

## Meteorite

By Elyse Lemoine

The motorcycle's engine was still warm when Shepard tossed Gunner a beer from her side bag. His fingers attempted to grasp the can and he juggled with it before popping the tab and taking a swig. "I hate this kind." But he kept drinking it anyway.

She laughed and pulled out a few more beers along with a ratty old blanket that looked like it had seen better days. "I didn't think you'd come," she said, throwing the blanket over her shoulder. Her helmet found its way to the seat of her bike as she dismounted, heading off into the endless desert expanding out from the side of the highway.

"I didn't think I would either." He thought he'd be at home, sipping a pale ale of his own while watching *Fortuna's Wheel* on the decasphere, but there he was, staring at Shepard's back as she smoothed a blanket over the hard, dusty ground and plopped down with a grunt. Love caused stupid people to do stupid things, didn't it?

"When did you get so boring?" She patted the spot next to her and he closed the distance, legs folding underneath him as he sat. He took another gulp of his beer before crushing the can in his hands and tossing it behind him.

"When did you start giving a shit about meteor showers?" He grinned.

"When you stopped trying to quit," she said. Gunner rolled his eyes and looked back over endless sight of rocks and cactuses spanning as far as he could see, disappearing into the dark horizon until they became a mess of indiscernible shadows. He was surprised empty space like this still existed, especially with MonoCorp being so keen on filling it all up with commercial high-rises and way stations. If only Shepard could read his mind; she'd probably deck him in the face for all of the corporate drivel rolling around in his head, spewing out numbers, statistics, and bureaucratic bullshit. He smiled at the thought, and it was just enough to make the numbers stop.

Finally, his eyes fell on her face and he watched her search the sky. "Speak for yourself, Shep," he muttered, grabbing another beer can and popping it open. "You're still three cubicles down, just like you were three years ago."

"At least I've got my head out of my ass," she said, and he knew it was true. He gripped his beer can and took a sip, looking back at the empty space. "They say people like us used to be

constantly looking up.”

“So they say.”

She sighed and popped another beer, but didn't drink from it. He watched her as he sipped his own, slowly and pathetically. In that moment, he wanted to be drunk: to be laughing it off while his head buzzed like a beehive; while he socked her in the arm and talked about the past. But they only had two beers left, and he knew that wasn't enough. He thought he had a bottle of chronos in the back seat of his car, but it was probably empty. “Remember Titus Five?” she asked.

It was his turn to sigh around the rim of his can. “I try not to.”

Shepard looked down from the sky and looked over at Gunner, turning toward him with a scowl on her face, eyebrows drawn together. It was the same look she got when she was working at her desk or assisting on calls. He had memorized it a long time ago, back during a time when he always had a scope on her back. He thought it was cute, even when she had it turned on him. “Titus Five was all we used to talk about. Slogging it out together, us against the world.”

“I've adjusted, Shep. The time for those stories is past.” He finished his beer and set the can down next to him, watching her lips instead of her eyes. They had a way of searching his soul that he usually found comforting. Not at the moment. “I'm tired of rehashing the same old shit. I've moved on.”

“Adjusted my ass,” she snorted. “*Please*. I know you, Gunner. This is not adjusted.”

“Right. Like you are? Chasing things that don't exist and still staring up at that stupid sky like it's gonna carry you away. Space pirates don't exist, Shepard.” He threw his hands up, looking away from her.

He could practically hear her grinding her teeth, followed by a deep, petulant huff. She crushed his can between her hands and tossed it on the ground next to her own. “I didn't come here to fight, dumbass.”

He sighed and looked out into the desert. He knew he was being the childish asshole of the two. She was just trying to talk about “old times,” like how the way things used to be, how they could be. He loved that the most about her, her spark of life, the way she smiled and laughed at old memories. The way he couldn't. If she was always looking up, then he was always looking forward, even if the only thing forward was the light at the end of the tunnel.

Whatever that meant.

Finally, he turned back to her. The last thing he wanted to do was push her out too. “I know. Rough day at work.”

“You say that like it’s an excuse,” she said, and topped off her beer. She grabbed the last one; he didn’t protest.

“This morning I found out I was passed for the raise. That fuckhead Todd hates me, I swear. I put in more overtime than I knew what to do with, and he doesn’t even give me a shred of compensation.”

“Do you even hear yourself talk?” Shepard asked. “It’s like listening to the accounting department droning on about quarterlies or whatever the hell they’re called.”

He laughed. “Seriously, Shep. You’ve been at Mono for three years, I thought you would’ve learned something by now.” He hesitated before knocking his knuckles into her arm. There was a moment’s breath before she smiled, lips pulling back to reveal white teeth and a bubbling laugh, and he couldn’t help but smile too. In that moment, he remembered her smile the night he had taken her out drinking after they had gotten their first, and only, job together. They called it “the first day of the rest of their lives” as they smashed their glasses, spilling Corvo all over the bar and doubling over in half-tanked laughter. Right then, he wanted to kiss her – a feeling he had come to expect – but he didn’t.

Then her smile died. “I’m not going into work tomorrow,” she said. Her finger was pulling at the lid of her beer can, the reverberations filling the silence with a quiet hum.

“If you’re planning on getting smashed without me tonight, then I’m gonna be pissed.”

Her eyes were on his face for a moment longer before she turned her head back toward the sky, her eyes following up to the stars. He kept his eyes on her face, studying every little freckle he could spot under the light of the moon. He didn’t get what was so great about the sky, but, then again, after all of these years, he still didn’t understand why she cared about it so much. It wasn’t for a lack of trying. “You know, people used to be constantly looking up there.”

“You said that already.”

She ignored him. “I wonder what they were looking for.” He pretended not to care, but he did.

“Answers, I guess,” he said. He wished he had thought to bring a case of beers. Next time. “Though we’ve got enough of those.”

She nudged him with her foot. “Seriously, what’s the point of coming to a meteor viewing if you aren’t even going to look up?”

He laughed. “What’s the point of a ‘meteor viewing’ with no meteors?” She kicked his leg with her foot this time.

“I don’t know what I’d do without your witty comebacks,” she said as she leaned back on her arms and smiled, basking in the moonlight.

He laughed and nudged her foot. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He was trying to be smart, but he regretted the words the second they departed his mouth. It was too late though; he couldn’t take it back. Not without some serious backpedaling and a lot of stammering, but the apology clung to the tip of his tongue and his jaw remained locked.

Next to him, she was quiet, and he didn’t dare look over to see the expression on her face. Instead, he looked out into the dark desert ahead of him, at the massive blur of black on the horizon. Eventually, the sun would pull itself up and into the sky and he would be rolling out of bed, getting ready for work. At that moment, however, he was off the side of the highway, sober and stupid.

“I’m sorry, Gunner.” It was enough to make him look over at her, but she wasn’t looking back. “I quit today.”

He didn’t know what to say; there were no witty comebacks for a comment like that. He wasn’t even sure how to feel. First it was confusion, then hurt, betrayal, frustration, anger, and, finally, sadness. His head spun around like *Fortuna’s Wheel*, confused and hurt and uncertain, until it finally settled on one: betrayed. Did he really hear her correctly? For three years, he had his eye on her back, watching her as closely as he could to make sure her skin was safe. He had her back, literally, for as long as he could remember, pulling her out of scraps and keeping her cool, training his scope in her range, just enough to watch her. The one time he needed her at his back and she was leaving him behind.

It was selfish of him to resent her for it. He sure as hell didn’t like the job. Who in their right mind enjoyed sitting at a cramped desk all day, wishing it were finally five so they could go home to a bottle of Corvo and the warm, comforting promise of clean sheets. Every day was like a nightmare, like he was inching closer to that stupid light without accomplishing anything. But he was *adjusted* and he was making it because he had to, and he knew she hated it more than anything; knew that she needed to be free. And he needed to have her back in that too.

“Shepard,” he said, and that was all he could think to say. His mouth hung open hopelessly and she spared him a glance. He felt pinned to the spot under the weight of her gaze; she looked uncomfortable.

“I know,” was all she said, and looked down.

He floundered with the right words, but he was never one for eloquence and rhetoric. Then again, neither was she. She was an artist with her fists, and he had his sensibility, but neither of them was good when it came to knowing the right thing to say. Maybe that’s what made their friendship so strong, maybe that’s why he loved her – maybe it was just one of the many reasons he did. In that moment, however, he wished he had the diction to express what he was thinking: that it was okay, that it would *be* okay, that he would get over it, move on, adjust. Everything in life was fleeting, he told himself one day, and he stood by that realization. He hoped their friendship wasn’t one of them, but this betrayal would pass.

“So,” he finally managed, “where’ll we be working next?”

Her head snapped back to him and she smiled. “Figures you won’t even give me time to enjoy my vacation,” she says, knocking her elbow into his arm. “You’re such an asshole, Gunner.”

He smiled too, but only a small one. It still hurt, more than he cared to admit, but as long as he had her in his life, he could keep plowing forward, even if she wasn’t three cubicles down like she always was.

When Shepard gasped, his head snapped up just in time to see a ball of fire shoot across the sky, lighting it up as it passed. The meteor crackled and pulsated, shooting over their heads and toward the horizon of the desert, illuminating the shadows and bringing the cactuses and dust to life in a bath of red, until it landed with an explosion of light and erupting earth. As the firelight faded on the horizon, the stars peeked out from their soft black blanket of night and he looked up.

Shepard hopped up with a laugh of childish excitement. “You wanna chase it down?” she asked.

He looked up at her, and in that moment, he wanted to kiss her. Instead, he pushed himself up and slapped his hand on her back. “After this, we’re getting drinks.”