves and on the floor. Firing up her Omni-tool scanner, Sam played a very quick game of Hot or Cold. An ordinary metal suitcase on the closest crate had a message chit that displayed Samantha's Alliance credentials on a tiny holo screen in response to her Omni-tool.

*Jackpot?*

No Alliance markings on the case itself, though. *Suspicious.*
Is that Liara theory sounding insane now?

Only one way to find out.

The comms specialist stepped as far into the open "closet" as she could to avoid being seen. Taking a deep breath, Sam pressed her thumb to the front clasp. It chimed another welcome at her biometric scan. The case had made a satisfying pop as it opened.

She squinted her eyes shut, afraid to open them for a moment.

Tick-tock, scaredy-pants. Time's a-wasting. People are behind you.

Right.

Slowly opening the case, Samantha had cautiously peeked inside. The first thing she saw was a small, flat package with a holo chit on top. She tapped her finger on the chit to display the message:

["To Lieutenant Traynor,

I hope you are doing well! With Karin taking over your treatment, you should be good as new in a few weeks. I still recommend taking it easy following the ordeal you went through, but I've noticed the Normandy crew are not adept at sitting still. At least promise you'll try.

You left this item in my clinic that day. I heard the Normandy was embarking immediately so I hope the courier returned it to you in time.

May I request a favor? If you happen to see Garrus, could you deliver this small gift of turian chocolate to him? I would really appreciate it!

Tout le meilleur!
Dr. Chloe Michel

P.S. When you next return to the Citadel, please visit my clinic!"]

…Garrus, huh?

A giddy smile started to creep up Sam's lips until she heard a voice from behind. Squeaking, she had snapped the hardcase closed and stepped out of the storage closet.

It was just Specialist Douglas shouting something at Joker down the bridge. Xian was still poring over the galaxy map console. She had remained unnoticed.

Sidestepping over to the elevator, Sam pressed the call button with her elbow as she did her best to hide the case behind her via an awkward parade rest position. The metal knocked against the back of her knees a few times before settling, a majority of it hidden from view by Sam's legs.

The elevator chimed open, but Sam stayed patiently at the door facing out to the CIC. Her caution paid off, as a pair of tech specialists strode off the lift a second later. But they were too engrossed in the datapad they were discussing to notice. Sam had paused to survey the CIC for any potential fellow elevator passengers who might join her, but none appeared so she slid over to the car and stiffly pushed the green button.

When the doors had closed, Samantha realized she'd been holding her breath and let it out in an explosive exhale.
...why are you acting like you're Blasto the bloody SpecTRe just after stealing some government secrets? This could not be more boring. Especially since none of these items are even for you, Traynor.

**Uh, being in possession of turian chocolate is one thing. Liara's armor is quite another.**

Only now did Sam have a moment of peace and quiet to allow that twisting feeling in her stomach to fully release into full-blown anxiety: she had Liara's armor. The set the asari had lent her for the encounter with the Normandy Traitor.

**Remember, Traynor? The set you stripped off and left in Dr. Michel's bloody clinic on the Citadel after you got shot?**

Yes, I recall. Thank you.

"EDI? Where are Garrus and Liara right now?" Sam asked the ceiling as she adjusted the case behind her.

"Garrus Vakarian is in the Port Observation Deck with Ensign Copeland. Dr. T'Soni is in her office."

"Thank you, EDI."

"I am pleased to assist."

Fuck. There's a really good chance I might run into Liara if I go to the Crew Deck.

**But, you could hang out with Garrus until she leaves, drop the case off while she's not there, and avoid the confrontation altogether.**

**Plus, I can harass Garrus about his new girlfriend.**

Sounds like that decision made itself, Traynor.

Echoing laughter greeted Samantha to her right when the lift stopped at the Crew Deck. The Port Observation door was wide open.

"Wasn't the first time we face Rachni, though," Garrus had rumbled back. "But it's par for the course with Shepard."

An excited, awed response. "Really? You've seen them before?" Sam recognized Ensign Copeland's voice.

"Few years back," came the casual reply. "On Noveria. Saren and his minions were trying to extract information from the Rachni Queen." Even out of view, Sam could just picture the insufferably smug grin Garrus no doubt had on his face.

"You saw the queen?" Copeland asked incredulously.

"Hell, we spoke to her."

Sam felt her eyes roll involuntarily before glancing over to the Starboard Observation Deck. A swipe at her Omni-tool revealed the Lieutenant Commander was inside, Ashley's blue dot parked over on a couch by the bookshelves.

Peeking around the right corner into the empty Mess, Sam had then padded quietly over to the Port
"You spoke? I can't imagine that. The things you've done, sir... They're amazing," Copeland breathed. He was on the edge of his seat in the L-shaped sofa.

Opposite him on the other couch, a turian in hard blue armor leaned back lazily, his heavy clawed feet resting on the nearby coffee table. The smug grin Sam had anticipated was more restrained, but there was definitely a glitter to his eyes.

"Well, it didn't seem that way at the time..." Garrus paused and glanced over at Sam with a nod, before turning to his right to look out the window. "Mostly you're just clawing your way out of one mess and into another, hoping your ass comes along for the ride."

It was impressively dramatic. His angular turian jowls and crest cut a dramatic profile, and he spoke with the weight of a war hero. It made Sam want to cut the tension of his humble-brag.

Setting the hardcase gently down next to her right foot, Sam had opted for a slow, sarcastic clap.

"Bravo, Mister Vakarian. I look forward to your motivational speaking tour: 'For the Love of God, Please Don't Eat Me.'" Sam's hand made a swooshing motion, drawing an invisible advertising banner in front of her.

Unfazed, Garrus grinned wider. He leaned forward towards Sam. "Don't forget the sequel: 'For the Love of God, Please Don't Shoot Me.' ...No trilogy though. Best to leave them wanting more rather than deliver an underwhelming ending. Am I right?"

"I dunno, Garrus. Sometimes the third chapter can deliver the best material," Sam had shrugged back. "Why deny your fans a memorable dénouement?"

"If they haven't been satisfied with the first two, a third just feels like I'm in it for the money. I'm an artist, Traynor. Not a sell-out."

"A true turian of integrity."

"That's me," he rumbled back with a laugh.

Ensign Copeland looked at Garrus and then back at Sam before looking down at his Omni-tool. He darted up off the couch with a profanity. "Shit! Shift started 5 minutes ago. ...thanks for the pep talk, Garrus."

"Anytime," Garrus acknowledged with a raised forefinger as he leaned back once more. "Keep that chin up, Ensign. Shepard got through hell and back, twice. This won't be any different."

Copeland nodded stoically before striding past the comms specialist over to the elevator.

Hefting the hardcase, Samantha took over where the soldier had been sitting. *Ugh. Still warm.*

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Specialist Traynor?" Garrus asked, warm and curious.

She set the case across her knees and fired up her Omni-tool. With a few taps she quickly switched the device to Quiet Mode, as well as set an alert to trigger if Liara left her office.

*What are the odds of her leaving her room if she's not on a mission? 1,000 to one? 1,000,000 to one?*

...*I'll think of something?*
Sam smoothly switched from her Omni-tool to popping open the case. Her fingertips ran over the curves of the folded armor and she swallowed the anxiety it caused before pulling out the thinly wrapped gift on top.

"I have something for you," Sam stated, her left eyebrow arching quite against her will. She set the still-heavy hardcase down beside her before standing up.

The turian's head tilted in intrigue as his lip curled in a smile. "Traynor. You shouldn't have."

"I didn't." She walked the few steps to drop the light package into his large hands before retreating back to her post at the couch to watch the show.

I want to remember this moment forever, she decided. She had silently debating recording it, and the odds were pretty even for and against. In the end, human decency won by a nose.

Garrus's brows furrowed almost comically. He tapped a claw at the data chit on top of the light blue package, the holo-message reflecting a warm orange light in his left eyepiece.

Sam briefly wondered how that message translated into turian. They were so much more stoic and disciplined, maybe this wouldn't read as a romantic gesture?

She was rewarded when she saw his beady eyes slowly widen. He had cleared his throat awkwardly after finishing the message, throwing a glance at Sam before tearing into the wrapping.

The dextro chocolate wasn't in bar form like Samantha was accustomed to, it was more like sticks of pocky or beef jerky. The embossed gilding on the wrap around the bundle gleamed, implying it was a very expensive brand indeed.

Sam didn't realize how creepily she'd been smiling at this whole scene until Garrus cleared his throat again. "Knock it off, Traynor. You're making me wish I was back fighting Rachni."

"Is that anyway to talk to the comms specialist of love? I'm just trying to make sure you find eternal happiness in the arms of a good woman, Vakarian," Sam retorted, feigning insult with a hand pressed to her collarbone.

Another rumble in Garrus's throat as he shifted in his seat, his fingers caressing the package. "What was the other item you left at Chloe's clinic?"

A sharp stab of panic had left Sam briefly flustered. After all, he actually knew what happened on the Citadel. He was the one who had talked Shepard into leniency and forgiveness in that hallway before her disciplinary hearing.

But he doesn't know you know he knows.

Oh Jesus Christ.

"...Just... a uniform Dr. Michel cut off me when she was tending to an injury I'd sustained on the Citadel."

Garrus nodded knowingly, but had said nothing.

"And don't change the subject on me, Garrus. So what do you think? Of the Good Doctor of the Citadel?"

"She's—I... Wait, why am I talking about this with you?" Garrus picked at one of the bundle's
wrappers, crinkling it between his fingers.

Narrowing her eyes, Sam decided to play it casual. She stood up.

"Well, if you want me to leave you with your thoughts… just don't forget the privacy lock if your thoughts wander too far," she sweetly implied as she leaned down to pick up the hardcase and took a step toward the door.

Garrus stretched out a desperate hand. "Wait!"

*Called it. "Yes?"

Another throat clearing. "…Did she… What did she say about me?"

Sam sat down again, struggling to suppress her grin. "Well, I was a little woozy from the Medi-gel. From—from my injury…"

"Right," Garrus acknowledged, waving his hand for her to proceed. She felt a flash of appreciation at how willing he was to gloss over her injury/circumstances.

"…but she was very interested to know I served aboard the Normandy. She asked about Wrex, LC Williams and Tali'Zorah… I told her what little I knew about Wrex and Williams. She's ecstatic to hear he'll be a shag-magnet on Tuchanka with the genophage cured. And that the 'Chief will make a fine SpecTRe.'"

The word "chief" had rolled off Sam's tongue strangely, as she realized she knew very little about Lieutenant Commander Williams' history.

"Chief?" As in *NCO Gunnery or Operations Chief? She must be pretty bloody incredible to jump 3-4 ranks in only a few years for being so young.

…Not more incredible than Shepard, but possibly a close second. I bet there are some good stories there.

Garrus's eyes narrowed, but he only muttered a pointed "Uh huh…"

*Stop belaboring the point, Traynor.*

Samantha leaned forward, holding her head in her hands with elbows childishly braced against her knees. "…She wouldn't stop gushing about you. How she knew you back when you were C-Sec. How heroic and selfless you were even with all the shady shit going down in the Wards. How no one cared about what happened to her small clinic except the wonderful Garrus, her own personal Archangel."

Gesturing to the chocolate in his hands, Sam had smiled warmly. "So I think the underlying message is: 'You're as sweet as this chocolate, Garrus Vakarian.'"

Now, turians weren't capable of blushing. *Probably why they wear all that face-paint.* But those beady blue eyes got noticeably wider. And darted uncomfortably from side to side.

"You don't say…" Garrus's fingertips drummed on the bundle of chocolate. "I—uh… I don't really know what to do here."

"…I'm sorry if you developed feelings for me so quickly, but it's just not going to work out between us, Garrus," Sam teased, savoring the moment.
And was it ever delicious.

No. Stop it.

Garrus seemed relieved by change in tone. "Damn, Traynor. Shot down before I could even practice my moves on you. Are all human women this cold?"

"Just my sort, I'm afraid. But you'll definitely have better luck with this one, since she's actually sweet on you in the first place."

These puns hurt, Traynor.

"Heh."

"Well?"

"Well what?" Garrus had asked.

"Do you like her back? Find her attractive at all? That's usually a good place to start."

Scratching at his scarred neck, Garrus paused to think. "Sometimes? No—Yes. Yes."

"Word of advice? Probably best not to lead with 'You're sexy some of the time.'"

"I dunno. I mean, I've only found two human women attractive: Shepard and Chloe. And I'm too afraid of Liara to hit on Shepard as practice."

Right. Liara would hit you for that. Sam bit her lower lip.

Leaning back, Samantha felt along her wrist, but it was cold. Still no alert that Liara's left her bloody room.

Need to keep this going.

"...But you at least find her attractive," Sam encouraged. "What about personality-wise?"

"She has fire, I'll give her that," Garrus had agreed. "She's strong. Doesn't back down."

"So what are you waiting for, Vakarian? She handed you an open invitation to go see her. Are you going to act on it?"

Garrus pulled out one of the sticks of chocolate and rolled it between his fingers. "I dunno, Traynor. I mean, I know I'm a charming package. Plus, who wouldn't fall for this voice?"

I wouldn't, but that's neither here nor there.

"But?" Sam prodded.

The turian turned his right cheek towards Sam, showing her the ragged lines of scar tissue trailing from his "lips" and cheekbone all the way to his right ear and down his neck. "...kind of kills the mood, doesn't it?"

Captain Confidence, insecure about his looks? I guess it can happen to anybody.

Sam had waved her hand dismissively. "Oh please. I think she's noticed. And she still gave you the bloody dextro chocolate. Are you familiar with the human idiom: 'ball's in your court?'"
Garrus nodded then grinned. "...Are all human women this pushy?"

"Just the good ones," Samantha confirmed, making a "tsk" noise in the corner of her mouth accompanied by a finger-gun.

"I don't know," Garrus had admitted. "I never really thought about cross-species intercourse."

There was a beat of a pause, enough time for both to mirror each other's cringe at that statement.

Garrus quickly amended. "...Damn. Saying it that way doesn't help. Now I feel all dirty and clinical. What I meant was, I never really had a big fetish for humans. But... Chloe is someone I respect and trust. So that's a start."

"Sometimes that's all you need," Samantha agreed. "It's a lonely galaxy to not take a chance on a sure thing."

…Why does this sound familiar?

"Here's hoping it doesn't end up some cross-species weirdness thing," Garrus said, looking up at the heavens (spirits?) for support. "Otherwise, fighting Reapers might be a welcome distraction big enough to cut the awkwardness. ...Though that reminds me, I should take Shepard out on the town for some bonding time. She's had a rough go of it these past few weeks. Mordin. Thane. Almost Grunt and Ash. Our fearless leader probably needs a distraction, too."

I'm working on it.

It was Sam's turn to clear her throat. "Try not to make Dr. Michel jealous already, Garrus. Women hate being jealous."

He had smirked back. "Don't worry, Traynor. I was thinking less 'candlelight dinner' for Shepard and more 'combat sim' or 'shooting stuff.' Plus, I've gotten the feeling she just isn't into me." Garrus winked at Samantha.

…Wait, does he know? Or is that just a "she prefers women" joke?

Sam suddenly felt a warm pull on her wrist and a faint orange glow appeared.

It's Go Time.

"I'd love to stay and torture you about all the beautiful women who are (and aren't) throwing themselves at your feet, Vakarian," Sam said as she stood up. "But my break is over so I better get back to the War Room. If you're not going to sweep Dr. Michel off her feet soon, at least thank her for the bloody chocolate. Don't be a prat, Archangel Sir."

Garrus chuckled once. "I will try not to be a 'prat,' Traynor."

Nodding at her in acknowledgement, he peeled the end of one wrapped stick in a smooth motion and took a satisfying bite. His eyes closed as he relished the taste, mandibles twitching in appreciation.

"You levo-aminos don't know what you're missing."

"We literally don't," Sam had agreed.

Hmmm, that might sound discouraging since he likes a human lady, Traynor.
"Shit. Undo, undo."

She added, "...But we can adapt. 'Love finds a way' and all that."

"Noted," the turian said before taking another bite. "Thanks for the pep talk of your own, Traynor. You're not half bad at it."

Picking up her hardcase in one smooth motion, Samantha backed out towards the door, which swished open. "You're welcome. Just promise me you'll at least talk to Dr. Michel."

Garrus saluted her with the remaining stick of chocolate. "Promise. Last thing I need is two angry humans gunning for me. Hopefully not with actual guns for once."

"Stick with the one you've got a shot with, Vakarian!" Sam crowed as she headed toward the elevator.

*These puns are the worst, Traynor.*

"Ooooh, that is some juicy gossip, Traynor," Allers gleefully interrupted. "I did a Battlespace piece on Dr. Michel right before I got embedded on the Normandy. The woman has a quad and a half keeping a free clinic open during a war. She passed up a spot on Huerta's advisory board because it would take time away from her patients. If I were Catholic, Dr. Michel would be a serious candidate for sainthood."

"And if half of what I've heard about Garrus is true, they sound like a good match," Samantha concurred.

The reporter stroked her chin. "It's a good story, too. Damsel in distress rescued by our turian hero, who then turns vigilante to help even more people on a far off world infested with scum. Leaving her behind to pick up the pieces. Then they meet again at the most dire of circumstances." Her voice had grown far-off and wistful.

Sam rolled her eyes. "I don't—I don't think that's actually what happened, Allers."

Diana pressed a finger to her lips. "Shhh shh shhhhh. The audience doesn't need to know that."

"I thought you were a reporter," Sam interjected. "Why does this sound like a screenplay for a trashy romance vid? Trying to secure your future after the war is over?"

**If the war is ever over, Traynor.**

*It's nice to dream, though.*

"A 'based on true events' screenplay, Traynor. The best kind. What's better for morale than a 'love finds a way against all odds' tale?"

Diana spun in her chair and began tapping away at her keyboard. "They need an amazing reunion on the Citadel next time we dock."

"Don't tell me you're going to hidden-camera Garrus and Chloe. If they even have a first date," Sam protested.

"Course not," Allers waved dismissively but kept typing. "It's just a small quid pro quo. Get them an amazing reservation and score an amazing exclusive later down the line. Even a feel-good soundbyte
thrown in another piece can do wonders for people in despair. …I’m not a vulture, Traynor. I’m a professional."

Oh God, what have I unleashed? It sounds like I need to start practicing apologizing now for siccing Allers’ well-intentioned meddling on them later.

"Allers."

Diana didn’t turn around, she was too busy muttering under her breath. "Apollo’s Café? Too open. Zakera Café? Too seedy. What I really need is a reservation at Ryuusei’s Sushi Bar in the Wards… Who do I know who owes me a favor?" The tapping of keys increased rapidly.

"Allers!"

Oh well, it can’t be that bad, right?

Despite her embarrassment, Samantha was slightly relieved that Allers was tumbling down this particular rabbit hole. It spared her having to skirt the truth about what happened immediately after leaving Garrus.

But the memory of it still stung.

When she heard the Port Observation doors swish closed, Samantha had hurriedly hissed into her Omni-tool. "EDI! Where’s Liara right now?"

A low, polite voice came over Samantha’s earpiece. "Dr. T’Soni is in the Shuttle Bay reviewing personal requisitions, Specialist Traynor."

"…is that unusual?" Sam had whispered as she peered around the corner into the Mess Hall. Mess Sergeant Beaumont was partly visible at the kitchen counter. Faint sounds of rustling and metal scraping indicated the ship’s cook was cleaning up the pots and trays from lunch.

Otherwise, Sam could see Dr. Chakwas seeing a male patient across the hall in the Med Bay. Both crewmembers had their backs to the elevator area where Sam hid.

"Statistically unlikely based on Dr. T’Soni’s past reticence to leave her cabin," EDI replied. "However, Dr. T’Soni is cleared to return to fieldwork, so an update and approval of her personal ordnance is required."

Okay. Okay okay okay. Sam breathed deeply, though she immediately winced from the spark of pain in her ribs.

One down, one to go.

I’ll just drop this off in Liara’s cabin and be done with it. She’ll never know I was here.

Until Glyph tells her. Or she reads her cabin log. Or she steps off the elevator in the next ten seconds.

Crossing over, Sam had slid along the outer wall towards Liara's cabin. The rustling in the Mess Hall cabinets continued, and Sam could hear a faint lilting singing from the Mess Sergeant.

To Sam's shame, she had eyeballed her own locker in the opposite corner to mentally compare volumes. But it was obvious the case was too wide. Plus, Samantha's locker was half-full of essential
clothes and boots to put this task off for another time.

Even if you decide to Laundry Day it up with all your spare uniforms, workout trousers and sleeping shirts… it's still not going to bloody fit, Traynor. Just give the damn thing back to Liara and be done with it already.

She might even be grateful for it since she's returning to active duty soon. It's almost thoughtful if you think about it.

…Right.

Sam tried calculating the time it would take her to get in and out. She also mentally pictured several viable drop-off locations.

Bed? Too conspicuous.

Next to the servers on the left side? Not conspicuous enough.

Just leave it under her tower of feeds? Out of the way, but she'll notice if she's over there?

When she's over there.

Sold.

The doors swished open upon Sam's close proximity, which admittedly surprised her a little. She assumed she'd been banned permanently from Liara's quarters.

Also surprising was the lack of Glyph. The small blue info drone was nowhere to be seen.

Maybe she took him with her? Work never stops and all that?

Being in Liara's cabin again was oddly paralyzing. Sure, the flashing screens, humming servers, and piles of datapads still looked the same as before. But what was once simply an intimidating room had become a forbidden fortress where a comms specialist did not tread.

Samantha struggled to shake the fear off. She was hesitant to step away from the open doors, as she would lose the ability to hear the elevator.

Just set it down and get out.

As Sam tiptoed over to the tower of screens along the right wall, the doors hissed close behind her. But there was a perfect spot underneath the command console there, only a few metres away.

As Sam leaned over, a glint of light hit her peripheral vision from something on the floor in the middle of the room.

Don't do it. Just go.

She set the case down, and made a small correction in its position.

Out of the way, but noticeable.

Perfect. …Get out. Now.

As she turned, Sam could finally see what that glint was: broken glass. A shattered frame lay on the floor. Taking a step closer to investigate, Sam scanned the floor and found a crumpled chain flung a
metre away from the frame. At the end of that chain sat a pair of deeply scarred military dog tags.

*Oh shit.*

*Get. Out.*

A pang of empathy and sadness hit below Samantha's heart. Which was immediately replaced by icy terror as she stepped toward the doors. Which had just opened.

*OH SHIT.*

"—if we extend amnesty to Sonax Industries, we can leverage their engineers for the Crucible to—"

Liara's blue eyes, so glassy and tired before, quickly hardened upon finding Samantha Traynor in her room. The asari had stopped dead in her tracks, the info drone glyph bouncing at her elbow.

"By the Goddess…” Liara trailed off, though Sam still heard a faint "…this is just what I need…” muttered bitterly under the asari's breath.

*SHIT shit SHIT shit SHIT shit SHIT shit SH—*

The comms specialist had words, but they were currently trapped in her throat.

Raising her chin defiantly, Liara inhaled a deep breath through her nose. "Samanth—Specialist Traynor. I did not give you permission to enter. I am occupied. Please leave."

Sam felt incredibly sheepish. As cold as Liara had been a few days ago after the showdown with the Normandy Traitor, she was downright frigid now.

*What had changed?*

Sam's eyes started to wander down to the set of Shepard's dog tags on the floor, but quickly snapped back up.

"Why are you here, Specialist Traynor?"

Clearing her throat, it had taken a few deep swallows before Sam had been able to muster a shaky answer. "I—I was returning the armor you lent me on the Citadel. In case—in case you needed it."
She gestured toward the hardcase on the floor, which the asari’s cold eyes flicked towards before returning to Sam.

"Thank you. Was there anything else?"

*Just go, Traynor.*

*But there was something else… What am I forgetting?*

"And I—I—"

"You what, Specialist Traynor?"

Stupidly pointing at Liara, Samantha sputtered, "Login. Firewall. War assets…"

*Get ahold of yourself. Jesus.*

**Confrontation is hard, Goddammit.**

Sam had cleared her throat. "May I—May I have your login credentials? I have—I need to coordinate war assets now and—and…" She sighed. *Please. It's part of my punishment from the whole Normandy Traitor fiasco. I need your ID to access some of assets to do my job."

Mention of the Normandy Traitor softened the asari for a moment. Her Omni-tool glowed as Liara swiped at it briefly. Sam felt an answering vibration in her own wrist as an alert echoed in her earpiece.

["Download complete."]

"Thank you."

Liara waved at the console on her left, which Glyph hovered over to before docking. The grid lines of his round form spun in place as he uploaded information to the console. She then turned her body to give Sam room to exit.

"You're welcome. If there's nothing else…"

*I have to say something. Anything.*

"I'm sorry," Sam whispered, clenching her fists. She was dreadful at confrontation.

"What was that?" Liara's eyes narrowed.

Sam steeled herself by taking a deep breath. Louder this time. "I'm sorry, Liara. For everything."

Those cold blue eyes softened slightly, allowing the pain behind them to surface. But the asari straightened her shoulders and the ice returned. "And what do you have to be sorry about, Samantha?"

**Well? What do you have to be sorry about, Traynor?**

"I don't know. I just—I wouldn't have— …I didn't know you and Shepard were involved," Sam sputtered out finally.

*Shit shit shit shit shit.*
Liara walked over to where Sam stood childishly frozen in place and scooped up the hard case. She slowly cracked the case, revealing her blue hardsuit within. Nodding, Liara had started talking to her armor rather than Samantha. Her words were hard.

"We aren't. Not anymore. Not for a long time."

The asari noticed Sam's eyes returning to the dog tags on the floor. The Alliance insignia on one and a bold "N7" on the other were painfully obvious.

"Yes, those are—were—Shepard's."

Sam said nothing.

"I got them off of Shepard's…" A small swallow. "…body."

"I'm sorry, Liara," had spilled out of Sam's mouth before she could stop herself.

The asari looked over at the broken chain on the floor, a mixture of sadness and bitterness reflected back. "I'm sorry, too. It wasn't supposed to be this way."

"What do you mean?"

"…We were supposed to have dinner. I was supposed to give them back. We were supposed to pick up where we left off. Then a call came and, like always, she answered. Blew up a relay. Went into Alliance custody. The right moment never came. And never will."

*If you say "I'm sorry" one more time…*  
*What the fuck else do I say?*

"I didn't mean to come between you and Annelise, Liara. I hope you can believe that," Sam said, though she suppressed the desire to reach out and touch Liara's arm.

A rueful laugh. *I do believe you, actually."

Sam couldn't tell if Liara was being sarcastic or not.

Gesturing emphatically, Samantha felt herself pleading with Liara. "I just—she saved my life. My family's life. I wanted to know more about her. Just talk. She seemed so withdrawn, I wanted to make her smile. I wanted—I don't know…"

"I'm glad, Samantha," Liara interrupted. She didn't sound glad. "And I know the feeling. I, too, was captivated by Annelise. She saved my life as well. Made me feel things I had never felt before. We connected. And then that connection was broken."

The hardcase snapped closed as Liara hefted it.

"I hope you are happy together, Samantha. Annelise—**Shepard**… deserves to be happy after everything she's been through. Just… not happy enough with me."

There it was. That stinging, bitter acknowledgement.

The asari doctor swept past the comms specialist, a slight crunch as her boot caught an errant shard of glass on the floor. Sam opened her mouth to say something, but nothing would come out. Liara turned her back to the door, busying herself with stowing the armor case back under her bed.
Sam had taken that as her cue to leave, before muttering another "I'm so sorry" under her breath.

Glyph chirped out a "Goodbye, Specialist Traynor!" as the cabin doors hissed closed behind Sam. Taking a few shuddering inhales to calm her jangling nerves, Sam started towards the elevator when she felt a warm pulse in her wrist.

A direct message.

[Message received: "Traynor: steer clear of Liara for a few days. Last time the Normandy was on Noveria, Shepard had to kill Liara's indoctrinated mother. In front of her. Yea. So she's in a terrible mood right now. Just FYI. – Garrus"]

_Oh Goddammit._

"...it'll be perfect. Right, Traynor? Traynor! Are you listening?" Allers was waving both her hands at Samantha.

"Unh?" Sam muttered stupidly. She felt the scowl across her brow smooth as the memory from earlier faded.

"Jeez, if you hated the plan that much, you could have just said so," Diana said with an eyeroll.

"No, it's great. Go for the gold, Allers." Sam shrugged nonchalantly before trying to take a nonexistent sip of coffee. She made a hollow slurping noise before realizing the cup was (still) empty.

"Uh-huhhhhh..." Allers' nails drummed impatiently on her desk once more.

She leaned forward in her chair, elbows on her knees, fingers steepled. "Spill it, Traynor. The fuck is going on with you?"

_It's a reasonable question, Traynor._

"Nothing!" ...No.

"I'm fine!" ...no.

"Sod off!" ...even worse.

Any of those responses still would have been better than what Samantha actually blurted out:

"I just—I met someone!"

In Sam's defense, her brain had been quite unhelpful on the matter. Which put Stupid Sam in charge, however briefly.

_Brav a, Traynor._
Diana purred loudly in response. "Oooohhh! You sly minx! Who is she? Did you hook up on the Citadel? Details, woman. You owe me after pretty much blowing me off most of shore leave. And for making me sit through the Comm Specialist Smalltalk Variety Hour."

"I just—" *We can fix this.*

"I didn't—" *There's got to be a way to fix this... Right?*

"...She's Alliance." *Good God, woman.*

Sucking in air through her teeth, Diana tsked in salacious disapproval. "This keeps getting better. First Garrus, now you. Forbidden romance in a time of war. ...A little cliché, but clichés sell."

Sam's cheeks burned with her blush.

"Look, I didn't tell you—I hadn't told anyone—because, obviously, it's terrible for my career and hers."

Diana clasped her hands contritely. "As a sub branch of the Alliance, our official position is that fraternization within military should not be tolerated per company policy." A pause. "As a news network, there's nothing juicier to the ANN than two people finding love during adversity. And as a reporter during wartime, I say: *go get you some while the getting's good.*"

Allers laughed and slapped at Sam's feet dangling over her bed. "So? Have you two 'smooshed booties' yet?" Her fingers curled in air quotes.

Sam felt her chin pull back and neck tighten with her disgusted grimace. "Ugh! *Really,* Diana?"

A light laugh. "That's my nephew talking. Teenagers really have a poetry of language."

"...you have a nephew?" Sam struggled to picture a sibling that had to deal with Allers growing up. "Let me guess: older brother?"

*Younger* brother. Older sister. All middle child, Traynor." Allers gave herself two waggling thumbs up. "And you're trying to change the subject and it just won't work. Spill. How was she?"

The comms specialist squinted back at the reporter, trying to convey silent rage.
"...What? **Obviously** you did the nasty in the past-y. You wouldn't be this ridiculous over holding hands at the ice cream social. I assume it wasn't public."

_Damn you damn you damn you, Allers._

Sam took several deep, if shaky, breaths.

_it might feel good to finally talk about this with someone, yea?_

"I hate you."

An amused "Mmmhmm" in reply, but Allers waited expectantly.

"...no. Private room."

"Floor?"

"Shower."

"Ooooh!" Allers cooed in approval and leaned forward. "Very nice. How was her performance?"

"It was..." Sam felt a blush creep in at the memory. "...superb. I mean, there was an awkward start. Bit rougher than I'm used to. But a stunning finish, as it were."

Ch Chuckling low in her throat, Diana grinned. "Excellent. I'm glad she recovered. And? How was yours? I expect great things from those worker bee digits of yours." She nodded in the direction of Sam's hands.

Somehow, this made Samantha's blush deepen. Partly at the realization of Allers thinking of Sam's fingers in that position (oo, double entendre!), but also at the actual memory of her performance. Or lack thereof.

"Um, well..."

"Well what?"

"I didn't get the chance."

A skeptical eyebrow. "Why not? Interruption?"

"No, **that** would have made sense. No, she... she wouldn't let me return the favor."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... after the shower... We moved to the bed..."

"Good, good."

"Started to get into a good rhythm. She seemed into it. Then suddenly, she wasn't. She backed off."


A bubble of frustration that had been steadily growing in Sam's chest burst. She didn't realize how long this had been bothering her until someone had finally asked. A torrent of words dripping with gossipy frustration poured from her mouth, snapping the thread of modesty that had been holding Sam back.
"I don't know! We'd been dancing around this kind of weird flirty banter for awhile, and then she invites me up to her place. So I think, ohmygod, she likes me too! Gives me a tour, even offers to let me use her shower! Then she has me pinned against the wall in the shower, and it's fantastic! But when I take things to the bed with her, she shuts down."

"Did she tell you to stop?"

"No, but I could tell she wasn't responding. I asked her if she wanted me to go, and she said yes."

A deep, irritated sigh. "I mean, what do you do at that point? It just… it just really hurt my feelings."

*It did. And it still does.*

As patient and understanding as Samantha was trying to be about the situation, it still fucking hurt.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Traynor. Have you talked to her about it since?"

"A little. Here and there."

"Yea, we've been a little busy, huh?" Allers agreed. "What did she say about it?"

Sam tried to remember the chess game the following day, where they traded questions for pieces. "Just that her mind got really crowded all of a sudden. Insecurity, fear of losing control. Something to that effect."

"Hmmm." The reporter rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "She sounds inexperienced. Don't tell me you were tapping a virgin."

"Psh, no. I know I'm not her first."

"But maybe her second or third?"

Sam shrugged and shook her head. "That I don't know. She did mention she'd just lost some crewmates recently."

"Maybe. It's pretty weak, though," Allers conceded with skepticism. "You'd think she'd be into a little escapism to get out of her head for awhile. …But, minds can be stupid things. It can be hard to shut that shit off. Still, that sucks for you, Traynor. I'm sure you would have rocked her world, if not galaxy." The woman patted Sam's foot consolingly.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Allers."

"Are you still talking, or is she pulling that embarrassed-radio-silence bullshit?"

"We still chat every now and then."

"Does she still seem interested, or is the magic gone?"

"I still sense a sexual tension…"

"Obviously…" Diana smirked.

Sam scowled back. "…Shut up. No, I mean there's still chemistry. She seems responsive. But it's all so vague and undefined."

"Take it from me, Traynor. This is not the time for vague and undefined. This could be the end of the everything so it's Shit or Get Off the Pot time. If she's not gonna sign up for a physical relationship
along with an emotional one then next time you see her on the Citadel, she's keeping you from finding someone who will..."

Right. The next time I see her "on the Citadel" as opposed to "in the hallway."

"...Unless you're into that, Sam. I mean, if you're happy with an emotional relationship only: that's great. That's what 90% of relationships are built on, and it's amazing shit. But you seem pretty keen on that other part... and if only one of you wants it: game over."

Allers tapped her temple. "So, good for you being all about consent and reading cues. But next time? She's gotta get to the root of her problems. You're not doing her or yourself any favors living in that weird Will She Won't She limbo."

Squeezing her empty coffee cup, Samantha chewed the inside of her cheek thoughtfully. "What do you recommend?"

"Well, in my experience with soldiers..."

"...been mixing business with pleasure, have we?"

Allers shot Sam a sharp glare, but smiled. "...you have to be direct. Chain of command, reticence to admit weakness, all that bullshit that makes them good soldiers can make them shit at volunteering feelings. So she needs to be straight with you, relatively speaking..." The reporter winked after her terrible pun. "...and tell you if it's a one-time thing or an on-going thing that will require counseling or something."

So "one day at a time," then. Sounds familiar.

"She needs to step up. You deserve better, Traynor. I don't care how hot she is... she is hot, right?"

"Gorgeous," Sam sighed.

"That's my girl," Allers grinned. "You don't have to put up with that shit, Sam. You deserve better, and someone who can be up front with you and all that warm fuzzy shit."

Sam was touched at how thoughtful and protective Allers was being. "Thank you."

Allers nodded in affirmation, and allowed a few seconds of poignant silence.

Then, "So... she's hot, huh? Like, really hot?"

Sam sighed. "Oh, she's bloody gorgeous. Those eyes and that hair and those lips and ohmygod her arms and... She's just got this dangerous aura. Super sexy. But then sometimes she can be funny and sensitive." Sam had to resist the urge to summarize with an "UMF!" noise.

"That's my girl," Diana said proudly. "...is she a chess nerd like you?"

"Amateur. It's growing on her, though."

"What else does she like?"

This gave Samantha pause. What else does Shepard like?
"Uhhhh…"

A scolding tsking noise this time. "Maybe you should get to know her outside of sex and Alliance shit, Traynor. Like a date? Or why don't you try like direct chatting? Then build her confidence with some cybersex or kinky photos?"

_Hmmmmm…_

Sam shrugged. "Riiiiight, with the Alliance monitoring comms? I don't fancy my tits or arse on the intranet."

"Oh wah wah," Allers snarked back. She tapped her chin. "If only you knew the person in charge of communications on this boat who could secure your stupid chat logs."

"That's true," Sam admitted.

A pair of incoming messages appeared on Diana's monitor. "Shit, that's my editor. And huh, Second Star Broadcasting is headhunting me."

The reporter swiveled back towards Sam and gestured to the door. "I need to take this."

"Ditching us for greener pastures, Allers?"

Allers scoffed. "Uh, no. I liked their Garvug story. But _seriously_? I'm on the _Normandy_! …But I need to check in with the ANN about my next Battlespace upload. So skedaddle, Specialist."

"You're lucky my break's over, otherwise I'd throw such a tantrum over this poor treatment, madam," Sam complained good-naturedly as she hauled herself off the low bed.

"Take it up with your new girlfriend. Since I'm not trying to get into your pants, I don't need to put up with your crap." Allers smugly stuck her tongue out at Sam.

As Samantha headed out the door, she heard Allers call back to her.

"Hey Traynor!"

Sam peeked her head back in and nodded.

"…Give her another chance, okay? You said she lost some crew. We've got robots the size of skyscrapers trying to wipe us out. That can be really fucking stressful." Diana shrugged. "…I mean, I _obviously_ think she's an idiot, for the record. I would have made it work. But sometimes you can't shut off that part of your brain. It's stupid, but it happens. And if you can't enjoy the moment, it's a great disservice to your partner's efforts."

"I suppose," Sam admitted.

The reporter stood up and fired up her Omni-tool as her camera drone came to life. "All you can do is lead the conversation and hope she jumps you next time you see her. That's my armchair psychologist advice: fish or cut bait." Allers casually saluted with two fingers.

A smile quirked at the corner of Sam's mouth. "Thanks, Allers. You're not total shit as a friend."

Diana shot Sam a lecherous wink. "Let me know if you need some practice!"

"Okay I lied: you're rubbish," Samantha called back as she headed for the elevator.
In the wee hours of the morning, Samantha slipped down to the Crew Deck for a cup of tea.

Decaf, Traynor. It's been a loooong day.

Sam took her time, mostly because the first cup she attempted to make did not have an actual tea bag in it. When she eventually returned to the War Room to close out her console, she noticed the emptiness of the room. Blearily checking the time on her Omni-tool, it was nearly 4AM.

The night crew are probably all in the bow command center so they don't have to deal with the security checkpoint hassle. Lazy gits.

…Why didn't I think of that?

As her console locked down, Sam stood up straight and cocked her head. There was a distinct thumping noise… somewhere. It was odd but also familiar.

Padding a circuit around the War Room, she noticed it got louder as she approached the QEC room. The moment the doors swished open, Sam's ears were assaulted with loud synth-rock music blaring from the ceiling speakers.

She also found Commander Annelise Shepard in the comm room, perched on one of the side banisters. Her shoulders were slightly rolled forward, giving her a hunched look. Shepard's eyes were closed, but her head swayed in perfect rhythm to the bass line. Her loose feet, however, bobbed and bounced erratically to the music.

So. It's the feet that are responsible for Shepard's awful dancing.

Despite the dull headache the volume caused, Samantha found herself utterly charmed by the sight. Annelise had this childish wiggle about her. And she looked semi-relaxed for a change.

It's just so… normal.

Sam tried to decide on how best to alert Annelise to her presence. Touching her cheek or hair incited a warm purr in Sam's chest, but she shook the impulse off. That might be a) too familiar too quickly (you have shagged, remember), or b) too surprising and get Sam decked in the face.

She settled for tapping the Commander's jostling knee. Sam's second instinct had been correct, for Shepard's hands jerked off the support into loose fists as her green eyes shot open.

The hands relaxed when Annelise found Samantha next to her. Though attempting to be nonchalant, there were signs Shepard was flustered over being found in such a state. There was a hint of pink to the Commander's cheeks. Her casual sweep of red hair behind her ears was a little erratic. And the line of her mouth narrowed petulantly.

Sam had to shout over the music. "I'm thrilled your first reaction wasn't to just uppercut first and ask questions later, ma'am!"

"Sorry!" Annelise barked back sheepishly as she swiped at her Omni-tool to pause the music. "I wasn't expecting anyone at this hour." She looked up at the ceiling. "I told EDI to warn me if someone was coming."

"I believe your instructions were to report incoming visitors, Shepard," EDI hummed back
overhead. "I was not aware Specialist Traynor was classified as a visitor considering your mutual sexual history. Shall I readjust my parameters for future encounters?"

Sam put a hand on her hip, looking back expectantly at Annelise.

Annelise only sighed back, her cheeks still flushed. "No, EDI. It's fine."

The AI signed off with a quick goodbye while Sam grinned back. "Good answer."

Shepard shrugged apologetically. "I was just—I didn't know anyone was still up."

"I was about to turn in, honestly. But I heard this tea calling my name before I closed everything down." Sam gestured with her fresh mug, dramatically inhaling the fragrant steam.

_Ahhh, Earl Grey._

An exhale-laugh as the Commander started to push herself off the narrow railing. Sam waved her off and sidestepped next to the woman while taking a sip of her tea. "Why are _you_ up?"

"Couldn't sleep," Shepard shrugged. The dark circles under her eyes confirmed this. "And I'm expecting an update from Admiral Anderson, so I thought I'd just wait in here rather than in my cabin."

"I was quite relieved to find you in here. Rather than the varren stampede I was expecting," Sam teased, nudging the woman's knee with her hip.

"Sorry. I know I like it loud. I hope I didn't hurt your delicate eardrums," Annelise apologized, though her words were laced with amicable mockery.

Samantha scoffed. _Please. _I've been to my share of rock concerts. If I can still feel my teeth, it's not loud enough._

That wonderful exhale-laugh in response.

When Shepard brought up her Omni-tool again to turn off the music player, Sam leaned in closely to look at the screen.

"What were you listening to? It sounded familiar."

Annelise pulled her wrist over so Sam could get a better view. "Turian/human band called Storm Eagles. Did you see the ASO show in Vancouver in February? They headlined."

Sam snapped her finger in dawning acknowledgement. "That's what it's from! Were you there? I was in the upper west mezzanine with Cortez. We lost Joker like ten minutes in."

A rueful smile pulled at Shepard's lips. "Saw the simulcast vid. I was still under confinement. At least Vega was a kind enough jailor to bring a couple beers."

_Right. The whole "turned herself in after blowing up a Batarian relay" thing._

_Subject change?_

Before Sam had a chance to think of something, Shepard asked, "Have you been to a lot of concerts?"

"A few," Samantha admitted. "A few local nobody groups on Horizon. Wasn't much else to do in
the colony otherwise. There were some concerts at Oxford… that I admittedly don't remember too well, being a young and foolish co-ed."

She felt a tug of excitement at Annelise's intrigued "Oh really?"

But Sam just shrugged innocently and continued with a smile. "Arcturus Station had its share of benefit events the politicians occasionally let the riff-raff attend. Saw Element Heero from the eighth row… before they got arrested for soliciting red sand from an undercover cop." She shook her head. "Bloody geniuses. …What about you?"

Annelise leaned her head back against the wall to think. Strands of red hair fell into her eyes. "Mostly just ASO shows when I got breaks from missions. Four, maybe?" She smiled, her eyelashes bouncing the hair pressed against them. "My first ever, I was fourteen and snuck into a packed Knights of the Round concert in Seattle."

"My mum would be so jealous," Sam encouraged. "She thought Strife McCloud was just so dreamy. I think she cried actual tears when they broke up."

"I know Andy did." A fond smile at the memory. "She got us thrown out because she tried to sneak into their dressing room." Shepard dropped her chin to roll her eyes at Sam. "Bloody genius,' too."

Is this—am I having a normal conversation with Shepard?

Miracles do happen. Keep it going, Traynor.

"You and this Andy were close?" Sam hoped her tone was interested but nonchalant (rather than bursting with curiosity).

That smile did not quite meet Shepard's eyes. "We were. Took care of each other in the Tenth Street Reds for almost six years. She was a lifer. I wasn't."

Don't say "I'm sorry," Traynor.

"I'm—" Sam caught herself and cleared her throat.

"Be straight with her," remember?

…relatively speaking.

Obviously.

"I just realized that, I don't actually know that much about you, Shepard. Other than what the Alliance has told me. Or what I've figured out from observation."

Annelise turned to study Samantha. "Likewise." A slanted smile pulled at her right cheek. "If only we had a chessboard. To trade intel."

I WILL RUN UP TO MY BUNK RIGHT NOW AND GET MINE AND—

Sam cleared her throat again, then suggested, "We'll have to do a raincheck on that." She felt relieved when Annelise nodded back in agreement.

Gesturing to the QEC video comm consoles with her mug, Sam asked, "Do you have time to talk now, sans chess barter?" She stopped herself from offering Shepard a polite out.

This isn't confrontation, this is conversation.
Annelise waved her hand to the stretch of banister next to her. "I'd love the company, Samantha."

There was a giddy sensation that ran up Sam's spine as she leaned her backside against the banister. She even maneuvered so her thigh pressed gently against Annelise's. She suppressed a grin when that thigh shifted a little more snugly towards Sam.

*I don't think I'm the only sly minx here.*

…Challenge accepted.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," Sam hummed as she took another sip of tea.

A confused blush in response. "My—what?"

Sam nodded at Shepard's Omni-tool. "Your playlist. What does Commander Shepard listen to?"

A small *(disappointed?)* monosyllable. "Oh." It was Annelise's turn to clear her throat as she brought up her wrist again. She quickly adjusted the volume down to a more bearable decibel before opening a multitude of windows.

"You'll have to be more specific," Annelise said coyly. "I don't know if you know this about me, but I don't do things half-assed."

"No!" Sam half-shouted with feigned innocence. "You!"

"I know, I know." The woman leaned in to give Samantha a better view of her Omni-tool. "Where do you want to start? I've got playlists for warm-ups, cool-downs, general Shuttle rides (dependent on length), pre-mission, post-mission, mission-dependent mixes (say infiltration versus rescue). I also have eight playlists for workouts: two for cardio, one for weights, two for stretches, two for biotics, one for strength…"

*Good lord. She wasn't kidding…*

…*She also smells really good.*

"What's that one?" Sam asked, though her voice cracked slightly. She pointed at a tucked away window whose title had caught her eye. "'Strategy Mix'?"

Shepard's cheeks turned slightly red. "That's… for when I'm at the galaxy map—or asset log in the
War Room—and going through missions to determine course of action.

Samantha had to stop and think about that. "...Wait, so all those times you've been standing by me next to the galaxy map planning out flight paths and such, you've had music going in your earpiece?"

"Pretty much?" Annelise grinned sheepishly.

Childish outrage bubbled in Sam's throat. "Are you bloody kidding me? I talk to you while you're at the galaxy map! Are you telling me that all this time I've been chatting you up before, you've been tuning me out with background music?" The comms specialist scowled, though she was too amused to be truly cross.

Annelise squawked defensively. "Hey, I listen, too! I just... it helps me focus and figure out what all we can get accomplished with our fuel reserves. Unless you'd like to be stranded in dark space at some backwater system flagging comms for whoever happens by."

"Fair enough." Sam smiled. "You have to give me a sneak peek of Shepard's Strategy Mix. I don't think I've ever wanted to hear anything more in my life."

Other than possibly the sound of you pinned against the wall saying my na—

Nodding, Annelise offered her Omni-tool window to Sam, who tapped on the play button.

A soothing, synthetic beat sounded through the speakers. It was soft and undulating at first, but as it progressed more sounds layered on top with a sense of increasing urgency. There didn't seem to be any beginning or end, just a constant thrumming cadence.

"I'm not sure what I was expecting," Sam admitted. "You seemed like a trashy synth-rock kind of woman."

"I'm a woman of many layers," Annelise said sagely. "'Trashy synth-rock' is just layer one."

Leaning back, Sam stared up at the ceiling and let the music wash over her for a few moments. "I'm not sure what I was expecting." Sam admitted. "You seemed like a trashy synth-rock kind of woman."

"I'm a woman of many layers," Annelise said sagely. "'Trashy synth-rock' is just layer one."

Shepard rested her head against the wall as well. "'I'm Commander Shepard and this is my favorite set of tunes on the Citadel?'"

"Brilliant," Sam agreed. "Sold."

"I'll think about it." Annelise brought her wrist up and made a few swiping motions. The music faded. She made a welcoming flourish towards Sam. "...Well? What about yours? I showed you mine."

"You did. And it did not disappoint."

Balancing her tea in her right hand, Sam flicked her Omni-tool on and tabbed into her own music player. About a half dozen windows opened. "Not quite as robust, comparatively. I make up for quantity with quality," Samantha jibed.

"Oh really?" Annelise said skeptically as she reached over to scroll through a few. Her head dipped closer and warm breath tickled at Sam's neck.

"Those are my data crunchers, mostly slow jams," Sam narrated as Shepard sifted through each
"Then my comms analysis playlists to get my mind working… and few ambient ones when the sleeper pod isn't doing it for me…"

"A lot of PK Thunder, DJ Hookshot and Screw Attack in here," Annelise noted. She raised an eyebrow at Samantha. "So synth-rock is trashy, but half hour-long salarian house remixes are not?"

Sam shrugged. "I don't make the rules, Commander."

A scowling snort through Shepard's nose. "Uh-huh." She tapped a PK Thunder song.

Since Sam's Omni-tool was not synced to the QEC room, a warped tone hummed from her wrist that quickly escalated into a complex symphony of beats with occasional salarian voices joining in.

Annelise brought up her own Omni-tool. "I'm willing to give it a shot. Want to trade?" *Oh really?* "Oh absolutely."

A few moments of silence passed as they flicked windows across their wrists and granted sync access to the other's libraries. Then they each surveyed their haul of files.

*Well, at least with double shifts I'll have plenty of time to warm up to my "Shepard's Shit" playlist.*

"So," Annelise began before stopping.

"So," Sam seconded as she sipped her tea and perused her new music.

"…How long have you known?" Shepard asked.

Almost *hearing* a record scratch sound, Samantha's head shot up as she closed down her Omni-tool with an abrupt flick.

*Oh, that's a loaded question indeed.*

She turned to Shepard, who just had an expression of relaxed curiosity.

"How long have I known what?"

"You know…" An awkward pause as Shepard tucked a strand of hair behind her ears. "…that you like women."

**Bold. I like it.**

"Hmmm," Sam casually contemplated as she took another swig of tea to silence the gleeful screaming in her brain. "Grammar school, I think? I believe I came home from fourth grade and announced to my parents I was playing House with Alexa Danvers and we were 'married.'" Another sip. "She was a real package. Superb at hoverball."

Annelise chuckled warmly. "Sounds like it. How did she get away?"

"Jealous, are you?" Sam shot back before continuing. "Her family moved to Bekenstein three months later. I was devastated. For about two weeks. Then I discovered chess."

"So fickle, Traynor," Annelise teased.
"That's me. What about you, Shep—Annelise?"

"Fourteen," Annelise replied. "Later bloomer. And I didn't even know until Andy kissed me after telling me to stop being an idiot. That's when I finally figured out why I never felt anything with any of the guys in the Reds."

"Better late than never," Sam agreed.

Now we're getting somewhere.

You know the next question to ask, Traynor. History favors the direct.

"Do you—how many have you been with?"

Shepard looked away and suddenly dug her heels against the wall for a moment. "Four."

"...Does that—"

"Include you? ...Yes," Shepard finished with a shy shrug. "Andrea Belmont. A one-night stand after Elysium with a woman named Quinn. Liara T'Soni. ...Samantha Traynor."

"...Interesting," Sam replied lamely. She wasn't sure what else to say to that.

Smiling gently, Annelise nudged at Sam's knee. "What about you?"

Fuck.

"Well, there's a context to—what I mean is—I was younger when—wait I am younger but—"

"Samantha," Annelise interrupted with a light laugh. "I don't know what you think I'm going to say, but give your Commander a little credit."

She hadn't thought about it in a long time. Sam actually had to count up in her head.

Two in high school, four at Oxford, two furlough one-offs during Basic (since they'd had a consistent port of call), one brief fling with a colony ambassador's aide on Arcturus last year, and Isabela.

Don't forget Shepard, Traynor.

"11. A few that lasted, otherwise mostly spectacular failures."

Shepard was thoughtful, which gave Sam's stupid mind time to prey on the silence.

...She's judging you.

Me? I should judge her. Only three other women? Has she seen her? And how bloody attractive she is? ...How deep are her trust issues?

And how shallow is your trust that you always seem to jump into bed first and ask questions later?

That's... not what happened. Some of the time.

Samantha was the first speak up. "I think the moral of this chat is: we're both rubbish at relationships."

Shepard looked up, a warm smile pulling at her mouth. "Both? I was worried it was just me."
"If only," Sam laughed. "I'm crap with long-term."

"And I might have a small issue with letting people in," Annelise admitted dryly.

"So this is either the part where we agree we're too different, or…" There was a nervous flutter in Sam's chest.

"Or?" The immediate counter sent a wave of relief through Sam.

"Or we go for a happy medium? Not too serious, not too casual?"

"Sounds good." Annelise offered a hand. Samantha had to shift her cup to her left hand in order to shake.

Did we just… did we just make this Official?

A little more formally than I'm used to… but I'll bloody well take it.

Sam held that hand a little longer than required. "Well then."

"Well then, indeed," Annelise agreed. Her thumb traced over Sam's knuckles.

Downing the rest of her tea in one greedy gulp, Samantha fired up her Omni-tool and synced it with the room speakers. "We should celebrate." She hit [Random] on her wrist and let fate DJ their next move.

A slow brassy tune started, before immediately transitioning to a powerful ballad.

I was hoping for something a little sexier, but I'll take it.

Sam was very curious to see if Annelise was familiar with this particular song.

The SpecTRe cocked her head. "Is that—is that the theme from a Blasto movie?"

"Yes! But which one?" The old movie nerd in Sam couldn't resist the pop quiz.

Annelise starts snapping her fingers. "The one about… oh it's on the tip of my tongue… the planet-eater worm… spreading spores to systems to soften them up before it descends…" A dawning realization as she announced proudly, "Blasto 4: This One Is Not Enough."

Samantha gently golf-clapped against her empty mug. "Brava. I didn't take you for a Blasto fan, Commander."

"I love a good action vid," Shepard grinned as she leaned back once more. Her head bounced to the bassline for a few moments. She raised an eyebrow at Sam. "Let me guess. You were an Agent Widow fan."

"Agent Widow" referred to the dangerous leading lady from Blasto 4, an asari with her own secret motives known for her epic double-crossing.

"Please," Sam said dismissively. "Obviously I was Team Genevieve, the plucky human female weapons dealer?"

A breathy laugh. "Right. Of course."

"Can't beat that ending though," Samantha acknowledged.
Sliding off her banister, Sam stood in front of Shepard and hefted her mug on her hip like a pistol. Her voice lowered to a deep, dramatic inflection as she quoted, "'This one is on to your tricks, Agent Widow. This one has seen the results of the last one who accepted your 'help.'"

Shepard's voice pitched higher into a smarmy falsetto. "'But Blasto," she mock-cried as her head shook dramatically. "'...If we don't hurry, the Sporefiend will destroy us all.'"

They continued, while Sam leaned in close at the finale of the quote: "'This one will always remember you before you betrayed us. What we had together. But this one has a job to do.'"

Now, this was the part where Agent Widow kissed the hanar SpecTRe before dropping backwards out a window, the live grenade belt on her hips falling into the waiting maw of the space worm.

Annelise smirked, but followed canon dutifully: "'Embrace eternity, SpecTRe.'"

"Only if you enkindle this first."

Sam felt hands grip her uniform lapels and was pulled forward between Shepard's knees where she sat on the railing. Their lips crashed together for an awkward kiss before they both pulled away snickering.

"Classic cinema," Samantha breathed with a satisfied nod. There was an answering exhale-laugh of agreement.

But those hands were still on Sam's shoulders. And Sam's hips still pressed against Shepard's.

They drew back together slowly, and the kiss this time was far less awkward. Fingers traced past Sam's neck to bury themselves in her hair. Sam ran a hand down Annelise's waist, cupping the side of her thigh for a firm grip. Her right hand still clutched that bloody coffee mug, and she seriously contemplated throwing the damn thing across the room.

Gloriously slow and deep kisses ensued, mixing with the sound of deep inhales through their noses. Their chins dipped and tilted, experimenting with various positions. Sam felt the pull of Annelise's lips on her own tongue, and responded in kind. There was a soft moan of delight, though Samantha wasn't sure if it was Annelise's or her own.

Does it matter?

Suddenly, the music stopped as EDI announced overhead. "My apologies for interrupting, Commander, but Admiral Anderson is available on Comm Two."
Annelise cleared her throat as she pulled back. "...got it, EDI."

Samantha took a few reluctant steps back and drummed her fingertips on her stupid bloody mug. She tucked her hair behind her ears.

"Raincheck?" Shepard asked.

Sam smiled back. "Another one? We're running quite the IOU program after one night."

Annelise's voice was husky and her eyes crinkled with warmth. "We'd better get on that, then."

Feeling heat in her cheeks, Sam backed out towards the door. She could see the blinking console light on Comm Two waiting for the Commander.

*What else did Allers suggest?*

"...How would you feel about direct chat sometime? When—when we both have some downtime?"

"I'd like that." Shepard slid off the railing and shook out her shoulders a little. There was a pleased curl of a smile on her lips.

"Great, I'll set it up," Samantha said with a wink, though a yawn did creep up her throat.

"Get some sleep, Traynor." A gentle command from the Commander.

"Aye, aye."

*Well, that went better than I ever could have hoped. What a superb day for romance.*

*And you're not the only one, Traynor.*

*Oh right!*

"Oh right! Garrus mentioned something about you two having fun the next time you were on the Citadel. Don't get into too much trouble, ma'am," Sam called back just as Shepard reached the console and started plugging in her IP.

The woman loosely saluted back in acknowledgement. "One of many things to look forward to, then." Her green eyes sparkled in the low light.

*Indeed.*

Chapter End Notes

Ren's Long Overdue Note:
I scoured the Mass Effect Wiki for the names of Future music genres but came up empty. So I made up some band/music group names that tickled my fancy.

No, this story isn't dead (neither am I). Sorry for the almost 2 year gap in updates. In my defense, it's been REALLY busy.

2015: After my magical engagement to my magical fiance, I stupidly took on a freelance design project that ate up a fair chunk of my freetime and also exacerbated back
problems I was having. I spent most of last year suffering from crippling pain, mounting medical debt, as well as the emotional toll of being in constant pain culminating in several panic attacks as well as depression. On top of this, my fiance dealt with several job changes and we bought a house together. At the end of last year, I had a spinal fusion as well as a correction of a fracture and misaligned vertebrae. Fun times.

The first quarter of this year was spent recovering from the spinal surgery as well as a job change for me this time. There was some residual depression I had to get through, all while planning for our wedding in October. It was an amazingly epic nerd wedding, but it was an emotional haul to get through. I'm finally done with all of that. IT'S ALL DONE. I did almost all the major Adult milestones (medical procedure, buy a house, job change, marriage) over the course of about 18 months. I just missed a pregnancy to complete the hat trick (let's not get ahead of ourselves).

Anyway, I hope y'all are doing well. And thank you for not forgetting about my little story. I've missed it.
Still pursuing the mystery surrounding Leviathan, the Normandy heads to the Mahavid asteroid to find Dr. Garneau. Samantha Traynor is pushed to her physical limit while still healing from the cracked rib she got on the Citadel. And despite Mahavid holding more questions than answers, Sam and Shepard grow closer via a private channel set up by the Comms Specialist.

Art by Herssian.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

To: [Traynor, Geoffrey; ‘Suresh-Traynor, Priya’]
15:48:31 GST, 02/05/2186
Subject: All fine. …Seriously.

Mum & Dad,

I’m sorry I haven’t written/called/texted. I really am. I got your seven vidmails and twelve emails,
thanks. Admittedly, I’ve been a little distracted. And admittedly, it hasn’t 100% just been work-work-work. …I’ll tell you later, when/if I’m ever allowed. (Not all bad news. Promise.)

I’m staying safe and doing well. My responsibilities on the Normandy have expanded, so I’ve been quite busy as of late. I’m even something of an amateur forensic data analyst. Perhaps I missed my calling. Think the Alliance will pay to send me back to Oxford for a master’s degree? I wonder if the Fishbone Pub is still there… Kidding! I know how much you hated me working there, Mum. It was really good money, though! Another potential calling your precious daughter missed out on. I’m keeping a tally.

I’m sorry to hear you’re pulling double shifts now, Mum. I can relate. How is being rotated from the clinic to the hospital going? Is it utter madness? I pray things will quiet down so you can return to physical therapy, your first love. That’s what happens when you’re a brilliant nurse, Mum. If you were rubbish, they wouldn’t want you for everything.

Glad to hear you’re keeping busy, Dad, even though they cancelled class at uni indefinitely. That local citizens watch sounds like a good idea, plus you love organizing things. Our neighborhood couldn’t ask for a better unofficial copper, yea? Maybe I’m not the only one who missed their calling. We should have a Traynor family meeting and hash out all these feelings next time I’m on shore leave.

Yes, I promise I’ll look into that “Sanctuary” thing. I think I’ve seen adverts around the Citadel as well, though I didn’t think much of it. And you say it’s stationed on Horizon? Is it anywhere near Discovery? Surely the colony zoning board would have pitched a fit. Hm. Strange. Wouldn’t we have heard about something like that being built? Especially if it’s as incredible and safe as it claims to be? And speaking of feelings, you mentioned Dr. Harper and his wife left for Sanctuary already? Have you heard any word from them about it? I’ll run some filters on social media to see if there’s any buzz about it.

Please don’t do anything rash. As far as I can tell, Horizon has kept off the radar for the… you-know-whats. You don’t need some potential scam artists taking your money and leaving you out in the cold.

Stay safe. I love you both.
- Alpha Sprog (Sam)

P.S. Rxd7, Dad. Check.

Samantha hit [Send] for the fifth time and drummed her nails on her console in irritation. These new security measures were incredibly frustrating for the Comms Specialist.

I just want to send a bloody email to my bloody family.

You’re the one who almost touched an incredibly dangerous Reaper artifact, Traynor.

I know, I know. I’m already banned from vidcalls until I’m cleared of being an indoctrination threat. And can’t even use the word “Reaper” in a bloody email.

…Better bloody safe than bloody sorry.

Hmph.

Sam almost did an air fist-pump in the middle of the War Room when the process bar transitioned to “SENT.” She’d been off the clock for close to 30 minutes now, except “just gonna send one email”
had turned into a tedious fiasco of rewrites.

There was a ping to her Omni-tool from a direct message.

[“You better not be late, Traynor. I don’t tolerate tardiness. 1600 on the dot. Tick tock.”]

The clock above the message on Sam’s wrist read 15:51 GST.

_Eep!_

[“Eep. I’ll be there ASAP.”]

Samantha bolted for the door and silently fumed at Westmoreland and Campbell sipping their coffee while the security curtain lazily drifted over Sam. The seconds felt like minutes. Mental obscenities Sam leveled at the two soldiers grew nastier and nastier.

Finally, the door pinged approval, allowing Sam to haul ass to the elevator.

Sarah called out from behind. “What’s your hurry, Traynor?”

“I’ll tell you later, Campbell!” Sam tossed over her shoulder as she skidded into the open lift.

_Crew Deck, Crew Deck, Crew Deck,_ Sam frantically mashed on the call button. She kept shifting her weight from one foot to the other, her impatience building. It didn’t help that her ribs had already started to throb from so small an exertion as running to the elevator.

The doors weren’t even fully open before Sam darted through them. She clipped her shoulder on the way out which radiated into her already throbbing ribs.

—_Shit shit Shit shit Shit._

Throwing open her footlocker next to the stasis pods, Sam dug out a fresh pair of clothes. When she noticed the Mess Hall was empty, she didn’t even hesitate to strip down right then and there to change (though Sam did spy a baffled look from Dr. Chakwas through the unfrosted Med Bay window).

—in _Shit shit Shit shit._

Still pulling on her shoes, it took some hopping and skipping to get back to the elevator. Thankfully, it was still where she’d left it. Sam elbowed the call button for the Shuttle Bay now, her ribs on fire from the manic pace.

—in _Shit shit Shit shit._

She ventured a glance at her Omnitool.

_1559 GST._

_Oh bollocks._

..._Tick tock, Traynor._

_I fucking know, dammit!_
“1559 and 53 seconds,” an impressed voice called out as the woman straightened, her Omni-tool already out. “Starting off on the right foot, Traynor. 'Better never than late.'”

Breathing heavily, Sam closed her eyes a moment to help remember where that quote was from. “I want to say… George Bernard Shaw?”

“Very good.”

*Putting that ol’ Oxford education to use, Traynor.*

*Thanks, mum.*

Ashley Williams grinned back as she raked fingers through long, dark hair. In a practiced motion, the Lieutenant Commander twisted her hair up into a bun before placing her hands on her hips.

Sam followed suit by pulling back her own black hair into a short ponytail with the help of a hair-tie on her wrist.

“Congratulations on being cleared for light PT, Lieutenant. I’m in charge of strengthening you up. Ready to get to work?” Ashley’s tone was light, but the arch of her eyebrow implied a challenge.

*Eep.*

Clearing her throat, Sam politely saluted. “Aye aye, ma’am. …permission to speak freely?”

A crisp returned salute. “Permission granted and expected.”

“…how much is this going to hurt?”

Ashley laughed in response as she gestured for Sam to follow her over to the closed Shuttle Bay doors. “Not as much as it should. Don’t think I didn’t notice how sparse your PT logs have been over the past couple years.”

Sam swallowed in trepidation. A small sigh of pain escaped as the fire in her ribs dulled.

“…But I don’t mess with Doctor’s Orders. Plus, I guess you’ve earned a little leniency considering how you got hurt.” The SpecTRe winked kindly at Sam.

*This woman is a saint.*

“…still gonna kick your ass, though!” Ash snapped to attention and made a circular motion with her finger before taking off in a jog around the Shuttle Bay. “Starting with light cardio. Laps, Traynor! Move it!”

*…This woman is the devil.*

It was 20 minutes of hell. Sam wasn’t that out of shape (standard service regs required minimum fitness requirements). But compounding her slow, huffing jog was the searing pain in her ribs that had returned with a vengeance. (Williams would occasionally shout hollow reassurances like “If it burns, it means it’s healing!”)

After about 5 minutes in, Ashley was running backwards barely breaking a sweat. It made Sam start to hate the constant “On your left!” as the obviously more fit soldier lapped her. But Samantha was anything but a quitter. She remembered her strategy from boot: play a game of speed chess in her
It made the ramping workout (a mixture of steady jogging with brief spurts of hard effort) slightly more bearable.


Sam was determined not to be a complainer, but the burning in her ribs was getting… intense. She definitely wasn’t used to this much exercise after sitting and/or standing at a console all day every day. Everything resisted the movement, especially Sam’s legs. They burned with the effort, seeming to get heavier and heavier.

Fortunately, Williams was patient. She didn’t bark criticisms or insults, only constructive feedback.

“That’s it! A little harder! Focus on your breathing and less on your running! Find a steady pace at first, then start to push those limits. Okay, now slow down! Feel your heart rate, control your breathing, let it slow then build it back up!”

Sam just wore her pain on her face, gritted her teeth and nodded. Occasionally, she would transition one of her pumping arms to tuck under her breasts to hold her ribs. It helped with the ache, though Sam still breathed in long, shuddering gasps during the harder pushes.

Finally, the Lieutenant Commander called out, “All right! Cool down, Traynor! Meet you at the weight rack in 90 seconds.” Ashley shook out her shoulders in a small stretch, only the barest hint of sweat on her forehead. Not a hair was out of place in that tight bun.

She really is the devil.

Comparatively, it took all of Samantha’s remaining dignity not to collapse in a heap on the floor. Blood pounded in her ears. Sweat poured off her neck and back. Her chest and lungs burned from the effort as Sam groped in her pants pocket for the small cube of an inhaler for her asthma. A sharp intake of cool air soothed her chest almost instantly, though the ache still lingered.

“Gotta teach those lungs to expand again,” Ashley mused as she waggled a water bottle at Sam from next to Vega’s collection of weights. The carrot was enough to entice Sam over to the SpecTRe and chug half the bottle in one go, wheezing the whole time.

“They’re just—“ Gasp. “—a little—“ Wheeze. “—rusty.”

You sound like a volus, Traynor.

A familiar, skeptical eyebrow arch. “Uh-huh. And how much of the rest of you is ‘just a little rusty,’ Traynor?”

“…Permission to speak freely rescinded, ma’am.”

Williams let out a single chuckle. “That’s what I thought.”

The Lieutenant Commander proceeded with a basic demonstration of the exercises Sam was expected to execute, mostly a variety of leg work with mild upper body and core. “No chest presses, and if you feel your torso or ribs compressing in any way: you’re doing something wrong and cut that shit out immediately,” Ashley emphasized with a cutting wave across her throat. “…or Chakwas will have my ass.”

But Karin seems so nice?
“But Karin seems so nice…” Sam muttered as she eyeballed the collection of weights, her ribs still throbbing.

“Yea, to her patients. Otherwise, she’s a bigger Mama Bear than Shepard is. And that’s saying something.” Ashley put a hand on her hip. “You have no idea the laundry list of threats I got from the good doctor if my physical training sessions make you even a fraction worse. …The threat from Shepard was just ‘make her better… or else.’” The Lieutenant Commander’s impression of Shepard was actually pretty dead on.

A chuckle bubbled up in Sam’s throat. “That’s… rather touching everyone is so vested in my well-being.”

“Whether we want to be or not,” Williams joked with a wink. (…Oh God, does she know something?) The woman’s expression turned thoughtful. “We look after our own, Traynor. We need everyone at 100% if there’s any hope of winning this war. You get me?”

“I get you, ma’am.”

As Williams prepped a pair of dumbbells for Samantha, she quoted:

“Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.”

Scanning… scanning… poet not found.

“Sorry, that one doesn’t ring a bell,” Sam shrugged as she took another swig of water. “And I believe there will be more emphasis on the ‘sorest’ than the ‘need’ tomorrow morning, ma’am.”

I didn’t realize there was going to be both a physical and literary exam during PT. I should have studied.

Like how you studied for your actual Historic Literature final, Traynor?

Hey, the Fishbone Pub patrons were somewhat helpful with my flashcards-for-shots cram sessions. I did make a B, after all.

Only because you were shagging your TA, Traynor.

Offering Sam a hand weight, Ashley asked, “No room for Emily Dickinson at Oxford?”

“She was in there somewhere. I must have missed this particular poem. Or was hungover when it came up. …And someone’s been looking into my history,” Sam observed, hefting the dumbbell.

Join the club. EDI and Liara could probably teach a course in Traynor 101.

…Shepard, too.

Hmmm…

“I prefer to think of it as ‘showing an interest in my squad,’ Traynor.” Ashley’s smile was fond as she hefted a heavier pair of weights for herself. “Old habits die hard.”

An aggressive workout began as Samantha alternated between leg squats and holding the hand
weights outward to engage her abs. The Lieutenant Commander would start an exercise with a
demonstration, quickly burn through her own repetitions with ease, then spend the rest of the
segment supervising the Comms Specialist’s performance.

Her eye critical but not cruel, Ashley would occasionally extend a hand to correct Samantha’s form
or nudge her back into a better position, especially on the barbell hip thrust. It did get easier just past
the halfway mark. Particularly when Sam no longer felt like blacking out every 30 seconds. The
ringing of her pulse in her ears had also died down as she got into the rhythm, the weight machine
hissing for a final, upward leg press.

Rolling off the weight machine, Sam felt a delightful tingling in her calves and hips as the endorphins
hit.

*It may be good feelings now. Don’t forget the burning tomorrow, Traynor.*

*Oh shut up.*

Conversation no longer near-impossible, Sam squinted one eye to do a mental recall of the laundry
list of tasks Williams had been assigned following the “Normandy Traitor Incident.”

“May I ask how your punishment is going, Ashley?” Sam asked conversationally with a dab of a
towel to her neck and collarbone. “Obviously mine is going swimmingly since I haven’t passed out
yet.”

“Setting that bar high, Traynor,” Ashley deadpanned between burpees on a soft floor mat. “Well, I’m
definitely in better physical condition than you. But then I’ve been doing double PT for two weeks.
So this? Is cake.” Williams paused. “…You’ll get there.”

Eyeballing Ash’s trim soldier physique, Sam raised a skeptical eyebrow of her own as she took a sip
of water. “I highly doubt that, but your—rather optimistic—confidence is appreciated.” A second
nearby mat was just large enough for Samantha to start some hamstring stretches.

Ashley paused mid push-up, curving her back to look upward with a thoughtful smile. “Well, I used
to be a bit of a pessimist,” she said. “But I think optimism is more useful right now.” She pushed
back up to a jumping-stretch, exhaling loudly with the effort.

“Kind of all we really have right now,” Sam agreed.

“And your punishment, Traynor? How’s it been going?”

As she leaned over to pull her toes, thigh muscles tense, Sam deadpanned, “Well, my double War
Room shifts have been a treat.” …*In more ways than one,* Sam remembered with a fond smile. That
last kiss with Annelise was still very fresh in her mind. “The PT and weapons training you already
know about.”

A nod after a clapping leap. Ashley tapped her wrist before dropping into another push-up. “On the
books for the end of the week. Starting with pistols.”

“My favorite.” Sam gave an insincere smile. “Also the cut in pay. Which is a real tragedy. I was
planning on being truly reckless with my next paycheck.”

“Yea, you really seem like you’re a few credits away from a Citadel-wide bender.” Williams scoffed
between burpees. “Word to the wise, the Consort has a waiting list.”

“And you know this how, ma’am?” Sam couldn’t help a teasing lilt at the end.
Wrinkling her nose, Ashley’s drop into push-up form was a little too quick. “It was a long time ago and—We were just there to ask about—and Shepard was the one who actually—” A defeated sigh as she rested face-first into the mat. “...I did this to myself,” came the muffled reply.

An airy chuckle escaping, Sam switched legs. There was a slight pang from the stretch on her torso. “That you did, ma’am.”

“Shepard actually” what? Oh, I have even more questions.

What’s the list at? The hand tattoos, the baseball, Cerberus, Liara, Thane, her past, her present, her future.

And now her liaisons with an asari sex worker, Traynor.

Oh goody.

“Anyway. Anything else?” With a jumping clap to finish, Williams did a few bending stretches at the waist while shaking out her arms. Bubbles of sweat had (finally) started to appear on her forehead and dampen her tank top.

Looking upward as she leaned into her outstretched leg, Sam said, “I’m also unofficially in charge of the EDI-bot. First consultation starts tomorrow with Engineer Daniels.” Pausing, Samantha brought her heels close to her body, knees akimbo to start a “butterfly” stretch. “Apparently the Commander doesn’t want to shoulder the existential responsibility. She’s just so lazy like that, shirking her duty,” Samantha deadpanned as she settled into the pose for 60 seconds.

Exhaling a smirking laugh through her nose, Ashley agreed with irony. “Oh yea, that sounds just like Shepard. Lazy and lowkey.” Then the Lieutenant Commander shuddered. “That one sounds like the worst punishment to me, but then again I’m the only one who got her face bashed in as an introduction. First impressions count.”

“So does spending 6 months with EDI during the retrofits,” Samantha pointed out. Even though she was pretending to be a VI. “I hope you’ll give her a chance someday. EDI’s... more like a curious puppy. Not inherently dangerous if we give her a chance and the right guidance and care.”

Over the Shuttle Bay intercom, a pleasant female asked. “I am unclear whether your statement was intended as a compliment or insult, Specialist Traynor. My database of common language metaphors regarding native fauna are either disparaging to intellect or complimentary to physical ability, often sexual prowess. Clarification requested.”

Eep.

“Compliment! ...Compliment,” Sam squeaked. “I was referring to your loyalty to the crew and potential for character growth, EDI.”

“Understood. Thank you, Specialist Traynor.”

Ash shook her head and pointed a thumb at the ceiling. “See? That right there? Gives me the creeps.”

“One day, LC.”

“Not in this lifetime, Lieutenant.”

“Otherwise, for me...” Ashley gestured over to the armory. “Made progress on my other task. I
finally got that heap perfect after all of Vega’s souped-up meddling. I mean, not every shotgun needs a Smart Choke mod.”

Sam nodded in polite agreement. *I’ll have to take your word on that.*

Williams rolled her eyes good-naturedly as she made a gruff impression of the beefy Lieutenant. “‘Whaaaat, cabrona? It’s worth the weight!’ …or it depends on who’s **carrying** the extra weight, ‘idiota.’” The Spanish rolled off Ashley’s tongue with ease.

“I will take your word on that.”

“But I’ve made a dent in the paperwork finally. Would be easier if my office wasn’t a couch in the Starboard Observation Deck, but at least the library is pretty good for off-duty,” Williams said. She shrugged good-naturedly. “So it coulda been worse. I coulda been stuck babysitting a tenderfoot or something.” She then shot Sam a pointed, withering glance.

Grinning sheepishly, Sam said, “That would have been hypothetically awful, ma’am.”

The final set of physical training included a hybrid regimen of turian-inspired yoga with Sam following Ash’s lead. It was grueling as Sam’s legs and arms quivered with each new pose, the muscles not used to the effort. Her breath came in puffing gasps as she struggled to find the right rhythm.

Mid-Paripurna Nasavana pose, Ashley recited:

“When you’re up against a trouble,
Meet it squarely, face to face;
Lift your chin and set your shoulders,
Plant your feet and take a brace.

When it’s vain to try to dodge it,
Do the best that you can do;
You may fail, but you may conquer,
See it through!”

*Shit, this sounds familiar.*

Straining to keep her hands lifted near the knees of her outstretched legs, Sam tried to sound her way around a guess. “I know this… Edgar… Edgar something…”

*Rice Burroughs? No.*

*Degas? That’s a painter.*

*Alan Poe? No.*

*Pierre Jacobs? Comics, not poetry.*

*I miss comics.*

*Focus, Traynor.*

*Edgar Alan Poe feels closer. Edgar A—*

Sam snapped her fingers a few times to sound it out til the memory surfaced. “Edgar Albert Guest!”
“Color me impressed,” Williams said, her upright arms and legs perfectly still and steady, perfectly balanced on her rear. She opened an eye as she breathed out. “You just earned yourself a pass on clean-up duty.”

*Maybe she’s still a saint.*

As they finished the final 60 second pose, Samantha felt a ping to her Omni-tool. When her “trainer” wasn’t looking, she snuck a peek.

[Blasto: “Don’t look up. You’re putting too much weight on the balls of your feet.”]

[Blasto: “Try keeping your feet flat and toes curled for that pose.”]

Of course Sam had to bend her knees and push up off her wrists to look up. Her neck craned to see Annelise Shepard peeking out from the Engineering window above with a sly, freckled smile.

“Passing notes in class, Traynor?” Ashley’s voice brought her back, tone severe.

Pivoting counterclockwise, Sam felt heat spread across her face and neck (perhaps it was just from the workout?). She could only imagine how she looked: twisted awkwardly, ass sticking out with her Omni-tool glowing on her wrist flat on the ground.

“Uh, just… a notification on some algorithms I was running.”

“Mmmhmm,” came the skeptical reply. Ashley’s stern expression softened as she snapped the towel in her hands at Sam’s thigh. “Hit the showers, Lieutenant. Same time tomorrow.” Thankfully, Ashley didn’t glance upward. She turned and began rolling up the yoga mats and resetting the weight machines.

Accepting the dismissal, Sam did look back up to the upper floor observation area. A faint handprint was still visible where the woman had touched the glass.

“Yes, ma’am.”

---

...Earlier that week...

[Secure Chat IP ANC-045.2.4259.4-C9 Configured]
[Data Ports 23.4,45.766,834.2 Blocked]
[Administrator Access: ***************]
[Approved]

...Connecting...

...Connection Secured.

[“s.traynor” has entered the channel]

[Closed Comm invitation sent]

[Invitation accepted]

[“a.shepard” has entered the channel]

[Channel ANC-045.2.4259.4-C9 pipeline closed. If additional access required, please contact your communications administrator, “Lt Samantha Traynor, SSV Normandy SR-2, HSAID# 225-VG8-]
[a.shepard: “Well good morning to you too Samantha”]

[s.traynor: “Who doesn’t love a good comm validation protocol first thing in the morning?”]

[a.shepard: “It sure beats killing Reapers”]

[s.traynor: “….really?”]

[a.shepard: “No. So what’s going on? Tired of hearing my voice?”]

[s.traynor: “Oh it’s divine. However, I figured it would be nice to have a private conversation every now and again that won’t have the scuttlebutt mill going. Discretion is the better part of valor and all that rubbish.”]

[a.shepard: “Is it safe? Because I thought my email was safe and I can’t seem to get rid of some really aggressive elcor spam”]

[s.traynor: “…elcor spam, you say?”]

[a.shepard: “Oh yea. Remind me to have you check my email filters. It went from harmless if pushy tourism spam to like hardcore elcor porn. I’m a sailor and even this stuff makes me blush”]

[s.traynor: “How awful. I’ll have to check it out. …Anyway, welcome to our private channel. A few details of note. I had a bitch of a time setting it up and I want to stroke my own ego for a bit.”]

[a.shepard: “Stroke away”]

[s.traynor: “Hmmmm… ahem. First, this is a closed comm. Omni-tool serial validation, not an open signal. That means we’re not connected through the ship comms, but direct to each other’s Omni-tool implants with constant biometric validation.”]

[s.traynor: “Benefits include: super bloody secure and private. Comm IPs can be spoofed and/or hacked, whereas with serial sync someone would have to have your actual Omni-tool implant AND biometric data to get in.”]

[s.traynor: “Plus all the bells and whistles of a regular channel: direct messaging and voice/vid recording and such.”]

[a.shepard: “Impressive. What’s the downside?”]

[s.traynor: “Absurdly short range. Not a problem on the Normandy, or across a fair chunk of the Citadel. Definitely can’t withstand orbit-to-ground during missions. But if you’re messaging me during ground missions, ma’am, I think that means you don’t have enough to do.”]

[a.shepard: “Oh, so you can stroke your own ego, but I can’t brag about how many Reapers I killed. I see how it is, Traynor”]

[s.traynor: “It means I’ll have to wait for you to return to see the one-woman show about it. See? No downside, then.”]

[Administrator is typing…]

[‘Ariake Q-Queue Protocol 5542’ now active. Please see terms of service for changes to your channel.]
[a.shepard: “What just happened? Like hell I’m reading that”]

[s.traynor: “I just activated a queueing function: anytime we’re too far apart, we could still send messages that would queue in an outbox until back in range.”]

[a.shepard: “I like it. Gives me a chance to document in detail all the dead Reapers to discuss later”]

[s.traynor: “I’ll be waiting with bated breath at my console to hear all about it.”]

[s.traynor: “Last order of business: usernames”]

[a.shepard: “Usernames?”]

[s.traynor: “Usernames. Unless you want to be stodgy, boring ‘ashepard’ this entire time. I certainly don’t fancy staring at ‘straynor’ when I could be ‘chessgoddess’ or ‘queenofgambits.’”]

[s.traynor: “I’ll even let you choose mine. If I can pick yours.”]

[a.shepard: “This sounds dangerous. And rife for abuse. Can it be changed later?”]

[s.traynor: “Sure. You’re an admin of this channel too, ya know.”]

[a.shepard: “Co-authority? Hmph. I do better in charge”]

[s.traynor: “You’re welcome to dig into the comm code to usurp me. It’s only a few million lines of code. Are you also ACrP9 certified? Because that is SUPER attractive and we should have many long conversations about it.”]

[a.shepard: “I changed my mind. Co-admin is fine”]

[s.traynor: “That’s what I thought. All right, first test of our relationship. If we cock this up, we’re doomed. Change each other’s usernames in 3… 2… 1…”]

[“a.shepard” is now known as “Princess”]

[Princess is typing…]

[“s.traynor” is now known as “TheWizard”]

[TheWizard: “Hmmm… thematically similar.”]

[TheWizard: “I have to know: is this a reference to my brilliant wit and skill?”]


[TheWizard: “So you’re saying I’m a con artist?”]


[TheWizard: “Oh… dammit. That’s actually kind of sweet? Absolutely terrible, but I appreciate and abhor the sentiment. Not a sportsfan, darling. Especially of ancient sports.”]

[Princess: “Well no one’s perfect. It’s a fascinating chapter of sports history. Also super hot to talk about long into the night.”]

[Princess: “And now I have a private outlet to teach you that history at length. With vids”]
Princess: “I’m definitely starting to like this thing”

TheWizard: “While I am starting to have doubts.”

Princess: “Why princess?”

TheWizard: “Oh.”

TheWizard: “umm”

TheWizard: “I thought it would be amusing. And precious.”

Princess: “Please change it”

TheWizard: “You don’t like it? I mean I adore mine. This insult won’t be taken lightly.”

“Princess” is now known as “CmdrRubbish”

CmdrRubbish: “I have”

CmdrRubbish: “history”

CmdrRubbish: “with being called Princess”

CmdrRubbish: “I’ll tell you later”

CmdrRubbish: “HEY”

TheWizard: “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I just thought it would be charmingly ironic.”

CmdrRubbish: “If THAT’S how it’s gonna be”

“TheWizard” is now known as “SpcLamer”

SpcLamer: “I see someone has been talking to LC Williams.”

CmdrRubbish: “You brought this on yourself”

SpcLamer: “I did. How about one more try?”

CmdrRubbish: “Just one, then it’s over”

SpcLamer: “Wanker.”

CmdrRubbish: “I’m sorry, it’s just too much responsibility”

SpcLamer: “You know, I had a brilliant idea that I’m now second guessing.”

CmdrRubbish: “Let’s hear it”

“CmdrRubbish” is now known as “Blasto”

“SpcLamer” is now known as “Genevieve”

Blasto: “Now this I can get behind”

Genevieve: “I also don’t object. Especially since you picked the best team”
[Blasto: “ENKINDLE THIS, CRIMINAL SCUM”]

[Genevieve: “How long have you been a Blasto fan?”]

[Blasto: “Since the novels came out in the 2170s. I was on a long furlough after the Blitz and was going stir crazy. Saw Blasto 1 opening night”]

[Genevieve: “An OG fan, as it were”]

[Blasto: “What about you”]

[Genevieve: “My dad dragged me to the first one when I was home from college because mum REFUSED to go. Got me hooked.”]

[Blasto: “Your dad a big fan?”]

[Genevieve: “He thinks all the sequels are rubbish, but loves the first one. I usually trick him into watching one every time I visit. We’re up to #4 but I’m running out of ideas”]

[Blasto: “That sounds really nice”]

[Genevieve: “It is. And mum still hates all of them”]

[Blasto: “Is your family close?”]

[Genevieve: “We are. Mum says I got her brains and dad’s love of chess. I try to visit whenever I get the chance.”]

[Genevieve: “Do you have any family?”]

[Blasto: “Probably some distant cousins floating around somewhere, but a lot of the Shepards got wiped out in the Mindoir raid. Mighta been me too if I hadn’t gotten stuck on earth”]

[Genevieve: “What was it like growing up on Earth? I was born in London, but we relocated to Horizon when I was a baby and I don’t remember much.”]

[Blasto: “Pretty shitty. Mom died when I was 4, my brother John when I was 13 and my dad shortly after. I was homeless til I turned 18 and enlisted”]

[Blasto: “Did some shitty things to survive on the streets when I was a teen that I’m not proud of. But a girl had to eat”]

[Genevieve: “Oh my god Shepard. I’m so sorry”]

[Blasto: “Is this all not in my file”]

[Genevieve: “Oh you mean the HEAVILY redacted one that’s mostly just your age and rank?”]

[Blasto: “You HAVE been checking on me. You do care, Samantha”]

[Genevieve: “Well I had to check if you were going to be a terrible boss.”]

[Blasto: “And? The verdict?”]

[Genevieve: “I believe my initial impressions were: quite scary and intimidating. Will she fire me any minute now? Oh God please don’t let her yell at me.”]
[Blasto: “...”]
[Blasto: “You were that worried?”]
[Genevieve: “You do realize you are quite difficult to read? Stoic? Fierce, one might say?”]
[Blasto: “Well I mean”]
[Blasto: “It’s just”]
[Blasto: “Hmmmm”]
[Genevieve: “Aren’t you glad I set up a private channel? Now we can talk about these things. Air those grievances.”]
[Blasto: “You have MORE grievances??”]
[Genevieve: “I mean, it’s quite early in the morning. And I haven’t had my tea. Everyone is a monster when I am without tea.”]
[Blasto: “I’ll try to remember that”]
[Genevieve: “That you’re a monster?”]
[Blasto: “That you have fewer grievances when you’ve had tea”]
[Genevieve: “Hmph”]
[Genevieve: “While I don’t LOVE that takeaway, it’ll have to do”]
[Genevieve: “I suppose I should go make my tea and regain my sense of wonder and optimism.”]
[Blasto: “That does sound nice. Talk to you later?”]
[Genevieve: “You better.”]

After signing off, Sam smiled to herself from her empty perch in the war room. Stretching lazily, she had headed down to the crew deck for that cup. Her irritation began building as she dug around the cabinets for her favorite gray mug to no avail. It was when her nose was level with the counter did she spy a full mug next to an empty kettle, a holo square glowing on the curved handle. She picked it up and smelled the rich, full-bodied scent of Irish Breakfast. Tapping the square, a short memo had popped up for about 5 seconds before disappearing.

[“Stay optimistic. Someone should. And you’re very good at it.”]

Damn right.

She leaned into a deep sip… then sputtered on the brackish liquid.

Blech!

Too much milk. Too long steeped. The entire mug nearly slipped out of Samantha’s hand. But she had muscled through it as she pondered her reply. Mostly to resist the call of every snarky bone in her body.
Genevieve: “Thanks for the tea, darling. Careful spoiling me. I might get used to it.”

Blasto: “Is that a threat or a promise?”

Genevieve: “Both.”

Gathering up her datapad and an uneaten protein bar, Samantha closed out her console in the War Room. She tilted back and forth at her hips, the soreness from yesterday afternoon’s workout still lingering. A tightness pulled from her core all the way to her thighs. The Normandy’s graveyard shift was starting to stir, eager for the morning rotation to take over at 0930.

Everything had quieted down from earlier in the evening when the push on Mahavid had begun. A lone mining facility was cast in shadow from its perch on the small asteroid. More of Nahta Belt’s nearby asteroids dotted the horizon as overlarge “moons” in the sky, light from Aysur reflecting off their porous surfaces.

For ten years the T-GES Mineral Works been held captive by that (Leviathan?) artifact. No memory of the time lost, the people were just puppets put on a loop of strange experiments and pattern analytics. The presence of Reaper forces had been disconcerting, but confirmed the Alliance’s suspicions that this place held a useful secret. Too bad the secret turned out to be a long dead Dr. Alex Garneau and a suspicious artifact at the center of it all.

Shepard, Vega and Garrus managed to break the spell but the artifact was destroyed, leaving little to investigate. Sam had watched from Vega’s hardsuit cam in wonder as the workers slowly returned from husk to normal. The colony had so many questions to ask.

The first being: “What’s a Reaper?”

Eep.

Sadly, the Alliance had quarantine protocols to deal with evidence of indoctrination (which Sam was well aware of). An Alliance supply convoy flanked by a security frigate had arrived around midnight to pick up the fifty or so remaining colonists. The Normandy orbited nearby to protect from any more Reapers that might attempt a counterstrike.

What should have been a joyful victory (Colonists heroically freed from mind control!) became a depressing discussion around the War Room among the other Specialists. The tired crew debated the pros and cons of having no knowledge of Reapers to a backdrop of holo vid angles showing Kodiaks ferrying miners to the MSV Hidalgo.

It was about a 50/50 split amongst the tech specialists. Samantha probably would have been on Team “Ignorance is Bliss” before she joined the Normandy, but now she was very much in favor of Team “Knowledge is Power (even if it’s bloody depressing).”

As Sam headed for the security barrier to turn in for the night (morning), she noticed the conference room was privacy frosted. She had seen Commander Shepard escorting Fifth Fleet guests in hours ago for debriefing, but was surprised that a meeting might still be going on. The door was ajar, however.

Tiptoeing past, Sam tried to glance through the door inconspicuously. It wouldn’t have mattered, as the room was mostly empty. A lone figure stood at the head of the table, back angled toward Samantha. But the Comms Specialist would recognize that profile anywhere.

Annelise Shepard was slightly leaned over the conference table, her hands gripping a pushed-in chair
before her. She was decked out in full dress blues, complete with hair tied back in a short ponytail. She didn’t move, however. Shepard appeared to be staring at the other end of the table, lost in space.

Sam switched her protein bar to her datapad-hand before slowly walking into the room. Shepard didn’t seem to notice. Leaning over, Sam rapped a knuckle on the conference table to get the woman’s attention.

“Credit for your thoughts?”

Blinking awake, those green eyes crackled with biotic blue as they focused on Sam. There was suddenly a loud series of clunking thuds as Shepard’s distant gaze cleared. It took a second for Sam to realize that all the furniture in the room, including the conference table, had been suspended an inch off the ground.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Are you all right, ma’am?” Sam said pointedly and gestured at the now askew furniture. It brought back a memory from weeks ago when Sam had seen a half-armored Shepard in the Shuttle Bay, her biotics pulling at the loose crates around her after a literal fight with Vega.

*Is this a sign she’s in control or losing control? Do I... tell someone? Dr. Chakwas?*

Biotics hadn’t been a common sight back on Horizon or at Oxford. Sam remembered hearing whispers of “freaks” growing up, but the sci-fi nerd in her was instead utterly fascinated by the concept. Humans with telekinetic abilities? Wasn’t that every kid’s dream: to be a superhero?

*Well, I still think Shepard’s a superhero.*

*Even though currently her superpower is feng shui.*

Green eyes flicked over to the open conference room door. Annelise’s tone was conversational if stiff. “Just winding down from a mission. We did good work today.”

“Uh huh,” Samantha said, putting a hand on her hip. “How are you doing?”

Shepard hesitated, brow furrowing. “I’m…”

“...Fine?” Sam retorted, arching an eyebrow.

An exhale-laugh. “I was going to say ‘tired.'”

“Mnhmm.”

“Just... wondering if we did the right thing, coming here,” Annelise said as she crossed her arms. Her tired gaze drifted away to the distant specks of shuttlecraft returning with their final precious cargo. “These people might have been safe without our intervention. Safe harbor from Reapers is a hard thing to come by. Maybe impossible.”

“Second guessing? That doesn’t sound like the Commander Bloody Shepard I know,” Sam observed.

A small shrug through her crossed arms. Shepard blew a puff of air across a stray lock of hair too close to her eyes. “Less second guessing, more weighing the risk versus gain. I can’t even say we gained anything by coming here, for us or for these people.”
Sam chewed her cheek. She was empathetic. She couldn’t imagine what those men and women were going through. They didn’t do anything wrong, just were at the wrong place at the wrong time. And what do they get for that? Indoctrination somehow became the best case scenario when the reality was: they probably have no one to go home to and everyone who knew them thinks they’re long dead.

*Why does this sound familiar?*

“We were having this debate in the War Room, actually. I’m of the opinion that: at least their lives are their own again? However terrible or short-lived they may be?”

“…that’s all any of us can really hope for, I suppose,” was the vague reply.

Leaning forward, Sam studied the downcast woman. “You’re really rattled by this, aren’t you? Why?” She pushed softness into her voice, taking a step closer. She placed a tentative hand on the woman’s cuff.

Annelise pulled back with a frustrated sigh. Glancing at the door, she flexed her fingers to bring up her Omni-tool. A few swipes later and the conference door closed. Privacy secure, one hand swept across her dress jacket. With a smooth motion, the top three clasps popped out from her dress jacket and the tight ponytail was pulled out. She ran fingers through her red hair haphazardly before once again gripping the chairback.

*Focus, Traynor.*

Her tone was husky and angry. “Just reminds me of the Alpha Relay. Another pointless loss of life because of more goddamn indoctrination. And this Leviathan could be working to counter the Reapers? On our side? I don’t see how. They—It?—held people hostage for a decade.” Shepard shook her head and looked downward, bangs hanging in the air. “This feels like a wild goose chase when there are more important things going on.”

“I honestly don’t know, Shepard,” Sam admitted. She hefted her datapad, fingers swiping over the scrolling feed of war assets. “It’s a ruthless calculus. Maybe depriving Leviathan of a few dozen miners will raise the bar in our favor. More talent for the Crucible, perhaps? I see Admiral Hackett has requested more mineral assets for production.”

Annelise mumbled, “I’ve always hated math.”

“Bite your tongue, madam! My profession and I demand an apology on behalf of math.” Samantha shot the woman a glare of mock outrage.

Finally a smile. “Sorry.” Unfortunately, Shepard quickly returned to austere. “I just keep thinking about Balak and the batarian hegemony crumbling under indoctrination. About the Alpha Relay taking a further toll. That could be us soon enough. We’ve already lost Earth. We’re being slowly chipped away.”

“Is this… Commander Shepard succumbing to doubt and what-ifs?”

“I don’t like it either,” Shepard replied with a small crinkle around her eyes.

“I don’t care for it at all, I must say,” Sam warned. “Quite unattractive. And out of character.”

An exhale-laugh. “Just thinking out loud. Thanks for letting me air some grievances.”

Sam waved off airily, “Any time. And it’s just a sign you need some tea.”
“I’m sure I do.” A smile pulled at the corner of Annelise’s mouth. Her tense shoulders seemed to relax.

Turning around, Sam edged closer as she half-sat on the conference table edge. The MSV Hidalgo’s engines sparked to life as it angled toward the nearest mass effect relay in Caleston Rift. “Since it’s now on me for some reason to be the optimistic leader here… Perhaps we’ll learn more if we go back to Dr. Bryson’s lab?” Sam suggested.

Mirroring Sam’s sit-lean against the table, Annelise asked, “Are you volunteering?”

“Absolutely. I mean, both the Reapers and this Leviathan can both induce indoctrination? That can’t be a coincidence. Maybe we can develop an antigen or something?” Sam crossed her arms, the datapad fitting awkwardly under an armpit. She heard the crinkle of a protein bar flattening under her rear.

_Oh dammit that was the last mango flavored one._

“That reminds me, I do have something for you though I was waiting til the morning.” Firing up her Omni-tool once more, Shepard swiped across the interface for a few moments.

Sam felt an answering vibration in her own Omni-tool, which flashed a message about a received data packet. She dropped her datapad to her side.

“See what you can make of that intel?”

“I do love a good bit of intel.” She started to swipe through it and had to restrain her curiosity.

_Go to bed, Traynor. You just finished a double shift plus PT and you’re no good to anyone asleep at your desk._

“I’m glad it’s in the right hands, then.” Annelise gave a small smile. “I just wouldn’t appreciate it as much.”

“And what a waste that would be,” Sam agreed. “Hopefully we can crack this wide open, recruit some giant Reaper-killers on our side, and all go out for drinks on the Citadel. Then I can finally send emails to my parents without having to self-edit every time I want to say ‘Reaper.’”

Shepard straightened with an exhale-laugh. “Well that would certainly be a relief.”

“I wholeheartedly agree. So I’m going to need you to get on that and find an ancient ally who’s going to single-handedly win this war for us, no questions asked.” Samantha nodded.

“I’ll get right on that.”

Shepard’s brow smoothing, her gaze drifted from Sam’s eyes down to her lips and back a couple of times. Before Sam could smile and make a witty flirtation, Annelise surged forward and kissed her.

_Oh I could get used to this._

Her fingertips traced over the lapel flap of Shepard’s open dress coat, her other hand snaking upward to thread through the woman’s hair.

_It would be so easy to just slip a hand a little lower_, she thought. Instead she changed direction and ran that hand upward and outward, over the shoulder and down Annelise’s arm. She smiled to herself in the kiss. Oh did she ever have a thing about arms.
The kiss deepened as Annelise’s hands wrapped around Sam’s waist, thumbs rubbing small circles on her sides. Feeling the trace of a tongue along her teeth, Sam felt herself sigh with delight.

Unfortunately, that sigh quickly stretched into a yawn and forced her to break away. The yawn rolled through her jaw and deep into her chest, making her head swim slightly as the exhaustion of the day caught up all at once.

San swallowed a breathy apology, “Sorry, it’s been a rather trying day. I don’t think I’m the only one.”

“You should go to bed, then.” There was a reluctance from the hands around Sam’s waist, but they eventually slipped away into dress pants pockets.

*Maybe you should come with me.*

“What about you?”

Annelise gave an airy chuckle through her nose. “No rest for the wicked, I’m afraid. I have us set to rescue some Cerberus scientists my Comms Specialist told me about.”

*Yours, you say?*

Touched, Sam gave Shepard a quick peck on the nose. “Oh I hope it ends up a good lead!”

“Only one way to find out.”

---

Just as Samantha crawled into the top bunk of the Crew Quarters, she felt a ping to her Omni-tool.

[Blasto: ”I didn’t ask you how your ribs are doing“]

[Blasto: ”Or how PT went with Ash“]

[Genevieve: “Refreshed my medigel pack at the end of my shift so I am on cloud nine, thanks.”]

[Genevieve: “And my mother told me if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”]

[Blasto: ”I guess I shouldn’t critique your leg press form then“]

[Genevieve: “Were you WATCHING me? Tsk tsk”]

[Blasto: ”I was“]

[Blasto: ”Happening by“]

[Blasto: ”Supervising“]

[Genevieve: “Right right. I feel like you owe me credits for the free show. And Ash an apology. Should I tell her?”]

[Blasto: “Oh god please don’t. I’ll never hear the end of it”]

[Blasto: “By the way I ate that protein bar you left in the conference room”]

[Genevieve: “You do know I sat on that?”]

[Blasto: “Waste not, want not?“]
[Genevieve: “You are a monster.”]
[Blasto: "I know"]
[Genevieve: “Well as long as you know.”]
[Blasto: ”Good night, Sam“]
[Genevieve: “Good night, Annelise”]

Chapter End Notes

Ren’s Note:
I’ve been stunted on this chapter for so long for a myriad of reasons (chiefly Life, Marriage, Career and Writer’s Block). The pieces have been there for a good while, but threading them together has been difficult. I also had a very different conversation planned for the end that didn’t fit the feel of where the dialogue went.
I’m experimenting with the texting format in another fandom I’m (sort of) writing for, and I really enjoyed it for that pairing and wanted to bring it to these gals. Hopefully it doesn’t get overwhelming/hard to understand. Or if you liked it and want to see more of it, let me know! It’s a fun writing challenge unique to our generation to communicate emotion and body language with a one-sided medium. I like the potential conversations it opens up that can’t always be face-to-face on a crowded ship. Especially when you’re fraternizing :D
Sam’s mental chess match is pulled from a 2004 Olympic match between Zsuzsa Polgar (“T’Suzsa!” *eye squint*) and Pia Cramling (the match ended in a draw). Ashley quotes “Death is a Dialogue” by Emily Dickinson and “See It Through” by Edgar Albert Guest.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!