Solid Fluidity

Summary

AU, starts before ME1.
Shepard and Garrus in a relationship from the start with lots of romantic sparkles and drama
and sex. Garrus's POV, the hunt for Saren as a criminal investigation, new conspiracies, new
enemies and cameos from our favorite TV shows. Come for the smut and stay for the story...
Someone said my summary "hides this incredible, magnificent story within", so see for
yourself.
Follows canon and the story of Mass Effect 1 very loosely, new adventures, new problems,
new characters and more love, sex and friendship.
Updates whenever but it will get finished I promise!!!
In my mind, both Shepard and Garrus are experienced grownups and not blushing virgins by the time they meet in the game. For this story, I thought about what would happen if Garrus and Jane met each other before all the trouble with Saren even started and from there, all this began. The story has taken on a life of its own in my head and has become way more sparkly romantic than I had originally planned.

This was my very first fanfic, published back in 2012 on ff.net. I revised and edited it for publication here but still, the first few chapters show that I had a long way to grow as a writer. I can only promise that the writing and vocabulary will get better later on. But I'm still proud of this story, this got me started. Without this fic, none of the other fics would exist.

Rated Explicit for sex and more sex. Warning: I use the words penis and vagina and I do that on purpose.
"Garrus - you’re on watch in the Choras Den alcove tonight!"

Garrus Vakarian gave a friendly, if slightly hesitant nod towards his superior and stacked up the pads that he had been working on. He was still the rookie on the team, didn’t yet get assigned to the more exciting and dangerous jobs on C-Sec. Not that he complained, inexperienced as he was, he could see why he didn’t get the dangerous wards to patrol but he was just slightly bored with the simple watch jobs. But at least it was better than this desk job, shuffling datapads like he did for his first three weeks at C-Sec.

The Choras Den alcove was a hidden and not quite so secret watchpost above the dance floor. Through semi transparent windows that appeared to be dark glass panes viewed from the inside of the club, Garrus's job was to watch over the people in the club. He was supposed to see and sense trouble brewing before it escalated and interfere and call for backup when necessary.

This was the third night that Garrus sat on his watch post above the dancers and so far nothing whatsoever had happened. He began to wonder if all the stories of the dangerous mobs on the Citadel were just exaggerated because all he ever saw were drunks who needed to be reminded that some females were just not interested in them and that the dancers were not up for “grabs”. That kind of stuff was easily handled by the club’s bouncers.

He had been at C-Sec for four weeks now, leaving a promising start of a career in the military on
Palaven as a favour to his father. For the hundredth time he asked himself if he should have done what he wanted and stayed in the military, trained as a sniper and tech expert instead of following his father's example in the C-Sec force. He even had gotten an invitation for Spectre training and was about to accept when his father talked him out of it and blocked any follow-up contact. He knew that his father did all his meddling in his personal affairs not only because he despised Spectres but to make his mother happy.

Garrus let out an involuntary sigh, his mother was a soft hearted woman, very attached to him and his sister and for all the cold and calculated behaviour his father usually showed, the possibility to see his bondmate hurt over their children was unbearable to him. He did everything he could to find safe places for their children to work and live, and the dangerous life of a Spectre was just unthinkable.

So Aethius Vakarian used his old connections as one of C-Secs most decorated officers to ensure a position for Garrus on the Citadel and a job as a technical engineer for his sister Solana at Armax Arsenal in Cipritine on Palaven. They both didn’t think of rejecting these positions, his father had done well and ensured the safety of his family in the best way possible. A caring father was not to be questioned by his children for that. Such was the turian way.

Garrus leaned back on his chair and stretched his legs, trying to find a comfortable position after having sat in front of the window for over an hour already. It was a slow night in the club and everything looked quiet, so Garrus decided to use the restroom while he could. He opened the door to the hallway a bit to let his eyes adjust to the bright light outside of the room, the last time he had almost ran someone over, practically blinded by the light.

This time something else stopped him from stepping through the door. There were two humans in the hallway, a male and a female, as far as he could tell. Humans visited the Citadel quite frequently and a lot of them lived on the Citadel, one of the wards was almost exclusively human. Before Garrus had joined C-Sec and moved to the Citadel he had never seen a human in the flesh, all he knew about them he learned from the vids during his military training. They were an interesting species, endlessly curious and demanding. And every single one of them seemed to be different from the other. Diversity seemed to be the main human trait.

His instructors during his military time had showed them vids from the Relay-314-incident and brought in veterans to talk about their experience in the war. They emphasized how every human was different and how even in a rigid military system like the Alliance Navy humans still acted as individuals. Sometimes they even disobeyed orders to act on their own without repercussions, as long as the results were good. Garrus remembered the gasps of surprise at that from the soldiers around him and how he thought that maybe, just maybe, these individual actions weren’t all that bad, if the humans managed to hold out on the overwhelming force of the turian military with their small troops like they had on Shanxi. He never voiced those thoughts aloud, those were definitely not the Turian way.

Shaking his head to get out of these memories, Garrus wondered if he should just walk past the humans in the hallway but he stayed hidden in the darkness of the room and couldn’t stop watching through the gap.

The two humans in the hallway looked like they were trying to eat each other, that was definitely not covered in the vids he had seen. But he remembered reading something about kissing that was done with those flexible mouths the humans had, so that must be what they were doing there. Garrus had never been all that interested in humans but he kept watching the couple. They both were Alliance military, they both looked strong and had the Alliance insignia on their shirts and pants. But there was something off about their movements, like they didn’t agree with each other.
The man had light brown fur and was slightly taller than the woman. Her fur had the brightest red he had ever seen on any creature and he wondered if it was artificial. She pressed the man against the wall and was clearly the more demanding of the two. She was biting his neck, his lips, and her whole body pressed into him and one of her legs wrapped around his. She looked like a strong female, moving with purpose like an attractive turian woman would. Garrus thought she was very sexy and that surprised him because he had never even considered human females as attractive.

The man seemed to not appreciate her demanding behaviour, he looked a bit uncomfortable. Maybe he was just too drunk or tired but Garrus had the distinct feeling that he didn’t like the feeling of being overpowered by the female. She sensed it too and pulled back from him, biting her lower lip. She didn’t look mad, her mouth was pulled wide, Garrus remembered from the 'Introduction to Alien Expressions' vid that this was a 'grin'. As she stepped back, she looked up to the flustered man and when she spoke Garrus was surprised how deep her voice was.

“As nice as this is, I think we have to stop now. Why don’t you go back to the bar, I’ll be back in a little while?” she said. It sounded to Garrus like she was letting him down gently, giving him an out, without making him feel rejected. The guy looked relieved and mumbled something incomprehensible and almost ran down the stairs into the bar.

The woman adjusted her clothes and let out a little sigh when she suddenly turned around and looked directly into the darkness of the surveillance room where Garrus was standing.

“Well, C-Sec-Blue, did you like the show?” she asked with a smile and Garrus was surprised how different her face suddenly looked, all soft and bright. Then he felt like he had been caught at something illegal and almost closed the door in reflex but he stopped himself. She had already seen him and the alcove entry wasn’t exactly advertised but it wasn’t really a secret either. Closing the door and hiding in the dark room would have been silly now.

Before he could answer she had stepped through the gap and stood right in front of him, her red fur bright alight from the light behind her. He towered over her but she did not appear to be intimidated by him. He realized that he hadn’t answered her question and spread his mandibles in a grin.

“Well, Alliance-Red, I must say, I’ve never seen a female of your kind to be so - demanding. It looked … interesting...” He stopped and his subharmonics trilled confused. *What am I trying to say here?*

She stepped closer and her smile got even wider. Her face was directly in front of him and she looked over his mandibles, his eyes and his mouth and he wondered how well humans could see in the dark and if she really saw him. Behind her the door closed and the room was suddenly completely dark again. He could still see her outline and her eyes but she looked around confused and grabbed his upper arms with surprising strength.

“Can’t you see in the dark?” he asked with a rumble, trying to sound reassuring. But he wasn’t sure if she could even hear his subharmonics. She had his arms in an iron grip and without his armor she might have hurt him. She was stronger than he had initially thought.

“No, it’s too dark, can you still see me?” Her voice sounded strong and Garrus realized that she was careful but not afraid.

“I can just see your outline, I’m sorry, I’ll turn a light on, I just have to step over there...”

“No, leave it dark, my eyes have already adjusted a bit, I can see the blue light from your visor. I think … maybe this is a nice way to … explore …”
One hand left his arm and he felt her many fingertips trace lightly over his face, mapping his mouthplates, stroking and squeezing his mandibles and then she ghosted over his fringe and Garrus almost lost his balance. The whole situation was suddenly very erotic and he felt the need to touch her face like she had touched his. He took off his gloves and let them fall to the floor.

The first feeling of her skin against the bud of his talons almost shocked him, it felt softer than the finest Asari silk. He wondered if only her face had such soft skin, surely the fearless human warriors of Shanxi could not have been so soft! His hand moved to her shoulder and slipped under the fabric there and still that utterly soft skin continued.

He had to ask, “Are you this soft all over?” and he heard her chuckle.

“Yes, my armored turian, that’s what human skin feels like all over our bodies.”

“How did your species even survive?”

Her mouth was suddenly very close to the soft skin of his throat and her breath was ghosting over it. “Do you really want to discuss this now?”

A deep rumble rolled through him. “No.”

“How about you take off that armor?”

She was still so very close him, her hands moving lightly over and under his fringe and her many fingers were almost disorienting. He hesitated for a moment, he was still on duty. Being caught without armor with a human female doing whatever this moment will lead to after the first month on the job sounded like a very bad idea. But then he smelled her and he just had to nuzzle into her fur, taking in her scent and his hands seemed to move on their own, releasing latches and piece by piece, his armor clattered to the floor.

Without that barrier between them, the woman suddenly moved close to him again and became just as demanding as she had been with the man out in the hallway. Her mouth moved over his throat, nibbling and biting his skin. She pressed her body against him and Garrus’s back bumped against the wall and the woman touched him everywhere. Her nimble fingers found the clasps in his underarmor and with lightning speed she had pushed the fabric away and stroked his plates. Her fingers traced the plates and stroked the skin between them, her blunt teeth were on him everywhere and he felt like he was about to explode from pleasure and desire.

She must have noticed how much he liked her actions, just from the sounds he made and she payed attention to his reactions, tested stroking different areas with different strength and just when he thought it couldn’t get any better she used her short and blunt talons to scratch with surprising strength over his plates. He growled loudly and grabbed her waist, stroking her sides and his hips snapped against hers. She giggled and said something about him purring like a cat but he didn’t really have the sense to listen.

He nuzzled her neck where her throat and her shoulder formed an elegant curve and he noticed that she somehow had gotten rid of all her clothing without him even noticing. It probably should have worried him how she messed with his sense of awareness, but in his mind was only room for the desire to get closer to her. His plates had loosened a while ago and he felt his erection growing. He could just hope that she wanted this as well because he was rapidly losing the ability to think straight.

His nuzzling and stroking seemed to get approval from her, evidenced by a loud moan and the way she was arching her back was probably a good sign too. He found himself looking at the mounds on her front and stroked one with his hand while he still held her waist with the other. She moaned and
moved her hips against him in a wonderfully erotic move and he stroked the incredible soft mound again for that reaction.

The little nub in the middle of the mound looked interesting and as his hands were already busy he experimentally licked over it with his tongue and she gasped and moaned as her whole body moved over him like fluid. Her fingers pressed under his fringe, whether she knew of this spot before or found it by pure luck didn’t matter, her fingers pressed and stroked the bundle of nerves and the sensation went through his whole body like an electric current. His knees buckled and they tumbled to the floor and suddenly she was all over him, biting, scratching and her hips were gyrating against his and he could feel her warmth and her wetness through the fabric of his pants.

She felt like fluid again, her soft skin and her many fingers all over his plates and he wanted to touch everything of her. Her waist, her ass, the softness and the ripple of strong muscles under her skin. It was all so different, so alien but so very erotic.

She moaned and her voice was even deeper with a rough growl when she spoke, “You’re so hot, so very hot! And you feel so strong and you’re not as spiky as I thought.”

“Spiky?” Garrus wondered if he should feel insulted.

“Yeah, I thought your plates would feel like metal or like stone, they have this metallic shine to them.” She rubbed against his erection straining in his pants, clearly enjoying the contact. “But your plates feel more like rubber and the skin between them is soft like mine. I wonder what your penis feels like.”

She started to tug impatiently at his pants as he stared at her. He knew an invitation when he heard one and he almost ripped his pants on his spurs, pulling them down urgently.

His erection sprang free from its confinement and he sighed in relief only to gasp in pleasure when her oh so soft fingers were suddenly all over his penis, stroking, rubbing, grabbing him strongly and softly at the same time.

He couldn’t wait anymore, he threw her on her back and almost thrust into her when he realized that he had no idea if human vaginas were built like turian ones. He couldn’t really see it but he felt around with the buds of his talons. She was even softer there and there was some fur. That was a bit weird but then he felt her soft lips and her wetness and he quickly decided to just accept the fur. As he was stroking around her labia her reactions got even stronger, her movements jerky, especially when he stroked a little nub on top. It was very strange, but her moans turned into pants and the whimpers from her were just too delicious.

He kept stroking and rubbing that nub and used his other hand to stroke from her mound down her waist and up again and then he went down the other side. She never stopped moving, her hips jerking, rubbing against him with her legs, her many toes stroking over his back and it was like she had a second pair of hands. And then suddenly she started panting faster and the pants turned into whimpers and then her back arched completely away from the floor and she screamed in ecstasy. It was the greatest sound Garrus had ever heard.

After a minute she seemed to come back to her senses and suddenly he found himself on his ass, the back of his cowl against the wall and she was touching him and suddenly there was a condom, where the hell did that come from? and before he could catch his breath she had put the condom on him and straddled him and lowered herself down on him. Slowly, maddeningly slow she took him in and the feeling was so intense, her vagina so wet and tight and there were muscles there grabbing him … he could only growl in pleasure.
She took him in completely, rubbing her nub against him and moved up again, stopping just before his tip would leave her warm wetness and then she moved down again and he could see that she looked directly into his eyes and she moved up and down, increasing her speed, demanding, grabbing his hips for leverage. Garrus couldn’t take lying still anymore, he flipped them over and slammed into her. He pressed his nose against her throat, inhaling her scent and he thrust into her faster and faster as he felt her tighten even more, her muscles felt like she was milking him, grabbing him from the inside and she made those delicious sounds again, gasping and then screaming and he couldn’t hold it anymore and came with an uncontrolled roar, throwing his head back as he spilled into her and almost blacked out.

His last shred of sense reminded him not to crush her with his weight and he rolled to her side, ignoring the condom hanging heavily down, completely unable to move any further.

*Hot damn! Spirits of all things!*

The woman lying on her side beside him was still panting and absently stroking the side of his face. He couldn’t quite see her expression but he felt confident that she was just as satisfied as him. Suddenly her mouth was right on his and the soft lips were caressing his mouthplates. He trilled slightly insecure, unsure what she expected from him. She moved away from his mouth and those soft lips kissed his throat and somehow, this fondling felt almost too intimate for fast sex between strangers. A strange feeling started in his chest and spread to his gizzard.

She sighed against his throat. “I have to say, C-Sec-Blue, that was amazing! Quite unexpected. And a wonderful way to end my shore leave.” She nuzzled his neck and he wondered if humans had a good sense of smell. Could she smell him? Would she recognize his smell? He inhaled her scent, vowing to never forget it.

He realized that he wanted to see her again, wanted to get to know her.

“What is your name?”

“No names,” she whispered. "I’m leaving for my training tomorrow and we will probably never see each other again.” She turned away and sat up to dress again. He almost didn’t hear her whisper, “We can never have this anyway - this … you’re a turian, I’m …“

She dressed in the dark with the efficiency of a well trained soldier and was at the door before he had even found his underarmour.

“Good bye, C-Sec-Blue.” The light from the hallway spilled into the room from behind her and her red fur looked like chemical flames on her head.

“Good bye, Alliance-Red. Spirits watch over you.”

The door closed behind her and he was plunged into darkness again. He found his pants on the floor and began to put them on when he realized that he still had the condom on and his penis seemed to be convinced that the action would continue soon. With a frustrated groan he removed the condom and willed his erection to go away until he was back behind his plates.

He slumped back against the wall, unwilling to move. He was annoyed at himself, *why had he let her go?* He was sure that he would never forget her and the great sex they had had. He should probably find a willing turian female for some traditional turian sex to get these deviant memories of amazing sex with an alien out of his head. How soft she was, how she moved like fluid, how her tiny talons scratched his plates, how her teeth had felt, how her inside muscles had grabbed him...
Garrus held his head in his hands with a groan. He was so screwed.
The halls of C-Sec were always busy and loud, but Garrus had no trouble making his voice heard.

“Johnson? Get over here, I got something!”

“You’re gonna have to wait just like everybody else, birdy.” Frank Johnson's voice had no trouble either to rise above the noise of C-Sec. Humans had only one set of vocal cords and their upper body seemed to be too small to act like a good resonating sound box, but Garrus had learned that humans could still raise their voices to impressive levels.

Garrus started to move towards Johnson’s office, loud music spilled out from it and Garrus knew that Johnson was busily darting around his office right now, probably working on three or ten things at once. Johnson was one of the few humans working at C-Sec and proved once again that humans were the most diverse and adaptable species on the Citadel. He could be slow and phlegmatic, falling asleep during a meeting with Pallin and suddenly something would grab his attention and he would talk faster than a salarian, thinking up ideas a mile a minute. That’s when Garrus started calling him a salarian pyjack hopped up on stims.

“What’s my salarian pyjack working on now?”

“Monkey, Garrus, not pyjack: monkey. If you want to insult me, at least do it right,” Frank said with a grin on his face.

Garrus clicked his mandibles at that, the remark reminding him very much of something his father would say. “Fine, salarian monkey on stims, what do you have?”

“Oh Garrus, you won’t believe it, remember the stash of weapons we busted two weeks ago, remember the volus? We couldn’t keep him, his lawyer got him out and we couldn’t pin him to the weapons cause there was no proof that he had rented the warehouse and you weren’t exactly gentle with the guy that didn’t help our case either, I have to say you might want to rethink your methods cause if we could have kept that guy a little longer, he might have told us about this guy Verringer, a human by the way and -”

Even Frank Johnson couldn’t defy basic biology and he actually had to take a breath, giving Garrus the chance to interrupt his ramblings and take a look at the datapad Johnson was holding.

“Breathe man, breathe! Let me catch up with you.” Garrus switched the display to citadel common and skimmed the notes and pictures that Johnson had collected. “So you found that this volus, what was his name, Kata Lon?”

“Kata Lem”

“Kata Lem, alright, so you found a connection to Verringer and he rented the warehouse?”

“Ah Garrus, my impatient friend, that would be too easy, wouldn’t it? Of course they hid it better, no obvious connections. But Lem has a little company beside his main trading between Palaven and the Citadel, he also has a bunch of bodyguards he is renting out and one of them is called ‘Mad-Ver’ who just happens to be the brother of one Karl Verringer who is just this friendly guy you call when you need a discrete job done and he is partner in a storage business owned by Belethia Gars’ada who
just happened to rent a warehouse but strangely enough never used it.”

Again, Johnson needed to take a breath and Garrus managed to get another word in.

“So Belethia Gars’ada, she’s asari, right? Why do you ignore her involvement, what makes you suspect this guy Verringer? And don’t tell me it’s because he’s human, you know you don’t have to prove to me that you don’t favor your own species over others.”

Garrus knew Frank Johnson for almost a year. They had been teamed up together for about seven month now and he knew that Frank was the most unprejudiced person out there. He basically considered every person to be a treacherous bastard until proven otherwise and he made absolutely no distinction for different species.

“Belethia Gars’ada hasn’t been on the Citadel for over a year, I’m sure that Karl Verringer is running the business in her name, using it to cover up his own dealings. Gars’ada’s company had no problem with C-Sec, nothing even remotely shady going on until ten months ago. Shortly after Gars’ada had left the Citadel, things started coming up, suspicions of slave trading, Red Sand trafficking, nothing that could be proven, but the business is definitely not clean anymore. There is some big shit going on, birdman!”

Johnson’s eyes darted around the office until he found his coffee cup and went to a little coffee maker on a shelf, to pour himself a fresh cup of the vile beverage. Garrus used the quiet to look over the information Frank had gathered. It wasn’t much, but better than nothing. They needed some real stuff to actually arrest this guy but usually a bit of digging turned things up, once you knew where to look.

Garrus had become a skilled investigator, he had a talent for digging into a case and find the connections, something that his father had also done very well. Garrus had to reluctantly admit that his father had been right in pushing him to C-Sec, even though he missed shooting his sniper rifle more often and his tech skills weren’t as useful as he would have wished. But he was a good investigator and together with Frank Johnson he had busted some really bad guys and closed some big cases. His only problem was that he kept busting criminals only to see them walk away because of some regulation. Not to mention the desk work was killing him.

Garrus realized that Frank was looking at him, waiting for his input.

“I see the connection, monkeyman.” He spread his mandibles in a wide grin, giving the insult right back. “But it’s not enough yet and you know it. We can bust neither Gars’ada nor Verringer with this, we need some solid proof.”

“I know Garrus, I know. But there is something big going on, I can feel it in my gut!”

“Your gut? Are you hurt? No, wait, that’s another one of those expressions again, it means that you have a feeling about this. Frank, we can’t arrest anybody based on your feeling.” Garrus shook his head.

“Yes, I know, but if we look around this warehouse and another one, that Gars’ada’s company has rented, maybe we can find something to bring Verringer in for some questions. I ask him and you stare at him and do your polygraph thing that you’re so good at and we find out how he is involved.”

Garrus had never told anybody why he had gotten so interested in humans and their expressions or why he kept looking for bright red hair when he saw a bunch of humans. After that special night in the Choras Den alcove, he had begun to read up on humans, their faces, their anatomy. He read and watched vids about human history and customs and at some point he came across vids about human
forensics and crime fighting. He found instructions about interrogation techniques and learned about facial expressions and micro-expressions.

Garrus found it fascinating how much happened in a human face, flexible as it was. And while they could control most of their expressions, it was impossible to hide those micro-expressions. Tiny facial movements that only appeared for a fraction of time, could tell an attentive watcher whether the person was telling the truth or not.

That knowledge became essential at C-Sec because as it turned out the famous adaptive capabilities of humans could also be applied very successfully to a life of crime. Most C-Sec officers were turians and used to dealing with turians. Turians were bad liars, most of them would eventually reveal any truth if pressured enough, their subharmonics usually betraying them quickly. But even the most skillful turian liars, who could clamp down any revealing trill, were still like toddlers caught with the hand in the cookie jar compared to humans.

Humans could lie. Really lie.

Garrus had seen humans tell him the most amazing stories straight to his face and without anything in their faces negating that story. Only after watching the recording later could he find subtle signs that betrayed them. He had gotten so good at spotting those expressions, that he hardly interrogated suspects himself anymore, he just watched and rewatched while his partner asked the questions. The had a good routine going with that.

Garrus looked at the evidence again and at a picture of Karl Verringer, showing a man with light skin, his fur - no, hair - cropped short and hard eyes that looked aggressively at the camera. Yes, he would like to hear what that guy had to say, he probably had some 'interesting' stories to tell.

“Alright Frank, how do you always say? Let’s find a big stick and poke around with it until the rats run out!”

“Yes man! I like that plan!” Frank grabbed some his weapons and was about to run out the door when Garrus stopped him.

“Hang on, first you have to take a look at the stuff I found,” he said. Johnson looked confused at him for a second and Garrus grabbed him by his arm, dragging him with him, “I happen to be a good investigator too and I have something, so come on.”

There was no loud music in Garrus office but other than that, it looked just as chaotic as Johnson’s, data pads strewn around and at least five half-empty cups of cava balancing on top of them. The only area that looked clean and organized was the weapons bench next to the weapons locker. A disassembled sniper rifle was lying on top of the bench, all of it’s parts spread around it in neat piles, three different cleaning solvents and gun oils arranged in a row on top of it.

They both ignored the weapons bench, stepping into the room. Garrus handed two old cava cups to Johnson to put away and he almost wanted to set them on the weapons bench, but thought better of it after a fierce look from Garrus and put them on the floor, the only empty surface to be found. Garrus then handed him two data pads and gave his partner some time to look the information over before he started to talk.

“So far, we found three victims in the lower wards who were missing most of their body parts, so we did assume that there is some black market trading with organs going on, right? But here’s what’s strange, I had the pathologist check the victims and he found some inconsistencies. Some kind of residue in the nervous system resulting from extreme stress, like the bodies were overtaxed almost till breaking point.”
Johnson scrunched up his face, deep in thought. “None of these guys looked athletic or anything, I mean what could they have even done that was so taxing to their bodies?”

“I don’t know. Another thing: I put out some feelers, asked around in the clinics about transplants and I got some disturbing information. There seems to be an increase with available organs but they seem to be ... kind of low quality, one of doctors called it.” Garrus shuddered slightly, thinking back to that conversation. ‘Scrap meat’ the doctor had called the organs, ‘causing more problems than solving’.

Johnson looked up. “If someone is taking out organs to sell them then there has to be place on the Citadel where that is done”, he said. “Something like a lab, an operating table, they need equipment, coolant to preserve the organs. Maybe we can find a lead if we look at the suppliers.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” Garrus nodded, already typing out orders on his omni-tool for a search algorithms, to see who had bought coolant agents recently.

“Let’s run some searches on that but while we wait for results we do our poking around in the warehouse. We need to get a warrant for that -” Garrus growled out his annoyance at that and he saw Johnson flinch at the sound. Yes, humans can hear subharmonics. “- and while we’re at it let’s see what other real estate Gars’ada has recently acquired.”

Frank grinned at Garrus, “I’m pretty sure it is your turn now for the warrant-asking-walk-of-shame!” He didn’t even try to hide his amusement as Garrus clamped his mandibles tight against his face in annoyance. He hated having to ask Pallin for warrants, Pallin always wanted to know every little detail about a case, he never trusted his judgement. Sometimes he wished he could just skip a getting a warrant, just act on his own perception like a Spectre.

Garrus scratched his fringe and sang a sigh. “Yes, alright, I take it to Pallin and how about we get some lunch, while we wait for the warrant?”

“I like the way you think, birdy,” Frank said. "And I won’t even complain when your food tries to run away from your plate before you can eat it.”

Garrus sighed. “It’s not like I could even get living kalkenda on the Citadel. Anyway, I’ll see you outside.”

Johnson laughed and walked away and Garrus went to Pallins office.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know nothing much happening and there isn’t even sex! I’m sorry, I wanted to set up how Garrus lived and worked before the craziness starts. So please, just bear with me, action scenes are coming up soon.

Thanks to TheLadyKellet for beta-reading.
Garrus crouched and almost crawled around yet another tight corner to peer into the third hidden compartment they’ve found in the warehouse. The warehouse had seemed normal enough from the outside but the more they looked around, the more suspicious the whole thing began to look. There were offices and counters and displays set up and everything practically screamed “normal business” to anybody looking at it.

But Johnson and Garrus weren’t fooled by the front displayed. It only took them half an hour of looking around to find the first hidden containers, full of illegal weapons tech and one call to Headquarters later the warehouse was crawling with C-Sec officers. Johnson was leading a team into the basement, gleefully ignoring the annoyed looks of the turian officers who still had a problem with a human leading them.

Garrus took a another team to the second level and left half of his team to catalogue the contents of the first hidden compartment they had come across. There had been at least one full container of Red Sand and some other drug they didn’t even recognize. Squinting into the darkness behind the hidden door near the floor he knelt on, Garrus was careful to recheck the filters on his helmet. With this much Red Sand floating around here, he had ordered everyone to wear their protective gear and keep the purifiers running inside. His visor didn’t show him any life signs but the room he was peering in was huge, and some kind of shielding crackled around the edges.

“There is a big area here but there has to be another entrance, this can’t be it. Look around, scan for cloaking tech. There has to be a door somewhere here. I see big containers, they didn’t just materialize there.”

The other three turians with him lit up their Omni-Tools and scanned the walls. Garrus used the programs on his specialized visor looking for the telltale signs of cloaking. Fizzily edges, ghostly mirror-images, those were the usual signs. The more expensive the tech, the harder it was to find it. Garrus began to grow nervous and excited at the same time. How advanced was this tech if they couldn’t find it even with the best programs?

The hunt was on.

Garrus could feel it, that stream of adrenaline coursing through his veins, the excitement of the hunt. They were coming up to something big, he could feel it, almost touching his spirit. The rest of his team was humming the same tune as him, subharmonics chiming with each other.

“Batius, check the container over there, I’m getting some strange optical divergences there.”

“Yes, there is something ... like the container is there but isn’t.”

“That’s it, we got it! Come on, overload that incanti, go!”

They cued up their Omni-Tools synchronising the overloads, when his visor flashed him an alarm about energy signatures flaring up and he could just call out “Trap!” when his vision turned white and for a blink of a second everything seemed to be frozen. He saw Batius trying to shield his eyes as the chemical flames engulfed him, he saw Tarten drop to the ground behind him, scarcely protected by his friend. Tinlenus fell backwards, his eyes fixed on Garrus, looking for help he
couldn’t give and then he was knocked back from the blast with the force of a skycar hitting him square in the chest.

He felt his armor crack on his back from the force of his crash to the ground and he didn’t even hear the sound of the explosion, the crash had knocked him out for few seconds. As his senses came back, he looked up to find the room transformed into something like a warzone. He slammed his comm to call for help but could only let out a violent cough as suddenly the pain rushed up and his cowl seemed to constrict around his lungs.

“Medic!” he managed to yell out in between coughs and tried to get up. On his hands and knees he crawled over to Batius and Tarten, their armor smoking, their bodies unmoving. Tinlenus had somehow avoided the worst of the blast and was also moving over to Batius, his eyes behind his cracked helmet wide in panic. He was keening in worry, his voices screeching. His subharmonics were clearly crying for a mate in danger, Garrus had had no idea that they were that close.

Tinlenus reached for Batius’ arm and Garrus stopped him before he could grab onto him to move him. Garrus was no medic but Batius was severely injured and moving him without a containment field around his bones and organs was probably not a good idea. He tried to turn on his Omni-Tool to scan his colleagues but it seemed to be fried. Without his Omni-Tool, he could only look over everyones armor. Batius armor was burned all over as much as Tarten’s but they had no visible cracks. But they both had been much closer to the explosion than Garrus and he already felt like he had been thrown around in his armor by an enraged krogan.

Suddenly Johnson was screaming in his ear. “Garrus! Garrus are you there? Come on man, talk to me!”

“Yes, I’m here, I’m...” Another cough and a surge of pain made him fall flat on the side of his fringe again. “Just get here, get a medic here...”

The sound of footsteps and the sight of many blue C-Sec armor assured him that things were taken care of and he let exhaustion wash over him and welcomed the darkness of unconsciousness to take away the pain.

Garrus woke up to a bright light shining in his eyes and the smell of medigel. A doctor with green markings on his face looked at him disapprovingly and Garrus vaguely wondered what he could have done to make the man so mad at him.

“We’ll keep him on the monitors and the pain meds until his cowl has healed. Please keep me informed of his progress, Dr. Michel.” The turian doctor spoke to a tiny human woman standing next to his sickbed.

The first doctor turned away and Garrus followed him with his eyes and saw him turn his attention to Tarten in the bed next to him. He looked around but couldn’t see Batius and Tinlenus anywhere. He turned to the tiny human doctor and tried to make a friendly face.

“I’m not sure what I did to make him so mad.” He was relieved that his speech didn’t sound slurred. The turian doctor left the room with determined steps.

The human doctor answered with an unusual accent. “Oh, despite from getting yourself injured you didn’t do anything wrong. You had your team all wear helmets and that probably saved everyones
life, at least ...” She stopped and looked over through the glass door into another room. Garrus followed her look and saw the two other turians from his team on sickbeds. Tinlenus was sitting up, looking worried at his friend or mate or whatever in the other bed. Garrus trilled a question and caught the confused look from the doctor. He coughed and hesitated to actually ask the question but he had to know.

“How are Batius, Tarten and Tinlenus?”

“Tarten is here in the room with you, he has many broken bones and some burns, we sedated him to protect him from the pain. Tinlenus is a little better off, he only broke his arm and burned his left leg. Both will most probably be fine after they healed for a few weeks. Batius ...” She hesitated and Garrus braced himself for the bad news.

“He is injured very much, almost all of his skin - eh plating - got burned, his armor fell off him like ash. He has a head injury and is in a coma. We are not sure if he will wake up. Even if he does, we are not sure if he will make a full recovery. I’m very sorry, Mr. Vakarian, we do what we can.”

Garrus fell back to his side. “I should have been more careful, I should have known that there would be traps.” Garrus groaned and closed his eyes. He was startled by the small human hand on his upper arm trying to comfort him.

The doctor had a shy smile on her face and her voice was high. “I don’t know about the situation that led to the explosion but without the helmets, I’m sure none of you would have survived. And you didn’t try to move Batius, that was good as well. You should sleep now, you broke a rib and have a crack in your cowl, you body needs some time to heal.”

Garrus closed his eyes and fell asleep after a few minutes.

When he woke up again, the Citadel was in it’s night cycle. He looked around the room and saw his friend Frank Johnson sitting on a chair with his head resting against the wall. He seemed to be asleep. Garrus tried to sit up but his cowl was clearly not agreeing with him. A sharp stab of pain had him slump back on the bed and the noise woke up Johnson.

“Easy man, don’t start any gymnastics just yet. You got a pretty bad crack on your front thing there!”

“It’s called a cowl, you should know that.”

“As if you guys bother to know what my body parts are called. Tinlenus still calls my hair fur.”

They both fell quiet for a few minutes, both worried about their colleagues.

“What happened after I fell unconscious?” Garrus asked, knowing that his friend would have started to investigate right away.

“Well, after you fainted like a precious flower ...” Johnson grinned and Garrus let out an annoyed trill.

“Allright, alright. You passed out right when my team and me came running in. For once those racist bastards listened to me and didn’t move you guys, Gestver just applied medigel all around and I had the other guys scan the fuck out of everything. They found another bomb trap that would have killed
all of us if we hadn’t disarmed the detonator. The medics showed up with this cute little doctor from a clinic in the neighbourhood, a human woman, maybe you saw her, has a sexy little accent.”

Garrus stopped his gushing, “You can flirt with her later, tell me more about the warehouse.”

“Ok ok, this room you found behind the vent flap or whatever that was, well - we eventually found the door, an honest good old-fashioned secret door hidden behind a closet. There wasn’t even electronic cloaking shit, I found it by scanning for airflow of all things. All the cloaking stuff was just there to cover the fucking bomb traps. The room was stuffed full of boxes and containers with drugs and weapons and all the illegal shit you could think about and we actually found a list of suppliers and buyers. Jackpot! Oh and get this, you remember that we wanted to look for cooling agents? Well, guess what we found?”

Garrus sat up with his weight on his elbows, despite the pain in his cowl. “They supplied the cooling stuff from that warehouse?”

“Lots and lots of the stuff. And tons of other medical supplies as well. Delivered to different names but all in close proximity to each other. Kind of stupid actually, trying to hide it but not really hiding it.”

Garrus sighed, “If the bad guys never made stupid mistakes we would never catch any of them.” He leaned back against the raised part of the bed.

“Yes, you’re right. I checked out the area, had a coffee, talked to the store owners, you know, just sniffing around. Nothing obviously suspicious going on, but the coffee guy told me about a biotech company in the area with lots of foot traffic, people of all species walking in and coming out shortly later.”

“Nothing wrong about that, Johnson.”

“I know birdy, but coffee guy is quite the observer and he saw the same people come back a few weeks later, looking sick and exhausted. Some of them he never saw come out of the building again.”

“And you think those could be the dead bodies we found?”

“Hey, you never know! Coffee guy mentioned some of the people working there have lunch at his place every day, so I thought I’ll hang around there for few days and see if I can chat up someone.”

Garrus snorted. “You just hope for a cute girl to flirt with there.”

“Cute or not, I will find someone to talk to. Find out what that company does besides what the sign on the front says.”

“What does the sign on the front say?”

Johnson scrunched up his face. “It’s a biotech company, working in artificially grown skin and cartilage. Quite successfully actually, they provide good skin supplements for humans, turians and others. Our friends Batius and Tarten may owe their life to those skin substitutes.” They both looked over to Tarten in the next sickbed, still asleep. Batius had been moved to another room, Tinlenus was alone in the next room.

Garrus keened softly. His worry about his colleagues slowly turned into anger, someone needed to pay for this. “If they have something to do with this, we’ll find a connection. We have to. Go ahead with your plan, find out what this place really does. But be careful, they could have legitimate
reasons for all the cooling stuff.” Garrus critically looked at the dark circles under Franks eyes.

“Oh, they get coolants on a regular basis, but it’s not much. The difference is in the numbers.” Frank looked pleased about his work but he was clearly tired.

“Frank, get some sleep, you look like you’re about to fall asleep right where you’re sitting.”

“Since when can you read humans so well, birdy?”

“Ever since you pyjak keep hanging around me.”

Frank grinned. “Monkey, birdman, monkey! But you’re right, I’m gonna crash at home and get some sleep. You better get well, I get bored without you around.”

Johnson took his hand in a strong grip and then left. Garrus closed his eyes, his mind turning all the information over and over in his head until he fell asleep.

Three days later Garrus was released from the hospital as the first of the injured group. Frank Johnson kept him updated with messages while he was confined to bedrest at home. Now that the heavy duty painkillers from the hospital wore off and he could just take the normal stuff, his whole body ached all over. So Garrus spend most of his days and nights in his bed, raised to a half-sitting position and watched vids and read stuff on the extranet. He caught up with some popular shows and concluded that he hadn’t really missed much.

He hated sitting around, resting his fringe on the top of his pillowroll. He needed to do something, anything, the stress from the last week had piled up and needed some release. Masturbation only took some of the edge off and it didn’t really help that his “favourite” hand was still covered in a bandage.

Garrus had just found another vid with turian-male-human-female porn and he was slowly and a bit awkwardly working with his off-hand on his erection. Turian-human and turian-asari had quickly become his favourite porn after he had started to “research” the various alien sex deviations out there.

After the great experience with a human female, Garrus had decided that he should broaden his horizons even more. He didn’t sleep around every night, but he definitely had his fair share of sexual adventures. He tried sex with different species, many asari, some human females and there was some groping with a human male that never went anywhere. He also had a fling with a turian female but there were only a few living on the Citadel and most of them were already bonded. He even had an affair with a Salarian female who showed more sexual interest than some turian females he had met. There was also one adventure where he put on half of an enviro suit and linked it with a quarian who ran her nerve stimulation program between them. While feeling quite technical, the sensations were not all that different from asari mind-pleasure.

He stayed away from Elcor and Hanar though, that would have just been weird. He almost had sex with a drell man but after falling unconscious from the hallucinogenic saliva and having to spend a whole day on a bad trip just from a bite to his neck, he decided that he didn’t have a gender barrier but he definitely had a species barrier when it came to drell.

He did like sex with asari but most of them didn’t allow penetration, they found it unhygienic. They could give and receive pleasure with their minds, so penetration wasn’t really necessary. But Garrus liked the feeling of his penis enclosed in warmth and thought that pure mind pleasure was lacking
something. Still, he didn’t deny the “Embrace eternity”-sensations when he came across them.

Garrus kept watching the vid, slowly rubbing his erection. It was another First Contact War setting, a stable when it came to turian produced porn involving humans. A female sort-of-Alliance looking soldier had her hands bound behind her back and was interrogated by a turian commander. He was trying threats to get information from her but was unsuccessful. After a little while he changed tactics and started to lick her neck and her breasts with his tongue and the female shuddered with pleasure. Her hands were still bound and Garrus waited for the turian actor to release her hands, fondly remembering those deft and soft fingers on his plates. There was really no point in tying them up. Finally the commander released her hands and after a short struggle where she halfheartedly tried to escape she eventually submitted to the pleasure his tongue gave her and started to kiss him.

Garrus kept his eyes on the screen while his hand worked faster and his talons occasionally scratched the seams of his retreated plates. On the screen the actress went down on her knees and Garrus froze at the sight of the tiny woman with long hair kneeling in front of the turians impressive erection and kissing and licking his penis. So that’s what they meant with “Special deviant moves” on the description.

He almost couldn’t believe his eyes and vaguely wondered if the woman didn’t get hurt when she took part of the turians erection in her mouth. Whatever she was doing must have been amazing because the turian actor growled out his intense pleasure in some very real subharmonics and suddenly pushed her away to thrust into her and the look of desire in his eyes was too real to be just an act.

Garrus was fascinated by the display and had forgotten for a minute why he was actually watching the porn. His hand had stilled but his erection kept throbbing just from looking at the couple on screen, both of them now panting and screaming. Right when he remembered to move his hand again, the doorbell chimed and he cursed loudly as he pulled up the camera picture.

Outside he saw an asari with white markings on her face that looked like they had been applied with a thick brush. Garrus knew her, she was one of the more regular night flings he had, a friend and sometimes lover. They cared about each other but they weren’t in it for a relationship, she was still a young maiden, eager to experience everything the galaxy had to offer.

Garrus send the key code to the door to open it and called out to the asari when she entered. “I’m in here, Dalinia, come in!”

He turned off the screen and threw a blanket over himself. He wasn’t embarrassed at the state of his arousal but he thought it to be slightly impolite to greet her with with his member standing to attention like that. She saw the state he was in right away and gave him a wide smile. Not wasting any time with small talk she licked his mandible and climbed over him. Garrus hissed in pain, even her slight weight was too much for his beaten body.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered and slid to his right side.

“No, I’m sorry,” he mumbled, “you have no idea how much I need that right now and I just can’t!” He groaned his subharmonics in annoyance. Dalinia put her hands to sides of his face and looked at him with a friendly smile.

“Relax, Garrus, let me help you. I’ll be careful and you won’t get hurt at all. Just relax.”

She kissed his right mandible and Garrus let his shoulders relax and rested his fringe back on his pillowroll as her as eyes turned black and she whispered “Embrace eternity!”
The sensation of her mind rushed through his body, her touch from the inside igniting his nerves. Behind his closed eyes, lights were rushing towards him, enclosing him, wrapping him in the feeling of a single touch engulfing his whole body. He felt her pleasure mix with his and her mind touched his inner desires, pulling them to the forefront, fulfilling them with bright intensity. Waves of pleasure rolled from his head to his loins and he felt her mind swimming through his veins and he saw his body alight with colorful streams of light and felt a warmth around his penis so intense that it almost hurt and a simple touch of his own hand was enough for him to spill all over his stomach and he felt and heard his asari friend moan as she reached the height of her pleasure herself.

With a sigh Dalinia’s eyes returned to normal and she laid her head on his arm. Garrus stretched, he felt pleasantly satisfied and knew that he was finally able to relax. He smiled at his friend, “Thank you Dalinia, that was just perfect.”

The asari looked at him with serious eyes and said, “Garrus, I was worried about you.”

“Huh? Didn’t know you cared.” Garrus looked at her slightly concerned, their relationship had been pleasantly easy going and he really didn’t want to change that.

Dalinia grinned, “Don’t worry Garrus, I’m not ready for my matron years with you just yet.” She nudged him on the side of his fringe and sat up so that she faced him.

“I was just ... you know the galaxy is a big place and we just sit here on the Citadel, shielded from everything. Why do we stay here? There is so much to see out there and we just sit here.”

“Well right now you sitting here is quite enjoyable ...” Garrus stopped her hand from punching him on his arm and grinned at her, “… but I know what you mean. Why do you ask yourself that?”

She straightened her back and said resolutely, “I’m going to leave, Garrus. I’m going to leave this safe haven and I’m going to see the galaxy. I found a position on a trade ship and I’m going to find out what I want from life. I just wanted to see you again before I leave tomorrow and you almost got yourself killed.” She looked quite mad and Garrus thought that he should probably change the subject.

He leaned his head back and looked out the window to the artificial clouds on the artificial Citadel sky. “So you’re trying to find your consilium.”

“My what?” Dalinia looked at him questioningly.

“Your consilium. Every turian is raised to find his or her consilium and follow it. Finding your consilium, finding your calling in life and trying to achieve it is the noblest goal of all.”

Dalinia smiled, “Yes, that’s what I want, to find my consilium, my purpose.” She jumped up from the bed as if she was going to run out to the galaxy right away.

Garrus spread his mandibles in a wide grin, he was happy for his friend, happy that she was doing something with her life. He didn’t know what his consilium was but one day he was going to find it. Maybe he should leave the Citadel as well, travel the galaxy.

But first he had to solve this damn case that had put him on bedrest, aching all over.
There! Action and sex. Phew, I hope you like it, that was a beast to write.

I promise Shepard will turn up soon, I haven’t forgotten her. And Saren and Nihlus.... you will see.
Garrus and Frank Johnson sat in one of the few cafes that served decent dextro and levo food, eating lunch. They each ate something that looked suspiciously similar and was called Burger in Frank’s case and Garlefka in Garrus’. Even though Garrus knew that humans were quite capable of eating with the correct tools, Frank had decided to eat his Burger with his hands, biting off huge chunks. Since his friend usually had his reasons for doing things, he didn’t question it, apparently that’s how burgers were meant to be eaten. He cut another piece off his Garlefka and stabbed it with his talon, raising it to his mouth.

Suddenly Frank stared wide-eyed at some point to the right of Garrus shoulder, chewing and swallowing urgently. He swallowed so hard that Garrus could see the chunk of food moving down his throat. When he opened his mouth, pieces of food were still stuck to his teeth and Garrus winced slightly at that, he couldn’t quite grasp all this chewing humans did if it didn’t even get their teeth clean.

“Holy shit! That’s the scariest turian I have ever seen!” Frank almost jumped up from his chair and was straining his neck to look at the turians walking towards one of the elevators on the Presidium. Garrus turned around to see what got him so excited and Frank kept on babbling.

“That guy has the whitest plates I have ever seen, did he turn his bones inside-out? And what’s with the long bones stretching back, you don’t have that.” He stared at Garrus like he was seeing him for the first time. “Is that artificial? None of you guys at C-Sec have those. And is that metal on his jaw? I mean mandible? Did he use a nail gun to staple his face back together?”

“Would you shut up for a second so I can answer all your questions?” Garrus grumbled annoyed. Of course he knew who that was, one of the most famous turians out there, he practically grew up on the stories about him.

“That’s the most famous turian Spectre Saren. Renowned hero of the First Contact war and famous and infamous to be the most efficient and successful Spectre ever working for the council. He get’s the job done no matter what and doesn’t shy away from the dirty work.” Garrus felt slightly uncomfortable praising the Spectre like that, there were some disturbing stories going around involving him and he wasn’t quite sure if the praise was all that justified.

“Oh, I heard about him, never seen him though.” Frank suddenly had a strange look on his face. “You should go over and talk to him, maybe you can still become a Spectre one day.”

“Why don’t you go and ask him for that?” Garrus snorted, he would not annoy a hero like Saren with his gushing about becoming a Spectre one day like a little boy.

“Yeah, probably not a good idea, he hates humans.” Frank still had this strange look on his face.

Garrus shrugged, “Well, he did fight in the Relay 314 Incident and his brother got killed during that war, it’s kind of understandable if he carries a grudge.”

Frank’s voice was quiet. “The First Contact War was a long time ago, people need to move on at some point.” He took a breath, still looking at Saren and not at Garrus. “My father fought on Shanxi.
Died there.” The silence was thick between them and he kept looking at the Spectre. “The galaxy is not the same anymore, times have changed.”

Garrus stared at him. Frank had never talked about his family or why he lived here on the Citadel and not on Earth. It had never even occurred to him that Frank’s father could have been fighting against turians in the Relay 314 Incident and how he had every reason to hate him because of that. Instead they had become best friends. A turian and a human. Spectre Saren would think he was crazy, Spirits, his father probably thought that as well.

Which would explain the strained stretches of silence he heard when he told his father about the work he did with Frank Johnson. Kind of obvious when you think about it.

“Who is the reddish turian next to Mr. Scaryface?” Frank asked, still openly staring at the turians. But he looked his normal self again, the unusual serious expression was gone from his face. “Is that a female? She looks pretty!”

Garrus sighed and took a closer look. His eyes widened in surprise. “I’ll be fugari! That's Nihus!”

“Did you just say you’ll be banished? That’s what my translator puttered out.”

“Well sort-of. I know that guy, oh and it is a man. Females have shorter fringes.”

“Are you sure? Cause the way he walks, damn! You put that swagger in your hips and the whole female population of all species will throw themselves at you.”

“I prefer my females not thrown, thanks. And yes, I’m sure. I’ve met him when I applied for the Spectres.” There was burst of grief in the back of his head when he thought back to those talks. He was so hopeful back then, and how he had idolized the Spectres. He had been so eager to prove himself to the Spectre and Nihlus was just really friendly, put him at ease and they just talked. Garrus felt like, given time, they could have become friends. And then he came home and his father made it clear in very few words that he would not go to the Spectres. He honoured his father's decision, like a good turian son would. But seeing Nihlus now, he became painfully aware that this path for his life had been closed off to him.

“Nihlus is a good guy, open and friendly. Total opposite to Saren. I cannot imagine how he even puts up with that xenophobe.”

“So Nihlus doesn’t hate humans?” Frank kept looking at the red-plated turian with renewed interest.

“No, I don’t think he does, as a matter of fact, I saw him meet a human woman back when our appointment was over. They seemed to get along just fine.” Fine was one way of putting it, nuzzling and kissing may have been more accurate. But Garrus considered it not his place to tell stories like that about the guy.

Frank finally tore his eyes away from the Spectres as they entered an elevator. “Maybe the council paired them up with each other for that reason, you know? Have Nihlus counterbalance Saren’s xenophobia. I don’t envy that guy, Mr. Scaryface looked like a real funbag.”

“Funbag?” Garrus translator didn’t even attempt to explain that word.

“I meant it sarcastically, you know, like he is fun in bags only not.”

“You humans...” Garrus let the rest of the sentence run off, it was a common joke between Frank and him to sigh about ‘You turians...’ or ‘You humans...’
Garrus turned his attention back to his Garlefka and cut off another piece. Frank had finished his Burger and was now sipping on his drink. Then he looked at him and asked, "Have you heard anything about Tinlenus and Batius?"

"No, nothing new," Garrus mumbled, looking down on the table. They both avoided that subject, knowing they couldn't do anything anyway. Garrus decided to stop by the hospital later to see if he could find out more about Batius’ situation. For now he wanted to change the subject.

“Alright Frank, tell me what you found out drinking coffee all day down in the wards.”

“It’s really good coffee actually, best I ever had on the Citadel. That quarter of the wards has a mostly human and salarian population. Hmm, I wonder if the salarians drink coffee too. Man, can you imagine? A salarian on caffeine - oh boy, he would probably talk so fast you’d have to record it with your Omni-Tool and then play it back at half speed!” Frank almost fell out of his chair laughing.

Garrus didn’t really get what was so funny, he tried coffee once and decided that is was the most vile thing he ever tasted. And he did not notice that he talked faster afterwards.

“So you had good coffee, what else?”

“That biotech company is called ‘Everest Artifics’, I wonder who comes up with these names... anyway, so far it looks like a salarian-human cooperation and as I said before, they do some impressive stuff with artificial skin. Nothing looked suspicious at first but I kind of befriended this cute girl who works at a lab there. She’s really smart and she’s paying attention to stuff around her. We talked for about an hour after her shift was done and she told me that they equipped a whole new section of the building a few weeks ago but nobody is allowed to go in. Sarah said, she tried to get a look but they seem to have some heavy security going on there. They hired special personnel for the new lab and those guys aren’t even allowed to talk to them. Sarah wanted to apply for a transfer but they seem to be very careful who they hire. I asked her if they were looking for people and she said she would ask her boss, maybe I can get hired there and find out more! Sarah said that they’re always on the lookout for people who do the clean-up, that would give me nice chance to sniff around there. I could hang out with Sarah, you know, to get to know all her colleagues and the work they do there.”

“Does Sarah know that you’re C-Sec?” Garrus could hardly stop the grin on his face, he seldom heard Frank talk about a woman so much.

“I may have neglected to mention that...” Frank said, looking contrite.

Garrus shook his head at that and looked at his friend. “Honestly, Frank, your gushing about this girl and you’re already lying to her?”

“Gushing? Lying?” Frank was turning slightly red. Garrus knew that that was a typical reaction for when Frank was embarrassed.

“Hey, I was just doing some small talk with her, I bought her coffee and then we just got along so well and I told her I was looking for a job to hear more about her workplace. How am I supposed to explain to her that I’m C-Sec now?”

“But if you tell her later she will think, you only got to know her to spy on the company. That’s not gonna end well, you know it.”

“Yeah, I know. We’ll see...” Frank leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for a minute.

Garrus had finished his meal and cleaned up the table. The waitress was a tiny asari maiden who
smiled very pretty from the counter over to their table. Nothing wrong with making a good impression at their favourite lunch place.

But Garrus got distracted by a familiar turian sauntering over to their table. Nihlus Kyrik walked straight towards their table and had his mandibles spread in a wide grin at him. Garrus was confused for a second if he should get up and salute but Nihlus was already in front of him and grabbed his arm in greeting.

“Garrus Vakarian, it’s good to see you. How have you been?” Nihlus was way more friendly than Garrus would have anticipated. Frank also seemed to think something along those lines and raised his eyebrows in question. Nihlus seemed to notice him now, turned around and grabbed Frank’s hand enthusiastically. “I’m Nihlus Kyrik, Spectre in training, a friend of Garrus. And you are?”

Frank looked slightly amused at the turian and raised his eyebrow at Garrus again. Garrus trilled involuntarily a confused reaction back before he realized that Frank couldn’t really understand that but Nihlus could. Frank turned to Nihlus and shook his hand with a friendly smile, “I’m Frank Johnson, C-Sec.”

Nihlus flopped down on a chair and trilled apologetic with his subvocals and Garrus answered with a questioning trill. Frank looked confused from one to the other and mumbled, “Would you two stop chirping like birds now?”

Nihlus rested his fringe on the back of the chair and closed his eyes for a second. “I’m sorry Frank Johnson, that was rude of us. It’s just where you guys do that raised eyebrow thing to ask ‘what the hell is the crazy turian doing?’ we use our subvocals. I can assure you, Garrus is just as confused as you are.”

“Yeah, I figured as much, I may not understand your subharmonics completely but I’ve been hanging out with Garrus for a while, I think I got the basics down.”

Garrus was a bit surprised by that but he decided to leave that revelation to later. He looked at Nihlus, trying to figure out what was going on. “Nihlus, I am glad to see you and it’s not that I’m complaining about your friendly greeting but we’ve only met for that interview and believe me I thought we got along very well. But still, sympathy aside, we are not exactly close friends, I think...” he shut his mouth before he babbled even more.

“Yes, you’re right Garrus. I may have been a bit overenthusiastic. It’s just ... I’m a bit starved for friendliness.”

Nihlus sighed and looked at Garrus and Frank again. “Can you imagine what my days are like, hanging out with Saren?”

He sighed again and his talons made light scratch marks on the table. Frank snorted a laugh at that remark and said to Nihlus, “You know we were just talking about what a funbag Spectre Saren must be.”

“You called him a not-funbag, I called him a xenophobe,” Garrus grumbled and then listened for any reaction from Nihlus telling him if he overstepped. But Nihlus actually started laughing.

“You guys have him figured out. I would add ruthless to that and then we’ll have a complete description.” He suddenly turned around as if he was looking for someone. Then he turned back to them and sighed. “Look at me, looking around like a child afraid to get caught by his father, I expect him to jump up behind me at any moment, scolding me.”
Garrus shook his head, “Can’t you ask for a transfer?”

Nihlus sighed again. “Saren is the best of the best, he get’s the job done and I learned immensely from him. Getting along with his personality, well, I consider that part of the test, you know? It’s a challenge and I’m not walking away from that. I just need a bit of a break once in awhile.”

Garrus looked at Nihlus again and he realized that he was not much older than him. He wondered if Nihlus would have listened to his father if he had asked him not to go to the Spectre-training. Garrus had not been ready to face a challenge like that but today? Could he face his father today and disobey his orders?

'It’s a challenge and I’m not walking away from that.'

Maybe it’s time to face my challenge.

Frank had apparently decided that Nihlus needed a good distraction and they were talking about the various clubs and bars on the Citadel they could go to. Suddenly his eyes lit up and Garrus knew that Frank just had had an IDEA!

“Have you guys ever been to a rock concert? I mean real rock, metal, hard and loud?” Frank had a mischievous grin on his face and Garrus wasn’t sure if he liked that.

But Nihlus looked excited, “I’m open for anything!” he said.

“Allright, birdmen, there is a concert, a small festival going on tonight in an empty warehouse in lower Quedgin. Three human bands play there and it will be wild! I promise, you guys have never seen anything like it!”

Nihlus jumped up and smiled at Frank. “Sounds exactly like what I want, let’s go!”

“Hold your horses man, it starts in about three hours,” Frank said with a smile while Garrus thought what four-legged animals you could ride on, had to do with anything. “Garrus and I actually have to finish some work first. How about this, we’ll meet here again in three hours and take a skycab together from here.”

Their omni-tools lit up as they exchanged contact data and then they departed with some friendly greetings. As they walked away, Frank turned around again and called out to Nihlus, “Bring ear-plugs!”

The hell?

Garrus had to do an Extranet search to find out what ear-plugs were and he looked confused at Frank. “I thought we wanted to listen to music, why would I plug my ears?”

“Well, you guys have pretty sensitive ears, right?” Frank looked at him with a sheepish grin. “Compared to you guys, humans are hard of hearing and even we plug our ears to protect them at a metal-concert. It’s gonna get pretty loud man.”

“They make the concert so loud that it could damage your ears?” Garrus knew that humans sometimes disregarded basic health concerns but that sounded just ridiculous.

“Yeah, kind of stupid if you think about it.” Frank shrugged and went on, “You don’t want to close your ears completely, just dampening the sound a bit. You don’t have to wear armor but you should wear some sturdy clothes. And don’t bring any weapons, oh I’m gonna write that to Nihlus as well, you won’t get in with weapons. Oh, it’s gonna be great.”
Garrus wasn’t so sure about that but he decided to just roll with it.

Three hours later they met Nihlus again at the cafe and got into a skycab. The turians both wore armor, anything else was just unthinkable. Frank Johnson wore jeans and a very old leather jacket and he almost beamed with excitement.

The warehouse, they arrived at, was huge and thousands of people were already inside. Garrus got nervous instantly, big crowds always made him uneasy. Frank suggested a place up above on a gallery, overlooking the crowds. He told them that he didn’t want to overwhelm them and from this point they had the best view.

As they looked over the crowd, Frank suddenly got very excited, “Look, over there, that’s Lieutenant Shepard!” Nihlus suddenly seemed very interested and Garrus tried to find out who they were looking for. They pointed towards a tall female with black hair that had a bright blue streak on one side. She looked strong and confident. She was surrounded by equally strong looking men and women who were all clearly alliance marines.

“What about her?” Garrus asked confused. Nihlus and Frank both looked at him like he just asked the stupidest question ever.

Frank smiled and made a big movement with his arm, “Lieutenant Shepard is the Alliance’s rising star. She has just been accepted into the N7 program, the youngest marine to enter ever. She did some incredible stuff on...”

Right that second the concert started and the noise was so intense that Garrus felt like he should curl up under a protective cover. He remembered his ear protection and hurried to put it in his eartube. Nihlus and Frank did the same thing and Frank started to bop his head to the music. Garrus and Nihlus looked at each other confused. Turian music and dances were formulaic, arranged set of repeating melodies with defined steps to go with it. Some human music was like that as well, Garrus had seen a performance once, but this was completely different.

He had a hard time to hear any kind of melody at first, but after a while he noticed that the one string instrument seemed to lead with a melody, another string instrument laid a darker bass under it and the drums seemed to drive the music forward in a fast rhythm. A singer was screaming and roaring over all that and his translator didn’t even attempt to get what he was singing about. Garrus looked over the humans in front of the stage, they weren’t dancing, they were jumping and shoving and bopping their heads like Frank did. He noticed a few krogans on one side looking over the humans with an amused look and they were bopping their heads like them.

Frank noticed it too and yelled over the music, “Krogan love metal!” Garrus remembered that Frank had told him that this music was called ‘metal’ for whatever reason. He noticed that the whole lower floor was now jumping in the same rhythm, moving like a body made of hundreds of cells. His eyes caught black hair with a blue streak, jumping high, higher than the others. Her whole body was like a spring and her mouth was open screaming or breathing, he couldn’t tell.

It had gotten hotter in the warehouse and, not surprising, the air got heavy with human sweat. The music came to a fast crescendo and the band left the stage. Garrus realized that he hadn’t even noticed that the band had played several songs. He couldn’t see Lieutenant Shepard anymore, as the next band came on stage and a huge guy with tattoos took the center of the stage and let out a long
scream. The audience answered with a scream and Garrus heard the krogan join in. Then the music started again, fast and loud, the drummer beating his drums so fast, Garrus couldn’t really see it.

He noticed movement next to Nihlus and was surprised to see Lieutenant Shepard there. Nihlus smiled at her with his mandibles spread wide and Garrus had a feeling that they had met before. The music was too loud to talk, but Shepard yelled “Wall of death” at them and then pointed down and Garrus looked back down. Something strange was happening there.

The drum was beating out a rhythm, but it was more quiet and the other instruments were quiet. The singer was separating the humans to the sides so that an empty gap was left in the middle and told them to hold till he told them ‘Go’. Garrus looked at the humans facing each other over the gap. They looked feral, dangerous! He remembered that the teachers in basic had talked about the humans being predators on their world and how they were all amused by that. The tiny, soft humans predators, really?

But looking down at the two groups staring at each other, prancing, breathing hard like they could barely control themselves, he could see it. They were wild, ferocious, snarling at the people on the other side. Then the music started and the singer told them to hold. Another instrument joined in and the singer called out again “Hold!” And then the drums started to get loud and fast and as all instruments sounded out together, the singer screamed “GO!” And the humans on both sides of the gap ran! They ran towards each other at full speed, crashing into each other and Garrus couldn’t believe it. He expected people to fall down with head injuries but everybody just kept slamming into each other and they were jumping again.

He saw a few turians and salarians, some of them C-Sec, on the sides looking just as bewildered as he felt. The humans were still slamming into each other for fun, jumping and running. How could they do that without any injuries or fights?

The singer now ordered the krogans to do the same but insisted on only krogan against krogan, a smart move. A krogan smashing into anybody other than another krogan tended to end badly. About 20 krogans left a gap and waited till the singer yelled “Go!” and then crashed into each other head first. Garrus heard them roar happily like only krogan could and the humans were joining in. The krogan and the humans were now jumping to the rhythm, shoving each other.

Krogan and humans. It looked like they could get along really well. There was an old joke about what would happen if you locked a turian and a krogan in a room and depending on who told the joke, only the turian or the krogan would come out alive. Garrus wondered if you tried the same with a krogan and a human, if they wouldn’t come out as best friends.

He noticed that Shepard had moved to other side of the gallery and had a hose in her hand and was fiddling with a vent. Suddenly water came gushing out and she started to spray the people on the floor with cold water. The crowd seemed to be very grateful for that, the humans were raising their faces towards the spray and the krogan let the water run over their humps.

The band had finished and the crowd, cooled down by the water, went to get something to drink and Garrus saw humans and krogan joking and laughing with each other. Shepard had turned off the water and came back to them. She nodded in greeting towards all of them and Nihlus gave her a warm smile and she returned it. Garrus thought she looked beautiful and was startled by that thought.

She looked directly at him and asked, “So what did you think about the ‘Wall of death’?”

Garrus had to take a breath and couldn’t look away from her eyes. “That’s what it is called? How fitting.” He shook his head. “You know, I never saw it that way but krogan and humans, you seem to really get along well. If the krogan and the humans ever decided to form an alliance, I think the
Shepard grinned and started to say something but the last band started to play and while the music wasn’t quite as wild, it still was too loud to hold a conversation. She waved apologetic and went back down to the main floor. Garrus tried to keep the black hair with the blue streak in his sights but at some point she disappeared.

Garrus felt that he needed to get out and indicated as much to his friends who pointed to their omni-tools. He nodded and typed out a short message that he would stay outside for a while.

The cold air outside of the warehouse was refreshing and he walked around the building just to stretch his legs. He let the earplugs fall into his hands and enjoyed how clear the world around suddenly sounded.

Before he went around some containers he stopped. He heard a human female gasp and sigh and he carefully bent around the corner of the box to see what was happening. He almost let out a trill of disbelief as he saw a krogan sitting on the ground with a human woman. She was strong and muscular but still looked fragile compared to the krogan. Her clothing was open at the front and her pants hung on one of her legs at the side next to parts of the krogans armor. Garrus thought that he had to interfere, how could a human survive sex with a krogan?

But then he saw how gentle the krogan touched her and when he licked her breasts fondly with his tongue Garrus felt like his world got turned upside down.

Krogan could be gentle? And this krogan apparently knew about foreplay, did all krogan know that?

A krogan? Gentle? A gentle krogan?

The words just didn’t work together.

The woman moaned loudly and one look confirmed to him that, yes the krogan had traveled lower with his tongue and had found that magic nub. Oh - Garrus remembered that nub well.

Before he got lost in those memories, Garrus decided to retreat and leave the couple alone. If they had gotten this far they would surely be able to figure out the rest. Two adults having consensual sex was none of his business and it wasn’t like he was an expert at krogan sex.

And he wasn’t on duty tonight anyway.

He decided to go back inside, maybe he could find a female interested in him and have some fun himself. Looking over the heads of all the humans, he didn’t even realize that for the first time in a long time, he didn’t look for bright red. He looked for black with a blue streak.
you’ll know what I mean. I bet krogan would love that!
Thanks to TheLadyKellet for betareading.
Chapter 5

There was light. Very bright light. There was some weight on his stomach. There was also a headache of epic proportions trying to burst his skull from the inside and someone was breathing against his neck.

Garrus slowly opened his eyes and made an assessment of the situation. He was in an unfamiliar room that had the nondescript look of a not-too-fancy hotel room. He sat on the floor with his back leaning against the couch, apparently that’s how he had slept. The weight on his stomach was from Frank Johnson’s head, who was curled up to the right of him on the floor and was using him as a pillow. Nuzzling his neck in his sleep on the other side was Nihlus, sleeping in a similar upright position against the couch.

Looking around the closer vicinity Garrus could see many empty bottles of human beer and turian brandy. That did explain the headache. Garrus tried to remember how the evening had progressed but the details were quite hazy. He remembered the metal concert, Lieutenant Shepard with the blue streak in her short hair, a krogan having sex with a human female - *way to go, memory, that’s what I need to remember, sure!* - and then he met Frank and Nihlus back inside and they had a few drinks.

At some point they had left and decided that Nihlus hotel room was a much nicer location for a last drink together. And then - things had apparently gotten out of hand. Garrus remembered that they told stories and Frank had taught them a drinking game involving stacking cards on top of a bottle. Nihlus ordered beverages and food from a nearby store and then... more drinking, more laughing. Personal stories were told, Garrus just hoped that his weren’t too embarrassing. But if his friends were in a similar state as he was, he needn’t worry about their memory.

Nihlus’s breathing and nuzzling became more insistent on his neck and Garrus had to admit that it felt pretty good. It had been a long time since he had been with a turian female and Nihlus was a very interesting guy. He leaned into the caressing touch and felt Nihlus scoot closer to him. He let his hand go on Nihlus’ back and scratched him lightly. Nihlus started to purr and Garrus felt a warm wave of excitement as the purr vibrated through his body. He turned his head to purr into Nihlus’ fringe...

*And stop right there!* 

Apart from Frank sleeping on his stomach he had the distinct feeling that something was not right about this situation. Why had he woken up in the first place? He strained his neck to look past Nihlus to see more of the room and froze. Another person was in the hotel room!

On the other side of the room at the dining table sat a turian with his back turned to him, clicking his talons on a datapad. His white plates made it easy to recognize him as Spectre Saren Arterius.

Garrus felt like the mere presence of the Spectre made the room cold and unwelcoming. He felt like he had done something very wrong and was about to be scolded for that. Now why the hell did he feel that way? He wasn’t a little boy anymore, caught by his dad under the covers with a Fornax issue. And nothing had happened anyway, not yet at least.
His posture seemed to have alerted Nihlus in some way and the red turian turned around to see what Garrus was looking at. On seeing Saren he sighed and laid his fringe back against the couch. “Hello Saren, what brings you here?” he asked without looking at the older turian. Saren put down the datapad and rose from the chair. He stepped over to the couch and looked down at them with a distinct expression of disgust on his face.

He made an annoyed growl with his subvocals and said, “I see you found yourself a new friend for your time wasting. And he brought a pet, how nice of him.” Saren’s voice was grating and he looked down on the peacefully sleeping Frank Johnson with disgust. Garrus rose up to defend his friend but Nihlus stopped him with a trill and a firm touch on his arm.

Nihlus got up with a groan and barely looked at the Spectre. “Shut up Saren.” he said without even raising his voice.

“Why are you here, Saren? Even I can have a free day once in a while and it is none of your business how I spend it and with who. So?” Finally Nihlus looked at Saren and there was no sense of friendship between them.

Saren looked him over and pointed at his wrinkled underarmor. “You better get cleaned up. Your initiation with the council is in about one hour. The exact appointment is on your calendar. Don’t be late.”

On that sentence Saren turned around and strode towards the door. As the door opened he stopped and without looking back said, “I removed your belongings from my ship, they will be delivered here. The council will provide you with a ship of your own if you ask for it.” He left the room without turning around and for the first time this morning Nihlus actually looked flustered.

Garrus grinned at him. “So you’re gonna be a Spectre. Congratulations!” Nihlus still stood unmoving and was staring at the door that had closed behind Saren. He scratched his fringe and took a deep breath as a trill of happiness was heard.

Nihlus looked up and sighed, “Spirits, I can’t believe it! No more Saren breathing down my neck. And my own ship!” He sighed again. “That’s just like him, no forewarning and not even a goodbye or well wishes for the future. Such an asshole.” There was a sadness in his subharmonics that told Garrus that Nihlus had tried to become friends with Saren but the weird Spectre had made it impossible.

Garrus carefully moved Franks’ head away from his stomach and leaned him against the couch in a position similar to his own. He got up a bit too fast and the room started spinning around him. Nihlus noticed his swaying and grabbed his arm to steady him. He had taken a step towards Garrus for that and he was close, so very close to Garrus.

Their mandibles almost touched and they both stood still, each one waiting for the other to do something. Garrus inhaled his spicy scent, he shivered and he was very aware of Nihlus’ hand on his arm. But then Nihlus pulled back a little and his green eyes fixed on Garrus. “You know, you are good looking guy and I won’t deny the attraction...” Nihlus said with a smile, “but I think I would rather be your friend, not your lover.”

Garrus felt relief and disappointment at the same time and nodded. The sexual tension slowly ebbed away and he felt safe enough on his feet again to take a step away from Nihlus. He almost tripped over Frank’s legs who had apparently woken up and was staring at them with disbelief.

Frank squinted his eyes. “Guys, have I missed something important? It looked like you two were about to kiss and make out right here and I’m really not into threesomes like that.” Frank stood up,
slightly unsteady and looked Garrus in the eyes. “Hey birdy, if I’d known you swing that way, I might have made a move on you myself.”

“What?” Garrus didn’t know what to say - Frank? No, just no, no.

Frank started laughing. “Relax birdy! I’m just messing with you. I can say with confidence that I don’t swing that way but you can of course do what- and whoever you like.”

Nihlus joined in the laughter and went over to Frank to take his chin in his talons and looked him directly in the eyes. “You know Frank, I almost feel challenged to change your mind about that swinging.” He purred suggestively, his mandibles spread wide and Franks eyes got very big.

Nihlus made a dramatic arc with his arm and released Frank from his hold and sang like an opera singer, “Ah but I don’t have time, I don’t have time! Oh love will have to wait! Farewell my little human, time does not grant us the swinging we want!” He swirled around in a circle and then bowed to Frank who had watched him speechless and with his mouth hanging open.

Finally he seemed to come back to his senses and started laughing so hard that he had to sit down on the couch again. Garrus snickered and then had to laugh as well. Nihlus was such a flirt. It was probably best for his spirit that he wouldn’t be around Saren anymore.

Thinking of Saren reminded him that Frank didn’t even know that the Spectre had been in the room and what kind of news he brought. Nihlus walked backwards, still humming his song and then disappeared into the bathroom with a deep bow. Garrus got himself a glass of water and one for Frank from the kitchenette and flopped down on the couch again. Frank took the drink with a grateful nod and drained it in one go. He then turned to Garrus, his eyebrows raised in a question.

“Now what the hell has been going on here? You guys kissed, Nihlus is in an exceptional good mood and I dreamt about Saren sneering around here. I mean, really, what the hell?”

Garrus drank his water and hissed at Frank. “We did not kiss! Turians can’t kiss anyway, no lips, remember? And all that salvia slobbering you humans are so fond of is kind of gross to be honest.” He was only half joking, his experience with Alliance-Red kissing his mandibles had been quite pleasant. But he once had another try at kissing with a human female and she was practically flooding him with salvia - really terrible.

“Nihlus and I were not ... well, not doing that. I guess we’re friends now.”

“Now come on, I could sense the vibes all around you guys and I was still half asleep.” Frank laughed at him and Garrus couldn’t really disagree.

“Yeah, at another time, in another situation maybe something could have happened but it will not. But you did miss out on the most exciting thing: Saren was here and announced that Nihlus will be initiated as a Spectre in a little while today! He already threw all of Nihlus belongings off the ship and Nihlus will get his own ship from the council.”

“No shit man? No wonder he was in such a good mood, that is awesome!” Johnson looked as if he was genuinely happy for Nihlus and Garrus was glad that his new friendship with Nihlus seemed to extent to Frank as well.

He looked down on his wrinkled underarmor and took a sniff of himself and Frank. He turned away slightly disgusted and looked over to the bathroom where Nihlus stepped out in cloud of steam.

“That’s where we should go, Frank, right away. We stink.” Garrus said and stood up to go and take a shower.
Nihlus was naked and his red plates with the white markings were glittering with water. Garrus was not ashamed to look but the sexual attraction was mostly gone. But he noticed that Frank was downright staring at the naked turian and licking his lips. Garrus smirked and suppressed his laughter as he went into the bathroom. *Looks like Frank is learning something new about himself today.*

When he came back out after a quick shower, Frank was eating in the kitchenette while Nihlus was nowhere to be seen. Frank noticed him and walked towards him, presumably to get a shower himself. Before he closed the door he swallowed the last bite of his breakfast and called back to Garrus. “Nihlus already left to get to the Council Chambers, muttered something about not to be late at all cost to avoid pissing off the asshole.” The door closed behind him and Garrus heard the shower start.

He was reluctant to put his underarmor back on, it still smelled of lots of alcohol. His armor wasn’t much better, it smelled of human sweat from the concert. But if they wanted to watch the initiation, and he just assumed that they would, they had to get there right away, no time to get clean clothing. Garrus used a wet towel to wipe off the worst grime from his armor.

Frank came from the bathroom in his shorts and they way he wrinkled his nose as he smelled his shirt he seemed to have the same problem with his clothing. He shrugged his shoulders and put his things back on, coming to the same solution as Garrus.

“Let’s go birdy, we better get there in time. I’ve never seen someone become a Spectre before.” Neither had Garrus, he had never been in the Council Chambers before.

*What an interesting day so far.*

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Garrus had to admit that the Council Chambers were impressive even though it was a bit dark. Real trees were lining the paths and they were in bloom, giving off a faint smell. Fountains and patches of greenery with beautiful flowers, were sprinkled around the gigantic room on top of the Citadel Tower. The room made a beautifully sweeping rise towards the top and the huge window in the back showed a spectacular view of the blue tinted Serpent Nebula that surrounded the Citadel. The council was raised on a platform and across a gap on the Petitioner platform stood Nihlus.

Garrus and Frank had found a spot on one of the higher galleries lining the room to watch the proceedings. The asari councillor Tevos was making a speech.

“Spectres are not trained, but chosen. Individuals forged in the fire of service and battle - “

Garrus tuned out the speech and looked at Nihlus. He appeared to be completely composed but there was a slight smirk to his mandibles. He didn’t show it, but he was damn happy to stand there. Garrus let his gaze travel, looking for Saren, as Nihlus’ teacher he surely would be there as well.

He almost didn’t see him, he was standing in a dark corner on the lower level, like he was hiding. His face showed no emotions, if anything he looked unimpressed. Garrus couldn’t understand him, he should have been up there on the platform, proudly releasing his student to his new position.
Garrus wondered if Nihlus was disappointed that Saren didn’t seem to care about his new spectrehood but he figured that he was probably used to behaviour like that.

Frank leaned over to him and whispered “I wanted to ask you something about last night, did you find her?”

Garrus was confused, “Find who?”

“Lieutenant Shepard! You went outside, looking for her. Did you find her?”

Memories of the last night came back, Lieutenant Shepard smiling at him and he shook his head. “No, I didn’t find her, maybe she had left. Why do you ask?”

“Didn’t you find her interesting? She may not be a classical beauty but I thought she would be right up your street.”

Garrus stared at Johnson for a second. Since when did Frank become an expert in what kind of women he liked? “Really now? What makes you think that?” Now this is going to be interesting.

“Well...” Frank had huge grin on his face as he spoke. “She is tall, muscular, a strong warrioress. She looks you straight in the eyes and she has that strength in her posture and the way she holds everybody’s gaze, I think she wouldn’t even back down from a krogan. Practically a turians dream girl. And Shepard especially is the kind of woman who doesn’t take shit from anybody, you should read her file sometime. And I’ve been told she’s also into tech and fixing things. So yeah, right up your street.”

Garrus stared. “Huh,” was all he could say. Frank was right, that was exactly the kind of woman he liked. Frank was more attentive than you’d think.

Frank looked at him. “And she smiled at you.”

Garrus chuckled. “I’m pretty sure she smiled at a lot of people, Frank.”

“No, Vakarian, she’s not the ‘instantly friends with everybody’ type. But she smiled at you.”

“How do you know so much about her anyway? It sounds like you have a crush on her.” Garrus grinned at Frank to see if he would get flustered.

But Frank remained calm and shook his head. “I’m more of a fan maybe. Sort of followed her career. She’s the youngest marine to ever enter and most probably finish the N7 program. That makes her the best of the best humanity has to offer.” He turned towards Garrus to continue. “I’m aware that we humans are the new kids in the galaxy. I know how the other, older races look down on us. Hell, I only have to look down there and see that there is no human representative near the council and that it will maybe take years or decades until we can see a human becoming Spectre like Nihlus. My guess is that the Alliance is going to push Shepard forward for humanity, she’ll be the one representing us.”

Garrus turned Franks words over in his head. He was right, a lot of the old council races looked down on the humans. Humans were curious and demanding. They wanted to play a part in the galaxy and were not content to sit at the sidelines. Especially the turians were wary of the humans. The turians were used to their position as the “police-guards” of Council space and expected a certain obedience to the rules from other species. But humans had a habit of questioning rules. They directly threatened the established position of the turians.

The turian military had once underestimated the humans in the Relay 314 incident. After beating
down the small forces on the planet from orbit they had just assumed that this fight, vicious and costly as it was, had been enough to put the new aliens in their place. Only to realize that they had woken a sleeping giant as the Second Fleet of the Alliance came down on the turians with massive force. Garrus shuddered thinking what would have happened if the Council had not intervened. Both forces were ready for all-out-war with equally strong determination on both sides.

Luckily it never came to that but it was clear that the humans would not be the obedient allies that some wished them to be. Frank was right, humans would keep pushing for political and military power and maybe it was wise to keep an eye on their most prominent figures.

Garrus called up a quick search for Lieutenant Shepard on his omni-tool to let it download the information. Nothing wrong with keeping informed.

They both looked back down on the platform where the ceremony had come to an end and Nihlus was congratulated by some high ranking military representatives of the turian Hierarchy. He looked around the galleries until he spotted Frank and Garrus and they both saluted him with a grin. He turned back to someone talking to him but a short message popped up on their omni-tools to meet him down at the elevator in a few minutes.

As they turned away to walk down, Garrus saw Saren move from his dark corner over to Nihlus and he actually made a short salute. Nihlus dipped his head in thanks and Saren turned and walked away. *Probably the friendliest thing he could manage.*

They kept walking among the spectators and Garrus noticed that Frank was the only human around and got some odd looks. He turned to Frank. “I never realized how you must feel like an outsider a lot of times.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. There are thousands of humans on the Citadel but they just keep to themselves. It’s a human thing, huddle up in your social circle if you feel threatened and look suspicious at the foreigners. I don’t wanna do that. That’s why I hang around with you!” He punched him on the arm and Garrus punched back, careful to not hit him too hard as he wore no armor.

“So that’s why? And I thought it was my winning personality.”

“Yeah right...” Frank snorted sarcastically and then they both laughed.

Garrus thought back to the beginning of their conversation. “By the way, she smiled at Nihlus too.”

Frank smiled. “Oh but not like that, my friend. She *really* smiled at you.”

Garrus wasn’t sure what he meant but left it at that.

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Chapter End Notes

I’m trying to make Shepard her own person and not a selfinsert-standin but of course some of me will blend into her personality. I’m a tech-geek so that’s what she is going to
be as well although she’ll probably be more of an infiltrator in battle cause that’s what I played. I’m also convinced that you can’t be a strong warrior like Shepard being petite and girly, it just doesn’t work in my head. So she is more like Vasquez from “Alien” in appearance but the rest like the default FemShep only more angular. She looks nice but she isn’t a model.

As to Garrus and Nihlus...
I blame Smehur’s awesome story “The Candidate” for the insistent Garrus&Nihlus shipping that happened there (even though that is a Saren&Nihlus story and I don’t ship those at all). I had no idea they would do that, I swear!
Garrus slumped down in his office chair and put his feet up on his desk. Stretching his neck, he began to contemplate what he should do with the rest of the day. There was so much work on his desk, that starting any of it felt pointless. They had left the Council Chamber together with Nihlus but separated again after a little while. Nihlus had to go and find a ship then search for a crew to go along with it. But they agreed to meet later in a cafe in a mostly turian part of the Citadel.

On the way back to the C-Sec academy, they stopped at the hospital to visit their injured colleagues. Tarten was in pretty good health, all things considered. His skin grafts and bones were healing fast and he was to be discharged to bedrest at home the next day. Tinlenus had already been released from immediate medical care, shortly after Garrus had gone home. His arm was in a light cast to help with the healing of the fracture and he could have gone home but he had hardly left the hospital. He spend everyday next to the Batius' sickbed, making no secret of their relationship. Garrus felt kind of silly for never having noticed it before.

Batius had not regained consciousness yet, even though his body seemed to be healing well according to Dr. Michel. The doctor was very friendly and explained to them in great detail what they had done for his injuries and was carefully optimistic about his chances. That at least was a relief.

Garrus still felt guilty for putting the guys into danger, it was their job, yes, but in a way he was directly responsible for them ending up in a hospital. He said something along those lines to Frank who told him something like "shut up with the stupid". Frank went to give him a slap on the back of his head but got caught up in Garrus fringetips and almost sprained a finger.

Garrus knew what Frank tried to say, he would say the same things if the situation was reversed. But he couldn't get away from the guilt and whenever he saw Batius lying unnaturally still in the hospital bed, it got even worse.

They left the hospital in silence, both not so eager to put their worries into words. Frank received a call from Sarah, his contact at Everest Artifics on his omni-tool. He left in a hurry to meet with her and Garrus smiled at the memory of the happy grin on Frank's face. That guy was in love, he couldn't deny it.

So now Garrus was alone in his office with all the piled up work, guilty feelings and hazy memories of the last week.

He took a datapad into his hands with a sigh and downloaded everything from the warehouse case to
it. Maybe he could at least get a start on that case. As he read he realized that nobody else had even looked at this until now. There were no notes, just endless lists of inventory from the warehouse and names of employees or people who happened to hang around the area that day. He wondered what Frank had been doing all week.

Garrus started a search algorithm for background information on the names and then looked over the inventory lists. Apart from medical drugs, recreational drugs and some disturbing stuff that he would rather call poison than drugs, there were lists of weapons, electronic parts and mass effect generators like one would expect. But one thing caught his eyes. There was a cold storage room where the officers found boxes of meat.

Garrus looked closer, it wasn't just meat - it was organs! There were almost twenty boxes equipped with miniature life support systems with various organs ready for transport off the Citadel. He read through the descriptions: 'heart, salarian; heart, human; lung, turian; liver, turian; liver, human; kidney, turian; krogan, testicles...' it went on and on. He needed to know more about that, where did these organs all come from?

Scrolling through his contact list he called up the pathology lab and made an arrangement with Dr. Kaltkan to meet him in the lab. Then he went to the evidence storage and got three random organ boxes from the cold storage. Balancing the boxes on his arms he went down to the pathology lab. Dr. Kaltkan, an older turian in a labcoat, greeted him with a nod.

The doctor was a veteran of the force, he had seen pretty much everything in his career. Garrus had met him before and had never seen him show a hint of surprise. He was almost proud to see the doctors eyes widen in surprise as he read through the list of organs that had been found in the cold storage.

"This is quite unusual," he said without looking at Garrus. "Twenty organs in storage, that is a lot."

He opened one of the transport boxes and took a surprised breath. Garrus pressed down on his subvocals to not release the smirk his face almost showed.

"This life-support system is highly advanced!" The doctor sounded genuinely impressed. "It would be possible to keep the organs ready for transplantation for at least two weeks like that." He opened all three boxes and started to take samples from the organs. A faint hum could be heard from the small life support systems, Garrus made a note that he should check the supply lines for the parts needed for such an advanced system.

Dr. Kaltkan had placed the samples in the scanner and was looking through the results. He was mumbling to himself and Garrus chimed his subvocals once to get his attention. The doctor looked at him like he had forgotten that he was there.

"Ah, yes, I'm sorry, let me tell you what I found." He transferred the data to Garrus datapad and highlighted some sections. "As you can see here, the organs are in good condition. They have been taken from very recently deceased specimen, there are no traces of decay. As for the quality of the transplant, I can't give a definite judgment yet but I will run more tests for that. I have heard of lower quality transplants showing up in the hospitals around here and if these come from the same source, they have improved the procedure or their donors very much. I think these are top-quality."

Garrus looked at the doctor in surprise, apparently he still knew what went on outside of his lab. "I'm shocked, Doctor, I thought Johnson and me were the only ones even looking at that case."

The doctor chuckled. "Yes, yes, nobody wants to touch this stuff, I was surprised that you took such an interest in it and your human partner as well. Humans can be so squeamish with things like that."
"Well, Frank Johnson is a good cop, organs and blood won't stop him." Garrus wondered what the doctor was hinting at.

The doctor stopped chuckling and looked at him seriously. "Officer Vakarian, let me tell you something. Whenever someone in a lab somewhere set's out to work on illegal stuff there will always be traces, hints, something. But nobody sees it, nobody wants to look at it. Research and experiments take a lot of time, Vakarian, a whole lot of time. You can't completely hide it, people work with you, you need resources, if someone is willing to look, he will find things." His talons clicked angrily on the metal table. "I know most of the medical staff working in the Citadel's hospitals and I have heard about bad transplants for a while. I even told the Executor about it but nobody looked at it. Then suddenly, you and your partner, a human of all things, take one look at it and take the case to a whole new level."

Garrus waited for him to continue but he didn't says more, so he broke the silence with an angry trill. "Doctor, what are trying to tell me? That C-Sec let the case drag on purpose? Maybe that's true. That Frank and I blow it out of proportions? There are officers still in the hospital because of this! I won't accept you accusing us of ..."

The doctor raised his hands and his subvocals sang a calming apology. "Please, Vakarian, stop! I never wanted to suggest that you blew the case out of proportion." He laid his hands back on the table and looked down. "What I've tried to say - and apparently I didn't do it well - was that you and Johnson are damn fine officers. That after everybody else just stepped around this, you took the case and investigated. I tried to say that I'm very impressed with you and Officer Johnson and personally I can't even believe that I'm saying that about a human."

Garrus let out a snort. "I'm getting kind of tired of this whole 'for a human' thing. Johnson is a C-Sec officer and we both do our job as best as we can. I - eh - thank you for the compliment but it may not be all that deserved. We just sort of stumbled onto this and things didn't go exactly smoothly lately." He scratched his neck and then straightened. "We both take our job serious and we just do it."

The doctor nodded, "Yes, I may have to rethink old prejudices and I agree that it is your job. But believe me, I've seen other C-Sec officers not doing their job for such a long time, it's really refreshing to see some doing it well." Dr. Kaltkan smiled and Garrus was pretty sure he had never seen him do that before.

Garrus' datapad vibrated to indicate that it received another set of data and the doctor explained that he had made a DNA profile of each sample."

"Just send the other organs down here as well and I will make DNA profiles for all of them," the doctor said.

Garrus started to make a cross-search for DNA profiles in C-Sec's database. There was nothing on the salarian heart and liver he brought, but he got a result on the turian liver. He started to read through the file when Dr. Kaltkan suddenly trilled at him.

"Officer Vakarian, your company is not completely displeasing but I have to say that I rather work alone down here." The doctor looked at him with a slight smirk.

Garrus looked around and agreed that maybe the pathology lab was not the nicest environment to work on this case. He got up and subvocally hummed his good bye and slowly walked towards the elevator, still reading his pad. As he stepped into the elevator his subdermal comm speaker beeped in his ear and he snarled in annoyance. He thought about ignoring the call but his omni-tool showed him that it was Frank calling. He tapped the receiver behind his ear.
"Hey human," he said.

"Hey turian."

Their ritual for answering comm calls. Garrus waited for him to continue as he stepped out of the elevator into the central hall of C-Sec academy and kept on walking.

"Listen Birdy, good news! Batius has woken up and he has even spoken coherently! The doctors think that he can make a good recovery! Tinlenus looks like his plates will pop off out of happiness!"

Garrus sighed in relief and sat down on one of the benches outside the academy. The Presidium was bright in artificial daylight and Garrus trilled out his happiness as he watched the clouds on the sky.

Frank laughed in his ear, "Now listen to the pretty bird sing! It's okay, man, I know you were worried but everything is gonna be fine. Oh and I got more news, Sarah, you know...?"

Garrus interrupted him, "Yes, Sarah your girlfriend at 'suspicious company' who doesn't know that you're C-Sec. What about her?"

Frank mumbled something under his breath but didn't say anything against Garrus' assessment. "Well, she got a job in one of the new labs and that will give us some new insights. I got a job in the clean-up crew, I already settled things with Pallin, I go undercover and take the job, he gave me two weeks to find something, it's not much but we'll see, I'm going there right now, see if I can get to work right away..."

Garrus interrupted Franks endless stream of words. "Hey, pyjak-man, stop! Listen, I got a new lead here I'm going to check out but if you're busy I just take Cercus with me." Frank didn't like Cercus at all and Garrus waited for him to take the bait.

He could hear Frank hesitate but then he said, "It's alright birdy, I can't let this opportunity pass and if you want to spend your time with whiny Cercus - that's your problem!" He laughed. "I know your game, Vakarian!"

Garrus laughed back, "Alright, you got me. Fine, I take one of the rookies with me, we're just going to ask to the family of one of the organ donors some questions, there won't be anything problematic going on."

Frank made a snort. "Now you jinxed it man, I'll just wait for the explosions."

"Very funny, Frank," Garrus growled.

"I'll see you later, Birdy. Just send me the coordinates to meet you, I don't want to walk alone into some turian hellhole tonight."

Garrus agreed that that was probably not a good idea.

They ended the call and Garrus went back inside C-Sec to randomly pick one of the new recruits to come with him. He still remembered how he had felt back in the day when he started at C-Sec, how none of the veterans ever wanted to take him along. How were the new guys supposed to learn anything if they never went outside with one of the experienced officers?

He stuck his head into Pallin's office. "Executor, Sir? I'd like to take one of the new guys for some questioning I have to do. Nothing dangerous."

Pallin's subharmonics chimed loudly of anger and disbelief. "'Nothing dangerous?' With that coming
from you, Vakarian, I'm inclined to send a SWAT team along." The Executor grumbled loudly again and then dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "Just take whoever you like, Vakarian. No explosions, no shootings please."

Garrus went to the main hall where he saw in one corner six new recruits huddled around a terminal, watching vids of C-Sec arrests. He walked over to them, the group consisted of four turians, a salarian and a human. When he was next to them he said to noone in particular. "I need someone to come with me to question people. Anybody interested?"

For a second they all just stared at him and then the salarian and the human, a female, both stepped forward at the same time saying "Yes, Sir!" very loudly.

He chuckled slightly and looked at them. "This is not the military, you don't have to be quite so ... so 'yes Sir' you know? I'm Garrus Vakarian, what are your names?"

The salarian spoke first in a high voice. "My name is Berdin Lerv." His skin was white with yellow spots on his horns and he wore typical salarian armor with the handle on the front. Garrus had always wondered what that thing was for.

The human woman spoke next. Her skin had a dark tint and her hair was dark brown and sat in short curls on her head. She wore light grey armor with blue lines on her arms. "My name is Katrina Peters, I just got here three days ago. I don't know how much help I can be but I would like to see some real C-Sec work. Watching vids gets kind of boring." She spoke with a soft voice but still sounded confident.

Garrus chuckled, watching and learning from vids was a typical turian way of education, he had noticed with Johnson that he thought it was boring too. Maybe that was another one of those human things, they preferred hands-on training to watching instructional vids.

Garrus didn't feel like deciding between them so he took them both along. He didn't bother talking to Pallin about that, the new recruits had clearly nothing better to do anyway. They took a skycar from the garage and Garrus programmed the destination. He turned around to the young recruits in the backseat.

"Ok, Lerv, Peters, here is the short version. My partner and I have found some suspicious stuff with transplant organs. There seems to be a new, very active market for that going on here on the Citadel. We recently raided a warehouse and found a whole bunch of them. Among them was a turian liver that gave us a name via the DNA profile. His name was Titus Kerdotus, he had a bondmate and a son. I just want to talk to the family, how he died, how the organ donation was contracted, that sort of thing. This is probably a very emotional time for the family, so don't ask stupid questions, just look around and pay attention, see if anything seems weird to you."

The recruits both looked at him and nodded. Garrus remembered that they both weren't turian and he tried to think of things they should know before they would cause an incident in a turian household mourning. "If you see a picture of the deceased don't touch it. That would be insulting. If you say his name, don't let your eyes wander away, that would be rude. Better let me do the talking and you just pay attention to our surroundings, got it?"

"Yes Sir!" came from the backseat and Garrus reminded them again that they needn't do that. They arrived at their destination and Garrus parked the car in the underground garage and they took the elevator up to the tenth floor. He pressed on the door chime and steeled himself for the grieving widow to open the door but he was met by a happily smiling turian woman. She greeted him friendly and then looked at the three of them expectantly.
Garrus trilled an apology and lowered his voice. He looked her in the eyes, "Matrona Kerdotus, my name is Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec officer. I would like to ask you a few questions about your bondmate, Titus Kerdotus." He trilled apologetic again and she looked at him confused.

She smiled at him, "Why don't you ask him your questions yourself?" She looked over her shoulder to call out, "Titus! Come here please cari!"

Thankfully the way she was facing she couldn't see the dumb look on Garrus face. A turian, who looked exactly like the picture on the profile came around the corner and greeted Garrus with a friendly trill. His plates looked a bit dull but other than that, he seemed to be in perfect health. Garrus mind was completely blank, he could only stare at the turian. He looked at his two alien companions but they had similar dumb looks on their faces.

Peters was the first to come back to her senses and stepped forward. "Sir, we have received disturbing news about health problems in this area and would like to ask you a few questions. Have you had any medical problems lately?" She held her datapad in front of her like she was just checking off a list on it.

Kerdotus looked at her slightly bewildered but he answered the question. "I had a slight accident at my workplace last week but other than that, I had no problems and I haven't heard of anyone getting sick."

His mate chimed in with worry. "Is it contagious? Are we in danger?" She looked in panic at them and Garrus finally remembered his training and trilled a soothing tone at her.

"No, there is no illness spreading around, we have just heard of people - eh - getting hurt around here. It was a statistical anomaly."

Peters looked back on her datapad as if she was checking her list. "I just need to know where you both work and then we are done," she said with a friendly smile that showed all her teeth. Garrus flinched at that, hopefully the Kerdotus's were used to humans and didn't misinterpret the gesture.

Titus Kerdotus answered without hesitation, "I work at Everest Artifics as a technical assistant for Dr. Saleon. My mate is a sales assistant at Saronis Applications down in Zakera wards. Do you have anymore questions? We expect visitors and we have to make some preparations for that."

Garrus was checking his omni-tool, already deep in thought about Everest Artifics and how this could all be possible but Peters wasn't missing a beat and thanked them very politely for their help and excused them.

The were silent until they reached the elevator, each of them reading things on their omni-tools. But once the elevator doors had closed, Peters and Lerv both looked at Garrus expectantly.

He shook his head, "Honestly guys, if I knew what's going on here I'd tell you. There is a liver down in the pathology lab that has his DNA and even though I couldn't get a DNA sample from him now, he looks exactly like his profile picture. He should be dead. I don't understand it."

Peters looked at them both with raised eyebrows. "Do turians have more than one liver? Can you take one out and the donor lives on?"

Lerv finally spoke for the first time. "You can’t take a whole organ from a body without killing the subject!"

"You can with human kidneys. You can take one out and live with just the other," Peters retorted.
Lerv looked at her with wide eyes, "Really? Humans don't die if you take out a whole kidney?"

Garrus found himself staring at the human woman in the same way.

She nodded vigorously. "Do salarians and turians not have two kidneys?"

"They do, but they are connected, you can't just take one out without injuring the other, at least as far as I know," Garrus said.

They both looked at Lerv and he huffed annoyed. "Don't look at me for confirmation! Just because I'm a salarian doesn't mean I'm an all-knowing scientist. I don't know a lot about other species, just the basics."

Garrus grinned. "Well, I may not be an expert either but I'm pretty sure that turians have only one liver. If he is the donor, he shouldn't be alive. That was good work there, Peters, you adapted pretty fast to that situation. I have to admit, I didn't know what to say when I saw him walking around the corner there."

The elevator stopped on the garage level as Peters laughed and said, "You know, I finally know what a dumbfounded turian looks like now. They never covered that in 'xeno expressions'." Peters looked at him from a corner of her eyes, probably wondering if she overstepped with that. Garrus laughed wholeheartedly, he knew where she was coming from.

"Ok, guys, anyone got any idea what's going on here?" Garrus looked at his two young colleagues. They both shrugged their shoulders in an amusing accordance of cross-species body-language. Berdin Lerv was deep in thought, reading stuff on his omni-tool display and almost walked into a wall. In the car he looked up and said, "I made a search on recent police reports and nothing like this has been reported. Katrina and I could ask around if anybody ever heard about something like that."

Katrina looked at him with raised eyebrows, "Wouldn't that be in a report already if it had?"

Garrus shook his head, "No, Lerv is right, this is so weird, it might not get written down to avoid questions about it. You shouldn't just blurt this out either, you'll get ridiculed."

"Let's ask Bailey", Katrina said. "We met him yesterday, he seems to be a no nonsense kind of guy and I think he will always answer seriously to a serious question." Lerv nodded to that.

"I never met this Bailey", Garrus said, "you think he could tell you something?"

Katrina shrugged her shoulders again. "I don't know, but he works down in Zakera Wards, maybe he heard something." She hesitated for a second before she continued. "He's a human, he was one of the few guys who actually talked to Berdin and me. The other officers ... other than you, Sir... they're not exactly friendly to us."

Berdin snorted. "Not friendly - they are downright hostile towards you, Katrina!" She shrugged her shoulders at that.

Garrus sighed. The racism, or better speciesism in C-Sec was one of the problems that nobody liked to talk about. C-Sec used to consist only of turians, then a few asari joined the force, hardly any salarians felt compelled to do police work and C-Sec had been turian dominated for centuries. Now the humans wanted to join too. And again, humans weren't content to wait around till they got invited, they demanded to participate. Their willingness to serve in the force should impress turians but instead they felt threatened by it.

Garrus suddenly felt very tired, the stress of the last week and lack of sleep last night catching up
with him. He reprogrammed the car to take him to his apartment first before returning to C-Sec.

"Okay guys, I'm gonna be a bad example of C-Sec officer and take a long break. I think I need a nap." He stretched his neck, his whole body was tense. "I'll send you the information that I have on this case and you can look that over. I'll contact you later and we can compare notes, alright? Do me a favour and bring the other boxes with organs to Dr. Kaltkan down in the pathology lab so he can make DNA-profiles from them."

His two young colleagues nodded and Garrus had to smile at how eager they looked. He remembered how boring his first few weeks had been at C-Sec, he would have loved to work on a real case back then. His only highlight of that whole month had been the hot meeting with Alliance-Red.

Up in his apartment, he let the armor drop off with a sigh and shrugged out of his underarmor as well. That thing still smelled of the events of the last night and he was glad to throw it into the wash.

Falling down on his couch he stretched his legs and let his fringe sit on the backrest. He placed one hand on his genital plates, just enjoying the feeling of pressure there. In his mind he went back to his favourite memory of Alliance-Red moving over him like fluid.

He remembered what she felt like and how she smelled but frustratingly he couldn't remember her face. Back then, he had next to no experience with humans and they all looked pretty much the same to him. All he remembered from the look he got of her in the hallway was her bright red hair and that she smiled. But her face wasn't clear in his memory and that annoyed him to no end.

He had realized for a while now that he would probably never find her again, even if she ever came back to the Citadel. He had learned that humans dyed their hair and that their scent came mostly from the stuff they used to wash it. Some even used perfume, masking their natural scent completely. So none of the attributes he remembered of her were of any help.

But he still remembered how she had felt like fluid.

Garrus woke up still stretched out on the couch. He must have been more tired than he initially had thought, falling asleep with his hand on his plates. He checked his omni-tool, he had slept for over an hour.

Both Katrina and Berdin had messaged him in the meantime but they had no new findings to report. Dr. Kaltkan had sent him the DNA profiles of the other samples and he started a search algorithm on the database on all of them. Three came back with results and he started another search whether these three were alive or dead.

As he was looking through the information his omni-tool pinged with a reminder that one of his automatic searches had brought up another result. It was his 'Lieutenant Shepard' search, the algorithm he had set up this morning to gather information on the Extranet about her. He didn't have access to Alliance files but apparently she was already interesting enough to have people write about her. Maybe Frank was right, this could be the rising star of the Alliance.

One of the reports was about an operation on a planet called Tiptree. A small human colony, threatened by a catastrophic landslide from a collapsing mountain side. Lieutenant Shepard had transported a bunch of engineers from another mining colony to Tiptree to somehow contain the
landslide until the settling could be evacuated. Without proper resources or time, the engineers and the soldiers had managed to build a structure from scrap-wood and mass effect fields to contain the sinking boulders. The structure was so solid, that the settlement could not only get evacuated, the whole village, with everything the people had owned was moved to a higher rise in the area.

Lieutenant Shepard was lauded in the report for having organized this rescue operation without direct orders from command. Her orders had been to just evacuate the people but she went beyond that.

The report also mentioned her involvement in several missions against pirates who attacked the many new colonies humanity had opened up around the galaxy. That she was an excellent soldier was without question, her platoon protected several small settlements. Still she could only do so much, it looked like the Alliance was stretched thin trying to protect all the colonies.

He wondered how Nihlus knew Lieutenant Shepard, when he saw him later on, he would ask him about her.

Garrus was about to close the search results when he saw a small note about Lieutenant Shepard's past. Apparently she was colony kid herself, born and raised on Mindoir in a family of farmers. When she had just turned sixteen, Mindoir was raided by batarian pirates or slavers, who attacked the colony and ruthlessly killed almost everybody. Garrus was shocked, she had lost her whole family in that attack, a little daughter of a farmer, having everything she ever knew and loved taken away from her. He found it hard to make the connection from a farm girl to a hardened soldier and he wondered what that experience had done to her.

He thought about his own family. He had left his home for his mandatory military service at the age of sixteen and it had been hard for him. Harder than he cared to admit, he had been so homesick. Leaving his family, especially his mother, had been the most painful thing he had ever done at that point in his life. He couldn't imagine how it would feel to lose them in such a horrible way.

Garrus made a note on his calendar to call his mother when it was morning on Palaven.

He decided to visit Batius in the hospital and then show his face at C-Sec again and maybe have a serious look at all the other cases on his desk. There was still the question how the asari matriarch and this Verringer guy played into this weird case. He still had a few hours to kill before he would meet with Nihlus and Frank again, he might as well get some work done.

Frank was sitting on a bench on the side of the road to the mostly turian area of this ward. Around him, turians were busily walking to and from the public market but almost everyone spared a look for the odd human sitting there. He looked like he didn't notice or didn't care about all the attention he was getting but Garrus could tell from his face that he was uncomfortable. He wasn't called the 'polygraph' for nothing!

Garrus got out of the taxi and as he approached the bench, Frank visibly relaxed, waving at him with a big smile. "Hey man! You look much better than you did this morning, did you polish your plates or something?"

Garrus grinned. "I just took a nap, I feel much better now. Oh and by the way, good of you to not call me 'birdy'."

Frank scratched his head, "Yeah, I figured that might not go over so well around here. I can be
sensitive, you know?"

"Never would have guessed."

They made their way through the crowds to a small cafe, with windows towards the market place. They could see Nihlus already sitting at a table, working on his omni-tool. The cafe was almost empty, it looked clean and friendly. Every table was decorated with a flower from Palaven. Garrus took a deep breath, he hadn't smelled these flowers for almost two years now.

Frank looked around in surprise. "You know, this is not what I had imagined a turian hellhole would look like."

Nihlus noticed them and got up with a joyful smile, he took Franks hand and pulled him into an embrace. Frank looked slightly bewildered at Garrus over his shoulder and Garrus could hardly control his face. He wanted to laugh out loud at Franks look of panic. Nihlus let him go, only to put his hands on either side of his face and pull it towards him. It looked like he wanted to kiss him and Frank was pulling back fast.

"Hold it! You know, I do have a girlfriend! Could we stop with the kissing of the nice human please?"

Nihlus was clutching the cowl on his armor like Frank had hurt him on the inside but then he had to laugh himself. All three were giggling like little kids and the waiter behind the bar was looking at them like they were crazy.

Nihlus took a deep breath and then pointed to the chairs around the circular table. "Have a seat my friends. They have very good calida here and they even have levo coffee and tea, I have been told. There is a section of levo food on the menu although it's all asari, I think."

They settled down and the waiter brought coffee for Frank and calida for Nihlus and Garrus.

Nihlus smiled happily and then it just burst out of him. "I have a ship! She's a beauty, almost brandnew. It's a frigate, small sized, can house a crew of about ten but I only need four to run the ship. Spirits, it's gonna be so great to finally have a crew. I already hired two pilots and two engineers. I might look for soldier, to have someone at my back on a mission."

There was a pinch in the back of Garrus' mind at that. Would Nihlus ask him to accompany him? Frank had scrunched his eyebrows and asked, "What do you mean 'to finally have a crew'? You were on a ship with Saren..."

"Yes, but Saren has no crew on his ship," Nihlus interrupted and they both stared at him in disbelief, "It's true, he is all alone in his ship, he runs everything with an advanced VI!"

Garrus shook his head, "But that's crazy, he'll go insane!"

Nihlus snorted at that. "Maybe he already has lost his mind, it would explain a lot of things."

Frank shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe he just likes to be on his own, some people are like that."

Garrus shook his head. "Not turians. It has been proven that turians need the company of others, a turian in solitude will most likely develop psychological problems. We are raised in families and clans, we live and work in tight communities. We shouldn't be alone for long periods of time."

"Saren was always a loner," Nihlus said, "In the whole year I spend with him, I have never heard
him talk about his clan or about friends. He only mentioned his brother once and how the filthy humans killed him." He looked at Frank, "Sorry."

"Don't worry, I already knew that," Frank said with a dismissive wave of his hand. His omni-tool lid up and he read the message. His ears turned slightly red.

Garrus grinned. "Is that your girlfriend calling you? Does she know who you are by now?"

"Yes, it's Sarah, my - ehm - girlfriend. And yes, I told her I work for C-Sec and she wasn't really mad at me for that," he replied, his face turning red. "I'm just going to go outside for a bit to call her, could you order me something to eat?"

"I don't know what you like..." Nihlus said, "and I'm hurt that I have been replaced so easily!" He sighed dramatically, clutching his hands to his cowl.

"Oh, shut up you," Frank grumbled with a smile and walked outside.

"We'll just order something random," Garrus said while he laughed, "Frank always says that asari food tastes nice no matter what you get."

They ordered their food and were silent for a little while as Garrus tried to come up with a way to ask about Lieutenant Shepard.

"I wanted to ask you something," he started.

Nihlus grinned at him and said, "About Lieutenant Shepard?"

Garrus was stunned. "How do you...?"

"The way you looked at her and she smiled at you - it was like watching a Spirit light up between you two."

"What? No, we hardly talked, I don't even know what kind of a person she is. I am just curious how you know her," Garrus said.

Nihlus smiled, "Well, I met her while I was still in the military. We were on our way to a distress signal from a turian colony, the only cruiser in the area. As we arrived the orbit was swarming with mercenary ships, pirates who were after the eezo resources from that colony. They had already punched through the orbital defences and were landing troops on the ground. We were hopelessly outnumbered but of course we engaged."

Frank came back to the table and sat down, listening to Nihlus story.

Nihlus nodded at him and carried on, "Things looked bad when suddenly, an Alliance cruiser appeared, very precisely shooting pirate ships out of orbit and two shuttles were landing on the planet with small ground troops. Our troops were already pinned, we had attacked with one platoon of 30 soldiers and they had us trapped with nowhere to go. Typical turian battle tactic, attack with overwhelming force, well, that only works if you have the overwhelming forces. We didn't, we were just a bunch of soldiers in a bad situation.

"The humans used a different tactic, they had small teams of three or four soldiers. They cut down communications, destroyed their weapons and forced the enemies to spread out and lured them into traps. I couldn't see any of that of course, we were just sitting behind cover, hearing firefighting all
around us. After half an hour the pirates fled and three human soldiers stepped towards us. I got up and saluted, that got me some looks from my platoon. And then I thanked them for their help and the leader took off her helmet, grinned at me and said 'Glad to be of service' and then she made a perfect turian salute."

Nihlus smiled at the memory. "Most of my platoon had never seen a human soldier before and you know what they teach at the academy, humans are weak and their tactics are wrong and all that. That day changed a lot of minds, I have no doubt that we wouldn't have survived without the help of Lieutenant Shepard and her platoon."

He took a sip of his calida and continued. "After that experience I set out to organize combat trainings for human and turian troops together, I was convinced, and still am, that we can all learn from each other. Spirits, the amount of stercus I got for that from the Hierarchy! Admittingly, the Alliance was reluctant at first as well but Lieutenant Shepard and Captain Anderson liked the idea and worked for it on their side. It took a whole lot of diplomatic tubaric to get that project off the ground. But we got it, there are now regular trainings with turians against humans or mixed platoons. And there is another project that sprang from that that I can't talk about yet. But it's amazing!"

His eyes were shining and Garrus wondered what secret could have gotten Nihlus so excited.

"Anyway, that's how I met Shepard and we have stayed in contact ever since. She's a good person, you can trust her."

Garrus had no idea why he felt such a relief at that remark. Frank was grinning at him. Suddenly he looked intently out of the window and his grin got even wider. He pointed outside at a figure strolling towards the cafe's door.

"Speaking of the devil...!"

"Devil? What devil?" Garrus asked confused.

The door opened and Lieutenant Shepard stepped in.

And she smiled at him.

Chapter End Notes

_I had so many more things in my mind that were supposed to go into this chapter but I think it is long enough now. That stuff will have to go into the next chapter. Phew. Like any writer I love getting comments, so thank you for the comments. Thanks also go to TheLadyKellet for beta reading this long ass chapter._
Shepard smiled at him, and it was like the sun rising over Palaven's mountains.

What the hell? Getting poetic now, Garrus?

He couldn't stop staring at her, taking her in. Her short, black hair, with the bright blue streak on her left side almost touching her eye. Her blue eyes, framed by dark lashes, some black paint around her eyes making them shine even brighter. She looked so alien, but fascinating. But it was her smile that stood out the most. Her smile for him.

Her gaze shifted towards Nihlus and she smiled at him too. Before he could clamp down on them, his subvocals released a quiet growl. It was just a short burst of something like jealousy and Garrus wasn't even sure why, but Nihlus had heard it. His mandibles snapped into a smirk as he got up to pull Shepard into an embrace. Again, Garrus felt that growl escape before he could stop it. Nihlus turned Shepard around so that he could look over her shoulder and he grinned - grinned! - at him. Garrus knew he had been caught; he was jealous of Nihlus over a human woman he hardly knew. He would never hear the end of this.

Shepard stepped out of Nihlus' embrace and turned around to Garrus. She extended her arm and held out her hand. Garrus got up, dipping his head respectfully, and grabbed her lower arm with his hand. She looked at him slightly confused, and he realized that he had turned her human style handshake into a turian greeting among friends. He touched the inside of her arm and she didn't even wear armor there!

Stupid!

Garrus wanted to slap himself, he knew how humans greeted each other, better than most turians probably. Why was he acting so weird?

She took a step towards him, as close as it was possible with a chair standing between them, and put her other hand on his shoulder. He couldn't feel her touch through his armor, but he was aware that she was now clearly in his personal space, looking into his eyes. As she edged closer, his visor gave off a proximity warning.

She smiled and he could see her flat teeth. "We haven't really been introduced yet," she said, "I'm Lieutenant Jane Shepard, Alliance Navy."

Garrus widened his mandibles and wondered for a second if she knew that he smiled at her. He was aware that many aliens found this look intimidating. "Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec." He put his free hand on her shoulder, unsure if this was the right thing to do. This didn't look like any form of greeting he knew, and from the outside, it looked like the only thing to stop them from embracing was the chair between them.

She still smiled and they stood in this weird, almost embrace, a little bit too long. Nihlus stepped up and gently broke them apart by offering that stupid chair to Shepard, and they all sat back down. Johnson came back in and he took her offered hand and shook it as they introduced each other.
Yes, that's how it's done! Stupid!

Johnson sat down with a happy smile on his face. "Sarah wants to meet me at the Presidium in half an hour. I would say I'm sorry to leave you guys, but honestly, I'm not." He grinned at them and waved his credit chit over his coffee cup to pay for it.

Nihlus smiled at him and asked, "Why didn't you invite her to join us?"

Johnson looked at him, his expression suddenly serious. "This is the turian part of the Citadel. I feel intimidated here, and I'm a big guy. And no offense to Lieutenant Shepard here, but she clearly looks like a woman who can hold her own in a fight."

Shepard raised her hand, "None taken."

Johnson nodded at her and turned to Nihlus again, "Sarah is a tiny woman, a scientist, not a soldier. I don't want her walking alone around here."

Nihlus looked equally serious now. "Do you think a turian would attack her like a wild animal? Because we can't control our predator side?" There was a threat there, just under the surface of polite conversation.

Johnson didn't flinch. "No, Nihlus, I know turians are not wild animals," he pointed to Garrus, "I hang around with this guy, you know, and he's pretty much the nicest guy I have ever known."

Garrus hummed in embarrassment. Shepard looked at him with a smile and Garrus' hum grew louder until he forced a hold down on his subharmonics.

"Have you been to this part of the Citadel lately?" Johnson asked, sweeping his arm to include the whole area outside of the window. "Racism, or is it speciesism? Anyways, it runs rampant here. It's the same everywhere, if the different species don't mix, prejudices against the unknown aliens grow. Look around, look at the market there. You might see a salarian occasionally or a volus but no human would dare to show his face here without some turian friends around him."

Nihlus sang a sad tone and lowered his head in an apology. "I'm sorry, Frank. I apologize for my accusation, I should have known that you are not that kind of a person. I had not realized that the situation has gotten worse."

Shepard spoke up, an angry furrow between her eyebrows. "Has it gotten that bad? I was hoping that people would get used to each other over time." She made a short snort, "that explains a lot..."

"What do you mean?" Garrus asked her. Her face had a look of barely suppressed rage for a second and then turned calm again. He realized that she was very careful with the emotions she showed.

She turned to him and gave him a sad smile. "On my way here a young turian boy wanted to talk to me, he was just curious I think, maybe he had never seen a human before. But a woman, probably his mother, grabbed him roughly and pulled him away, scolding him. And then she yelled at me, some curses that my translator couldn't define. I thought it was just a misunderstanding, but maybe it wasn't?"

Garrus felt frustration rise. Like Frank had said a while back, the galaxy was a different place now. People should adapt and try to get along instead of secluding and stewing in their old prejudices. But as he had noticed today with Peters and Lerv, the speciesism didn't even stop at C-Sec. If C-Sec couldn't even be an example, how were people supposed to learn?

Before he could say something in his anger, Shepard spoke up again, looking at Nihlus. "You know it was the same before we started the combined training program, remember? People didn't know
about each other and they just assumed the worst. Maybe we could set up some kind of festival, let people experience the different cultures. We invite some of our guys, you know, the ones who went through our training? We could have a mixed martial arts tournament, performances, dances, things like that. Humans and turians with each other, no separating, show everyone how we can work and live together." Her eyes were alight with excitement and her optimism was infectious.

Nihlus smiled at her and gave a subvocal trill of happiness and pride. "I may not have time to organize this directly, but I'll gladly lend my new Spectre authority to this. I know just the right person to take this up, I'll contact her right away."

"Is she a turian?" Shepard asked. Nihlus nodded and Shepard suddenly had a mischievous grin on her face. "Would she get along well with a human? Male, military, serious?"

Nihlus looked at her curiously, "Sure, she's not a prejudiced turian and comes from a military family. Who do you have in mind?"

"I wonder if I could get Anderson to chairman this. His staff on the Citadel are very capable, they could handle things without his direct involvement all the time, and his name does carry some weight around here." Shepard smiled at Nihlus, and Garrus felt like he was missing some part of the story here.

Nihlus shook his head, "You do know that Anderson has had some bad experiences with turians? There isn't a whole lot of love in him when it comes to us. You can't change everyone, Shepard."

"I know Nihlus, I know I can't change people. But maybe I can just give him a nudge in the right direction so that he wants to change himself." Again those eyes, full of light.

Garrus was fascinated. He knew she was a soldier, a deadly force. But now she was more like a guardian of understanding, forcing people to come together. He knew it wouldn't be easy, and she probably knew it too, but she was determined to get people to work with each other.

Nihlus and Shepard already put together a contact list and had their omni-tools exchange data. Garrus noticed how Frank looked at her like he saw her for the first time. There was that growl of jealousy trying to rise up again and Garrus stamped down on it with determination.

"You have no claim here!"

Frank must have noticed something and grinned at him now. Garrus felt very stupid. He stretched his throat, "Eh, I think we could include C-Sec in this project. Spirits know we need this just as much as anybody. I spoke to a new human recruit today, apparently speciesism is just as common at C-Sec as it is here. I'll talk to the Executor, we'll have to deal with the security anyway, and maybe we could find something to participate in."

Nihlus nodded absentmindedly, but Shepard looked at him with a wide smile and her whole face was alight.

"Like the sun over Palaven - Oh stop it."

"That's an excellent idea, Officer Vakarian!"

"Please, call me Garrus, Lieutenant," he said and her smile got wider.

"Then I ask you to just call me Shepard, Garrus."

"Gladly, Shepard."
They looked into each other's eyes and neither looked away until Frank cleared his throat. He coughed into his hand and got up to leave. "I'll leave you now to meet Sarah."

Nihlus stood up as well, "I don't feel comfortable having you or Shepard walk on your own in this district anymore. May I suggest that we all go to the Presidium together? The three of us can easily find a place to eat there and Frank will get safely to Sarah." He looked at all of them one after the other. Frank and Shepard shrugged their shoulders while Garrus hummed his agreement to himself.

They apologized to the waiter for not getting any food and stepped outside. The wards had no day and night cycle, the light was the same as always but Garrus felt like the atmosphere had changed. Turians were staring at them and at their two human friends.

A group of five young turians, all wearing the same black armor with a red logo on their shoulders, walked slowly towards them, following them to the main street. They walked the same speed as them, keeping the distance. But they were not just following, they were herding them out of the district, blocking the path behind them.

Garrus and Nihlus exchanged a look, they were both aware of the situation. Frank was already in C-Sec mode, sending out a message to headquarters and setting his omni-tool to record like he always did. Garrus looked at Shepard, her face was friendly and he wondered if she had not noticed the group behind them. But then he saw her feeling for a weapon apparently hidden under her vest.

She looked at Nihlus, who already had a pistol out and held it close to his chest. She urgently shook her head and whispered, "We can't shoot here, there are civilians and children around here!"

Nihlus hesitated for a second but nodded and let the pistol disappear again. Behind them, the group was walking faster, closing in on them and Garrus could hear their menacing growls. Nihlus and Shepard exchanged a look and Garrus felt slightly left out. These two knew each other well and they communicated without words.

They both stopped and turned around at the same time, their arms spread wide and with a friendly smile said "Hello!" to the group. The other turians almost ran into each other and seemed momentarily confused.

Nihlus had his mandibles wide in a grin and addressed one of the black-armored turians directly. "How can we help you, friend? Anything you wanted to say to us?" His smile was friendly but his subvocals were singing a clear threat.

The other turian answered the same way and then pointed with a hateful snarl at Shepard and Johnson. "These two should not be here! They don't belong here or even on the Citadel!" He was shouting now, making a big show for his audience. "Let them go back to their muddy planet, let them go back living in caves! You should be ashamed to be in their company, that is not the turian way!"

"To learn something new is not the turian way? That explains a lot!" Obviously Shepard did not have a lot of patience for stercus. She took a step forward, her empty hands still visible. Her voice was deep and loud, she was talking for the benefit of the families around them. "So, is it you who get's to decide how a turian is supposed to live? You tell the people who they can talk to? You decide what's right and what's wrong?"

Now another kind of growl was rising from the turians around them. Turians followed orders of superiors and listened to their parents. That was ingrained in every turian from early on. But for young men like the five in front of them to assume that they could decide for others, that showed an immense lack of respect.
Does Shepard know that?

The leader of the group realized that he had lost the popular vote; he twitched one mandible and his group turned away. Shepard started to walk backwards and the rest of them did the same, not letting their eyes stray from the turians in black armor. Finally they felt safe enough to turn around and walk to the transport terminal. Suddenly something hit Shepard on her back, splattering her in purple goo. One of the agitators had thrown an overripe necitina at her. The juices had sprayed all over her back and were dripping from her hair and down her bare arms.

They all stared at her, wondering what she would do now. Garrus saw her gripping something under her vest, probably the grip of her pistol. He wondered if this would make her forget the civilians. For a moment her face was full of rage but then the emotion was gone and like a mask another expression slid over her face. She smiled, no - she laughed! She laughed like this was the funniest thing that had happened to her all day, and to his surprise he heard some of the children laugh with her. Even some of the older turians were grinning and somehow the whole incident turned into a funny little thing.

The agitators realized that they still couldn't get the aggression against the humans they had wanted and turned away. Shepard waved at some turian children and then climbed into a skycar. As soon as she was out of sight the smile fell from her face and she desperately tried to wipe the fruits juices from her arms with a rag. Nihlus produced a wet medical pad from his armour and looked concerned at her arms. Where the juice had touched the naked skin, angry red welts had formed. He wiped the skin clean and applied some medigel. Shepard hissed whenever he touched one of the welts, they were clearly painful.

Garrus felt helpless, "Is this an allergic reaction towards dextro-fruit?" he asked. Shepard shook her head and gave him an assuring little smile followed by a pained grimace.

"No, I'm not allergic to dextro, few humans are, it's just like sugar to us. But this juice feels like acid!" She looked angry at her arm as if she could make the red marks go away just by staring at them.

Nihlus trilled apologetically, "These fruits are quite sour, the juice is definitely acidic. It even burns on my skin and your skin is so sensitive..." He had a dreamy look on his face, his talon moving lightly over her arm. Garrus stared at him and his jealous growl came up again. Shepard chuckled and gave Nihlus a flick on his mandible with her fingers.

"Stop playing around, Nihlus. I have to wash this off, as soon as possible. Any idea?"

She looked between them and Frank spoke up. "Your apartment is not far from here, Garrus."

"Excellent," said Nihlus and had Garrus program the destination into the car. "We will take Shepard there and you, Frank, can continue on your way to meet Sarah, before she starts to worry about you."

Faster than Garrus could worry about the state of his apartment, he found himself searching for one of his softer washcloths for Shepard. He also gave her some levo-salve for irritated skin and Shepard raised an eyebrow in question that he had such a thing.

"I have visitors, sometimes..." he mumbled. He didn't want to explain that asari and human skin
sometimes suffered from sex with him.

He left Shepard to washing herself in the bathroom and took a look at her vest that she had taken off. As he started cleaning it, he realized that it wasn't armor, but it was still a protective vest, with some kind of sturdy inlay inside. There was also a hidden knife on the left side and some other small weapons Garrus didn't recognize. He smiled, humans looked weak, but that was deceiving.

Shepard came back into the room and smiled when she saw him cleaning the vest. "Thanks Garrus, you didn't have to do that," she said.

He shook his head, "It was no problem. I was also curious about it, it looks so harmless but I just found a knife here." He looked at her with mock indignation.

She laughed. "Us humans lack the natural armor you guys have, so we have to use some tricks. That vest is no substitute for armor, it won't stop a bullet but it would probably stop a knife. Made me feel much safer back there with the turian hooligans."

"Hooligans?"

Shepard shrugged her shoulders. "Old word, means something like aggressive troublemaker. Hey, you found my toys!" She pointed at the weapons he did not recognize.

"I was wondering what these are." He held up a little tube-like metal object. Nihlus leaned over the back of the couch to look at it as well, balancing some drinks in his hands. He looked just as confused as Garrus felt. Shepard took one in her hand and showed them how a short needle got extended when she pressed down on the end of the little tube.

"It's a new system for non-lethal takedowns," she explained. "Contains a strong sedative that works on most species, even turians!" She grinned at them. "It even works on krogan but only for a short time, their redundant nervous system is impossible to really shut down."

Nihlus sat down on the couch next to Garrus and handed out the drinks. Shepard flopped down sideways on Garrus' only armchair, her legs dangling over the armrest. He wondered how this position could be comfortable, but the way she smiled at him showed him that she was happy. He liked that smile on her face.

"What is your fighting style?" Garrus asked, wondering what kind of soldier would have a need for injectors like that.

"I began training as an engineer, cause I'm good with tech. I'm pretty good at hacking and stuff like that, but as it turns out I'm also a good shot. I got trained with pistols, submachine guns, and sniper rifles." Garrus' interest was peaked as he heard her say sniper rifle. "Infiltrating also means stealth missions," she said. "They are developing a cloak system for us but it's not finished yet. We have to make do with keeping to the shadows for now."

Garrus could easily imagine her sliding in and out of the shadows.

"Infiltrators get combat training to take down any species quietly. Well, except the krogans, nobody has figured out how to do that with krogan." She laughed again and flexed her feet. "Most moves we learn are lethal and that always annoyed me. I wanted to have a way to sneak in and out of a place, undetected and not leaving a trail of corpses behind. My old engineering friends and me got together and developed this prototype. Finding a sedative that worked on a wide range of species was the hardest part."

Nihlus scanned one of the injectors with his omni-tool. "Human scientists developed that?"
"Not alone, a salarian helped." Shepard turned and put her feet on the ground, her elbows resting on her knees. "Never met him, but he was extremely productive. Developed the sedative in something like two weeks, when some of our scientists had already spent months on it, unsuccessfully." She leaned back and bumped her head on the backrest. The armchair was for a turian, the backrest ended in a roll to rest the back of a fringe on it.

Garrus trilled apologetic, "Sorry, I guess that chair is not made for humans."

She smiled at him with her lips wide, showing her teeth. "No problem, I prefer having my knees up anyway." She flopped back sideways, putting her knees over the armrest and smiled at him again. Garrus was beginning to really like that smile.

"So you are a sniper?" he asked. He had been one of the best snipers in his platoon during his military training. "Maybe we could go to the gun range together and have a little sniper challenge?"

Her eyes lit up, "Oh, I'd like that. What gun do you use?"

They happily compared make and models and exchanged stories about impossible shots they had taken. Nihlus rested his fringe on the back of the couch and started to nod off. Shepard and Garrus kept on talking. It was so easy to talk to her.

The conversation wandered from light hearted stories about pranks and mishaps to real missions. Shepard told him about a mission that she got to lead as a new N6, where she had lost contact to her team and was on her own. She was sniping pirates until she was out of ammo, then she had to take out the last opponent in close combat with a knife.

Shepard fell silent for a while and then spoke with a hushed voice. "Sometimes I think that it shouldn't be fun, you know? Killing people. I'm good at it, sometimes it's even fun, exhilarating, and ... it really shouldn't be. It's always someone's son or daughter on the other side of the scope. My mother would probably be horrified at what I do." She looked him in the eyes. "My parents were simple folk, we lived on a farm and I had never held a gun in my hand until..." her voice got even quieter, "until I joined the Alliance."

Garrus wanted to get up and hold her in his arms. This urge to comfort her surprised him. But he didn't get up, they hardly knew each other and embracing her was much too personal for their new friendship.

"If you are fighting for the good side, helping people..." Garrus began, trying to somehow comfort her with words.

Suddenly Nihlus' omni-tool chimed and Nihlus woke up with a start. He looked at the translucent display and groaned. "The Council, I have to take this somewhere private." He looked questioning at Garrus.

"All I can offer is my bedroom or the bathroom," Garrus said and pointed towards the bedroom.

"I think I prefer the bed to the toilet," Nihlus said, scratching his fringe. He closed the bedroom door behind him and Garrus could faintly hear him talking.

Just as he wanted to continue the conversation with Shepard, his own omni-tool chimed, announcing a vid-call. He groaned in annoyance when he saw that his father, Aethius Vakarian, was calling him. On a vid-call of course, so he could see if Garrus kept his apartment clean and what kind of company he had.

"I'm sorry Shepard, it's my father, I have to take this. He's..."
How do I explain this without sounding like a little child?

"I don't want to have to justify to him why a human is sitting on my couch. Could you be, like, quiet?"

A short emotion flitted across her face, something like hurt but then she smiled again. "I'll be sneaky, don't worry. I'm an infiltrator after all." She sat herself down on the floor so that the couch's backrest covered her. Garrus moved to the kitchen area so that the camera was facing away from the couch. He took a deep breath and opened up the call interface on his omni-tool.

"Hello father. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, my son, everyone is well here on Palaven. And if you'd call your mother occasionally, you would know that."

Garrus clamped his mandibles in a wince. His father was right, he hardly ever called his mother even though he loved talking to her. "Yes, sorry, I was busy."

"Don't give me excuses son, I don't want to hear them. The reason I'm calling is, I have arranged another praecipit convenire for you. The meeting is tonight, at a turian restaurant on the Presidium. I have sent the time and coordinates to you just now."

Garrus groaned and he trilled his annoyance loudly. "Father, you can't just set me up on a praecipit convenire at such a short notice. I have plans for tonight." At least he hoped he had, he had wanted to ask Shepard to go out with him.

"Then you will have to change your plans," Aethius Vakarian snapped. "Do I have to remind you of your duty as my son and your responsibility to your clan? Sapita Fedorian is the daughter of Lartius Fedorian, who is the brother of the Primarch of Palaven. The Fedorian clan is of the highest tier in the Hierarchy and it is an honour that they have agreed to a praecipit convenire. You will not embarrass our clan by dissenting."

Garrus had to hold down tight on his subvocals to not reveal the anger that welled up in him. This was the main reason why he had left Palaven. He was so tired of this part of 'the turian way', how parents planned their children's life. He should have told his father a long time ago that he would never agree to a praecipit collocatio, a prearranged bonding. Aethius Vakarian was still looking for a suitable mate for him, one that was of a high tier and a beneficial connection for the clan.

"Father, please, you have to stop this. I will never ..."

"You are my son and this is my will. You cannot disobey."

Garrus sighed, there was no way out for him. Unless he wanted to break with his family over a vidcall, he had to do what his father expected of him. "Fine, I will meet this woman but then we will talk about this. No more praecipit convenire without talking to me."

"We will see. Please look and act presentable tonight. Your mother sends her regards. And clean your apartment. Farewell, Garrus." And with that he ended the call.

Garrus wanted to punch something. He looked over to Shepard, she had watched him during the whole call. Her face showed something - Garrus called back on all his expertise to recognize the emotion. She looked sad, disappointed maybe?

He went back to the sitting area and Shepard stood up from the floor. She looked at him expectantly and he felt like he had to explain himself.
"Sorry about that, I had hoped we could have ... if you had time tonight, ..." he was fumbling badly, he knew it, but he just couldn't find the words. "I wanted to ask you ... but now I can't. Apparently my father has made plans for me and I have to meet this ... woman."

"For a praecipit convenire?" It sounded strange when she tried to make the turian words. "Is that like an arranged rendezvous?"

He nodded at that, feeling like he should somehow apologize for that. But why should he? It was just a meeting that he had to go to, they would have some polite conversation and then go their separate ways again. Just like with the other five convenire his father had arranged for him. The women had all been in the same situation as him, they had to go to these meetings to keep their families happy but none of them had any plans to actually agree to a bonding through that.

Shepard still looked at him, her face serious. "So are you expected to marry the woman that your father picked for you?"

"That's the traditional turian way, parents find a suitable mate and arrange the bonding." He stretched his throat, this sounded so strange, explaining it to someone who was not turian. "The children have no say in it. It's not always like that anymore, many families leave the bonding to the children but my clan is very traditional. My father wants to raise the clan higher in the Hierarchy and one way to do that is by mating his son to a high-tiered woman of another clan. He hopes to find a woman for me who I can agree to."

Shepard's face was unreadable. Garrus found that confusing, he was usually so good at reading human faces.

"I didn't know that turians had arranged marriages like that." She said with a polite smile. "We, I mean humans on Earth used to do that too, but that was a long time ago. I'm sure parents still try to influence their children in any way they can but arranged marriages don't happen anymore. At least as far I know."

She put on her vest and gathered up her equipment. Garrus felt panic rise, he didn't want her to leave. He could see that she was disappointed but he wasn't sure why.

"I should go, I'll be leaving for Earth tomorrow to start my N7 training. I still have to pack." She didn't look at him and went to the door. "Goodbye Garrus, it was fun meeting you. Tell Nihlus I'll call him later." She finally looked at him over her shoulder, her eyes sad. With a small wave of her hand she disappeared into the hallway.

The door closed behind her and Garrus had the distinct feeling that he had lost something important.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, I'm not going all Jane Austen on the story, just a little.

The words I'm using for the turian expressions are latin words, jumbled around with extreme disregard to any kind of grammar (or straight made up).
Here are some translations:
praecipit convenire = a prearranged rendezvous / date
praecipit collocatio = a prearranged bonding / marriage.
stercus = bullshit
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

*I think around this time I had begun watching the Brandon Sanderson lectures on
youtube. I think we can see a definitive improvement from here on out. I think. I use the
word think too much...*

Translations for the latin words I'm happily mangling:

*a praecipit convenire = a prearranged rendezvous / date
a praecipit collocatio = a prearranged bonding / marriage.
stercus = shit, bullshit
consilium = purpose
affectus = love, passion
pacalla = concubine
decretum = ruling, decision
futuo = fuck (as a cuss word)*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus stared at the door. Shepard had left and she had not been happy. Why had the praecipit
convenire upset her? Could it mean that she liked him? That she had wanted to be with him tonight
and he just blew his chances? He felt a short burst of intense joy, immediately followed by absolute
despair. He keened loudly in a subvocal curse.

"Spirits, I'm an idiot."

"Why?" Nihlus asked behind him. Garrus hadn't even noticed him leaving the bedroom. "Where is
Shepard?"

"She left, she said she'll call you later."

"What did you do?" Nihlus asked him, his subharmonics chiming an accusation.

"Why would you assume...? Nevermind." Garrus sighed and he let his confusing emotions sing out
unhindered.

Nihlus stared at him. "And here I thought I was just helping along a little fling. You sound... serious.
You like her. I never would have thought you would decide for such affectus."

Garrus groaned. "I feel like I wasn't really deciding anything, it just happened."

Nihlus had a faraway look on his face. "The humans call it falling. Falling in love. I always liked that
expression." He grabbed Garrus by his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "Are you sure that you want this?"

He didn't have to say what he meant, Garrus knew what a traditional turian would say to such a liaison. A traditional turian like his father. Spirits, the whole Vakarian clan would rather snap off a mandible than getting close to a human.

"I might have already lost my chance but I'm not sure why," Garrus said and fell back down on the couch.

Nihlus slowly sat down beside him, half turned to the side to look at him. "Garrus, my friend, I know her well and I'm sure that she likes you too. So why did she leave, what did you do?"

Garrus groaned again. "It was more my father, he called on a vid-call."

"Oh, did he see the filthy human and yell at you?" Nihlus seemed to be very amused by that idea.

"No, I told her to hide before I answered the call," Garrus said and saw Nihlus flinch at that. "That probably wasn't the nicest thing to ask of her, now that I think about it."

"I'm sure she understood that, it's not like you are in conveniri already," Nihlus said jokingly.

"About that, guess what my father was calling me about." He heard Nihlus trill out and nodded. "Yes, he has set me up with a praecipit convenire for tonight. He picked Sapita Fedorian, daughter of Lartius Fedorian, who happens to be the brother of the Primarch of Spirits-be-dammed Palaven to act as a ladder up the tiers of the Hierarchy. I am to meet her in a restaurant on the Presidium in - let me check -" he looked at his omni-tool, "in an hour. Spirits take him, how can he still do this to me?" He let his head fall back and sang out his frustration.

Nihlus made a sympathetic trill but then his tone changed to a harsh question. "So Shepard heard that your father set you up with a praecipit convenire? What did you tell her then? Why did she leave?"

"She asked me if that was like an arranged rendezvous that my father had set up for me. And she wanted to know if there was a marriage to follow." Her confused expression stood clearly in front of his mind. "She seemed to be bewildered that turians had arranged marriages. I told her that that was the traditional way."

Nihlus laid back his head and sighed. "Really Garrus? You tell the woman that you want to get closer to, that you will meet with another woman to arrange a marriage like your family wants? And you wonder why she left?"

"I'll never go through with the praecipit collocatio. Like every turian child, I just do the convenire and then I'm done with it. Hopefully my father will get the message and stop arranging these."

Nihlus snorted. "And how is she supposed to know that? Humans don't do arranged marriages, not anymore at least. They believe in romantic love like the asari. Shepard knows a lot about turians, especially from a military standpoint. But I'm fairly certain she's not familiar with the finer details of turian parenting and convenire."

Garrus slumped forward and put his face in his hands, his talons digging into his forehead.

"So I basically told the woman who I wanted to invite to a rendezvous that I'd rather go out with a marriage candidate."

"Yes, pretty much." Nihlus shook his head.
"Spirits take me." Garrus considered punching his fist through the table but decided against it. He didn't have time anyway, he had to get ready. He got up to change his clothes.

Nihlus eyed him with a critical look and spoke quietly, "Maybe it's better this way."

"What the futuo do you mean?" Garrus snarled angry down at him.

"You really think your father will stop controlling your life? After everything he has done so far? What if you get together with Shepard, will she have to hide whenever he calls? Will you live a secret life with her? What's she supposed to do when the next praecepi convenire comes up?" Nihlus looked at him and Garrus stared back. His mind couldn't comprehend the picture Nihlus was painting. The red turian continued, "Shepard is my friend, I care for her. She may be complicated and annoying sometimes but she doesn't deserve to be someones dirty secret."

Nihlus got up and grabbed Garrus hard on his upper arm, "Unless you break with your family and start deciding for your own life, you can never really be with her. So - leave her alone." His subharmonics underlined the order with a harsh trill.

Garrus turned away, when had things become so serious? So far he had just met a pleasant alien and he certainly was attracted to her. But Nihlus made it sound like they were about to be bondmates and that was taking things a bit too far. He growled in annoyance as he put on a fresh tunic and pants.

"You know nothing about my life. I've gotten as far away as possible from my family, that's why I live here on the Citadel. I'm in control of my life."

Nihlus stepped in his way. "Are you?" He sang a challenge to Garrus. "You know, I checked out your files. I had wondered why you ended up here in C-Sec and not in Spectre training like I recommended."

Garrus trilled a question and Nihlus smiled at that.

"Yes, I recommended you, there was a mentor arranged for you, the messages were on the way. But your father made sure you never heard about that and got you this job at C-Sec instead."

"I'm good at my job." Garrus felt like he had to defend his life, prove that he lived on his own terms. "My father has made a good decision, it was his responsibility, that's how things are done." It sounded empty, even to himself.

"Take a step outside, Palaven boy." Nihlus put his hands on his shoulders. "I consider you my friend Garrus, and it pains me to see how you stop yourself. I saw how you looked at Shepard and I don't think that was just curiosity for sex with a human."

"I have had sex with human women before," Garrus groaned back to him.

"Have you now? Plural even?" Nihlus trilled in amusement. "Good, then you already know that it works and can be quite pleasant. So it's not just deviant curiosity that I saw, you do like her. Why are you on the way to your praecepi convenire then, instead of being with her now?"

Garrus trilled in defeat and annoyance. "I couldn't ... nevermind what I should have done. I already said that I would meet that woman, I'm sure you are not suggesting that I dishonour my whole family by not keeping my word."

Nihlus shook his head. "No, you have to go, I can see that. But think about your life, Garrus. Your father will not stop until you have a mate he agrees with and live basically the same life that he lives."
Garrus sighed, "The galaxy is changing, Frank always says that."

"Shepard says so too. It's probably very obvious for humans and a bit harder to see for us, the old council-races."

Garrus looked at Nihlus, wondering about his past. "Did your family approve of your choices?"

His friend turned away, his talons scratching against the side of his armor. "My father died when I was 16 and my mother sent me away to the military faster than a pyjack runs. My family is not from Palaven and low-tiered in the Hierarchy. So I guess it's easier for me to defy the old norms and rules of the turian way." He turned back to Garrus and put one hand back on his shoulder. "You have potential, Garrus. Find out what you want, find your consilium, carve your own way in this galaxy."

They both stared at each other until Nihlus broke away with a laugh. "Listen to me, sounding like a philosophy teacher in the old temples." He shook his head. "The council is waiting for me, I have to be on my way." He held out his arm with his omni-tool and Garrus' omni-tool lit up, receiving data.

"I gave you my own contact and I gave you Shepard's as well. I trust you will use it well." He bowed his head in a farewell and Garrus did the same.

As the door closed behind Nihlus, Garrus stared at the contact entry for Shepard on his omni-tool. He hovered over the entry to call her but opened a message instead.

He began typing: 'Hello Shepard, I'm sorry that'

Sorry for what? What are you sorry for, Garrus?

He felt the urge to lie down but he was out of time. He had to get to the Presidium to the restaurant for the praecepit convenire. Snarling angrily he erased the last word and finished the message.

'Hello Shepard, I'm sorry for being an idiot. Garrus'

For a short time he hesitated, then he hit send.

The turian restaurant had a high ceiling and was decorated in traditional turian design. The walls were colored in dark red and green with blue ornaments. Comfortable chairs with high backrests were arranged around circular tables covered with dark red table cloth. On every table sat a little vase with white flowers, real calilia from Palaven. Garrus had to hand it to his father, he had picked the perfect location for a praecepit convenire, or any kind of rendezvous.

He looked around the restaurant and he stopped on a beautiful turian woman sitting in front of the window. He recognized her from the picture his father had sent him along with the coordinates. The picture did not do her beauty justice. Her plates had a purple color, glimmering in the light. The tips of her short fringe wore a silver shine and she had painted the tips of her mandibles with red make-up. Her white markings made an elegant curve from her face down to her shoulders. The silver dress left her shoulders bare, it flowed loosely down from her neck to her waist where it was scrunched up by a belt, accentuating her narrow waist. Her long legs and her thin spurs were visible under the dress, shining purple. She was breathtaking.

It had been a long time since he had been with a turian woman. He imagined what she would look
like without the dress, how her plates would shine. Her waist and her hips sharp and angular, perfectly fitting against his. How she would feel against him in a tight embrace, her talons scratching the skin between his plates. He would rub her spurs, making her squirm against him and she would massage him under his fringe, driving him crazy. Her hips would snap to his and her spurs would dig into his back. He would feel her vagina slide with delicious friction over him and grab him in a perfect fit.

_The Spirits sure have a sense of humour._

The growl that left Garrus's throat had the turians close to him turn their heads. Only three days prior he would have looked forward to an evening with this beautiful woman. He waited for the instinctual response of his body towards her but nothing happened. She was the most attractive person in this restaurant but he was discreetly checking his omni-tool.

_Answer me, Shepard._

He closed the interface with a sigh and made his way over to the beautiful woman. A few looks of envy followed him as she waved towards him.

"Garrus Vakarian?" she asked, her voice high like the sound of tiny bells.

He bowed his head to her. "You must be Sapita Fedorian. I am honoured to meet you." _Best stick with the traditions._

Garrus sat down opposite of her and looked at her. "My father should have prepared me that he found the most beautiful woman on all of Palaven to meet me here." _Compliments? Check._

She smiled back at him and trilled joyfully. "Thank you. I am also pleasantly surprised by you, my father has praised you and your abilities but he didn't mention how handsome you are."

Garrus trilled his embarrassment and said, "I ... thank you, although I don't quite believe your assessment." A subject change was very necessary. "Have you already ordered? I'm sorry if you had to wait, my day was very eventful and I lost track of time." _Apologized? Check._

She trilled reassuringly with her beautiful voice. "I have arrived shortly before you, I only ordered wine from Oma Ker for us. Shall we order our food?"

He nodded at that and looked at the menu on the datapad. The selection was extensive and exquisite, but he settled on a simple Palaven dish that he had not had since he left home. She ordered an asari-inspired dish, in the dextro version of course. An unusual choice, Garrus wondered what that meant.

As they waited for their food to arrive he checked his omni-tool again. Still no answer from Shepard.

He realized that he had to try to start a conversation. "My father has neglected to mention anything about you. So what do you do and what brings you to the Citadel?" _Small talk? Check._

"I'm a surgeon, I worked on military hospital ships since I left the fighting squads of basic. But I have accepted a position at Huerta Hospital here on the Citadel, starting in two weeks. I plan on staying here on the Citadel with..." She stopped and looked at him, trilling a tone of reservation.

Garrus trilled back his confusion and for a few seconds they just stared at each other. He stretched his throat and decided to come clear with her. "Sapita, we both are here because our parents have made a praecipit convenire for us. Personally I don't see any obligation to pretend like we are here out of common interest. You are beautiful and probably intelligent, and on any other day in the past I might even have courted you. But I don't plan to enter collocatio with you, and I don't think you do..."
either, right?"

Sapita growled dismay and Garrus panicked. It sounded like she had taken the arrangement seriously. He saw her stretching her throat and mentally prepared himself for the attack for his dishonourable behaviour.

She leaned forward and looked him in the eyes. "I don't expect any affectus from you, we are here because of an arrangement. I assume this isn't you first praecipit convenire?"

Garrus trilled agreement and waited for her to continue.

"It isn't the first for me either and until I decide to go through with a collocatio, my parents will continue to set me up with these. I'm tired of it." She leaned back and hummed harshly. "I have a bondmate but ..." she paused and sang quietly in what Garrus could only interpret as love.

He hummed his confusion and asked: "Why don't you enter collocatio with your bondmate then?"

Discreetly he checked his omni-tool again. Still no answer from Shepard.

Sapita growled again and the people on the next table turned to look at them. She quieted her voice a little and leaned forward. "My bondmate is unacceptable for my parents. She... she is asari. My parents would never accept her or the child our bond could give us one day." A happy little smile had entered her face. "Love is just a silly asari thing for traditional turians. They would never understand it and our child ...", a painful trill left her, "our child would be hated."

Garrus hummed in empathy. He was surprised by that, he really felt compassion for her. But he didn't understand why she wanted go through with the collocatio then. "So what do you want to do?"

She trilled with determination. "I want you and I to have the collocatio. We are a good match, I think we will get along well. Our families will be united, rise up the tiers of the Hierarchy, just like they want. We will take my bondmate and whoever you are checking your omni-tool for as part of our family to us. I might even have your child if our bondmates agree to that. That's the traditional turian way, it has been done before."

"Traditional?" Garrus snorted in ager. "Taking your and my bondmate as pacalla, as mistresses, is your solution? I don't care if that is a tradition, it's dishonourable!"

Sapita keened quietly and Garrus immediately felt sorry for her. She laid her head back against the backrest and closed her eyes. Her voice was almost a whisper. "I just want to be left alone, I want to live with Jinala and not worry about my parents. I don't want to go on another praecipit convenire ever again." She pressed her talons into her forehead. "I'm just so tired of all this. I see Jinala smiling at me every morning and I know I can't give her what she deserves. Spirits, she chose this dress for me so that I look nice for this dinner!" Her sad keen got so loud that almost all turians stared at Garrus aggressively, assuming that her distress was his fault.

"Spirits." Garrus didn't know what else to say and was saved by the arrival of their food. Sapita had her subvocals under control again and they both ate quietly.

Garrus checked his omni-tool once more. He wrote another message, 'Shepard, please answer me.' He hit send before he could change his mind.

His food was delicious and it reminded him of his mother in an almost painful way. He wondered what she would say to a human bondmate. She had always been more open minded, less traditional than his father. Would she accept Shepard?
Aren't you getting ahead of yourself here, Garrus?

He noticed that Sapita looked at him. She trilled questioningly, "So who are you constantly checking your omni-tool for?"

Garrus hummed in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I find myself in a situation not unlike yours and it's... unusual for me. I don't even know if she's interested in me that way but I can guarantee that my father would not approve."

"Assuming she is interested, what are you going to do?" It was clear that she was genuinely curious, looking for some kind of guidance.

Garrus sighed and took a sip of wine. "I have had the most eventful day today and that would still be true without any 'falling in love' as the humans apparently call it. I have met this woman and she - I don't know how it happened but I find myself thinking about her all the time. And in under an hour I managed to get to know her, find affectus and scare her away. That must be a new record." He groaned. "Sitting here with a beautiful woman is probably not helping my case."

"So, she is human then?"

"Yes, she is. You know, they call me an expert in humans at C-Sec but Spirits know I don't know what the futuo I'm doing."

"If she is human she probably wouldn't think of me as beautiful so you might be safe there," Sapita said thoughtfully.

"Huh?" he trilled out confused. It had never even occurred to Garrus that turians might look unattractive to humans. Had he been kidding himself? Was that the reason she had left?

Sapita hummed thoughtfully. "So what is your plan? You are sitting here, with me, because your father has made it his decretum. But you still don't want to follow the tradition? I know that feeling, believe me, but if you are telling me about honour and love, then why are you even here?"

Garrus felt his mandibles clamp against his face. "I have to admit, this is a new development for me. Before today I never really questioned the old traditions. Maybe I thought that leaving Palaven would be enough to get away from the old turian way. But today has shown me that plain distance in lightyears is not enough. Not only that, a friend has challenged me to find my own way in life and now you are asking me the same questions. It's like the Spirits are trying to tell me something."

"So you think I should break with my family and be with my bondmate? Without family, without the guidance of the elders?" Her mandibles tensed tight to her face.

Garrus trilled loudly, it wasn't like he had all the answers! "All I know is that we cannot live the same lives that our parents are living. Maybe they cannot guide us anymore. The galaxy is changing, just ask the humans. We have to change too. The first step for that could be leaving the old traditions by the wayside and finding our own path."

She stared at him and her subvocals were singing all over the scale. "Garrus Vakarian, this is certainly not what I had expected from this evening." She took a sip from her wine and her subharmonics were chiming in excitement. "I also never would have thought that a turian would listen to humans."

"Yes, I get that a lot lately." He had to hold down his grumble of annoyance. "Humans are very adaptable. It may be their biggest advantage. They can bring new perspectives and they question everything," Garrus said. "I don't know how they deal with family issues though, they may have the
same problems as we have. But knowing how adaptable they are, maybe they break those bonds easier than us."

She looked at him thoughtfully, tilting her head to the side. "I'm not sure if that is a good thing. Turians have defined themselves by the families and colonies they come from for thousands of years."

Garrus sang agreement. "True. To be honest, I'm not sure about it myself. So far I have neither broken with my family nor made advancements on that human woman I keep thinking about. So I'm just floating like a hanar here."

His omni-tool gave a small chime at that moment. Shepard had answered his messages. He didn't even bother to excuse himself before looking at it.

'Hello Garrus, sorry, I was busy. Why are you an idiot?'

He typed as fast as he could. 'I let you go without explaining this whole situation. I'm sorry if I upset you.'

He stared at the interface, waiting for her answer. Sapita trilled at him in empathy. He was about to start another message when her answer appeared.

'Aren't you supposed to be having a rendezvous with your future wife right now?'

He could hardly answer fast enough. 'She is not my future wife, I'm not interested in her.'

Her response came equally fast, 'I hope you have told that to the beautiful lady sitting there with you, she might be very disappointed otherwise!'

His head snapped up and he stared out the window. The Presidium had gotten darker, simulating evening and many people were ambling around. At first he couldn't make her out but then he saw her. She was sitting sideways on a bench facing the lake. She wore dark armor and had a bottle of something next to her. Her face was turned towards the restaurant and illuminated in gold by the glow of her omni-tool.

Sapita looked confused and was trying to see what had him so interested outside the window. He pointed towards the bench.

"She is sitting right there."

"Her?"

"Yes, her."

Sapita stared at the person and then smiled and raised her glass to her in greeting. Shepard raised her bottle and dipped her head. She turned back to him. "How did you know she was there?"

Garrus couldn't stop grinning with a trill. "She called you a beautiful lady."

He was about to type another message to Shepard when suddenly Sapita stuck her talons painfully in his hand and hissed at him. "Garrus, if this is the woman you want, you better get your ass out there right now!"

He hesitated for a second. Then he grinned, "Yes, ma'am!".

Throwing a credit chit on the table he almost ran out of the door.
Chapter End Notes

Someone got Jane-Austen-romantic-sparkles all over my fanfiction again! I can promise more action and drama in the next chapter.

I never explained that "stretching his throat" for turians is the equivalent to "clearing his throat" for humans. So it's what a turian would do if he/she is embarrassed.

Thanks to Credete for not completely losing his mind editing this chapter.
Hello dear readers!
First of all big, huge thanks to everyone who reads this little story and thanks to everyone who put in a comment, honestly, you guys make me so happy!
Now, on with the show!

He skidded to a halt next to her. She looked up to him, surprise on her face. For a few breaths they both just stared at each other. Suddenly, she smiled.

Her brilliant smile hit him like a punch to the gizzard and Garrus's knees turned weak. He slumped down on the bench next to her and she giggled in surprise.

"I would offer you some beer but I don't know how you deal with levo-beer," she said, holding up her bottle.

He held up a hand. "Thanks, but I don't need anything." He turned to her. "I'm glad to see you."

"Me too," she said in a quiet voice. After a few breaths she spoke again. "Shouldn't you be in the restaurant with your beautiful lady?"

He smiled at her, his mandibles wide. "I'd rather be here with you." He longed to touch her, to get closer to her. His subharmonics were singing out of control.

She put the bottle down on the floor and turned towards him. She looked him directly in the eyes. "Garrus, I don't know how this works in turian... courtship. The way I understand it, you left a woman you are supposed to marry alone over there to come over here and I don't even know... I'm not sure if we both want the same..." She looked down on her hands and made a small laugh. "You know, I'm not even good at this with my own species."

She looked up to him with a lopsided grin. "Usually I just have sex."

Garrus swallowed hard.

She giggled a little and without warning she took his hand in hers. He missed at least one breath.

"But then I just leave and never see him again. That's not what I want with you."

Her hand felt cool against his. He was glad that he didn't wear gloves tonight. His thumb started stroking the soft skin on the back of her hand autonomously. He tried to take in every detail, the little
bumps on her hand, the calloused tips that showed practice in holding a gun.

Suddenly she turned and was on her knees on the bench. That move made her taller and her face was right in front of him. Her blue eyes never left his.

"As I was saying, I don't know how turians do this but if you were human I would do this." With surprising strength she grabbed the back of his head and pulled him towards her, her touch under his fringe enough to make him stop breathing. She tilted her head a little to the side and pressed her lips to his mouth.

*Soft. Warm.*

She suckled on his upper mouthplate and it felt incredible. He relaxed his mouth and it opened slightly. Suddenly he felt her tongue entering his mouth, the tip of her tongue grazing over his mouthplates. Her free hand stroked his mandible and her tongue danced along the inside of his upper mouthplate.

*Spirits!*

*Yes, this is kissing. Please never stop.*

Garrus opened his mouth a little more and experimentally touched the tip of his tongue against hers. The feeling of this touch went through him like a live current, he wouldn't have been surprised if he could see sparks running on his skin. She gasped and her hand under his fringe grabbed him harder. He put his hands on her back, silently cursing her armor for shielding her from him. There was this need - *need!* - to get closer to her, to touch her, to hold her, to have her whole body wrapped around his own. His subvocals sang out in desire.

The need for air finally broke them apart and they were panting, staring at each other.

She drew in air like she had been drowning.

"Wow. That was ... you have kissed before right?" she asked him with a breathless smile.

His voice was not quite working. "Yes, but it was never like this. You... you..." - he was out of words. In an urgent need he pressed his forehead to hers, knowing that he spread his scent all over her. He didn't care.

A light trill behind them caught their attention.

Sapita was standing behind the bench, looking amused. "You do realize that people are watching you eat each others face?"

With her subharmonics she trilled a question at Garrus, knowing very well what he had done with his forehead to hers.

Garrus resisted to stretch his throat and just hummed. Shepard looked confused between them but didn't seem to be all that embarrassed.

"I'm sorry I ruined your rendezvous," she said with a smile. She was still raised on her knees and still had her hands on him, absentmindedly stroking his shoulder with her many fingers.

Sapita stared at her hands and then her eyes moved up to her lips. She swallowed and then said, "I never thought I'd see the appeal... it's called kissing, right? With your mouth... why do you do that?"
Shepard smiled even more, "Our face and especially the mouth area is full of nerve endings, extremely sensitive. Same goes for the tongue. Judging from Garrus's reaction there, it's quite pleasurable for turians as well." She looked past her where a tiny asari was standing a few meters back. "Is she with you?" she asked Sapita.

Sapita nodded, "Yes, that is my bondmate Jinala. I called her to pick me up." She looked lovingly over to her. "We have a lot to talk about."

Awareness showed on Shepard's face and she squeezed Garrus' shoulder. Then she grinned at Sapita. "You could try kissing with her, asari have soft lips as well. Just start slow and soft..."

Sapita's eyes got wide and she stared at her bondmate with visible desire, swallowing hard.

Jinala had noticed them looking at her and she walked over. She stopped next to Sapita, stood up on her tiptoes and they lightly touched their foreheads to each other. Then she turned to Garrus and Shepard and smiled at them with a hint of insecurity.

"Hello. I'm Jinala." Her voice was just as high and clear as Sapita's. "I'm Sapita's... I came to pick her up. What were you talking about?"

Shepard smiled warmly. "We were talking about kissing and that you two should try it." The smile turned into a grin now.

The other couple flustered and their movements were like mirror images of each other, hiding their faces behind their hands. Shepard laughed and her face showed true compassion. "I can help you, if you want. Just try it, see if you like it."

Jinala's blue face had turned a shade darker and her eyes never left her bondmate even as she was talking to Shepard.

"I thought that maybe... it is a bit unhygienic?"

Shepard shrugged her shoulders. "Not worse than the exchange of other bodily fluids." Garrus groaned at the image that conjured.

Jinala stood up on her tiptoes again and whispered, "Would you like to try it?"

Sapita trembled and her voice was a hoarse whisper so very unlike her normal bell-like song. "Now? Right here?"

"At least here we have an expert to give us advice," Jinala said with a smile.

Sapita nodded, apparently unable to form words. She lowered her head towards her bondmate and Jinala's mouth came close to her mouthplates. Shepard leaned forward over the back of the bench and began to whisper to Jinala.

"Put your lips softly on her mouth, just a soft touch. Now take her upper lip between yours and gently suckle, yes like that, don't pull, just a little suck. Sapita, relax, you're all tense. Open your mouth a little. Jinala, you can use your tongue to stroke over her mouth. Yes, just like that."

The tiny asari tongue was visible from Shepard's and Garrus's viewpoint, dancing lightly across Sapita's mouthplates. The turian woman's eyes were wide and she was trembling.

Shepard whispered again. "Sapita, move your tongue forward and Jinala, you have to be careful of her teeth but you can stroke her tongue with yours." The women both hesitated but Shepard
whispered again, "Trust me, just try it."

The asari and the turian woman moved closer again and Garrus recognized the moment when their tongues touched. Both their eyes went wide and Sapita's legs began to shake, she had to hold on to the back of the bench to not fall over. Garrus knew exactly how she felt. Jinala's hands went to her bondmate's neck and it looked like she had to hold on for dear life.

Shepard let out a small giggle. "Now I have to remind you that there are people watching! I think you got it now, maybe you should try it again somewhere private."

The women broke apart, panting, staring at each other in wonder. Sapita took her bondmate's hand and visibly struggled to get in control of herself again. "Yes, we go. We... to go... home. Now."

She was still slightly shaking when she turned towards Shepard and Garrus. "Thank you. Thank you both. I... we..." She turned to look at Jinala with a loving smile. "There is something about to change." Her voice was steady again. She typed on her omni-tool and both Shepard and Garrus received and accepted the data she send them.

"I wish that we stay in touch. I want to..." She seemed unsure what to say and Garrus could relate. He send out his address as well and trilled reassuringly to her.

"Spirits watch over you. I'm sure you'll make the right decision and I want to hear about it. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything." He hummed his support again.

Shepard looked at him curiously and then turned to her omni-tool and send her address as well. "I would also like to offer my help. If you need anything or have questions about kissing..." she smiled and closed one eye for half a second, "just send me a message, I'll get back to you as soon as I can, promise."

They said their goodbyes and Shepard and Garrus watched the two women walk away, holding hands. The turian and the tiny asari looked at each other until they had reached a skycar parked on the side. They saw them get in and program the destination and just as the car rose up in the air, they saw the two bondmates turn towards each other, their mouths touching.

Shepard giggled, "Looks like they're putting in some more practise at kissing."

Garrus hummed in agreement, forgetting that a subvocal hum was not a real answer for humans who had to rely on words all the time.

He suddenly felt her hand on his chest and she was looking at him fascinated. "Do that again," she demanded.

"Do what again?"

"That hum."

He hummed again, this time a reassuring tone. Her eyes went wide and there was something else in her eyes, staring at him. Her mouth fell open in a near silent "Oh."

He looked at her, unsure of what was going on.

"Your whole chest vibrates when you do that. And that hum and vibration go through me, through my whole body. " In a sudden movement she ripped off the front of her armor and scooted closer to him so that her chest was pressed against his. She spoke right next to his mandible. "Do it again."
He hummed. He felt her shiver, pressing her soft chest on his hard cowl and her head fell forward, her breath blowing over his neck. She was so close. He felt his genital plates shifting. He desperately tried to hold on to the realities of them sitting on a bench on the Presidium, people walking around and staring at them and this wonderful woman pressing herself against him, trembling.

She raised her head to look at him and he recognized what he had seen in her eyes before. Lust.

"That is..." she was breathing hard, "You should need a license for that. That hum is like... like a sex drug."

She kissed him lightly and then moved back, only her forehead still pressed to his. She whispered with a hoarse voice, "I want you so bad right now, you have no idea."

"Oh, I'm sure I have a pretty good idea," he replied, his voice shaking. He held her by her shoulders and felt his forehead releasing his scent again. He really shouldn't have done that, not without talking to her about it but he couldn't stop. He had to mark her with his scent. No one else should touch her.

Garrus knew he was being ridiculous, he acted like he had just flown down from the trees like turian ancestors in ancient times.

She pulled his head down towards her and kissed the top of his fringe. Garrus grabbed her shoulders harder. Was there any place she wouldn't kiss and would it ever not feel incredible?

"I swear, I wish we could just check into a hotel right now and continue this," she said with a sigh, "but I actually have some work to do. I'm supposed to meet a contact in a little while." She picked up the breastplate from the floor and snapped it back on.

"I'm coming with you."

"You can't, Garrus, you're not even wearing armor."

"But I'm C-Sec, I know my way around the Citadel, I can help you."

"Armor, Garrus, and you not wearing any!" Her hands indicated all of him and apparently displeased with the lack of reaction from him she punched him hard on his arm. He clamped his mandibles tight to avoid showing his wince.

"Do we have time to stop at C-Sec? I could put on armor there."

She checked her omni-tool and shook her head. "No, no time, we have to go now if we want to make it there on time." She put on her gloves and got up and turned to leave.

He had to stop her. "I stay behind you, keep in cover, watch your back."

She seemed to consider this. Then she threw her head back in annoyance. "Right. Someone has ordered, no asked me to train my leadership potential cause they want to me to be more than just a grunt... " She sighed in annoyance again. "So I'm supposed to get used to working with a team. Might as well start now."

She straightened her back and clasped her hands together behind her back. She looked so much like his old sergeant, he felt himself standing to attention in reflex. Her tone was all commanding officer. "Do you have a gun?"

"I have a pistol." He swallowed a 'Sir' and pulled out his spare Striker pistol he had taken with him out of pure habit. He certainly had not expected to get into a firefight tonight.
Her pose relaxed again. "Well, it ain't pretty but it will have to do." She indicated with a dip of her head that he was to follow her as she started walking.

He noticed that her armor had no Alliance markings or any at all. He wondered what kind of a mission would have her alone in unmarked armor, walking into some ugly corner of the wards.

Garrus didn't have to ask, she started talking about it while they walked. Their path took them far away from the beautiful area of the Presidium and down into the ward. He wondered why they had not taken a skycar. She walked with a brisk pace that Garrus found comfortable to keep up with. Her voice was low and quiet and it was clear that her words were only intended for him.

"This isn't really an Alliance operation. This is a mission for the Alliance NIS, the investigative branch of the Alliance Navy. I've been doing missions with them for the past four months. Mostly I work alone, infiltrating, get the intel and get out again, that sort of thing you know? Some of it is general intelligence, some is plain busting criminals, the sort you probably run into all the time." She looked up to him and he nodded, not knowing what else to do. He could hardly tell her how that look into her blue eyes had taken his breath away just now.

She continued talking in her deep voice, "The ANIS is after a guy who deals in some nasty weapons and is involved in the death of three marines on Arcturus station. I followed his trail here but I lost him on the Citadel. I'm supposed to meet an informant who can tell me more about him over there in that warehouse."

She pointed to towards a grimy building that looked dark and uninviting even in the never changing bright light of the wards.

Garrus stopped her walk by grabbing her arm. "Shepard, fill me in, what do you know?"

She looked slightly embarrassed. "Sorry, I've done this alone for so long, I forgot." She looked up to the Citadel sky. "Well the weapons dealer's name is Verringer, he was caught on camera at the crime scene, three dead marines and an asari matriarch. We..."

"Wait - Verringer?" Garrus needed a second to recall why he knew that name. "We just busted his warehouse. Almost got blown up in it. Found weapons, drugs, and coolant."

"Coolant? How weird." Shepard looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "You almost got blown up?"

"Just a little. I'll tell you later, okay?" She looked worried but nodded. He continued, "We had another reason why we raided the place, had something to do with weapons as well. We found the cooling agents by accident. We, Frank Johnson and me, have this case with organ transplants and we figured they would need lot's of coolant to preserve the organs. That is actually the connection how Frank met Sarah but we can talk about that some other time. Have you heard anything of a Matriarch Gars’ada?"

Shepard stared at him. "Well, yes, she's dead. We found her dead with the three marines on Arcturus station. What is the connection?"

"She actually owns - eh owned - the company that Verringer is running in her name. As far as we know she wasn't a criminal."

"Well that's good to hear, it puts the other guys in a better light. We still don't know how the marines were involved in this." She took out a heavy pistol, the like of which he had never seen before, to check it once and snapped it back to her side. Then she started to walk casually towards the front door.
Garrus made a rasping sound in his throat like humans did when they tried to get someone's attention. Her head snapped around and she looked at him like she had completely forgotten that he was there.

"Right, I was supposed to tell you what we are about to do here." She examined the outside of the building. "There are some stairs on the outside there, see if you can get to a window overlooking the inside up there. I'm expected, so I just walk in through the front door."

"That's more of a sniping position, and I only have a pistol..."

"I know, it's not ideal but it will just have to do."

She put her gloved hand on his arm and smiled her wonderful smile that Garrus just wanted to drink in. "Just watch the surroundings, everything will be fine."

Garrus nodded. "I'll have your back, Shepard."

She walked towards the door and Garrus sprinted over to the stairs. His clothing enabled him to move quietly but he still felt uncomfortably exposed without armor. The window was a bit high up on the wall. He had to move a box and step on it, but then he had an excellent view over the mostly empty warehouse.

Shepard had already entered and looked completely relaxed. She had her hand on the grip of her pistol but didn't raise it. She just walked in, there was no cover, no protection at all. Was she crazy? Garrus shook his head, he had to talk about her disregard for safety later.

A salarian, standing next to a few shipping containers was looking at her nervously. Three krogan were hulking, like krogan do, behind him. The salarian fidgeted with a handgun, clearly not used to handling a weapon regularly. The krogans on the other hand looked very capable and Garrus felt even more worried. Shepard was smiling! She wasn't intimidated by any of this. Casually she waltzed over and leaned her elbows on a shipping container. This posture had her backside jutting out. From his viewpoint this presented him with a perfect view of her armored ass.

Garrus swallowed a groan. He couldn't let this distract him now, he had to be attentive, protect her. \textit{When did you start to find a human's ass so attractive anyway?}

She was talking to the salarian and Garrus tuned his audio implant to his and her omni-tool. He was relieved when he could hear her.

"So, I have the information you wanted right here." She padded a pocket on her thigh. "So, what do you have for me?"

The salarian spoke with a squeaky voice. "I can give you all of Verringer's and Matriarch Gars'ada's business contacts, financial supporters and connections. And I can assure you ..." he made a squeaky little laugh, "you will be very interested in those connections."

Shepard straightened and her carefree posture fell off her like a coat. She was all business now and her hand on her pistol a clear threat. Garrus was amazed at the change and had to force himself to tear his eyes away from her. He looked at the three krogan, two had green crests and one was red. They all wore heavy armor, scratched and dented. No insignias as far as he could see, freelancers apparently.

He saw the red krogan doing something with his omni-tool, him even having one was unusual already. But he noticed that Shepard's omni-tool lit up at the same time. She didn't look at the red krogan but that in itself was a giveaway because she never let her attention stray away from the other guys. Garrus wondered what that meant.
Down below the exchange went through without a problem and Garrus saw Shepard turn and walk out. He hurried down the stairs to meet her. She looked over to him but shook her head once. She walked quickly away from the building but into a different path. He tried to keep up without indicating that they were together. Suddenly she stopped and Garrus hid behind a corner.

After a minute the red krogan came out of the building next to her. Garrus aimed his pistol at him, knowing full well that pistol slugs were hardly efficient in stopping a krogan. But the red krogan just stood at an arm's length away from Shepard and they talked. Suddenly he turned and looked directly at Garrus and shouted, "I can smell you from here, turian. And I can smell you on her too."

Shepard raised an eyebrow in surprise at that but didn't say anything. Garrus walked over to them. The krogan snorted, "Normally I wouldn't trust a young hatchling like you but Shepard seems to trust you and I trust her judgement." Garrus still couldn't stop the hostile growl leaving his throat. He moved closer to Shepard to protect her.

The human woman looked fragile compared to the krogan but he was not threatening towards her. He looked at Garrus with a condescending smirk and then back to Shepard. Then he sniffed the air and grinned. "Shepard," the krogan said with his rumbling deep voice. "You can't jump him now despite all this mating scent in the air. We don't have time." He laughed out once.

Shepard flushed pink and nudged Garrus in his side with her elbow. Then she straightened again and spoke seriously. "Wrex, this is my friend Garrus Vakarian. Garrus, this is my old friend Urdnot Wrex. He has some more information concerning our squeaky salarian." She called him squeaky just like I did.

The krogan rumbled, "The guy has started a new business with batarian slave traders. He has a batch of new slaves in a cargohold in the lower wards that he wants to transfer very soon. I just got the time a few minutes ago, we have to get there fast to stop him."

Garrus was confused, what was the krogan trying to gain by giving Shepard this information? Shepard looked at her omni-tool and then back at the krogan. "We should call C-Sec, and get Garrus in armor before we get into that."

The krogan shook his head, making the air waver around him. "No time for that. Call C-Sec but we can't wait for them." He turned to walk away and called back over his shoulder, "Be there Shepard, I'll be fighting from the inside."

"Alright Wrex, but after this you and I are going to have words!" Shepard shouted after him, pointing with one of her fingers at him. Garrus couldn't believe that she threatened a krogan like that.

The red krogan just nodded and disappeared inside the building.

Shepard was checking her omni-tool and then looked at him. "You need armor and a rifle, and we have to be at these coordinates in like ten minutes. Options? Ideas?"

He ran through his options, even if he got Frank to bring him his stuff it would take more than ten minutes. Shepard was checking her omni-tool again and suddenly started running. "Come on Garrus, there is a armor and weapons dealer around the corner." She sprinted fast, he had to take long strides to keep up.

Did she expect him to just buy new armor? He couldn't really afford that. Before he could stop her she ran into the store. Somehow, with a brilliant smile and purring compliments, she convinced the salarian behind the counter to hand over a turian armor set for him for 'testing'. In the same manner he got an assault rifle to 'test'. As he hurriedly put the armor on she promised the salarian salesman an
endorsement from him if he was satisfied with the armor.

"One day, an endorsement by him will be invaluable, trust me, he will be a hero!" She sounded so convincing that Garrus stopped closing latches for a second and stared at her.

She indicated towards him to hurry up and ran out of the store. He scrambled behind her into a skycar she had ordered. "Hurry, hurry!", she yelled, "We're fucking late! Call your friends at C-Sec, we need backup!"

He hesitated. "Do you really trust this krogan? Couldn't he lead you in a trap?"

She looked at him, clearly irritated. "Yes, I trust him, can you trust me?"

He looked into her eyes, "Yes okay, I trust you." I do.

She turned back to flying the skycar manually and extremely fast. It was nerve wrecking. He thought more than once that they would crash into another car but they always got away at the last moment. He called C-Sec for backup and to distract him from the near-death situations happening in front of him. Just as he had transmitted the coordinates, Shepard pulled the car down fast and landed it rather inelegantly on the roof of a two-story building, screeching and skidding.

Garrus let out the breath he had been holding to stop himself from screaming. Shepard was already running towards the edge of the roof. She spoke into her omni-tool, "We're here Wrex. Situation?" She threw herself on the ground and peered over the edge down into the back court of the building next to them. Garrus scooted up next to her, wincing when he heard his brandnew armor scratching on the ground.

Shepard apparently received some reply from Wrex that he didn't hear. She realized that as he looked at her and started to link up their omni-tools. "Wrex is ready, they will be moving the cargo down the alley to a little illegal spaceport hidden somewhere. We have to get down there now. I want you behind me, check the surrounding buildings for unexpected guests. I confront them and Wrex will be our surprise behind their backs. Let's go."

She scooted back and got up to run over to a set of rusty stairs. Garrus held her back by her arm, he didn't like her plan at all. "It would be better if I confronted them, I'm C-Sec. And you would be vulnerable..." He stopped, because her eyes narrowed and the look she gave him was frightening.

She growled, actually growled at him and spoke very quietly, "This is not an official C-Sec operation with me here. Stick to the plan."

He nodded, too annoyed to answer her with words.

As they walked down the street, a door opened in the building and let out the three krogan they had seen before and two turians along with the squeaky salarian. In between them seven small children, asari and human were chained together. Garrus had to bite back on the hateful keen he wanted to scream. Children!

Slavers were already the worst of the worst but slavers who traded children? The worst stercus of the lowest life forms.

Shepard had her heavy pistol drawn and trained on the salarian. Garrus raised his Assault rifle as well, almost shaking in anger. Shepard stepped forward, "You are under arrest by the ANIS for slave trading. Drop your weapons!" She spoke with authority but Garrus considered it a needless gesture. Those were slave traders and mercenaries, why did she waste her time talking to them?
In that second a shot rang out and hit the ground next to Shepard, spraying shrapnel on her leg. Garrus cursed, he hadn't checked the roof of the building behind him. He aimed with his assault rifle and shot at the assailant. It wasn't a sniper, but his shots were still well enough to take the shooter down.

In the meantime a full-on firefight had started between the salarian and the turian mercenaries on one side and - surprisingly - all three krogan and Shepard on the other side. Shepard and the krogan had taken cover behind some of the many containers that were always scattered around the wards. Behind one box the red krogan, Wrex, was protecting the children with his massive body. He held up a biotic barrier, enclosing the crying children inside a shimmering blue bubble.

More turians appeared on the roof and came running into the road from the building. Shepard's heavy pistol apparently even had a scope and she took out the snipers on the roof with frightening precision. Garrus sorely missed his sniper rifle or even his regular pistol. The assault rifle he was 'testing' wasn't correctly calibrated and shot slightly off the mark, he had to compensate by aiming a bit to the left. He grew more annoyed at that by the minute. Finally he switched to his old Striker pistol. It didn't have the same kind of punch as the assault rifle but at least it was calibrated.

Shepards and Garrus' shooting with the work of three krogan shotguns soon sent the surviving mercs running. Shepard indicated to Garrus and the krogans to follow her in her pursuit of the fleeing turians. But she had a different order for Wrex. "Protect the children Wrex, take them to C-Sec."

"You got it, Shepard." He turned towards the children and removed their chains. Garrus saw with bewilderment how the huge krogan bent down to pick up a probably injured human boy and gathered the other children around him. They quickly moved away from the firefight.

Shepard ordered the two other krogan on a path around the building to cut off the mercs escape. They hesitated, apparently irritated to get ordered around by a human. Shepard stepped up to them and made her voice even deeper and louder, reminding them to either step up their game or get lost. The krogans decided for getting lost and lumbered in the other direction. Shepard shrugged her shoulders and mumbled "Mercs" as she walked past Garrus.

They moved carefully but as fast as they could from cover to cover, following the turian mercs. Garrus moved up to Shepard, who carefully peered around a corner before running again.

"Did you expect them to listen to you?"

Shepard sighed, "No, not really. They're just mercs, they blew their contract for the kids, which was nice of them, they didn't have any obligation to follow me. It might have been different if Wrex was here."

"Wrex is also just a merc. Honestly, how could you leave the children with him?"

Shepard rolled her eyes and slid over another box, rolling over her shoulder on the ground and pressing herself against another container. "The children are under the protection of Urdnot Wrex, krogan Battlemaster and my friend. You think that'll be a problem?" There was a challenge in her look back towards him.

Garrus had scrambled over to her position with a bit less elegance. He still felt clumsy in the unfamiliar armor. "Well, he's a krogan? I mean, Spirits! A krogan! And a merc." He couldn't quite fathom the idea.

She sighed and looked at him. "Garrus, I left the children in the care of a krogan Battlemaster who, in his lifetime, probably has buried more infants than the number of children he has with him right
now. There is no one in this galaxy who is more protective of children than a krogan." She looked him in the eyes. "He will do everything in his power to get them to safety."

Garrus stretched his throat with a low trill. He had never thought about the Genophage like that. Burying so many children.

Shepard seemed to read his face as he understood her reasoning because her look got softer. "Trust me, Garrus. The children will be fine."

He could only nod as his gizzard clenched around the intense feelings inside him that he couldn't quite place. How about you finally give her the trust that you promised?

Another short sprint took them to a construction site. They had plenty of cover but so did the mercs. Garrus couldn't find a good position to cover the whole area and any movement forward took them right in the line of fire. Shepard looked at him, clearly seeing the same problem. They were a bit further apart and Garrus heard her whisper through his comm implant. "How many do you see?"

"I see three from here, Shepard."

"Yeah, me too. They have us pinned." She looked up and around, looking for alternative paths. "I make my way over there and will take out the one on the right. As soon as he is down, you start shooting the guy closest to him."

"Shepard, there is no cover for you to get over there, that's crazy!"

"Have some faith, Garrus." She smiled at him and he swallowed his retort. He said he would trust her, it was about time he started with that.

Shepard moved further over to the side and rolled behind the half finished wall of the building. Then, instead of moving forward as he had expected her, she moved upwards. Using the scaffolding and the rough exterior of the unfinished wall, she climbed up fast and smooth. The building had no roof yet but when she reached the top she jumped from one beam to another, crouching on the beams in between. Her movements were elegant and efficient, and he was once again reminded that humans were predators.

He almost couldn't take his eyes off her. She moved with such an ease, quiet and fluid. Deadly.

To keep the mercs distracted, he fired a few shots blindly towards them, and they returned the favor in kind. Their shots hit his cover and he identified the sounds of three different guns. From his cover he could just see Shepard climbing down on the other side of the building and dropping herself the last three meters. Suddenly one gun didn't shoot anymore. Garrus risked looking over his cover, he could only see one of the mercs and fired a few shots with his pistol. The merc dropped with a cry. There was no more shooting.

Garrus heard Shepard in his ear. "All clear." He stood up and walked over to her. She knelt beside one of the mercs, checking out his combat rifle. Tossing it over to Garrus she said, "Here, I think this one at least shoots straight." She noticed. Looking around, he saw that the three mercs were still breathing but seemed to be sedated.

Shepard grinned at him. "I got to use my new toys." She held three of the metal tubes he had seen in the afternoon (was it really this afternoon?) in her hand. "Worked perfectly, dropped quietly in seconds." She looked very pleased with herself.

I really shouldn't doubt her abilities.
They ran up to the next corner and as they looked around they could see the illegal spaceport with a shuttle waiting. The mercs were scattered about, covering the entrance while two were arguing with the batarians in the shuttle. Shepard indicated to Garrus that they should wait. Suddenly she turned her face towards him and looked at him seriously, "I have a question. What was that back there when I confronted the squeaky guy, Vakarian?"

"What?"

"Well I remember quite clearly almost getting shot. What happened?" She looked at him cold.

Garrus stretched his throat in embarrassment, "Sorry Shepard, I hadn’t checked the roof. I was distracted ..."

"Distracted by what?" Her eyes had him bound.

"The children, the krogan, your command, you..." he averted her eyes, he didn't want to see the disgust in them.

Her voice was lighter as she spoke to the back of his fringe. "You have a problem with me in command? Is it because I'm female or because I'm human?"

He turned back to her and he recognized the hurt in her face. What are you doing?

"I don't care that you are human," he answered hurriedly, "really, I don't. And a female commander is not all that unusual in turian military either..."

Before he could continue they got distracted by shots ringing out in the spaceport. The mercs were trying to enter the shuttle but the batarians obviously were not there to save them. The shuttle lifted up without them but was stopped by a C-Sec ship before it could go to FTL.

Shepard sighed in relief. "I'm glad C-Sec got here in time."

She looked around the corner of the cargo box they used as cover and shouted over to the left behind mercs. "You are surrounded and have nowhere to go. It's time to be smart and to drop your weapons now."

Garrus couldn't believe it. He hissed at her, "We should just shoot them. They were trading kids as slaves. Kids! They have no honour, they don't deserve to be treated so ... honourable!" He growled in anger. Children! Turians! Slave trading children!

Shepard put her hand on his arm. Her face was full of compassion and sadness and her eyes pulled him towards her. "Garrus, we are here for justice, not vengeance."

He stared at her. He knew she was right. He was a cop after all, he couldn't just shoot whoever got him angry. He nodded, couldn't say anything, his anger still fighting with his rationality.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Chapter End Notes
I really wanted to wait longer with the kissing but obviously I'm incapable of slowmance. These two, they just can't keep their hands and mouths from each other.

I read a story on the kinkmeme a while back that had this background about the krogan being the best protectors of children. I thought that was an awesome idea and had to use it, so whoever wrote that, Kudos to you.

ANIS = Alliance Navy Investigative Service
(yes, I know)
"So tell me, what is the problem?"

She definitely didn't dance around the difficult topics.

Garrus didn't know what to say. He had so many problems right now, he lost count. How about that he completely lost his way as a cop and had to be reminded about justice versus vengeance? Or that he forgot to check for snipers because he was consumed by rage? Or how he questioned everything she said. And that he needed to protect her, keep her safe, his mate.

*Mate?*

Shepard still looked at him, waiting for his answer. They were walking back to the building that they had landed the skycar on. Around them, C-Sec was taking the mercs into custody and forensic teams entered the building.

Patience was not one of Shepard's virtues. She took a breath and held his eyes captive with her firm stare. "I like you Garrus, and I hope you like me too. But if we are to work together, then we can't let that distract us. And you can't go all overprotective lizard on me either. I'm not a damsel in distress, waiting to be saved by her knight. I'm a soldier, I know how to fight. If I order you to do something I have to be sure that you will do it."

"Yes, I understand Shepard, it won't be a problem again." He didn't know what a damsel was but he got what she meant.

"Can you work with me in command?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can!" There was a good, order abiding turian somewhere inside him doing a happy dance.

"That's... good to hear. Because I was thinking of recruiting you for - ah, I can't talk about that, not yet. And I can make no promises but if this thing works out the way I want to... " She fidgeted with her hands. "I know It's not a good idea to recruit someone for a team who you also have a personal... something - whatever we have..." she said and started wringing her hands.

Garrus took her hands to keep them from doing that and stopped her. She looked up to him and he had never seen so much insecurity in her expression. "We will work it out, Shepard. Don't worry, we
can make this work."

A relieved smile grew on her face and she sighed, "That's good. While we work, we keep things professional and everything else... we just take it day by day? Is that ok?"

He squeezed her hands once. "Yes, that is very much ok."

He reluctantly let go of her hands and they started walking again. Shepard seemed to be deep in thought.

A C-Sec officer, a turian Garrus knew from seeing him at the academy a couple of times, approached them to ask how they had come about this case. Shepard gave a short explanation, referring any further questions to her superiors at ANIS and then excused herself. She told the C-Sec officer that Garrus would be able to answer all questions and walked over to the car where Wrex sat with the children while a turian doctor was checking on them.

Garrus watched her kneel down in a crouch so that she didn't tower over the children. She spoke to every one of them, calming them, holding their hands. It was so very different from the ferocious warriress he had seen before. Wrex still had the little human boy sitting on his lap, apparently the boy didn't want to let him go. The massive krogan didn't look bothered by that and held the boy gently upright as the doctor was treating his leg.

*Spirits, it's another gentle krogan. Maybe it's time to get over some stereotypes.*

Garrus suddenly felt very tired. That concert had been yesterday. He couldn't believe that just this morning he had seen Nihlus become a Spectre, it felt like that was days ago.

He answered a few more questions from the C-Sec officer whose name he had already forgotten and promised him an extensive report if he could just go now. The officer finally let him go and Garrus made his way over to Shepard. From a car he saw the young recruits Berdin Lerv and Katrina Peters emerge, looking at him in surprise. He waved at them and they appeared like they were about to bombard him with questions. But after looking at him they apparently decided that it could wait. He must have looked more tired than he thought.

Shepard saw him approach and smiled brilliantly at him.

*That smile is going to be the death of me.*

She turned back to Wrex and Garrus heard her talking to him sternly. "What the fuck are you doing, Wrex? We talked about this, you had all these plans, ambitions. And now I find you here, back at being a fucking merc, why?"

The red krogan actually looked embarrassed. "Come on, Shepard, a guy's got to make a living somehow."

"And you couldn't find anything better than this?" Under all her anger it was clear that she really cared.

Wrex snorted in annoyance, "There isn't a lot of work for a krogan that doesn't involve using a shotgun most of the time."

"I guess that's true," Shepard said and her anger disappeared. "Tell you what, Wrex. When I get the chance to put a team of my own together, and that might not be too far away, I'm getting you. Will you work for me?"
"Of course Shepard." The red krogan held out his huge hand and Shepard's disappeared inside of it. There was an amount of respect at work here that Garrus couldn't quite fathom.

Katrina Peters had watched the exchange from the side and her face was full of awe. As Shepard got up, she waved the young woman over and instructed her to take care of the children for her. Peters was nodding so hard, her hair fell into her face.

Wrex talked to the boy on his lap, his voice a quiet rumble and after a little while the boy nodded and let Peters take him.

Wrex nodded to Shepard and the boy and then raised his hand with a greeting towards Garrus. That took him by surprise and he barely managed to raise his own hand for a wave before the krogan had turned around and lumbered down the road.

Shepard came over to him, looking at him critically. "You look dead on your feet. I'm taking you home."

Garrus nodded. "It has been a long day." His whole body ached.

They took the stairs up the building where the skycar was still waiting. As they got in, Shepard looked at him and then seemed to have come to a decision.

"This team that I want to put together, well, I haven't gotten the go-ahead yet, but it's looking good. It will be an investigative group of specialists, under ANIS for now. But it will be an interspecies collaboration, not a human project. The idea is... that's a bit of a long story, want to hear it?"

Garrus stretched and spread his mandibles in a yawn. "I'd like to hear it but I can't promise I'll remember everything you tell me because I'm just so damn tired!" He also really loved listening to her voice.

Shepard grinned, "I'll tell you everything again tomorrow if you want. After that I might be hard to reach for a few weeks."

Garrus wanted to ask what she meant but she continued talking.

"Here's the thing: The Alliance isn't exactly happy with the Spectres as the 'police-branch' of the Council."

"Why is that?"

"Because they are not regulated. They act as prosecutor, judge and executioner at the same time. A single person having so much power at their hands? That's a bad situation, just waiting to be exploited by the next power-hungry asshole with a god-complex. Humans have a lot of experience with those."

"There is a code the Spectres are supposed to follow." Garrus had heard about that one in school.

"It's not even written down!" Shepard shook her head. "If you had the volus on the council they would at least have made sure that this 'code' had some legal bearing. So far there is nothing stopping a guy like Saren Arterius from killing every human or asari he see's."

Garrus nodded, he had thought something like that before himself. He had wondered if the famous efficiency of the best Spectre was really such a good thing. "So what does the Alliance want to do about it?"

She drove on, a thoughtful smile on her face. "It's a delicate subject. They can't just kick in the door
and tell the Council that they should replace the Spectres. We have a bad enough reputation as it is as the power-hungry newcomers." She sniggered. "The idea is to start with these interspecies investigative groups and then sell the council on their success. Change the Spectres to a galaxy wide police-force and criminal investigators, bound by laws for all citizens of the Citadel races."

Garrus stared at her. "That's ambitious. The Council will hate the idea, they hate changing the status quo."

She laughed out once, "Oh, the Alliance knows, we know. That's why we start this small, so far we have one team already working, mostly turians and a fragile cooperation of the Alliance and the turian Hierarchy we can build upon."

He trilled questioningly, "A cooperation between humans and turians?"

She smiled in triumph, "Yes, it's happening! I can't tell you anything about it but there is something big going on. You're gonna love it, I promise!" She smiled her brilliant smile again, her eyes crinkling and her white teeth showing and Garrus felt his insides clench. He loved her smile so much.

Shepard stopped the skycar and Garrus noticed with bewilderment that they had already arrived at his apartment complex. Obviously Shepard was quite capable of driving a car without suicidal tendencies when there was no emergency. As they got out of the car, she typed a message on her omni-tool. "I'm telling the armor salesman that we will clean the armor and return it in a few hours along with your endorsement."

"Spirits, I had completely forgotten about that." He dragged himself out of the elevator and as soon as he had opened his apartment door he started to undo the latches of the armor. Shepard skidded around him and caught the pieces before they could crash on the floor, giggling like a little girl. He removed every piece of clothing, not caring that Shepard saw his naked butt and fell face first on his bed.

Groaning, he rolled on his side and felt a blanket being pulled over him. Shepard smiled at him and kissed him on top of his fringe. She was about to get up but Garrus stopped her by grabbing her arm.

"Will you be here when I wake up? Right here?"

She smiled warmly and stroked his mandible. "Alright, I'll be here. Sleep well, big guy." She kissed the side of his face and then kept stroking his head. He fell asleep with her scent in his nose and her hand on his fringe.

When he woke up he couldn't see her at first. Then he felt the bed slightly dipping behind him and he turned around. Shepard was sitting on his bed, her back against the headboard. She had a gauntlet on her lap and a cleaning rag in her hand. Her head had fallen back against the headboard and she was fast asleep.

Garrus rolled himself on the other side, facing her and resting his head on his upright forearm. He wanted to look at her. She looked so peaceful. The hardened warrior had fallen away and all he saw was a woman, soft, warm, maybe even vulnerable. And he saw beauty. Despite his upbringing
instilling a sense of beauty in him that involved fringes, spurs and sharp angled hip bones, he found her beautiful.

Not just attractive like an asari fringe was attractive or a human clavicle or the back of a salarian. He found her beautiful as a whole. And he admired her, the way she fought, how she assessed the battlefield and how she handled a gun. How she respected others and demanded respect towards herself. He loved her enthusiasm and her willingness to work with everyone, regardless of species and stereotypes.

He loved everything about her.

Shepard stirred as if she felt his intense stare. Suddenly her body tensed, her hand moved to her hip feeling for a gun and her eyes snapped open, quickly assessing the room. Garrus grinned, this was a soldier waking up. He made a low hum and her eyes snapped to him.

He hummed again, "It's okay, you're safe. You are in my bedroom." Awareness crawled on her face. He chuckled, "You're never going to finish cleaning that armor like that!"

There it was again, that smile! A feeling he couldn't describe wanted to break free from his cowl and his subvocals were singing.

She put the piece of armor down on the floor and looked at him for a second, a predatory gleam in her eyes.

With a fluid motion her body slid next to his. Her lips were on his mouth, her tongue entwining with his, her chest pressed against him, her leg over his waist. Her softness, so firm against him, pulled him into a haze of desire. He pressed her even closer to him, his hands on her back, her waist, her ass. Her fingers under his fringe, on his throat, her foot stroking his legspur, every touch like fire on his oversensitive skin. It was getting hard to pull in enough air.

His genital plates shifted, his penis more than ready in seconds and the smell of her arousal was like a drug in the air. She rubbed the apex between her legs against his erection and her moaning aroused him even more. He wanted her now, right now! She kissed his mandible, then she took it in her mouth and sucked on it, her tongue twirling around it in between breaths. Garrus wanted to explode in pleasure and groaned. Her clothes needed to go.

Before he could even get under the hem of her shirt to pull it over her head, his omni-tool chimed loudly, indicating an urgent call. Garrus roared in anger. "Spirits be damned!" He knew it was a call from his family, only they had this urgency code.

Shepard sighed and looked at him slightly annoyed, "Do you have to answer?"

Garrus nuzzled the top of her head and noticed for the first time how soft her hair was. "I'm sorry Shepard, really. But this is an emergency call from my family, I have to take it. Something could have happened."

Shepard sighed and rolled away from him, making him miss her immediately. "Well, then I better hide again, as I recall your dad is not supposed to see me, right?" There was hurt in her eyes, hidden under a friendly smile.

He took her hand and stopped her from getting up. "No, you don't have to hide. I'm done with... hiding."

Her brilliant smile warmed his gizzard again.
He thumbed his omni-tool and was greeted with the enraged face of his father. He started yelling and swearing in old Palaveni as soon as he could see Garrus's face. Suddenly he stopped and it looked like his eyes wanted to pop out of his head. He had seen Shepard and was visibly struggling for words. Then he hissed at Garrus, "Is that it? Is that the reason for your behaviour?" His eyes went back to her, full of hate. "Send it away."

Garrus was taken aback, his father was normally more restrained than that. "Father, please, what is the matter?"

"Send her away!" Aetius Vakarian growled full of aggression, his subharmonics sounding out pure hate.

Garrus didn't know what to do, he had never seen so much hate in his father. Shepard clearly sensed his distress and touched his arm, her fingers stroking him lightly. She whispered, "I'm just going to get some coffee." She dipped her head towards the face of his father on the screen who looked away, not acknowledging her.

When she had left, the older Vakarian turned back to the camera and fixed Garrus with a hard stare. "I got a call from Lartius Fedorian. Sapita has informed him that she is refusing the conveniere. Not only that, she has broken - broken - with her family to live with an asari! What did you tell her, Garrus? Did you pitch your deviant ways to her? Introduce her to your pets for your sick games?"

"Father, shut up!" Garrus yelled and immediately froze. He had never spoken to his father like that before. Aetius stared at him, shaking in rage. Garrus decided to keep talking as long as his father wasn't saying anything. "I'm done with this. Don't arrange anymore conveniere for me, I won't go. I will find a mate on my own."

"You can not refuse the traditions." His father's subvocals were broadcasting his authority. "We have found excellent candidates for you and we will find another one. You have a duty to your family to fulfill. Affectus will grow in time."

"Really? That's what I have to expect?"

His father growled in annoyance. "That is the turian way. Your mother and I have found affectus over time and so will you. We are not asari, we don't leave these things to chance."

"Spirits, father, maybe I have another idea about my life, maybe I want to..."

Aetius interrupted him with a subvocal scream. "Have you been watching 'Fleet and Flotilla'? Do you think this is how you will find a mate? Maybe a willing alien for..."

"No father, I haven't watched that vid -"

"Then I forbid you to ever watch it! It gives the young stupid ideas -" Aetius voices were tripping over.

"Really father? I'm over 20 years old and you want to forbid me to watch a vid?"

"You are my son and I make it my decretum that you -"

Garrus stopped him before this could go any further, yelling, "Enough! This is the wrong time, the wrong everything."

"You are denying my decretum?"
Was this the moment? The moment where he had to decide whether he wanted to give up on his family or not? Still half asleep, unfulfilled sexual desire burning inside of him?

"Father, please, can we talk about this later? Please, I just woke up." He laid as much submissiveness in his subvocals as he could, to calm his father down.

"Fine." Aetius ended the call and Garrus slumped back against the headboard, letting his frustration sing out in a loud keen.

He heard the door and panicked. Had Shepard left? He got up to run after her but in that moment she stepped into the room, carrying two big cups in her hands. He let himself fall back onto the bed, relieved.

"Hey, big guy. I got you cava, I hope you like that." Her voice was soft and soothing and he felt himself relax. "I assumed that coffee is probably not a drink for turians, it is an acquired taste, even for humans." She sat down on the bed right next to him. "The turian in the bakery said that most turians drink cava in the morning." The turian word sounded strange but she pronounced it correctly.

He took the cup from her and drank from it. It was good, a little sweet but not too much. He sighed and the tension fell from his shoulders. "It's perfect, thank you Shepard."

She scooted up to him and leaned her side against his chest. For a while they just sat like that, huddled closely together, drinking from their cups. He nuzzled her hair, it smelled of some foreign fruit. He put his arm around her, holding her close. It felt so right, sitting here with her.

After a while she spoke. "Your father doesn't like humans, I guess."

"No he doesn't. I'm sorry, he - I've never seen him behave like that before."

"Does he have a specific reason for that?" She tried to sound neutral but he could hear the hurt in her voice.

He pulled her closer. "For hating humans? No, I don't think he does. But he was very angry that the meeting with Sapita didn't go as planned."

She turned to look at his face. "So you really were supposed to marry her?"

He sighed again. "Yes, I guess that was the plan. My clan is very traditional and a bond with Sapita would have been beneficial for the clan."

She leaned over to put her cup on the table nearest his bed, next to his own cup and then settled back into the crook of his arm, her face leaning against his cowl. Her hand was gently stroking the skin and plates on his chest. "I'm sorry for making your life complicated," she said with a quiet voice.

"Don't be. This has been a long time coming. It wasn't the first time that I refused a bond offer like that. I guess I always thought I could just wait out the problem but now - I see that I have to actually make a decision."

Shepard took her hand away from his chest. She spoke, not looking at him, "You know, I had only intended to recruit you for my team, Nihlus had recommended you."

"He had?" Garrus asked in surprise, hoping that her hand would return to him.

"Yes, I spoke to him that I needed someone who could fight and investigate and he gave me your files. I looked them over, the files he made and the ones from your military service. You know, I
have no idea how they could ever let someone like you go," she said, shaking her head. "It's no wonder that turian mercenaries are such a pain in the ass if the turian military keeps on dumping fine officer material like that."

Garrus felt pride rise up in him. He had gotten in so much trouble all the time for questioning orders and defying traditions, it was wonderful to hear something positive about that.

"As I was saying," she continued, "I definitely had not planned to... like you so much." She grinned up to him and finally her hand returned to his chest. "I don't usually kiss new recruits. And this whole business with your family is really new territory for me. I don't want you to... suffer because of me." Her hand was lightly stroking the inside of his cowl where the skin was softer and more sensitive. A rumble of pleasure left his chest.

Shepard giggled quietly. "Everybody keeps saying how turians are so tough and armored but in truth you are sensitive all over!" She moved her face closer to his cowl. Suddenly her tongue appeared and she licked along the inside of his cowl. Garrus shuddered and closed his eyes at the intensity of this sensation. She giggled again.

He tried to speak but his voice was not quite cooperating. "I'm not suffering. At least not because of you and my family. But if you keep touching me like that I might suffer from a heart attack soon." He heard and felt her laugh into his cowl.

Suddenly her body moved away from his and she sat up, kneeling on her legs, facing him. "What I'm trying to say here," she said with her voice strong and deep, "is that I don't want to complicate things. The Alliance has some rules regarding fraternizations among crew but I don't really give a shit about that. I also don't really care what your family thinks about me, that is something you have to deal with, not me. What we may have to deal with are people disagreeing with turian and a human being... together and all. That is a problem we can't solve, so it's probably a good idea if we are not too open about it in public."

"So, no more kissing and humming on benches on the Presidium?" Garrus had to rumble at that. "Such a shame, I was beginning to see those benches in a new light."

She laughed and punched him lightly on his arm. "Yeah, that was probably not one of my best moves back there. We made quite the show."

Garrus moved one hand to the side of her head and carefully let her hair move through his talons. "I liked it. A lot."

Shepard leaned into the touch of his hand. "Yeah, me too."

Then she straightened again and looked at him seriously. "What I do want to make clear is that I want to work with you. I think I can teach you things and you can teach me things. But we have to separate that from the emotional... relationship we have." She looked at him seriously. "If you think you can't do that than you should probably go with Nihlus."

"Nihlus? Why would I go with him?"

"Oh, he said to me if I don't take you, he will snatch you away." Her tone suggested that this should have been obvious.

He took her hands in his and pulled her towards him until her forehead was against his. His scent released from the glands again, he just couldn't stop it. Sighing he said, "I already told you, I'm sure we can get this to work. I want to be by your side, I don't want to leave you."
He felt her smile as much as he saw it. "I'm glad to hear that but it may get a bit difficult to stay by my side in the next few weeks."

He pulled his head away to look at her. "Why is that? You have another mission for ANIS?"

"No, I'll be leaving in a few hours to an unknown location for the last part of my N7 training. We'll have our survival run and tests, that will probably take about three weeks. Afterwards all of us are going to spend our shore leave on Elysium, at least three days either celebrating passing the N7 tests or drowning our sorrows about failing them. Still, even failing N7 is an accomplishment so we will celebrate either way. After that..." She looked down on her thumbs stroking the skin between his fingers. "I'll contact you as soon as I can."

"Do you have to go right now?" Garrus asked in panic.

"No, I still have a few hours." She let go of his hands and pushed him back against the headboard. She pressed her chest on his stomach and her one hand was stroking his waist while the other went all over his upper body stroking, feeling, testing. With her tongue she licked along his cowl ridge again.

He groaned and wrapped his arms around her. Every touch from her, that agile and surprisingly strong tongue, her breath on his skin, it all made him burn inside. He carefully raked his talons across her back, they were blunted but still sharp, and he felt her shudder with a moan. He hummed in pleasure, earning him another shudder from her as she moved further up. Finally her lips were on his mouth again, her tongue touching his.

*Praise the Spirits, I love her kisses.*

They kissed until they ran out of air, gasping each others breath in urgency. Then she suckled on his mouthplates again and he tried to wrap his tongue around hers and he felt like he was falling into a dream.

Suddenly she jumped off him and he wanted to keen in disappointment but then he saw that she undressed herself with lightning speed. Naked she stood before him with an unsure look on her face and he stared at her in wonder. So much soft skin, hair between her legs, muscles and sinew visible under her skin, scars and little brown spots drawing a map of some unknown universe on her body.

He reached out to her. "Come here, beautiful."

Relief appeared on her face and he realized that she had been unsure whether he even found her attractive. He remembered that he had worried about the same thing. But the way she had looked at him and kissed him had chased those worries away.

He hoped she realized from his touch and his hum how much he desired her because he couldn't possibly put it into words right now. She slid over him in one fluid movement and set her knees next to his waist. Her open folds, dripping wet, rubbed against his erection, making him push against her in need. She smiled, bucking her hips and slid up and down, his penis sliding along her vagina, her labia's lips enclosing him from the sides. They both moaned, sounding like wild animals in heat and he couldn't lie still anymore.

He pushed her up and laid her on her back. He was still afraid to use his talons but he knew he could lick her. His tongue travelled over her body, licking her clavicle that he especially loved and her mounds with the little nubs on top. They turned hard and erect after a few licks which he found fascinating. He licked them again and again and he loved how it made her squirm. Slowly he moved further down with his hands, licking her mounds and ghosting over the skin of her waist with his
talons. Garrus felt drunk smelling her arousal and he buried his nose in the curve of her shoulder, breathing in her wonderful scent. He began stroking her thigh and her labia lips, dipping his finger in and out of her. She was panting, trembling with each touch and her fingernails were digging into his fringe. He had avoided the magic nub, the clitoris as he had learned it was called, and when he finally gave it a tentative flick her moan turned into a scream. Just a few soft circles later her whole body tensed and with a choked "Yesss!" she arched her back and moaned her release.

A clear fluid dripped from her vagina and Garrus dipped his finger into it, looking at it curiously. She was still trembling in pleasure but suddenly he felt himself pushed back against the headboard by her hands. Unsated lust was in her eyes and she moved over him. They had to scramble a bit to find a position that was comfortable for both of them, giggling while spurs and hip bones were getting in the way. Finally she had his waist between her thighs and one squeeze had his eyes roll back in pleasure. She giggled at his reaction. "Your waist, huh?" She squeezed again and his moan was probably heard by every sentient being in the building.

Shepard angled her vagina over his penis and in one slow movement lowered herself down on him, a relieved breath coming from her throat as if she almost couldn't have waited for it any longer. She took him in, moving slowly. He had to hold his breath to not come right then and there, ending this encounter way too soon. She raised herself up and lowered herself again and again, taking him deeper each time. She felt so tight, enclosing him like a glove. Finally she had him in her completely, her pubic hair tickling his genital plates. He groaned and bucked his hips against her, unable to control the need burning in him. She gasped and her head fell forward, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

Their movements became frantic, rutting against each other. She moaned and he felt her mouth on his throat, her teeth pressing into his skin.

Would she bite? Do humans bite?

He lost all grasp of reality, all his senses tuned to her, all of his self feeling with her, for her, in need to be with her. He closed his eyes, overwhelmed from the sensations.

Her mouth left his throat and he heard her whisper between gasps. "Open... your eyes... Garrus! Look... look!"

He snapped his eyes open, unsure why. He looked in her eyes and he saw it - he saw the intense feelings passing between them, the love neither of them would ever voice aloud. He felt himself sing in his chest.

Her movements became uncoordinated as she came closer to her climax again and little whimpering sounds left her. Garrus urgently tipped her over on her back almost poking her with his spurs in the process. She smiled about that. He felt her heels digging into his back as he thrusted into her faster. He knew she was close to her release but when it came he was still unprepared for the vise-like grip her vagina put on his penis, pressing and milking him. She whimpered his name when her orgasm peaked and he climaxed with a roar, his thrusts getting harder and faster, his talons digging into her hips. He spilled his seed in several spurts, his whole body shuddering each time.

He fell to the side and she moved with him, keeping him inside of her. She draped herself over him, somehow making her soft body fit to his hard one. A content sigh from her had her breath ghost over his throat and he shuddered again. He put his arms tighter around her, holding her as close as possible without hurting her. His subharmonics sang freely of the love he felt for her.

Love!
I love you!
Her arms pulled herself closer to him, her face pressed against his throat. He nuzzled her head and held her tight.

They stayed like that until their breathing had normalized again. His penis slipped back behind his plates and his seed was dripping out of her. He felt it running down on his thigh. She lifted herself up, her wet hair stuck to the skin of her face and looked at the dripping fluid with amusement.

"I think I need to get into the shower," she said, already bouncing up.

Garrus could hardly lift his head let alone the rest of his body. He indicated with his hand towards the general direction of the bathroom and said, "Feel free to use whatever you need. I don't think I can get up yet."

She laughed and mumbled "Men" to herself and disappeared through the door. Garrus heard the water running and decided that she was definitely capable of taking care of herself in there on her own. He rolled to his side and fell asleep again.

As soon as they had entered C-Sec academy, Garrus was practically attacked by Peters who informed them that the children were fine, that most of the mercs were already interrogated and that the Executor had been in talks with ANIS all morning and Garrus should make his way into his office quickly. "I can not repeat his exact words because my translator gave up on it but I'm sure it was something about your ass showing up on his desk with a bow." Shepard snickered at that and Garrus sighed.

She had woken him up, smelling of his soap fresh from the shower and he had wanted to take her again right away. But she convinced him him that they both needed to show up at C-Sec, to give a report about the events at the warehouse.

With a nod to Shepard he turned and made his way over to Pallin's office. Bracing himself for the barrage of questions and accusations, he was surprised to find Pallin in a good mood. Apparently he liked working with ANIS and Garrus wondered who had managed to convince him. His boss wanted to hear a full recap of the events and Garrus tried to give him the most complete short version he could. He wanted to get back to Shepard, he didn't want to waste the precious little time they had left sitting in his boss's office.

When he finally got out, he found her among the young recruits, telling stories, answering questions and giving advice. The young men and women of all species soaked up everything she told them like it was words from a god.

He stepped up to her, close but not too close, not touching her. Behind him he heard a commotion and somebody asked if it was 'Bring-your-girlfriend-or-boyfriend-to-work-day'. He froze, how could they tell? He hadn't even touched Shepard let alone shown any affection towards her. Her smelling of turian soap was maybe a bit weird but that didn't necessarily mean that they were together...

When he turned around he realized that it wasn’t him and Shepard that the remark had been for, but Frank and Sarah. Behind them Batius and Tinlenus were standing close to each other, Tinlenus supporting Batius who leaned heavily on two crutches. He nodded towards his colleagues and everyone started to applaud. Batius stretched his throat and trilled in embarrassment. Tinlenus put his
hand on his mate’s shoulder and then hissed loudly to quiet everyone down.

Batius spoke with a soft voice. "I would like to thank everyone who has visited me while I was in the hospital." He turned and looked at Frank. "I especially want to thank Frank Johnson who, as the doctors told me, made sure that I was handled correctly after that bomb went off." He nodded towards Frank and the human dipped his head in return. Garrus was surprised, before today Batius had hardly acknowledged that Frank was even a member of C-Sec.

Garrus also noticed another change. Batius’s markings looked different. They still indicated the colony he came from but the family lines had faded as if he hadn't reapplied the paint in a while. Tinlenus and Batius were quite open with their affections for each other now, but Garrus was fairly certain that they had never been this obvious before. Almost dying had a way of setting priorities straight.

Shepard was suddenly standing next to him and looked up to him. "What are you thinking?"

Garrus smiled, she was really attentive. "His markings have changed. His family lines are fading."

"What does that mean?"

"If I had to guess I would say that his family didn't approve of his choice of mate and broke with him."

She looked confused. "So his family has banished him because they don't like his mate?" Garrus nodded.

She scrunched up her face. "They are both male, right? Is there a stigma in turian society against having a mate of the same gender?"

Garrus shook his head. "No, it's all about the tiers in the turian Hierarchy. Tinlenus’s markings show that he is from Invictus, which has been a troubled colony in turian history and the families from there have a low standing in the Hierarchy. Batius’s family probably had a different mate of a higher tier chosen for him."

Shepard nodded. "Ah, that convenire thing."

Garrus stretched his throat, unpleasantly remembering the unfinished discussion with his father.

"Why was Batius in the hospital?" Shepard's voice pulled him back.

They made their way to his office and he told her of the raid in the warehouse and the cloaked bombs. She mostly listened, only asking a few questions in between. When they were inside his office, away from curious eyes, she took his hand in hers. Looking down on her fingers stroking his, she said quietly, "You're lucky to be alive. You - all of you could have died."

He pulled her closer and nuzzled her hair. "But we didn't. I'll be more careful from now on, do more scanning for cloaking devices."

Noises in the hall outside his door made them step apart again. She looked around and grinned. "This looks familiar. My workplace has the same kind of organized chaos."

"This isn't chaos. This is inventive prioritising!" He picked up a datapad from the floor and stacked it on top of a rickety tower of other pads. Behind him he heard her laughing and it made a tingle run down his spine.
Frank and Sarah came into his office, holding hands. For a moment he envied how open they could be with their relationship. He introduced Shepard and she and Sarah immediately started a conversation about Sarah's work and the science involved. When they opened their omni-tools to compare schematics, Frank stepped over to Garrus, rolling his eyes.
"I think our women are too smart for us," he said.

Garrus nodded and then froze. "How do you...? I mean, why would you think, me and Shepard...?"

"Oh, come on, Birdy. I know you." Frank laughed at him. "You may act all cool and professional but I can see that you are totally smitten with each other. And I think it's awesome."

Garrus stretched his throat with a quiet hum. "Thanks man, I... this is all so new to me."

Frank sighed, "I know exactly how you feel. You go around looking at all the pretty girls and suddenly - bam! - there is only one and she has your heart in her hands."

"Spirits, yes she does." Garrus knew that humans considered the heart to be the organ where love was felt. By the way his heart was trying to jump out of his cowl whenever he looked at her, he was inclined to agree. Turians felt love in their gizzard, or as his father had always said, a turian in love was just an idiot who ate something wrong.

Garrus turned back to Frank and began sending files to his omni-tool. "I made a check on a turian liver that we found in that storage yesterday and then went with Peters and Lerv to the family to talk about his death. Guess what, we talked to him!"

Frank looked at him in disbelief. "What the fuck are you talking about? If his liver is in storage, he is dead, did you find a medium or something?"

"No, he is still alive, I don't understand it either. That was one of the more embarrassing moments in my career, talking to a widow who isn't. Thankfully Peters got her senses back together fast and saved the situation." He shook his head and closed his omni-tool. "I've sent you everything I have, see if you can make sense of it. Oh, and he works at Everest Artifics, maybe Sarah knows something about him."

Frank looked dismayed. "Seriously, Garrus, something is wrong with that place. I wish Sarah wouldn't work there."

"If you think it isn't safe there anymore we'll get her out, I promise." Garrus said, putting a hand on Frank's shoulder.

"Thanks man, I'm going to hold you to that. Now go and get your woman away from my woman or else they'll be talking about shit we don't understand for the rest of the day." Frank said, pulling him over to the women.

Sarah and Shepard heard that remark and laughed. They exchanged contacts with a promise of keeping up on some technical project that Garrus had never heard about. They walked out of Garrus's office and Sarah gave Frank a small kiss on the side of his face. Shepard and Garrus exchanged a look of sorrow, this was something they would probably never do in public again.

They navigated out of C-Sec, Frank and Garrus exchanging greetings and short conversations with colleagues along the way. Shepard was quiet, deep in thought. She occasionally glanced at her omni-tool, frowning. Garrus wondered how much time they had left before she had to leave for her N7 test.

They disbanded on the Presidium, Sarah and Frank on their way to lunch, Garrus and Shepard
taking a slow walk along the stores. Garrus stopped at an arms dealer, eyeing a few mods and scopes that would look great on his favourite rifle. Shepard excused herself for a few minutes and disappeared into a few stores. She came back with a little bag she wouldn’t let him look into.

They ended up at a transport hub and just stopped, unsure of what to do. Garrus finally asked, "So, when do you have to leave? Should we go to the docks?"

She sighed, "No, I'm going to get a message and then I'm to give out my coordinates and they will pick me up from there and, I don't know, blindfold me maybe? It's all very secretive, unknown transport, unknown location, no contact to the outside world. That message should arrive in the next half hour, an hour max."

"So, where do you want to go to?" Garrus asked, looking at her from the side. He stood close to her, maybe a bit closer than a turian would normally stand next to a human. Not close enough though, he wanted to go somewhere where he could touch her. "How about if we just go back to my place? Would the Alliance mind if they had to pick you up from there?"

She snorted. "Fuckem. Where and how I spend my time is none of their business. If they have to pick me up in front of some apartment building they better not complain. Let's go."

A short trip with a skycar and they were back at his apartment. Garrus noticed her scent still hanging in the air as soon as he had opened the door and he loved it. Shepard flopped down on the couch and took two bottles of beer, one levo and one dextro, from the bag. Garrus trilled questioningly at that, was drinking before a mission such a good idea?

She grinned at him, "I know, I know, drinking before a mission, yada yada, bad bad. It's not like I'm drunk after one beer, and I won't get a beer for the next three weeks, probably. I hope you like the one I got for you." She handed him a bottle of turian beer from Palaven, the good kind. He trilled in appreciation and she smiled at that.

He sat down next to her and they clinked their bottles together in a toast. Only after his first sip he realized that she had reacted to his subvocal trills. He turned to her, "How much do you understand of my subharmonics?"

She grinned, showing all her teeth. "A little. Working with Nihlus and the turian troops we trained together taught me some basics like annoyance, disagreement, questioning - man, the questioning."

She rolled her eyes. "My hearing is pretty good, I can hear a lot of the turian range but when it gets too low I feel it rather than hear it." She took a gulp of her beer, enjoying the taste with a sigh. "I had a turian in my group once who behaved like a total ass, insubordinate, couldn't deal with my command at all. At one point he flat out refused to do something and I did this," she turned to him, stretched her neck and then made a sound that didn't sound quite turian but had a very convincing trill of 'behave yourself, child' in it.

Garrus felt himself cower his head instinctually and trilled approvingly. "That was good, very convincing."

"Yeah, Nihlus had practised that with me and when I used it on this guy his eyes almost popped out of his head. It really worked, he did what he was told after that. Maybe you can teach me some more." She put her hand on his chest as she took their beers and set them on the table. "I would like to learn some nicer ones... affectionate ones."

Garrus pulled her close and she climbed over him to straddle his lap. He was expecting her to kiss him but she bent down and picked up the bag from the floor. She handed him the bag with a smile, "I got you something." He hummed in surprise.
The present turned out to be a scope for his favourite rifle with a red flower tied to it with a yellow bow. He stared at it, how did she know that he needed a new scope? He turned it over, it was perfect, exactly the kind he would have gotten himself.

"Thank you, Shepard," he whispered. Carefully he opened the bow and took the flower in his hand. She smiled at him even more. "Careful, it has thorns. But maybe your skin is thick enough that it won't hurt you."

He touched one of the thorns with a tip of his finger, it pricked a little but didn't pierce his skin. Shepard looked at his finger interested, feeling the tip where the thorn had made a little dent that slowly disappeared again. "Couldn't they breed out the thorns?" he wondered.

"Oh they have, turns out without the thorns they don't smell anymore. Only the ones with thorns have that nice scent." She put her nose to the flower and breathed in. Garrus put his nose close to the flower as well and the pleasant scent of the flower mingled with hers. He breathed it in deeply, and quietly let his subharmonics hum out his feelings.

She looked at him and began to hum herself. He realized that she tried to copy his hum and after a little while came very close to the real thing. More flat than a turian hum but close enough. He felt his gizzard clench, wondering if she even realized what she hummed.

Love.

He put his hand behind her head, his talons playing with her hair and he pulled her forehead to his, holding the flower still between them. They both had their eyes closed and hummed.

Don't ever forget this.

The moment shattered as his omni-tool chimed with his families urgency code. Garrus cursed loudly and Shepard sighed.

"I was actually expecting my omni-tool to chime any minute now," she said. She moved back onto the couch, checking her own omni-tool for messages.

He looked at his omni-tool and cringed, it was his mother. He got up and trilled apologetic at Shepard. "It's a call from my mother, I have to take this, I... I'll be heading to my bedroom for it. Not to hide you, it's just..."

"It's okay, don't worry about it. But if I get my message I have to leave right away, I can't wait for you to finish your call," Shepard said, a serious look on her face. Garrus wondered if she was nervous and felt stupid to not have asked her about it.

"Just let me know it when you get it, I'll end the call and get back to her later." He ran into his bedroom and opened the call. His mothers face greeted him with his fathers face hovering over her shoulder. Garrus groaned, his father was not holding back, he knew how much he depended on his mother and that he could never refuse her.

"Hello mother, hello father. Now is not a good time, can I call you back later?"

An angry screech came from his father and he saw his mother wince.

"Your meeting with Sapita Fedorian has turned into a disaster. The Fedorian family is
accusing you of influencing her in breaking with her family. The clans are in conflict. This bond had been arranged by both of our clans and it was very...

"Mother, I know that," Garrus interrupted her. "I'm sorry that I didn't react according to plan but this bond - it never would have worked. Sapita was already bonded before. I had no influence in that, she decided herself to no longer repudiate her bondmate."

His father took a deep breath but didn't say anything after a hiss from his mother. She hummed at Garrus and he knew the next question was going to be important. "Are you already bonded, Garrus?"

He stretched his throat. He hadn't told Shepard that he had scented her and he had not asked her to bond with him. But he knew that they felt strongly for each other and he couldn't lose her. "I am courting someone."

"An alien?" his mother asked with anxious undertones.

"She is human, yes."

His father roared in anger, screaming and cursing, "The pet? You are courting her?"

Garrus hissed, "Don't call her that!"

His father was pacing behind his mother, moving in and out of the frame of the camera. "A human! Of all the species - humans! They are brash, deceiving, untrustworthy, asking for more than they deserve. You young people have forgotten the war, forgotten how..."

Garrus hissed in exasperation, "Let it go, father. The galaxy is changing. I won't follow your path, I will find my own."

His fathers face returned to the camera, almost pushing his mothers face out of the frame. "You will not continue this. I forbid you! I make it my decretement that you will not see this alien ever again."

Once again Garrus wondered if this was the moment. The moment where he had to decide whether he could be without clan from now on. If he denied the decretement, he would never see his family again. Not his mother, not his sister. He could be arrested for trespassing if he ever went back to his home on Palaven.

"What do you want me to say father?" Garrus paced, staring at his omni-tool. "Oh, I know. It's nothing serious, just a fling. Don't worry about her." He turned around, thinking that he saw movement in his peripheral vision but he was still alone in his room. "I can't say that, because it's not true. I can't let her go. Don't make me choose between her and my family."

His mother keened in panic and tried to calm his father down with a hum while fighting for control over her own emotions. But his father was past the point of control, his subvocals screaming, his mandibles slammed tight.

His face filled the screen and he hissed at Garrus. "Do you deny my decretement?"

Garrus took a deep breath. No point in avoiding the unavoidable. "Yes, father, I'm denying."

He heard his mother keen loudly and then his father ended the call. Garrus felt like someone had vented the air from the room. He had to see Shepard, he needed to talk to her. He went back into the living room but he couldn't see her anywhere.
"Shepard?" he called out.

She wasn't there. Had she left? Maybe her N7-message had arrived. Why hadn't she called for him?

His eyes fell on a little object on the floor and he bent down to pick it up. It was the red flower and it looked like someone had stepped on it.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to everyone who commented, makes me all warm and fuzzy everytime I see a new one.
And again thanks go to Credete for editing this chapter real fast, so that I could put it up quickly.
Garrus fell down on his couch. He had the feeling that something significant had happened but he hadn't been told what. He sat in a daze, his thoughts twisting around itself. His family, Shepard, the flower, that moment where they had hummed their love. After brooding for what seemed like hours, he switched his omni-tool on and sent Shepard a message.

'Where are you? Why didn't you say goodbye? -Garrus.'

A second later he received an automated reply. 'Participant has temporarily been removed from the message system. Addressee did not receive this message.'

Garrus snarled in frustration.

He got startled by his omni-tool chiming, announcing an incoming call. He acknowledged and the semi-translucent display opened to Nihlus's face, glaring at him.

"You pyjack-eating-fucking-crestless-boshtet-bareface!" Nihlus cursed as soon as the connection was established. "What by the damned Spirits have you done?"

Garrus just knew that Nihlus was talking about Shepard and sighed. "Nihlus, please tell me because I swear by all ancestors, I don't know."

"You little pyjack... I just saw Shepard as she arrived for her transport and ancestors damn you if she didn't look like her Spirit had been killed. All she told me was that you said it was just a fling, not serious and I can't believe I even encouraged..."

"Spirits, no! This is all wrong!" Garrus finally understood what had scared her away and his insides clenched at the realization. He was losing her because of some stupid misunderstanding. "Nihlus, I told my father that I knew that that was what he wanted to hear, but that I could never say it because it's not true."

Nihlus spat out another impressive array of curses from all species and from the tilting and shaking picture it was clear that he had begun to run. The camera turned itself off after a few seconds but the audio connection stayed on. Garrus heard Nihlus muttering to himself and at people he passed while running.

He was slightly out of breath but kept talking to Garrus. "So, I bet your father was really happy about that, huh?" Nihlus asked.

Garrus sighed, "He made it his decreatum that I never see her again."

He heard Nihlus breathing, his feet stomping on metal ground. "And what did you say?"

"I denied."
"Spirits."

Garrus felt the revelation sink in as he said it. He groaned, "Wouldn't it be just the greatest irony of my Spirits-forsaken life if I not only lost my family today, but Shepard as well."

Nihlus was talking to a human who apparently didn't want to let him through. "I am Spectre Nihlus Kryik. I have information for Lieutenant Shepard that she needs to see immediately."

"I'm sorry Sir, but Lieutenant Shepard is already under a communications ban. You can queue up the message for her, and she will receive it when the ban is lifted after the N7 exam."

Nihlus was growling with authority but the human was unimpressed. Garrus could see in his mind's eye how he raised himself up to tower over the human. But the human didn't budge. "Sir, I can not let you through, no one is allowed to contact the examinees." This human sure had a quad to stand up to an enraged turian like that.

"Lieutenant... Martens, you are interfering in an ongoing ANIS-Spectre investigation and I will hold you personally responsible for any unpleasant outcome of that. You are endangering innocents by withholding this from her! It is vital for this investigation that I get this to her."

Lieutenant Martens was impressively calm and fearless and didn't move from his stand. Nihlus growled with barely contained rage but a hint of respect. There was surely something about human stubbornness that a turian could respect.

Nihlus changed his tone, humming friendly, almost seductively. "Lieutenant Martens, could you just give a note to Lieutenant Shepard? Please, this is really important."

The Lieutenant finally seemed to waver as he mumbled something quietly to himself. He seemed to have come to a decision because Garrus heard him sigh and then speak to Nihlus in a confidential whisper. "Ok, Spectre Kryik..."

Nihlus interrupted with a low purr, "Call me Nihlus."

Garrus heard the Lieutenant gasp for a breath. His voice was a bit hoarse when he continued to speak. "Alright, Nihlus, put the information on this pad here and I will make sure that Lieutenant Shepard will get it."

Nihlus purred in a low register in a way that made Garrus's gizzard vibrate. He couldn't hear what Nihlus was doing but he assumed that he wrote something on a pad and handed it back to Lieutenant Martens. Nihlus's voice was humming low, "Please make sure that only Lieutenant Shepard receives this pad and that she reads it right away. If she has a message in return please send it to me, here is my contact." His growl turned downright sexual. "Thank you so much, Lieutenant Martens."

The human answered with a whisper, "Please, call me Leo."

Nihlus answered in an equal whisper, probably with his head right next to the human's ear, "Alright, Leo, thank you for your help. I owe you a drink, call me when you have delivered the message, alright?"

Leo's answer was just a hitched breath.

Garrus was impressed, Nihlus clearly was irresistible for everybody. He heard Nihlus walk and the camera turned back on as Nihlus as spoke to him again. "You had better be worth it, wet painted youngling," he growled, "Stay where you are, I'm coming over."
Nihlus arrived at Garrus's apartment together with Frank Johnson; they had brought beer, whiskey, and turian brandy. They stayed on Garrus's couch, listening to his story. Garrus was pacing, unable to sit still. Talking about it made him finally realize that he had broken with his family. He might not have talked to his family every day, but he spoke to either his mother or his sister at least every ten or twelve days. Now, none of that would happen again.

Frank rolled his eyes and shouted "Stop!" at him. "Garrus, seriously, you have to sit your ass down. You're driving me crazy." Garrus fell down on his armchair and keened quietly. Frank looked from him to Nihlus and back. "Guys, you need to explain this to me."

Nihlus looked at Garrus with pity and then turned to Frank. "Turians are not meant to be alone. We need a clan, we are conditioned to always be surrounded by friends or family. There is a reason why turians tend to join groups, such as the military, C-Sec, or if social standing doesn't permit that, mercenary groups are also an option. It is not healthy for us to be alone." He handed a new bottle of beer to Garrus. "Turians can get quite desperate without friends, and alone they will develop problems."

Frank took another sip, looking in worry at Garrus. "What kind of problems?"

"Paranoia, insomnia, depression, self-hatred. Every psychological stercus that can make a turian lose his or her mind." Nihlus looked over to Garrus. "And our friend is also in love. That's an emotion turians don't really deal with all that well. Didn't your father tell you, there is nothing more pathetic than a turian in love?"

Garrus nodded at that. "He called it 'stupid asari love'. Good turians don't love, they develop affectus after they have entered the praecipit collocatio that their clans have agreed upon." Another desperate keen that he couldn't stop left his throat. "I may have lost everything today. I'm such an idiot."

Frank put a hand on Garrus's knee. "Hey, birdy, I saw you two and I'm sure she is just as crazy about you as you are about her."

"But humans are different," Garrus sighed. "She might change her mind, this could all be too much for her. She already heard the hatred from my father and now with what I said... Even if she gets the message, she has enough time to think about it and decide that this is all not worth the emotional stress, and I can't join her team and..."

"Good god, Garrus, stop before I punch you in the face!" Johnson yelled at him. He was about to yell some more but was interrupted by a chime from Nihlus omni-tool.

They all stared at him as he opened the interface. Nihlus quickly read the message and a trill of relief left him. He had obviously been more worried than he had let on. "Leo relayed a message from Shepard. It says: Sorry for not saying goodbye, misunderstanding. I'm coming back to you, I promise."

Garrus trilled loudly, allowing himself to hope again. Nihlus was typing on his omni-tool, his mandibles spread in a smile. When he shut down the interface, he noticed that the other two were staring at him.

He grinned, "I sent a message to Leo, thanking him for his effort and asking him to meet me at Chora's Den tonight." He trilled excitedly. It was very clear what Nihlus had planned for that date.
Frank stared at him. "So you're planning on seducing the poor guy?"

"You have to try everything at least once, I always say." Nihlus purred, scooting closer to Frank, "You could have been my first human male, pretty little monkey-man, but you refused me... such a shame..." He was breathing down the side of Frank's neck and Frank's face turned deep red.

Frank was wincing. "If he's your first you might want to look up on lube and preparation, and that's all I'm ever going to say about this. Can we focus on Garrus here? Are you okay now, birdy?"

Garrus nodded, the relief enclosing him like a warm blanket. "I'm better now. Thanks for being here." He settled the underside of his fringe against the roll on top of the backrest, consciously relaxing his shoulders. The beer and two glasses of turian brandy he had had also helped to finally get him to lose some of the tension in his body.

Nihlus poured another brandy for him and Garrus, while Frank poured himself another whiskey. He sighed, "I'm going to be so drunk when I get back to Sarah tonight, I hope she won't kick me out."

Nihlus laid his head back in the same manner as Garrus did, smiling. "If she accepts you as a drunken fool, you have found yourself a woman to treasure. You better hold on to her." Frank nodded at that, breathing in the aroma of the whiskey.

Garrus felt utterly exhausted. He closed his eyes, trying to call up the memory of Shepard in his arms, lying on top of him. Her smile, her hum. That reminded him of the red flower and he opened his eyes to look for it. He couldn't remember what he had done with it after picking it up from the floor. He found it on the drawer chest on the wall and he got up to get it. As he held it between his fingers, the soft scent came back to him yet again and he breathed it in deeply.

Frank looked up and pointed to the flower. "Where did you get that flower from?"

Nihlus looked up with interest and sniffed the air. "It smells nice."

Garrus nodded, "Yes it does, and it has thorns. It's like a combination of beauty and prickliness. Shepard gave it to me, she had it tied to a scope she gave to me as a present."

Frank looked at him. "Shepard gave it to you?" Garrus nodded. "Huh."

Garrus felt that he could have said a lot more, and he wanted to hear it. "How do you humans say? Spit? Spill? Whatever, you're thinking of something, tell me, what is it?"

His friend let out a sigh and sat up. "Red is a significant color for humans, do you know why?" Both turians shrugged. Frank shook his head. "Imagine the flower would be blue, what color would you associate with that?"

Garrus thought that was a stupid question, "It would be blood-blue of course... oh!" he realized with a start. Red was the color of human blood.

Frank grinned. "Now you got it. Red is the color of blood. It is also the color of danger and warning, but more importantly, it is the color of love!"

Nihlus snickered at that. "Now that is a weird combination: danger, warning and love, all for the same color."

Frank snorted at that. "Honestly, looking at our friend here earlier, the combination doesn't appear all that far fetched." Nihlus’s eyes met Garrus's in a startled realization that they had to agree to that.
Frank kept on talking, "In human stories and mythology, love is the strongest emotion one can possibly have, so strong that it can destroy you but it’s also stronger than hate and other stuff. There are millions of stories about love overcoming all obstacles or about love leading to devastation. It's true that love can also die or get forgotten but if it stays strong, nothing will keep the lovers apart."

He closed his eyes for a second, a smile on his face. "So the stories say. Strongest emotion and all that also means that people sometimes go batshit crazy about it, I'm sure turians can relate to that. Anyway, red is the color of love, usually used with a heart as a symbol of love. But the rose is the flower of love."

He leaned forward and took the flower from Garrus's hand. "This, my friend, is a red rose. This is the flower of love, it doesn't get more symbolic for love than this. I don't know how romantic Shepard is but I'm sure the significance of this is not by chance."

Garrus was stunned. He hadn't even realized that the flower had meant something. The moment where they had hummed together over that flower now became so immensely symbolic in his mind that it hurt to think about it.

He wondered how many signs they missed from each other, like her not knowing what that hum meant and him not knowing what that flower meant. How many other things did they not realize because of cultural differences? Doubt was creeping up inside of him, could this even work? They were from different species, they had completely different cultural backgrounds, they couldn't talk to each other without translators.

Garrus let out an embarrassingly shrill keen, panicking. " Spirits, what am I doing? I didn't even know what that means. What else have I missed? This can never work, we are so different..."

Frank couldn't help but laugh. "Geez, Garrus, do turians self implode when they fall in love? It's a wonder you guys even managed to procreate." He clinked his glass against Nihlus's, "You weren't kidding when you said that turians don't deal with love well. We should put this guy into a coma for the next three weeks. Here, have another of that vile smelling stuff you guys drink." He poured a glass of turian brandy and handed it to Garrus. "Sit down and try to relax, birdy."

Garrus let himself fall down in his chair. The brandy burned its way down his throat, spreading a welcome warmth in his gizzard. He was feeling sufficiently drunk now to finally relax. So many pictures and words in his head swirling in the drunken sea of his mind. "I need to learn more about humans, I want to understand her. I will buy her roses, lots and lots of red roses, I bet that will make her smile. I love her smile so much. She shows her teeth, and there are these lines on her cheeks like she spreads her mandibles and her eyes shine like the sun..."

Frank whined, "Good god, somebody shoot me. I don't think I can deal with romantic turians. Fucking hell, it's always the tough guys who are the biggest saps. All hard and armored on the outside, but on the inside..."

"That's what she has said too, how turians appear so hard with our armor but in truth we are sensa... sensitive all over..." Garrus felt that he had a stupid smile on his face that just wouldn't go away.

"Nngahh!" Frank covered his ears, "I don't want to hear that, spare me your sex stories." He pointed at Nihlus. "Coma, I'm telling you, either him or me."

Nihlus was shaking with laughter.

Garrus felt that he could say something to that but his mouth was not cooperating with his mind. The words were swimming, swirling, and they came out in a skipping song.
Frank stared at him and then threw up his hands. "I'm out. My translator is not even trying to make sense of that. Come on birdy, let's get you to bed."

Nihlus and Frank appeared on his sides and pulled him upwards. He wanted to tell them that this was really not necessary, he was fine, he could use another drink though...

The room was tilting awkwardly and then went dark.

He woke up to a pounding headache and his mouth tasting of something rotten.

"I have to stop waking up like that." he mumbled to himself, carefully bringing his head into a position above the rest of his body. Untangling from the sheets, he swung his legs out of the bed. His left foot bumped against a bucket and he vaguely remembered hearing Nihlus and Frank talking while they put him on his bed.

"Do turians vomit?"

"Vomit if we drink too much? Yes, we do."

"We should put a bucket next to him."

"Good idea."

"Geez, he's heavy..."

"Fragile little human..."

"Shut up, lizard."

Garrus began shaking his head but stopped when it almost made him turn to the bucket for its intended purpose. He looked around and gratefully took the glass of water on his bedside table and drained it in one go. He slowly laid back against the headboard, putting his feet back up. Closing his eyes he let the happy memory of the last time he sat like that with Shepard warm himself.

Spirits, I could use some sex right now.

His omni-tool pinged quietly, announcing a call. He opened the interface to Frank's face, who looked about as hungover as he himself felt. Frank's voice was hoarse, "Hey, you're up early, birdy."

"How do you...?"

"I had your omni-tool ping mine when your vitals would change significantly. Don't worry, the ping's deactivated now, just wanted to make sure that you're okay." Frank yawned and drank some water. "I put a glass of water and some pills on the table for you to help against the worst shit from all the brandy you drank. There's also a bottle on the floor with more water, next to the bucket. Did you have to use the bucket?"

Garrus flinched at the thought, "No, thank the Spirits, I hate having to vomit. Thanks for taking care of me."

Frank smiled at him through the screen. "Hey, it's okay, that's what friends are for man. And it wasn't
just me, Nihlus helped too. He stayed with you a bit longer until he had to leave for his rendezvous... man, I hope he didn't traumatize the poor guy."

Garrus wondered about that rendezvous too, just out of curiosity. Personally he had never gotten far with a human male.

Frank had emptied his glass of water, it looked like alcohol was just as dehydrating for humans as it was for turians. He looked back at Garrus, "So, are you okay now? We can't keep you drunk forever and you still have work to do, you know."

"Yeah, I think I'm okay for now." Garrus stretched and took the pills from the table, swallowing them with some water from the bottle.

"Okay, I'll see you later then at C-Sec." Frank suddenly looked thoughtful and then stared at him seriously. "Listen, something else. I'm no expert but from what I read you turians get all horny under pressure and have sex all the time for stress-relief." He raised his hands. "I'm not judging, just saying. Here's the thing though, if you're serious about that human girlfriend of yours you shouldn't have sex with another... person."

Garrus sighed, "You know, I've heard almost the same thing about humans, sex-crazy all the time, unsatisfiable..."

His friend laughed, "Yeah, not surprising. I guess there are sex stories about all species going around. So it isn't true? The thing with sex for stress-relief?"

"No, well, I guess it is true in a way. But it's not like we lose our mind if we don't nail someone against the wall after a stressful day," Garrus said. "So you're saying that humans don't have casual sex?"

"Oh hell no, of course we have casual sex!" Frank laughed out loud. "If the relationship is casual, everybody can have sex with everybody, happens all the time. But if the relationship is serious, well... then humans tend to believe in monogamy. If you are serious about your woman, and after last night I'm sure you are, then you better not fuck around."

"Spirits, thanks for warning me." Garrus had a short burst of panic. He had just thought about sex, and he might have fucked it all up for some asari fringe in his face. "I guess I have to use the workout room a lot during the next days."

"If it helps." Frank yawned again. "Other than that, we have enough work to do to bury ourselves under it. This case with the turian liver and all the other organs is giving me the creeps. You have to find out something about that, I'm heading to my next cleaning shift at Everest Artifics, maybe I can find out something too."

Garrus nodded, "Alright, I'll see you later then." He closed the interface and laid back with a sigh. Now that the headache had mostly disappeared, he just wanted to fall asleep again.

His thoughts went back to Shepard and it amazed him again how the mere thought of her made him light up in desire. Just thinking about her smile and her soft skin made his erection poke out between his plates. He touched himself, imagining her fingers stroking him, gripping him, pumping. Her breath on his neck, her tongue on his mandibles, just the memory was enough for him to moan. He worked his hand up and down his erection, thrusting into his hand as if she was on him again, molding against him, taking him in. It took very little time for him to arch his back and come all over his hand.
His seed dripping from his hand, he keened quietly. He missed her. After this short time he really shouldn't, but he did.

The next few weeks were going to be hard.

Garrus stretched in his office chair and contemplated once again if he could take another sick day. He knew full well that he had done that too much lately and it wouldn't help with his immediate problem anyway. Frank had been right, the case with the transplants was creepy.

He checked the DNA profiles of the other samples he had the doctor make. Instead of embarrassing himself once again by asking the family about someone who should be dead but wasn't, he checked the background first. Tax notifications, work permits, anything he could look into without getting a warrant first. A very simple pattern became obvious.

Every single one of the organ donors was still alive. Every one of them worked at Everest Artifics.

A chill crept up his spine. He sent a quick message to Frank, he had been right, Sarah shouldn't work there anymore. Neither should Frank.

Despite the fact that organs donors normally did not continue to live, it also couldn't be a coincidence that they had all the same employer. This should warrant a closer investigation, it should even convince Pallin. He got up and gathered his findings on a datapad to talk to his boss.

Garrus made his way over to Executor Pallin's office, nodding at people he came across along the way. A few turian colleagues asked him about Frank, showing more interest towards his human friend than ever before. He wondered what Frank had done after Batius's accident to get on everybody's good side for a change. He made a mental note about that, his friend must have neglected to tell him a few things.

Having arrived at Pallin's door, he rapped his knuckles along the frame of the already open door. One of the very few nice qualities of Pallin was that he truly had an open door policy, his door was never closed. He said he liked hearing his people work, but Garrus suspected that he just wanted to stay on top of the gossip.

"Executor? Do you have a minute?"

"Vakarian, yes, come in."

Garrus stepped in front of the desk, facing the dark turian with the white markings. "Sir, Johnson and I have further investigated the findings from the warehouse. As you have seen in our report..."

Garrus was pretty sure that Pallin never read that report but he couldn't let that assumption show, "...we found organs for transplant in cold storage, complete with life support systems. I have reviewed the donors and found some disturbing things."

Pallin trilled in surprise. "You found something that is disturbing you? You have me intrigued, Vakarian."

Garrus laid out the facts, getting the expected disbelief from his boss at first, but he couldn't deny that this needed further investigation. Pallin read through the report from Dr. Kaltkan and the report of the questioning he did of Titus Kerdotus with Peters and Lerv.
Pallin looked up to him. "These two new recruits, Peters and Lerv, what do you think of them?"

"They're good officers. Peters reacted much better than me in this weird situation with the undead donor. I saw them again later, when Shepard and I busted the salarian slaver down in the ward. As far as I know they did good work there too."

Pallin hummed angrily. "About that, how did you end up with this human Lieutenant in an ANIS investigation? I like to be informed if one of my officers runs around with another agency."

Garrus stretched his throat, what exactly could he tell Pallin? His sexual escapades were hardly a reason he wanted to tell him, and somehow his mind was completely blank about anything else when it came to Shepard. "I... I met her through Spectre Nihlus Kryik. They had worked together before."

Pallin trilled annoyance at that, it was well known that he disliked Spectres.

"Me meeting her later was... just a coincidence..." Garrus held tight control of his subharmonics to not release more information about that meeting than he wanted. He had to stomp down on those memories with force. "Lieutenant Shepard had received information about the slaves from a krogan battlemaster who worked as a mercenary for the salarian. We had very little time to react. I didn't even have armor, we had to borrow that from a weapons dealer." A startled trill left him, he still needed to return that armor along with his endorsement.

"A krogan mercenary gave Lieutenant Shepard this information? What did he want in return?"

Garrus avoided an annoyed trill, Pallin really didn't read any reports. "Nothing. Apparently he wanted to save the children. He is a friend of Shepard's."

Pallin trilled in astonishment. "She is friends with a krogan battlemaster? And he just wanted to save the children? This story is almost stranger than the one you have told me before, Vakarian." Pallin shook his head and then pinned Garrus with his eyes. "Your stint with ANIS annoyed me a lot, you know?"

Garrus trilled an apology but Pallin stopped him with a reassuring trill. "It's alright now. I had an interesting conversation with the head of the first interspecies ANIS group, a turian named Jentarius Keggs. Seems to be a very capable man and I find it much easier to agree with ANIS than with the Spectres."

Now that - Garrus had not expected. Pallin was always so sure that he was the only one who knew the rights and wrongs around the Citadel. Hearing him talk about someone else as capable, Garrus never would have thought it possible. Especially not involving a human organization. But if they had appointed a turian to lead the first ANIS group, the organization clearly wasn't that human centric.

Pallin kept on talking. "Agent Keggs has asked me about you, Vakarian, and about your connection to Lieutenant Shepard. I couldn't say anything about that, care to enlighten me, Officer?" Garrus couldn't help himself, he stretched his throat in embarrassment. Now was certainly not the time to make whatever kind of relationship he had with Shepard public.

He made his subvocals sound secure when he answered. "We are friends, Sir. As I said before, I met Lieutenant Shepard through Spectre Nihlus, who I am friends with. I've gotten to know Spectre Nihlus when I applied for the Spectres." No need to clarify that he hadn't really been friends with Nihlus before Frank and him had met him on the Presidium three days ago.

"Three days? When has my life started to get so futuo eventful?"

"Vakarian, you don't exactly play by the rules all the time, don't think I don't notice that. But you are
a good investigator and C-Sec is your home. Think about that if you get another offer." Pallin's tone was unusually friendly.

Garrus hummed, confused. "Sir? I don't know what you are talking about."

Pallin snorted, "Don't play dumb with me, Vakarian. If the top agent of ANIS is asking me if he can get you and Frank Johnson for a new ANIS group, then I'm sure you know something about that."

"Sir, I swear, I had no idea. Shepard talked about recruiting for a team at some point in the future but as far as I know, that was all just speculation." His thoughts were reeling, it was actually happening, Shepard had already put things in motion. He would be on a team with Shepard. Galaxy-wide investigations, making a real difference. It was like a dream come true.

Garrus straightened his back. "Sir, I will think about any offer seriously. I know that C-Sec has a lot to offer but ANIS sounds very interesting."

Pallin leaned back and studied Garrus for a few seconds. When he spoke again, his voice was still friendly. "When you came here, your father asked me to take care of you, did you know that?"

Garrus growled quietly. "No, I didn't, but it sounds like something my father would do." He looked straight into Pallin's face. "The situation has changed, Sir, you have no more obligation to my father now."

Pallin trilled a question but Garrus decided to ignore it. "Sir, I'd like to go now and continue with my investigation. If you could sign the necessary documents..."

His boss looked like he wanted to say more but only nodded and typed something on his terminal. Garrus's omni-tool pinged with the receipt of data from Pallin. He turned around and left the office. It would have been more polite to wait for Pallin to dismiss him but he didn't really care about politeness.

Back in his office he decided to type a message to Shepard. He knew that she wouldn't receive the message until she came back but he felt that he needed to communicate with her, even if it was delayed.

'Hey Shepard. My boss just asked me why ANIS wants to recruit me. You don't waste any time, do you? Now this sounds more annoyed than I meant, I'm very excited about it and I'm looking forward to working with you.' He hesitated, so far this letter didn't really tell anything about his emotions. Just thinking about her made his gizzard clench in longing. 'I'm not very good with this but I want to tell you that I really miss you. I hope you are well.' He groaned and closed the message, queuing it up. A poet he was not.

Garrus waited in his office for Titus Kerdotus. He had sent Lerv and Peters to pick him up after his shift at Everest Artifics. He needed to know more about this company and maybe someone from the inside could actually tell him something. He looked over the file on his omni-tool again; Titus Kerdotus was a normal citizen, without any criminal record. He was only on file at C-Sec because he had made a statement as a witness once.

The door opened and Kerdotus stepped inside, accompanied by Berdin Lerv. The young salarian freed two chairs from datapads and sat next to Garrus and set up his omni-tool to record. Garrus
stated their names and the date for the record. Titus Kerdotus looked very confused and trilled in panic. "Am I arrested? What for?"

Garrus hummed calmly. "No, Mr. Kerdotus, you are not arrested. I just have a few questions concerning your employer, Everest Artifics. Please, sit down."

Kerdotus sat down, wringing his hands. He looked pale, his plates were dull and cracked. His fringe looked soft and wrinkled, Garrus was sure that he had looked much better the last time they had seen him.

"Mr. Kerdotus, could you tell me what kind of work you do?" Garrus watched the other turian. He was very nervous and he wondered what he was hiding.

Titus Kerdotus suddenly coughed violently and then leaned forward. "Officer, I don't know what you have heard but this company produces skin grafts, artificial skin to replace injured skin. I work in a research laboratory under Dr. Saleon. We try to find new ways to preserve skin and other organs. I..." He coughed again into a piece of cloth. Garrus noticed some faint blue specks appearing on the white cloth. "I always thought we did good work there, we are helping injured people. But lately..."

He stood up and began pacing back and forth in Garrus's small office. His posture was hunched over as if he was in pain. He kept on talking, his voice rough. "Lately strange things have been happening. I don't know what made you think about questioning me but I do have something to tell. Many of my colleagues had accidents, and would spend some time in Dr. Saleon's care. That happened to me too. I fainted at work and Dr. Saleon said he had to clean some poison from my system. I don't know what he did, I was sedated. I woke up, felt fine and the doctor told me that I could get back to work. All I noticed was a little cut on my abdomen. Something like this happened to many of my colleagues. But now I'm getting sick again and I have seen that happen to others too. Dr. Saleon takes them and..." another violent cough was shaking him, "...they don't come back. Nobody knows what happens to them."

Kerdotus fell back on his chair as Garrus was checking the database for notices of missing persons. "Nobody has filed any missing persons reports, why not?"

The sickly turian was coughing again. "I don't know. They say that they have been sent on a business trip but why would anybody do that with normal lab workers?"

Kerdotus coughed, spitting big blots of blue blood. He tumbled over and fell to the floor, convulsing in pain. Garrus stumbled down to him, trying to lift him up. Lerv ran out, yelling for a medic. Kerdotus's eyes locked on Garrus's and he keened in pain. "Tell my mate... she will forever be my sun." He convulsed in pain, blood appearing all over his clothes from the inside. With a scream he spasmed once, his talons slashing the air. He was breathing in, once, twice, fluid gurgling in his throat, and then he stopped.

Garrus stared in disbelief at the limp body in his arms. Blood was seeping out of him everywhere, forming a big pool of blue around him. Garrus messaged Dr. Kaltkan to come up to his office, he needed to know what had happened to the man.

A few minutes later Dr. Kaltkan pushed through the crowd in front of Garrus's door and knelt down beside him. He put on fresh gloves and carefully cut open Kerdotus's tunic. Garrus felt nausea creeping up in him, the whole body was covered with incisions. Dr. Kaltkan shook his head and motioned for his assistant to transport the body. They carefully took the body out of his arms and placed it in a bag.

Soon after that, Garrus was left alone, sitting dazed in a pool of turian blood. He barely felt that
Berdin Lerv was helping him up, cleaning some of the blood away as best as he could. Another guy, a turian, was helping him down to the changing rooms, taking off the bloody armor. Someone was shoving him under the shower and the water pattering down on him finally woke him from his daze.

He ran out of the shower, grabbing a towel and opening his omni-tool at the same time. He was about to open a call to Frank when his omni-tool announced a call from him. He opened the call as he grabbed a spare armor-set.

"Frank, get Sarah out of the lab. Something is seriously wrong there, my informant just died on me, bleeding all over."

Frank's face stared back at him, horror etched in his features. "Garrus, Sarah isn't in the lab anymore. They tell me that something happened and she fainted. The doctor took her."

Garrus didn't suppress the loud keen of panic from his subvocals. "Frank, you have to find her, get her away from this doctor, hurry! I'm coming to help you. Find Sarah!" Frank just nodded and ended the call.

Garrus latched on the last pieces of armor, jumped into a pair boots, and grabbed a rifle and a pistol. He turned on his omni-tool, ordering a full team to Everest Artifics.

And then he just ran as fast as he could.

Chapter End Notes

I know a bit of a filler but sometimes you just have to go from point A to point B to get to C eventually.

Translations for the turian/latin words (does not contain real latin):
stercus = shit, bullshit
consilium = purpose
affectus = love, passion but more formal
decretum = ruling, decision
futuo = fuck
Garrus arrived at Everest Artifics in record time, thanks to taking some notes from Shepard's driving style. He stormed the entrance hall, displaying his C-Sec badge on his omni-tool while downloading the map from the receptionist’s VI. Without slowing down, he jumped into an elevator and hacked it to take him to the Saleon labs without stopping in between.

He stepped out of the elevator into a quiet hallway, the faint whirring and buzzing of machinery and fume extractors as well as talking, indicating a normal laboratory, undisturbed. A door opened and a human woman in a lab coat with a tray full of small containers stepped out and looked at him, seemingly startled by his presence.

"Vakarian, C-Sec. I'm looking for Frank Johnson and Sarah." He realized that he didn't know Sarah's last name, hopefully Sarah wasn't a common name among humans. The woman in the lab coat recovered from her initial shock and had an expression of annoyance on her face.

"We have five assistants around here with the name Sarah, one of them asari, the rest humans. You'll have to be more specific." *No such luck then.*

"Human, female, smaller size, slender frame, light-brown hair," he rattled off, hoping that he could narrow down the options fast, "She fainted?"

"Oh yes, Sarah Dillon fainted today, she fits your description." The woman vaguely motioned to some point behind him. "They took her into Dr. Saleon's private lab, he has a special treatment for these cases. What is it with her? Someone from the cleaning crew asked about her too and went into the lab, even though it is strictly forbidden to enter Dr. Saleon's lab!" She looked like that was what had annoyed her the most about the situation.

Garrus didn't waste time with an answer and ran towards the door on the other end of the hallway, leaving the human woman yelling behind him. "It is forbidden! Do not disturb the doctor!"

The double doors displayed a red lock as he approached them and even his C-Sec badge was ignored. That happened more often than he cared to think about, making him turn to his hacking programs with practised ease. In theory, the C-Sec signal from his omni-tool should have overridden the doorlock, but that was rarely the case. C-Sec immune doorlocks were a bestseller in certain circles.

That Dr. Saleon had such an immune lock on his door was very telling and didn't bode well for the legality of his work.

The not-quite-legal personal hacking program on his omni-tool made short work of the block, Dr. Saleon obviously didn't spring for the expensive high quality stuff. The doors parted noiselessly and Garrus entered the lab, contemplating if he should draw his gun.

The main room that he entered was filled with typical lab tables, full of glassware, scanners, and all
kinds of small machinery that he wasn't familiar with. The long wall to the right was covered with workplaces under fume extractors, sealed with transparent doors in front, with things bubbling or sparkling behind. The other walls had doors and windows on them, showing more laboratories with similar workplaces. It all looked very sciency and normal except for the fact that nobody was there.

The room Garrus stood in and the others he could look into through the windows were void of living beings. All the tiny noises he could hear came from the fume extractors running and other appliances in the lab.

A beep made him snap his head around to some little machinery announcing it's success at whatever it was doing and displaying the result on the attached screen. He looked in the test chamber, some small piece of organic meaty material. The results showed numbers of 'cell-growth-rate' and 'regeneration-rate' and other things that didn't mean anything to Garrus. All he could gather was that they did research on organic tissue and cells in this lab, not really surprising.

But why was nobody here?

Garrus placed a call to Frank, growing more nervous the longer he waited for an answer. His scans showed no complete organs but lots of cellwork of organic tissue. He kept scanning for exits, the people in the lab had to have gone somewhere.

He had made it through every single room of the lab when Frank finally answered his call.

"Garrus? I'm at dock 11, Saleon has taken everyone from his lab on a ship. Sarah is with him, Garrus! I'm going in, I can't wait! I saw them, man, I saw how they were bleeding and he was just herding them on the ship and they stumbled... Sarah... like she had no control... I'm going in, get here, Garrus!"

"I'm contacting Citadel control, if they don't give him clearance he won't get away!" His omni-tool beeped at a closet door, indicating a larger room behind it. When he opened the door he saw the inside of a small elevator, only one button on the panel saying 'roof'. He hesitated for a second and then decided to take the chance. If he was lucky, there would be a skycar on the roof. Such a stroke of luck could have him at the docks much quicker than the slow elevator ride.

When he exited the elevator he was relieved that his gamble paid off in the form of a shiny skycar, which he hacked in three seconds. Citadel control finally answered his call and initiated a lockdown on the vessel in dock 11. The controller hesitated for a second and Garrus growled "C-Sec authority!" with all the aggression he could transport through his voice. He launched the car and programmed the destination.

The skycar moved efficiently through the traffic as he ordered the C-Sec team to the dock. He managed to get it to go even faster when he turned it back to manual control. Again taking a note out of Shepard's book, he dived down towards the dock, coming to a screeching halt in front of a small ship.

Frank Johnson and a salarian were in front of the ship in a shouting match. Through the ships open cargo door he could see people standing around. He saw humans, salarians, and asari, just standing there, slightly rocking back and forth. Their eyes were unfocused, staring out into nothing. Garrus saw the slender frame of Sarah among them, red rimmed eyes staring ahead like the others.

He ran towards the salarian who he assumed was Dr. Saleon and motioned with his head to Frank towards Sarah. His friend took the clue and walked over to her as Garrus involved the doctor in an argument to distract him.
"Dr. Saleon, I presume? We have received some disturbing complaints about your work at Everest Artifics. I'm here to take you to C-Sec for questioning," he said with authority.

The salarian doctor had the audacity to smile at him as he shook his head. "You have no warrant for that. You can't just arrest me, and I don't have to come with you. My assistants and I are leaving and there is nothing that C-Sec can do about it." He kept on smiling and turned around to step into the ship.

Garrus clacked his mandibles tight in anger, the salarian was right. The warrant only covered a search of the laboratory. He stepped into the ship's door to prevent it's closing, shouting over the rising noise of the ships engines, "You can't just take all these people with you, we can easily arrest you for kidnapping."

Dr. Saleon kept on smiling, just asking for a punch to the face. Garrus was barely able to keep himself under control. The doctor snarled, "These people accompany me out of their own free will, I'm not kidnapping anyone." He turned around and spoke to the dazed people in the cargo hold. "Does anybody want to go?" The people hardly reacted, but they mumbled, “No”. The doctor grinned at Garrus in triumph and the turian couldn't stop himself. He grabbed the salarian by one of his horns and slammed his head against the doorframe.

"I don't know what you did to these people but they are not alright!" he growled.

The doctor whined loudly and began muttering salarian curses. A small trail of greenish blood trickled down the side of his dark face. Garrus wanted to hit him again just to make sure but someone held his arm back. The C-Sec team had arrived and to them it looked like he was beating up an innocent civilian. So they stopped him, unfortunately.

Dr. Saleon was screeching, "I'll file a complaint about you! I'll sue you! This is outrageous!" He stomped onto the ship and hit the button to lock the door. "I'm leaving, right now!" he screamed. Just as the door was about to close he looked directly at Garrus, and he saw the salarian pull his face into a self-satisfied grin.

Garrus opened a channel to the Citadel control room. "Do not give departure clearance to the ship in docking bay 11. The ship is under C-Sec investigation," he said with authority, hoping someone would listen to him. He looked around, searching for his partner. Frank had managed to coax Sarah out of the cargo hold while Garrus had his argument with the doctor.

He stood with Sarah a little off to the side, holding her by her shoulders, trying to get her attention. She was swaying, her head lolling backwards. Suddenly her knees buckled and she collapsed. Frank managed to catch her in his arms before her head hit the floor.

"Sarah, Sarah, do you hear me? Sarah, baby, please, open your eyes." Frank desperately tried to get a reaction from her but she hung like a puppet in his arms, barely breathing. "Medic! I need a medic here, help!" Frank called out, his voice breaking. Garrus ran over to him, requesting an ambulance to his position with a code through his omni-tool.

The docking clamps still held the ship in place so it looked like someone was at least listening to him. Suddenly Garrus's omni-tool chimed with a call from Dr. Kaltkan. Garrus accepted the call, a bit confused what the doctor needed to tell him directly instead of writing it in a report.

"Vakarian! I have finished the autopsy of Kerdotus, his body was a science experiment. It looks like somebody used his body to grow extra organs! This is most disturbing, I've never seen anything like this! His body had apparently begun to reject the extras, and he died of internal bleeding where the original organs were severed. It seems as if, when the doctor found out the extras wouldn't grow
properly, he harvested the good organs, and left the extras to rot. This is the worst use of science I have ever..."

"Thanks for the info, doctor!" Garrus interrupted, feeling a short relieve that his hunch about Saleon had been correct. "We have one of his assistants here with us, she seems very sick..."

"Take her to Huerta right away, I will inform them of your arrival and what I know about the case. Hurry, her body is probably destroying itself from the inside."

Garrus felt nauseous, this didn't look good for Sarah. An ambulance had arrived and medics started to take the woman out of Frank's arms. He called over to them, "Take her to Huerta, they're waiting for her there. Dr. Kaltkan called ahead." Frank jumped into the ambulance, grabbing Sarah's lifeless hand.

Behind him Garrus suddenly heard the docking clamps releasing, and as he turned around Saleon's ship was drifting away from the dock and turned around to fly away from the Citadel. Garrus placed a call to Citadel control and began screaming as soon as someone answered.

"What the futuo are you thinking? I ordered you to keep this ship docked! This is an ongoing C-Sec investigation..."

The turian on the other side of the call answered with an aggressive growl but kept his voice calm. "We have not received a warrant from C-Sec, so we had no legal ground to keep this ship docked. Any further..."

"You're letting a criminal scientist get away, along with the people he experimented on. I want Citadel defence forces to shoot the ship, immobilize it. Do it now, don't let him get away..."

The turian controller remained annoyingly calm, "We can't shoot so close to the station and we can't endanger the passengers on the ship." Finally some kind of empathy could be heard in his subvocals, "I set up a trace on the ship so that we can find it again."

"Every halfway competent criminal knows how to get rid of such a trace..." Garrus growled, rumbling his frustration loudly. He watched helplessly as Saleon's ship flew away from the Citadel and then went into FTL with a short flash of light.

Garrus smashed his fist against another flat surface. "Spirits be damned! With all the stercus around here we have to let this piece of lowlife get away!" He jumped in the skycar and programmed the Huerta Hospital as it's destination. He called on the trace that Citadel control had put on the ship but predictably it had already been lost. His hand began to hurt from smashing it into innocent walls and skycar doors.

A C-Sec broadcast on his omni-tool informed him of an explosion and fire at Everest Artifics. 'Figures.' Garrus thought, losing all evidence in a fire was just what this case needed. His skycar arrived at the hospital platform, as he jumped out of it he programed it to return to it's point of origin. Hopefully it would burn.

On his way to the reception area he contacted the VI for Sarah's location and got directed to the correct floor. Stepping out of the elevator, he immediately saw Frank pacing in front of a glass wall. Through the glass he could see medics attaching sensors to her, an IV drip let into her arm. She lay motionless, only slight tremors made her hands occasionally twitch.

The gurney was moved into a room with medical scanners and the door closed behind the medics, shielding her from their view. Frank turned around and stumbled towards a bench and fell down on
the seat. Garrus sat down beside him, feeling utterly helpless. He had no idea what he could do to help his friend.

"I'm so sorry, Frank," he said, putting his arm over Frank's shoulder. "At least we got her away from that doctor, I'm sure they can help her here."

Frank's voice was rough, "Thanks man, I hope so." To Garrus's surprise he leaned his head against his shoulder. He heard him whisper, "I finally found someone... someone so wonderful... special." Garrus felt him shudder and he realized that his friend was crying, almost inaudible. He was shocked, he had never seen Frank like this.

Garrus had seen humans cry before and he was terrified by it. To feel emotions so strongly that their bodies reacted physically by secreting fluids from the inside, it scared him. He had heard that asari could cry too but he had never seen one do it. Asari only cried in private.

He didn't know what to do so he just kept his arm over Frank's shoulder and told him that things were going to be okay.

Things never got okay.

The doctors found several extra organs growing inside of Sarah and her body had begun rejecting them. Something in the process made Sarah react differently than the other 'test-subjects', her body changing and fighting at the same time. She woke up shortly and Frank held her hand and told her that he loved her but she only managed to say his name once before she lost consciousness again.

She never woke up again.

After six days of laying unconscious, her heart gave up beating.

Frank had been by her side, holding her hand. He only let Garrus lead him out of the room after the nurse told him that she was dead.

Garrus took him home and made him lie down on his bed. Frank was eerily quiet, lying on his side with his eyes open. Unblinking eyes staring at nothing. Garrus was reminded of old stories he had heard when he had been a child, stories of the night-birds who stole children's Spirits. The next morning the children were alive but empty, a hollow shell.

Just like Frank was now.

Frank had lost his Spirit, his soul as the humans would say.

Garrus didn't know what to do. He had dealt with loss before, that was unavoidable as a C-Sec officer. He had delivered the news of a dead relative before, he had comforted people who grieved. But it had never been a friend, his best friend. There was nothing he could do to stop his pain.

He had a good idea how Frank felt, and he had to push any thought about Shepard far away from his mind. Just thinking if anything like that would happen to her made him keen in grief. He had written another letter to her, queued up for later delivery. It had been hard to tell Sarah's story but he did want her to know about it.
Writing her had become a daily habit for him and he had gotten better at it too. His letters actually resembled coherent writing most of the time. He told her of the things that happened each day, things he liked and disliked. He tried to make it feel like a conversation with a friend. What he didn't write about were his feelings for her. He could only hope that they could continue where they had left off when they would meet again.

The writing had helped him too, putting his thoughts into order and dealing with Frank's grief. The aftermath of the Saleon disaster had made it clear to him that he needed to get away from C-Sec. He had to answer to an extended questioning how he could possibly order Citadel defence to fire on a civilian ship and why the whole case had turned into such a stercus. After nobody had even touched the case for the longest time and then no one listened to him when they had had the chance to stop the guy! He had a hard time not to smash someone's face in when he got asked the same questions again and again.

Whenever Garrus had to go to C-Sec, he made sure that someone else was with Frank. Nihlus stayed for two days before the Council ordered him elsewhere. Batius and Tinlenus and some other turians from C-Sec came around as well as all of the few humans who worked there. Frank didn't talk much at first but after a short time he started to talk about Sarah. Little snippets of their short time together, things she had said or did.

Garrus was relieved when he saw his friend returning. He didn't expect him to turn back into old Frank and he was right about that. Frank had been broken and he would never be the same. He seemed more fragile. Garrus wondered how many more blows he could take after this one.

Two weeks went by, everyday in the same halted rhythm. Garrus slept on a spare mattress in Frank's living room. He had brought his own pillowroll to sleep on, as human pillows were impossible for turian heads, and that made the bed bearable. It was better than his bed in the barracks back in basic, so that was definitely a plus.

He went to C-Sec every day to answer questions from somebody else. It was internal affairs investigators one day, lawyers the other day, quality control, Citadel defence and control, and even a spectre asked him questions. Questions after questions but nobody actually did anything. Saleon had disappeared, chances of ever finding him again were slim. Not that anybody even tried.

The only thing keeping him sane was the prospect of switching from C-Sec to ANIS as soon as Shepard came back. If he didn't have that to look forward to he might have just quit. The labyrinth of rules and regulations that made it almost impossible to actually get work done at C-Sec frustrated him even more now. Garrus was also suspicious about corruption at C-Sec, way too often lawyers knew way too many things about difficult cases.

He found it especially telling how many well dressed lawyers Everest Artifics had produced to drill him about his investigation. Two of them wore little pins with a strange symbol, yellow, white, and black. He discreetly took a picture of it with his omni-tool and set up an Extranet search for it. These lawyers were different than the others, they didn't ask about the doctor or his test-subjects. All they asked about was the lab, the equipment he had seen, the organs C-Sec had in storage. They seemed to be mostly annoyed that he hadn't copied any files from Dr. Saleon to his omni-tool. Those lawyers made him extremely uncomfortable.

He talked about them with Frank that night and they looked at the results the search algorithm had
turned up. The symbol apparently belonged to a human supremacist group called Cerberus. Formerly a special ops branch of the Alliance, they had separated themselves from government affiliations and became privately funded. Their involvement in a human-salarian company like Everest Artifics was unusual, as they normally avoided dealing with aliens.

The work of Dr. Saleon must have been extremely valuable if they managed to overlook their speciesism and work with aliens. Maybe they just saw it as some stupid alien doing all the hard work for them. The turian separatists from the group Facinus had done the same back when they hacked the FTL plotter from a ship so that it rammed into the main city of Taetrus. Despite being turian supremacists they had employed a quarian engineer to supply the knowledge about FTL drives that they had lacked.

Frank started to seriously investigate Cerberus, and Garrus was glad that he had found something to do. He didn't know if this was the human way of dealing with grief, but for a turian, grieving meant to do something. To find a purpose, solve a problem, anything to feel useful. So he could relate to Frank's new obsession and he was glad to help him with it. It also helped himself, due to the fact that he was still suspended from C-Sec work, so he was grateful for the distraction.

Still, after a week of being suspended, Garrus began to feel bored out of his mind. It was also rather hard to stay celibate. Not that he had been jumping from bed to bed before, but now that he actually wouldn't allow himself to do it - he could hardly take his mind off sex. The workout room saw him a lot, he spent at least two hours every day there. He would be in good condition when Shepard came back.

The treacherous voice of his father in the back of his head kept telling him that she still wouldn't be interested in him anymore.

*That's what humans do, they don't keep their words.*

He kept that voice down every day as best as he could by almost destroying the punching bag.

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Chapter End Notes

Emotions, how do I ...?
I'm sorry that Sarah had to die before she could become a real character, poor thing didn't even get any lines. But somebody had to die and it was either her or Frank. Frank Johnson is needed later so poor Sarah got the short straw. Sorry, my girl.
(So far this fic doesn't even pass the Bechdel-test, how embarrassing.)
After three weeks of suspension after the Saleon disaster, Frank and Garrus finally returned to work. They started with a security concept for the festival that Nihlus and Shepard had invented. Garrus was impressed, Anderson’s staff and the turian teacher Atika Birdan had managed to set up the small festival in record time. It helped that they could use existing infrastructure by extending a concert with an asari singer that had already been planned at a market square down in Quedgin.

They opened the square earlier and set the concert up as the end of the "All Together" festival. Several schools had performances prepared and showed them on an open stage on one side of the market. All other sides of the market square had food stands with delicacies from all over the galaxy. In an adjacent warehouse, Garrus recognized it as the one where the metal concert had taken place, a martial arts tournament was to be held in the afternoon.

Garrus and Frank worked out security shifts and drilled everybody in showing presence without intimidating the festival visitors. They set up mixed teams, combining two turians with someone from another species, to reflect the spirit of the festival. So far things had worked out nicely.

Garrus was in an exceptionally good mood today because this morning he had finally received a message from Shepard. It was just a short text, telling him that her training was finally over and she officially was an N7 now. She was on Elysium for a few days of celebration and then would come back to the Citadel. Her message ended with, 'I have been thinking about you all the time, looking forward to seeing you again.' Garrus finally felt hopeful again.

Frank, Garrus, and Tinlenus had just started their own shift as festival patrol again, after having taken a break to eat something. Garrus had tried something from a food stand that prepared dextro-versions of levo-meals. His meal had been called 'Spaghetti with tomato-sauce' and was pretty good, and according to Frank at least smelled sort of like the real thing. Frank had eaten a levo-version of Garlefka and announced that it was just like a burger with chilli. His eyes had watered a bit but he assured them that he was fine.

They started the day early by opening the location and overseeing the preparations. After the food stands had been set up and opened, the first school performance started. An asari school danced human ballet and afterwards a group of salarian singers performed human, asari, and even krogan songs. Later on a mixed school was supposed to show human, asari, and turian formal dances.

So far they had had almost no problems between the different species visiting the festival. People were talking to each other, trying different foods and applauding all performances. It almost made Garrus nervous how well everything went.

A group of turians, who Garrus thought he recognized as the ones that had attacked Lieutenant Shepard three weeks ago, had actually tried to provoke some conflict. But the rallying speech from the leader got loudly interrupted by Atika Birdan and other festival visitors, and after a short argument they quietly left. They had realized that they would not win any supporters here.
Everybody from every species was friendly to each other.

Which was why they all were surprised when suddenly a loud commotion began in front of the warehouse where the martial arts tournament was held. A turian woman in an old fashioned tunic held her son with her hand who had a smug grin on his face. She was yelling at one of the human tournament organizers.

"How can you let children watch this? It's outrageous, a performance like that for everybody to see, highly inappropriate!" Her son grinned and was clearly of a different opinion. Garrus wandered over to the woman to see if he could help.

"Vakarian, C-Sec, what seems to be the problem?" he asked, letting his omni-tool display his badge. Tinlenus and Frank did the same behind him. The human turned towards him with a confused look on his face.

"Sir, I have no idea. This woman thinks we do something inappropriate here but I assure you we have only standard martial arts here, official guidelines, correct clothing, I honestly don't know what the problem is. I'm very sorry if we somehow offended her." The human man shrugged his shoulders and Garrus saw that he was truly apologetic.

The turian woman began to shriek again but Garrus stopped her with a trill and went inside the warehouse with Frank to take a look. In the middle of the room, a raised area with mats had been set up and right now two human women in sturdy white clothing were fighting. They were grabbing each other roughly, trying to push the other to the ground. The wall-display said something about 'Judo' and had a timer running down.

Garrus stared for a minute, he had an idea why the woman, who according to her clothing was probably rather traditional, had been outraged.

Beside him Frank shrugged his shoulders. "I don't get it, there's nothing wrong here. I thought we would see naked mud-fighting the way she was acting but this is just normal Judo."

Stretching his throat, Garrus looked at his friend. "You've never watched turian porn, right?"

Frank looked taken aback, "No, why would... holy shit! Are you telling me that two women fighting is basically porn for you guys?"

Garrus trilled quietly in embarrassment, "Well, usually they wear tighter clothing, but two women fighting over a man is a common scenario in turian porn." He sighed, the things you have to think about when it came to interspecies understanding.

For the first times in weeks Frank was truly laughing, bending over in laughter with tears in his eyes. He looked around, there were humans, asari, and quite a lot of turians in the audience. "Don't tell me all these guys are just here to get turned on."

Garrus shook his head, "It sure looks interesting but I think you have to be very old fashioned to confuse this with... well... porn."

Frank sniggered, "Man, I have to take you guys to mud-wrestling one day, your heads are going to explode." Garrus looked at his friend, relieved that he appeared like his old self again. Suddenly Frank looked at him with a mischievous grin. "You know who else has participated in martial arts tournaments who we could probably find vids from on the Extranet?" He grinned even more. "Lieutenant Shepard has fought in tournaments."

Garrus’s mind was busily supplying him with imaginary pictures of Shepard fighting, maybe in a
tighter white dress, and what was it what Frank had said about mud-wrestling? He got jolted out of his daydream by a hard punch on his neck from Frank who couldn't stop grinning.

"I wondered if I needed to reboot you or something, you were gone, birdy!" Frank said with a laugh. "What are we going to do now? You think this is really inappropriate for turians?"

Garrus shook his head and turned to go back outside, "No, there's nothing wrong here. Let me talk to her, she looks very traditional and I don't think every turian mother would see this as strict as she does. Let's put up a sign at the entrance that says that small children shouldn't watch it because of the violence or something."

Frank snorted, "Violence, sure..."

They went back outside. But the commotion had stopped and the whole market was eerily quiet.

Everybody looked at one of the news-displays. Grainy images from traffic cameras showed streets destroyed from bombardments, people running in panic, and batarian mercenaries shooting at them. The caption under the picture scrolled the same words over and over again: "Pirates attack Elysium, heavy losses, reinforcements days away."

Garrus felt his knees shake. Frank grabbed his arm and led him to a bench to sit down.

*She can't be dead, not now, she can't be dead. She. Can't. Be. Dead.*

Garrus didn't remember how he got back to C-Sec headquarters. He vaguely recalled that they canceled the rest of the festival but people had stayed in the market, watching the news together and supporting each other. Elysium was a human colony but many asari, turians, and salarians had settled there as well. Everybody was afraid for the people on the colony.

The cameras had begun showing some kind of resistance fighting against the pirates, but soon after that the communications satellite was apparently damaged and no pictures came from Elysium anymore.

Garrus spent the next days in a daze, watching the news for anything new from Elysium.

After three days the Alliance fleet finally arrived and repelled the attack. The human pirate leader Elanos Haliat fled when the Alliance arrived and the planet was soon freed from the mercenaries. Soon after that the news began to trickle back to the Citadel.

**Humanity had a new hero: Lieutenant Shepard!**

The first attack from the pirates had been an orbital strike to the Alliance barracks and the city's police building, somehow circumventing the orbital protection systems of the planet. After that, the pirates had landed, hardly meeting any resistance after having blown up most of the soldiers and police.

Lieutenant Shepard had managed to rally her N7-exam colleagues and a bunch of civilians to take up weapons and defend the main street. She set up a perimeter that the pirates couldn't cross without getting shot at from cover. Using this technique she held them off for three days without supplies until the Alliance arrived. When the marines finally found her, her team and the civilians they
protected, they were almost delirious from their wounds and from hunger. A rumour said that Lieutenant Shepard had been awake for the whole three days, high on stims. When they found her and she saw that everybody was safe, she collapsed. She remained unconscious when they brought her back on the ship and flew her and her team to the Citadel.

Garrus stood anxiously at the dock where Shepard's transport was supposed to arrive, it had been six days since the attack and so far there had been no interviews with her. He was worried that maybe her condition was so bad that she couldn't even talk.

Finally the transport pulled into the dock and a mass of reporters ran towards the entrance to get a glimpse of the new hero. Cameras were zipping around when the door opened and showed a bunch of medical personnel, protecting gurneys from the pushing reporters. The gurneys were quickly loaded into cars and took off towards the hospital. Now people who were in good enough condition to walk exited the transport ship. Most of them had been patched up in some way and they were all very pale. The majority were human but a few asari and turians came out as well, looking just as bad as everybody else. The reporters were running around the survivors, catching statements, arranging interviews, but Garrus wasn't interested in them.

Frank appeared at his side, "I think she was on one of the gurneys. Let's go to the hospital, I know an asari who works there and maybe she can tell us something." Garrus just nodded, his throat too dry to talk.

The hospital was extremely busy and the staff was quick to dismiss them in favour of real patients. Luckily, Frank managed to get the attention of one of the asari nurses who took them into the restricted area of the hospital. Under the promise of confidentiality, she let them into a lab that had a glass wall on one side. Behind the glass, two beds stood side by side, both with a human on them. One was a male, the other a female. Garrus's breath stopped. **There she is!**

He couldn't see much from her, there were IV-drips leading into her arms and a mask on her face, giving her oxygen-rich air to breath.

The nurse whispered to them, "As you can see, she is breathing on her own, that is a good sign. She wasn't badly injured, but she has pushed her body to its absolute limits, not eating, hardly any fluids, no sleep for three days. We gave her a mild sedative and she is just sleeping off the exhaustion. The IV-drips are there to hydrate her again and to give her nutritions." She must have sensed Garrus's distress because she put a hand on his arm and tried to hum reassuringly, as much as an asari was capable of that. "The doctors are sure that she's going to be okay by tomorrow. The Alliance admirals can hardly wait for her to wake up, they want to have a big ceremony for her where she will be promoted..."

Garrus tuned out her talking and laid his forehead against the cool glass next to his hand. "Can I go in?" he asked and he knew without even looking that the asari was shaking her head.

"I'm sorry but this is all I can do for you, the room entrance is protected, only Alliance higher-ups and family members are allowed to visit."

Garrus nodded, he had expected that. Afterall, he was just some unknown turian, why should they let him in?
He looked at her once more and then indicated with his head towards Frank that they should go. Silently, they left and walked past the horde of people who stood in the waiting area, listening to a statement from a doctor. He said pretty much the same thing as the nurse had said and Garrus saw no point in staying. He couldn't do anything for her here.

Frank brought him back to his apartment and Garrus returned to staring at the news station. His friend handed him a beer and they sat silently together until they both fell asleep.

The next day he saw Shepard on the news. She was dressed in an Alliance uniform and gave a short interview about her situation and the attack on Elysium. Her answers were short, and it wasn't quite clear if she was annoyed or just exhausted. In the afternoon he saw another newscast about her, the hero of Elysium as they called her. They had a ceremony on the Presidium for her, where they announced her promotion and gave her a medal. She smiled at the cameras with her medal but Garrus knew a false smile when he saw one. Her face was like a mask.

He had messaged her as soon as he had heard that she was awake but he hadn't received an answer yet. Doubt was creeping up in him again. She avoided him.

On the vid screen, the ceremony had come to an end and Shepard disappeared. He kept watching for the chance to see her somewhere but the only person coming up on camera was a human man named Svend Lee. Garrus recognized him as the one who had shared the hospital room with Shepard. The newly promoted Lieutenant Lee had held the perimeter alongside Shepard and was happy to tell everybody the story. Most information in the newscasts about the resistance on Elysium had come from him.

Garrus was only half-hearted listening when his door chimed. He thought that it would be Frank, who had wanted to get lunch, and got up to open the door for him. But when the door opened it revealed the hunched figure of the newly promoted Commander Shepard. She looked up at him and tried to smile, but the smile couldn't chase away the haunted look in her eyes.

He hesitated for a second, and then stepped forward and pulled her into a tight embrace. He felt her relax as she let her weight fall on him with a strange sound coming from the back of her throat. He pulled her up so that her feet left the ground and carried her over to the couch.

As he sat down she gripped his cowl even tighter, and some part of him wanted to rejoice loudly that she was finally here with him.

*My Shepard!*

But he also felt her sadness and he knew that nothing was really okay.

They sat silent in this embrace, her legs dangling off his lap to one side, her face hidden in his cowl. After a while she began to whisper. "They promoted me and gave me a medal."

He whispered into her hair, "I know, I saw it on the news."

She stayed silent for a while and then whispered so quietly that he almost didn't hear her, “Nobody sees that I’m not a hero.”

He carefully put his hand under her chin and pulled back so that he could look into her eyes. "You
saved so many, without you they wouldn't have had a chance. That was heroic."

She sat up and turned around and slid down on the couch beside him. Her hands were fighting with each other, wringing, pinching. Looking at her hands, one twisting around the wrist of the other, she sighed and began talking.

“There was this girl, she reminded me of myself, as young as I was when the batarians attacked Mindoir. But she wasn’t helpless like me, she knew how to shoot a gun, she could fight! And I thought... I thought - she could do what I couldn’t back then. She could be strong, not hiding in the woods like a little coward. I should have sent her away with the others, but I didn’t.”

By now her hands were gripping each other so hard that the knuckles turned white. Garrus took her hands in his, stroking them, trying to get them to let go of each other. He put all his empathy in his subharmonics, humming at her.

Her voice was rough and bitter. “She died within the first hour. A batarian sneaked up on her. I was distracted, trying to get everybody in line, to stay in cover and not shoot around wildly. God, they were all running around like headless chickens, like they had never seen an alien pirate before. I saw him out of the corner of my eye and I yelled at her to shoot but she just stared. She was frozen in panic. Just because you know how to shoot rabbits on a field doesn’t mean you can fight batarians.”

Garrus noticed that her hands were full of cuts and some of them had started bleeding again from all the wringing she did. He got up to get a medical pad to clean her wounds and she got up as well. She stood in front of the window, a dark shadow against the bright Citadel sky.

"I should have seen that, I should have seen that she was just a little girl. How could I expect her to turn into a killer on my command, she was just a little girl... a little girl..."

He finally realized that she didn't need her wounds cleaned, her pain came from deep inside, not from the cuts on her hands. Carefully, he stepped closer to her and put his arm around her. "You couldn't have known, there was no time..." He tried to make his voice sound calm despite his emotions swirling in chaos inside of him.

She was shaking her head, turning away from his embrace. Her arms were wrapping around herself, her hands squeezing the skin on her arms.

"This batarian fucker grabbed her by her hair and slammed a device in the back of her neck. It must have been something like they use on the slave collars only this one was set to pain. She fell down shaking, screaming in pain, and the guy just laughed and raised his gun at me.”

Garrus made a step closer to her but she turned away from him again. He put his hand on her shoulder to show her that he was still there.

"I lost it. I just rammed into him, started beating him. I beat that four-eyed fucker to death with my bare hands."

She was breathing hard. "I killed him, I kept beating him even when he wasn't moving anymore, and the whole time that poor girl was screaming in pain and I didn't help her, I just kept beating this guy like that would help me, like a monster... I should have helped her but I couldn't think... I kept beating him and beating him and I only stopped when she had stopped screaming. I looked up from the bloody mess that had been his face and she had died, her body had given up."

He saw tears running down her cheek, terrifying tears and he put his arms around her again, hoping that she would allow him to hold her now. She stiffened and then suddenly it was like she lost all
bones in her body and fell into his arms, sobbing, "I should have helped her, I should have helped her!"

He hummed in grief for her.

She kept on crying and crying.

Terrifying tears.

After what seemed like hours, she stopped crying, wiping her nose on a handkerchief and he led her back to the couch. He was surprised to see bags with food on the table, Frank must have come in at some point without them noticing. Apparently he just put the food on the table and left.

Garrus had enough experience with humans to see that she was utterly exhausted and he picked her up and carried her to his bedroom. He carefully placed her on the bed and took off her shoes. She took off her uniform jacket and shimmed out of her pants. His breath hitched on the sight of her in her plain white underwear. He quickly put a blanket over her.

He knelt beside the bed, holding her hand. She looked at him and his heart was beating faster. The circumstances may have been bad but he just couldn't stop this feeling of happiness that she was finally back again.

She raised her head to whisper, "Lie with me. Hold me, please."

He swallowed, he didn't want to come across like a horny teenager but he couldn't stop the wave of desire that rushed through him. "I'm not sure that is such a good idea," he said with an embarrassed trill, "I missed you a lot and I... I can't stop my plates from moving when I'm so close to you I think"

"It's okay. I missed you too." She showed a little smile for the first time and Garrus felt like stumbling into it. "But my state is just not that obvious like yours."

He swallowed again and shrugged out of his tunic, only leaving his underpants on. He crawled under the blanket behind Shepard and nuzzled her head. Something that felt like a knot in his chest sprang free with a snap and he allowed himself to feel happy to finally have her in his arms like this.

They stayed like that for a while and he wondered if she had fallen asleep, but suddenly he heard her talking quietly.

"I feel dead inside. Like I'm not really here."

He pulled her even closer, her butt molding against his hard penis. He couldn't stop a groan escaping. "You are definitely here. Certain parts of my anatomy are very aware of you."

He felt, more than heard her chuckle. "Maybe you turians have the right solution with your sex as stress relief." Her hips rubbed against him.

He held his breath for a second. "I don't want to have meaningless sex with you."

"Nothing is ever meaningless with us. But I don't want to feel dead anymore," she whispered and twisted her body to look at him. "Please, break through me. Find me again."

He raised himself on his elbow and she turned on her back, pulling his face down for a kiss. He groaned when her tongue touched his and he lost himself in the sensations. Her tongue so soft and strong at the same time, her lips so soft, suckling on his mouthplates, her moaning. She broke away and wrapped her tongue around his mandible, sucking on it. He purred and felt his erection
throbbing in his pants. He fell on his side and pulled her towards him. Her body was molding against his and he had to bring up every little bit of control to not slam into her like a wild animal.

All his senses focused on her and her pleasure and he noticed right away when something suddenly changed. She stiffened and turned her face away and he instantly gave her space. He felt her shiver and she curled up like small child. His erection strained painfully against his pants but he ignored it and very softly put his arms around her from behind her back.

She whispered, "I'm sorry, I can't..." She curled up even more, her whole body tense.

"It's okay." He held her close again, it felt right.

"I'm not much of a turian I'm afraid."

He nuzzled her head. "I don't want you to be a turian." I love you, just you. "Let me just hold you."

She fidgeted as if to try to get up. "I can't.."

He nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent. "Let me be here for you, let me hold you." He let his subharmonics hum soothingly.

She whispered, "Okay," and he felt her relax. After a little while her breathing became more even and he felt that she had fallen asleep. He kept humming and holding her until he was sure that she wouldn't wake up when he got up.

Carefully, he slipped out of the bed and for a little while he just stood there and watched her, thinking. How fragile she looked. How strong she was despite that. How much he had missed holding her. How very much something behind his cowl wanted to explode.

Chapter End Notes

Perfect boyfriend is perfect.

I know, there she goes and turns Garrus into a can-do-no-wrong-Mary-Sue (Garry-Sue, hehe) but you know what? Isn't it sad that the willingness to wait with sex until your girlfriend is mentally and physically ready makes a character an unrealistic Mary-Sue?

Just sayin'.

Sex in the next chapter, I promise.
Oh and yes, I am aware that the jump in rank doesn't make sense if we look at current Navy ranks. In the game backstory, Shepard gets promoted from Lieutenant to Commander in one go. Assuming the Alliance is consistent with the current Navy, that would not work. Technically, in the game, she is can only be a Lieutenant Commander, according to the Navy ranks but everybody just calls her Commander. I'm sort of keeping it that way too. That's how Bioware made it, so we just have to roll with it.

Thanks to Credete for editing.
Garrus sat down on the couch and picked some food out of the blue bag that Frank had left on the table while he tried to convince his penis to calm down. He wasn't very successful. With a frustrated groan he laid his head back against the headroll when he noticed that his omni-tool indicated a message. It was a short note from Frank, asking 'Everything alright?'. He initiated a call back to him and his friend answered right away.

"How's it going, birdy?" Frank looked at him from the translucent screen with a sheepish grin. "You noticed the food?" Garrus nodded at that. Frank ruffled his own hair, "Yeah, I just ran in and I was halfway in the room when I saw you guys by the window and she was crying and... I thought I really didn't need to be in this room."

"Thanks, Frank," Garrus said. "I don't know if I helped her but she is sleeping now."

"Did she talk about what happened on Elysium?"

Garrus recalled the horrifying story of the batarian and shuddered at the memory. "Yes, she told me some things."

"Then you did help her," Frank said with conviction. "Talking about shit helps, swallowing and keeping it all inside is bad." The, by now, familiar shadow of his own pain passed over his face as he looked at Garrus. "Okay, I'll let you get back to your woman."

"I gave her some space for now. I'll be here when she wakes up," he said to Frank and he didn't miss the slight trace of confusion or worry going over his face. But Frank didn't say anything and he decided to ask him about it later.

Garrus had another thing on his mind, "Can you cover for me at C-Sec? I'd like to have one or two days just for me and Shepard if possible."

"Sure, but then you have to finally write the report about the lady who thought the martial arts tournament was porn." Frank grinned widely.

Garrus nodded, "Alright, it's a deal monkeyman, thanks. I'll talk to you later." He ended the call with a nod towards Frank.

After taking another bite from the fake kalkenda sandwich, he contemplated his future actions. He
would not go back into the room where Shepard was sleeping. Not only because he could hardly control himself and his desires around her, but also he didn't want to crowd her. He had to give her space, especially while she slept. No one liked an encroaching turian.

In the end his body decided for him, his plates loosened and his erection still throbbing, he put his visor on the table and went to take a shower. After the first gush of water he turned it down to a slow warm trickle that gently dripped down the plates on his back. It almost felt like someone was touching him softly between his plates, caressing the skin, and it was very easy to imagine Shepard's fingers doing it. He took his length in his hand and put his other arm against the wall to lean his forehead against it. The pressure on his forehead plates was very pleasurable and even though he was alone, he felt himself releasing some scent through the glands there. Slowly he stroked himself, thinking about the woman in the next room. His fingers moved slowly over his penis and he started to increase the pressure as he thought about her and how she had kissed him. The memory made him moan. He imagined her fingers working on his penis and he rubbed himself faster.

Suddenly those very hands that he had been thinking about appeared in his vision and joined his in a solid grip around his hard penis. He froze. Shepard was behind him in the shower, naked skin pressed against his back. Her arms encircled his waist and that touch alone on his sensitive waist almost made him whimper. The thumb on one of her hands was rubbing a soft circle on his tip and he shuddered involuntarily. He didn't dare to move at all.

"Shepard, what are you doing?" he asked her with an embarrassingly hoarse voice.

He felt her lips move against the plates on his back. "I woke up and you weren't there. I went looking for you and when I found you here... I was watching you... you're so sexy... I thought I could help you with that..." She was still rubbing little circles, going over the slit on his tip once in awhile. Every time she did that, a shudder went through him.

"You were watching me? Weren't you... I mean, you liked seeing that?" Garrus had a hard time forming full sentences but he needed an answer. He considered masturbation a private act that no one would like to watch.

He heard her chuckle, "Really? Turians too? I thought that was a human thing. Every guy loves watching a woman pleasure herself but if a woman wants to watch a man do the same, they think it's disgusting."

Garrus's imagination provided him with excellent pictures of Shepard pleasuring herself. He moaned. He felt her kissing his backplates and licking between them. The feeling was intense and he almost came just from that. His shudder made her giggle.

"Maybe I can learn something, what you like, how fast, how strong..." One hand still busy with those maddening circles she put the other hand on top of his that was still frozen around his length. "Lead the way, show me what you like," she whispered and he had to smile.

"It won't take long, that I can promise," he mumbled and slowly began stroking again. Her hand followed his and the oh so nimble fingers of her other hand found some knot on the underside of his penis to rub that made him weak in his knees. After a short time he faltered in his movements and she completely took over. He pressed both his hands against the wall next to his forehead. Garrus began feeling that familiar pressure building up in his abdomen and he knew it wouldn't take long now. Her hands had him in a firm grip and she followed every order of "harder - faster" he made. With a loud groan he came, a wave of tension running through him as his seed splashed against the wall.

There was definitely not enough air in the shower stall, he was practically wheezing. Her soft skin left his backside and he wanted to tell her to come back but he knew that wouldn't be right. He
pushed himself off the wall but suddenly she was back at his side, leaning against him and began washing him with a washcloth. She turned the trickling water on stronger and after having cleaned his abdomen, moved in front of him and used another cloth to wash his upper body. Garrus stared down at her, not daring to move. Not since he had been a little child had anybody washed him, and it felt so incredibly intimate, so loving. He was not used to this closeness, this intimacy after anything like this Spirits in greatness handjob.

Shepard slowly moved the washcloth over his cowl and then raised her face, smiling at him. His heart, yes, his heart, wanted to jump out of his chest. He didn't dare to touch her, afraid she would shatter like a mirage. She looked at him and he could see the confusion in her face.

"What's the matter Garrus?"

He didn't quite know, but he felt that there was some kind of cultural difference at work here. "I... thank you, Shepard."

"It was my pleasure, big guy," she said with a smile. "Why are you so nervous now?"

"You are so close..."

"Turians are not much for cuddling, I guess?" she asked with confusion but she wasn't hurt, just curious.

Something clicked. Maybe she didn't feel like he was pressuring her, maybe she liked it if he kept holding her longer. Longer than he would hold a turian woman. Humans loved touching, he had read that but he never connected it to this situation. He had left her alone in that room because he had just assumed that was the right thing to do. He loved holding her and maybe that was good, maybe she liked it if he stayed close to her.

"Shepard, I have to ask... is it okay if I hold you?"

She threw her head back in laughter, "Of course it's okay, why wouldn't I like that?"

Garrus sighed in relief, "In my culture it is considered very impolite to crowd someone. To enforce contact..."

"You're not enforcing anything if you touch me. At least not as long as I don't tell you to stop," she said seriously.

Garrus nodded, "Yes, telling, talking, that's we need to do, I guess. Not like I have anything else on my mind right now." He waved vaguely in the direction of his genital plates, "Why did you do this? You didn't have to, you didn't owe me..."

The water was still running down over them, he noticed that the skin on her fingertips formed little wrinkles.

Shepard took his hands in hers and looked seriously into his eyes. "Because I wanted to. Trust me, I will never do anything that I don't want to do. I didn't feel like I owed you but I wanted to make you feel good."

She let go of his hands and wrapped her arms around his neck, her hands stroking under his fringe. "I'm sure when I'm ready for it, you will make me feel good as well."

He chuckled, "Sure, I have a reputation to uphold here!" Her hand stroking him made him shiver.
She pulled his head down and kissed him. He eagerly opened his mouth to her tongue, craving this special touch that felt so intimate, so very much their own. He whispered into her mouth, "I promise, I promise to always take care of you." He froze for a second, that had sounded very much like a mating promise. The voice of his father was screaming in the back of his mind. He shut it up by pressing his forehead against hers.

He didn't know if she knew what that meant.

The light on the Presidium had changed into a warm glow, simulating a late afternoon as they sat down at table from one of the outdoor cafés. They both had ordered some kind of fruity drink and Shepard's had come with a whole assortment of fruits and straws and a little paper umbrella. Garrus had never seen such a gaudy decorated drink in his life. Shepard was happily picking the fruit pieces off the rim of the glass and she had a dreamy look on her face whenever she chewed one.

"That's the one thing I really miss, living on spacestations and spaceships - real fruit. Nothing can compare to real melon or oranges." She hummed contentedly, her eyes closed and she licked the juices from the last piece off her fingers. Garrus was slightly embarrassed by that. To him this looked very erotic and should not be done in public. He noticed the turian server staring at her and he knew he wasn't the only one thinking that way.

She opened her eyes and noticed him and the server staring at her. "What?"

"That looked... like something you shouldn't be doing in public," Garrus said with an embarrassed trill.

She looked from one turian to the other and suddenly shut her mouth with a snap. As she wiped her mouth with a napkin she leaned over to Garrus. "This licking, with my tongue? You mean I shouldn't be doing that?"

Garrus felt uncomfortable talking about these things but he realized that there were probably thousands of these that meant something in one culture. They had to talk about it if they wanted to understand each other. "Tongues and licking are very erotic for turians. It's our kissing, I guess? Personally I would want you to do this all the time but I'd rather be alone with you then."

"Oh." Her skin was now noticeably pinker than before. "Well, I guess then we leave popsicles and lollipops for a more private setting." She winked at him.

"Popsicles and lollipops?" Garrus started an Extranet search for that and it returned that it was some kind of candy.

Shepard grinned at him, "You'll see, Garrus, oh you'll see!" She grinned even more. Garrus wasn't sure if he should be excited or scared.

She took another sip from her drink through a straw and he saw her face turn serious again. "I wanted to ask you about this thing with turians and closeness again," she said, her voice low enough that only he would hear it.

After that enjoyable shower they had not talked about this subject again and Garrus was a bit nervous that she brought it up now.
She continued. "As I understood it, turians aren't much for cuddling and you prefer to give each other space. So, you don't touch each other unless for sex?"

Garrus cringed at that, Shepard certainly didn't dance around if a straight question could do the job. He stretched his throat and a small trill left him. "Traditionally, yes, turians don't touch each other a lot, and not in public. There are certain gestures of affection, like pressing the foreheads against each other or holding the lower arms of the other. Things like caring for the others talons and markings are also very personal."

Shepard nodded, "Yeah, I can see that with the markings. But what about married couples? Are you telling me that even married..."

"Bonded."

"...bonded couples then, that they don't touch each other often? Don't tell me they don't even sleep in the same bed."

Garrus trilled in surprise, "No, most of them prefer their own bed, some even their own room."

Her eyes got so big that her whole forehead scrunched up to let her eyebrows rise up. "Not even in the same room? Wow. Hell, I'm not even much of a cuddler and prefer to have my own blanket but I love sharing my bed, knowing that someone is there." She stared at him and he recognized something like fear on her features. "So... does that mean you don't like it? I mean cuddling, holding each other? I don't want to make you do something that you feel uncomfortable about..."

"Yeah, because lying in bed with you has turned out to be so uncomfortable for me...!" Garrus grinned at her. "Don't worry, I like it, I just have to get used to the fact that it is nothing weird. I have never been a very good turian and I can't think of anything I'd rather do right now than to hold you in my arms."

She smiled with relief and carefully placed her hand on top of his on the table, her thumb stroking the skin between his fingers. He looked around, showing their affection in public like this was not a good idea. But their hands were hidden behind a small vase with artificial flowers and nobody was looking over to them. He hummed a little relief and relaxed.

Shepard now looked at him curiously. "So, your parents, did they share a bed? Or did they have separate bedrooms?"

He looked down on their hands, recalling the house on Palaven he grew up in. "My parents had separate beds but they shared a room. But my father had a spare bed in his home-office, the study, and he always worked long. Most nights he just slept there so they sort of had separate rooms. It wasn't unusual, I know most of my friend’s parents each had their own room."

"It doesn't sound very loving," Shepard said and her face showed sadness.

"Bonding out of love is an asari concept, at least for traditional turians. Turians have *praecipit collocatio*, arranged by their clan. The bond has to be beneficial for the clan, the *affectus* between the bondmates hopefully grows afterwards." It sounded so strange to explain this to her. He had never really thought that this would concern him one day. "At least that's how it used to be, I'm sure there has always been love, maybe even bonding out of love. Young turians are different today, there's a line of romance stories that are very popular and there was even a movie made about bondmates in love."

Shepard looked at him strangely and then suddenly guilt flashed on her face. "Oh no, I didn't realize
how awkward the kiss between Sapita and Jinala must have been for them. They hardly touched each other and I was just imposing my understanding of intimacy on them... I'm such an insensitive idiot...

Garrus couldn't help but laugh. "Relax Shepard, I'm sure they wouldn't have done it if they hadn't been into touching each other. It's different with turians who bond with asari, as asari are much more sensual. As I said, love is an asari concept for turians and they do things differently."

She cocked her head to the side, "So you think Sapita and Jinala share a bed?"

"I would assume so. We had one uncle in my extended clan who had bonded with an asari and she was touching him a lot all the time, they held hands, she stroked his mandible. I remember being fascinated by that as a child, not only this strange blue creature but also how she would always touch him." He smiled at the memory of himself back then.

"So your family accepted an asari in the family?"

"For a while, I mean they had too, they were bondmates and when he got invited she was welcomed too of course. But after he died they didn't ask her to any family events again and I think my father even disinvented her once when she arrived unannounced." There was a vague memory of his father yelling and seeing the blue woman walk off.

Shepard snorted, "That's kind of a dick move! First they act all friendly and welcome her and as soon as he dies they kick her out of the family? She loses her bondmate and they can't even be nice to her?" She looked really angry and Garrus thought how wonderful it was that she got worked up over this person's fate whom she didn't even know.

He smiled at her. "I agree. But I was just a child, I didn't know better. I hardly knew this uncle, my parents never let me talk to him and definitely not to her."

She suddenly looked very seriously at him, her eyes piercing his Spirit. "So when I heard you talk to you father, he wanted you to give up on me and find a turian woman?"

"One that he would choose, yes."

"And you told him that you wouldn't." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, I told him that I wouldn't give you up."

Her face turned deep red and with sudden fear he saw tears glitter in her eyes. "That's the most romantic... god, I never... it's like I'm living in an asari romance vid." She took his hand in both of her hands. "Thank you, Garrus. I wish I could kiss you right now."

He stared at her, "Are you crying?"

"Not like that, emotions, you know, sometimes even good ones can be so overwhelming..." She quickly wiped at her eyes with one hand. "I'm sorry I misunderstood that, back when you were talking to your father."

"It's okay now, but I'm glad that Nihlus could get that message to you, he practically seduced a human man for that," Garrus said with a relieved trill.

Shepard laughed out loud. "Really? I have to ask him how that went, he..." Her face suddenly turned ashen white and she was trembling. She stared at some spot behind his back and when Garrus turned around he saw a batarian in blue armor. When he turned back she had gotten control of her features
again, her face a friendly mask but he saw her hands shaking.

He took them both in his own hands and hummed at her in a soothing tone. She gave him a weak smile. "Looks like it isn't as easy as I thought," she mumbled, "I thought I was over it but a batarian... still scares me."

"It's okay, Shepard, it's understandable." He kept on humming with his subvocals. "Why don't we go somewhere else? You remember the salarian armor salesman that had lent me that armor when we went after the child-slaver? After I had made the endorsement, he was so happy about it, he kept sending me invitations to try on new armor sets. Why don't we check out what he has?" It sounded stupid but he couldn't think of anything else.

Shepard sighed and then smiled at him again. "Well, you sure know how to show a girl a good time." They got up and he reluctantly let her hands fall from his. She smiled up to him, "Could we, maybe, just take a walk somewhere? Do you know a garden or a park on the Citadel?"

He nodded, "Yes, I know a place. Let's go." He walked close to her, as close as he could without touching her. They walked around the Presidium towards the elevators that led up to the Citadel tower, but he led her past those doors to another door behind the elevators. This door opened to a hallway with another set of doors on the other end. When they approached, the doors opened for them and revealed a garden.

The garden was cast in a reddish light and was populated with flowers from Palaven and other turian colonies. The climate was warm and dry, and a light wind was blowing. He had forgotten how much he missed the hot Palaven winds. The wind, the scents and the heat reminded him painfully of home. Home and a family that wouldn't welcome him anymore.

Garrus looked at Shepard and was happy to see the wonderment on her face. With wide eyes she took everything in, the high ceiling, the dextro-flowers. She opened her jacket, it was apparently very warm for her. She turned around and smiled at him, her brilliant smile that made his gizzard clench in happiness.

"What is this place, Garrus?" she asked, whispering.

"This is a Spirit garden. We don't have temples anymore but we believe that the Spirits need a place to go to when they want to leave. So we have beautiful gardens where they can settle." Garrus trilled slightly embarrassed, he had never given much thought to turian religion.

"Why would a Spirit want to leave?" Shepard asked, kneeling down to look closely at a yellow flower.

"A Spirit goes beyond a single person. A group, like a family or a military unit can form a Spirit between them, influencing them. Other life can have Spirits too, like trees or flowers. If a group falls apart, it is thought that the Spirit has decided to leave. That Spirit would be lost and we have these gardens to give them a home." He called on everything his mother had told him when he was a child to explain this. It had been years since he had thought about this.

She looked up to him. "Do you believe in the Spirits?"

"I'm not sure. It sounds kind of silly." He stretched his throat in embarrassment. "But if I look at us, I feel like there is something connecting us. That could be a Spirit." He couldn't suppress a nervous trill, hopefully she didn't think of him as crazy now.

"I like that, that's a beautiful way to think of it." She stood up, took a look around and then stood up
on her toes to kiss him on his mandible. "Thank you for showing me this. Can we walk around?"

"Yes, sure." He made a scan for life-signs, they were alone, so he took her hand in his. He had seen human couples do this, walking hand in hand. She smiled up to him and her thumb was stroking the skin on his hand. They walked slowly on a path that circled around the room. He tried to recall the names of the flowers and scanned the ones he couldn't remember until Shepard made him shut down his omni-tool. They came up to a big tree, Garrus wondered how old it could be and how they had gotten it on the Citadel.

Suddenly she grabbed his cowl and pushed him against the tree trunk, her hands stroking over his tunic. He lowered his head towards her and her mouth claimed his in a hungry kiss. He forgot how to breathe. As their tongues touched again, poking, stroking, his longer tongue wrapping around hers, they both moaned. They broke apart, panting.

She looked up to him, desire in her eyes. "If this is a holy place, making out might get frowned upon, don't you think? Or would it be the ultimate worship?" She grinned widely.

"If it were, it probably wouldn't include a human." He tried to make it sound like a lighthearted joke but the second the words had left his mouth he saw her expression fall. He wanted to kick himself. Her hands left him and she turned her face away from him but he knew what he would see on her face if he could.

She started walking. "I probably shouldn't even be here," she said and briskly walked back towards the door. He caught up with her with quick strides and pulled her back into his arms. She pressed her forehead against his cowl and sighed. "I'm sorry, I guess I'm a bit more emotional than usual right now. Don't worry, it will pass." She smiled up to him. "I'm very glad that you took me here, this is a beautiful place and I needed some beauty in my life right now."

They took the path back to the door, more slowly now, hand in hand. Occasionally she dropped down on one knee to look at a particular flower, to sniff at it. Garrus had heard the jokes how very bad humans sense of smell was supposed to be. ('Can't even smell another stinking human if it's standing directly behind him.') But seeing her taking in the scents of the flowers he knew that they were wrong. Maybe humans only smelled good things, beautiful things, like the red rose she had given him.

They left the garden with it's artificial red Palaven light and walked back out into the Presidium. The light here looked cold and harsh compared to the room they had just come from. As they stepped through the second set of doors they dropped each others hand and walked as casually side by side as they could.

The Presidium was very busy and occasionally humans walked up to Shepard and talked to her. She was now the hero of the Skyllian Blitz, people recognized her. She smiled, shook hands and posed for pictures with children, and Garrus wondered how she had learned so fast to deal with her new fame. He noticed after the fifth time that her face looked strained though. He decided that she needed a break.

Garrus stepped up beside her and said in his best official voice, "Commander, may I remind you that we need to hurry?"

She looked at him, surprised, and then quickly put up a serious face. "Thank you, Officer." Shepard turned to her fans. "I'm sorry, I have to go. Have a nice day, everybody."

They walked away with determined strides, like they were truly on their way to some official meeting. When they were out of earshot she mumbled towards him, "Thank you."
Garrus trilled his response of, "Anytime". When they were under an overwalk, momentarily protected from onlookers, he brushed his hand over her arm. "I thought you were dealing with all that remarkably well. But you looked tired now, I would like it if you would rest."

Nervousness crept up in him, he didn't want her to feel like he would order her around. "Not that you can't decide for yourself, but I thought after everything that has happened lately you could, maybe, use a break. Occasionally. Only if you want to of course. I don't want to impose..."

"Geez, Garrus, relax! You're not imposing, you are being sensible," she said with a smile, "And it looks like you know me better than I know myself. I didn't even realize how tired I am." She sighed and shortly leaned against him. "Can we buy some food and go back to your place? Hanging out on your couch and eating sounds like the best thing ever right now."

"Beaten by the couch for comfort, that's a blow to my ego," he joked and was glad to hear her laugh about it. *You know that you have found the right person if she laughs at your bad jokes.*

If he thought about it really hard he might have come up with a scenario that was better than this but he couldn't think of one. Sitting on his couch, Shepard snuggled in his arm, picking at weird looking food and watching a vid - he couldn't think of anything he would rather do. At least not while wearing clothes but that could wait, he thought.

They were watching a comedy show, one that made fun of all the stereotypes. They had insanely smart salarians, overly sexual asari, squishy humans who climbed trees and stiff turians who couldn't do anything without orders. A hanar, who couldn't control his floating was bumping along the ceiling, singing a song with the refrain "This one has his tentacles in a twist, a twist, a twist!" The human was climbing over furniture, jumping to catch the hanar while the asari rubbed against the turian, trying to convince him to grab one of her tentacles. The turian stood to attention and kept asking if these were the official orders of the Hierarchy.

Shepard was laughing so hard, she fell off the couch.

Garrus was relieved to hear her laughing, he loved it. He picked her up under her arms and pulled her back up. She ended up in his lap, leaning against his chest, still giggling. He nuzzled her neck because it was right there in front of him and she smelled so good. With a sigh she leaned back and turned her head to the side giving him free access to her neck. He groaned deep in his throat. *Does she even know what this means to me?*

He licked along the elegant curve where her shoulder met her neck and scratched lightly with his teeth. He realized that the neck was more of a turian erotic zone but she seemed to enjoy it very much. Her breath hitched whenever his tongue licked behind the lobe of her ear or when his teeth scratched along her collarbone. He wanted more of her, so much more.

With a sigh he pressed his head against the back of hers, wrapping his arms around her. "You are amazing, Shepard, and I think you know how much I want you. But I don't want to pressure you to do anything you aren't ready for yet."

She leaned back against him, turning her head towards him. Her soft lips were brushing along his mandible, her strange nose bumped against the plates on his face. She twisted around so that she was sitting sideways on his lap. She looked him in the eyes, her hand softly stroking the side of his face.
"You are the most wonderful person I have ever met." She cast her eyes down, following her other hand as it stroked down his arm. "I don't even know how to say this but... no one has ever been so..." She leaned her head on his cowl, her forehead touching the skin on his throat. He felt her breath on his skin, drawing in with a hitch and when he moved his hand to her cheek he felt the wetness of silent tears.

He still didn't quite know what to do with tears but he just held her, stroking her cheek.

Garrus woke up two hours later, Shepard still huddled against him. She was breathing evenly, apparently in a deep sleep. He wondered if he could get up and carry her to his bed without waking her. He carefully let her head slide down into the crook of his elbow and picked up her legs with his other arm. She grunted a bit but kept on sleeping. Garrus got up slowly, surprised how light she was, and carefully walked over to his bedroom.

He laid her down on his bed and then contemplated whether he should undress her. She had already taken off her shoes and her jacket when they had sat down on the couch. Personally, he never liked to wear pants if not necessary, maybe it was the same for humans too? On the other hand he knew that humans were always careful to cover up their genitals, even if they didn't wear anything else on their bodies.

Finally he decided to just take them off, as she had done the last time she had slept in his bed. He carefully opened the top button and slid the pants down, desperately avoiding to look too hard at the black underwear she was wearing. Then he covered her up with a blanket and smiled when she curled herself up in it, using all of it. She wasn't kidding when she had said that she preferred to have her own blanket. He needed to find one for himself if he wanted a cover.

It was late enough to go to bed so he decided to join Shepard. He shrugged out of his clothes, put the visor on a shelf, cleaned himself and put on the sleeveless white tunic he always wore to bed. On his way to the bedroom he grabbed a spare blanket from his closet and turned off the lights. As soon as his eyes had adjusted to the darkness he carefully crawled into the bed next to this human female he had come to love being close to. He put his arm over her waist, his hand on her stomach above the thin blanket. His other arm had to go up to her head, her hair tickling him.

Suddenly she moved and turned around. He saw her eyes glitter in the darkness. "There you are. I thought you had disappeared again."

He pressed his forehead against hers, "How will you ever sleep without me from now on?"

Shepard giggled, "I'm sorry, I just meant that I have a bad taste in my mouth. That happens after a long day and we humans clean our teeth with a brush and cleaning paste before we go to bed at night. The toothpaste also cleans our whole mouth when we rinse it out with water. Do turians brush their teeth?"

"Not with a brush, we use a cleaner-nozzle, a high-pressure spray with a cleaning solution. Maybe
you can use that just with water?"

She raised herself up, "That would be great, Garrus, I promise much nicer kisses afterwards." She
crawled over him to get out of the bed and Garrus took hold of her waist for a second.

"I can hardly wait," he said and squeezed her waist.

That didn't have the desired effect because Shepard squeaked and fell down on him, convulsing and
screaming, "That tickles!" in between laughter. He was frozen in shock for a second but then he
realized that she didn't look hurt and he tried that squeeze again. She almost knocked down the glass
on his bedside table with her flailing arms, laughing and screaming at the same time. He grinned and
filed that away for later use.

Shepard was catching her breath, still laughing, "It looks like you found my secret weakness. Are
turians ticklish?" She felt in the darkness for the light switch, reminding Garrus again that humans
couldn't see in the dark.

When the light had turned on he helped her out of the bed and followed her to the bathroom. "Not
that I know of it. But you are welcome to try and find out. Although I have to tell you that squeezing
a turians waist may lead to a very different reaction."

She looked at him with a mischievous smile. "Oh, interesting, I... holy shit, Garrus are you wearing a
dress?" She stared at his tunic and he saw that she was barely holding back her laughter.

"That is a sleep-tunic! Pretty standard as turian night clothes go." He trilled annoyed, he didn't want
her to laugh at him.

She snickered quietly, "I'm sorry Garrus, prejudiced human here, I'm working on it. Please don't be
mad, I didn't mean to ridicule you." She brushed her hands over the fabric. "It feels nice." She
looked up and winked at him. "And if you are wearing a dress then I'll have to undress you!"

He spread his mandibles in a smile and she smiled back with a relieved sigh. Her hands moved to his
head and her fingers began playing under his fringe. That familiar want build up in him again and his
plates began to shift from her touch alone. He broke the contact with a quiet keen and showed her
the cleaning nozzle. After he had filled the container with water she began spraying her teeth. It
looked like she enjoyed it, and unlike he had feared she hardly made a mess with it. He was
fascinated in how many ways she could move her jaw and how she could close her mouth up and fill
it with water until her cheeks puffed out.

After that load of water had exploded from her mouth she dried her face and turned back to him, a
smile on her face. She had opened the buttons on her dark shirt and he took her in. Her smile, her
pale skin, the dark underwear visible in the gap that her blue shirt made in the front.

After a few long minutes of just staring at each other she suddenly moved and was on him in one
fluid motion. In only a few seconds she had pulled his tunic off and her own shirt had fallen to the
ground next to it. Then she put her arms around his neck and with a short warning she jumped up
and wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing it with her thighs. It felt so good, he almost lost his
balance. She kissed him hungrily, her mouth soft against his plates, her tongue demanding entry. A
moan rumbled up in him from his gizzard. He couldn't help himself, he grabbed her shoulders hard
as their tongues connected.

Then he moved one hand under her to hold her and ran towards the bed with her, but when she
licked his neck and put her teeth firmly on his skin there, he stumbled. He held her against the wall, a
deep rumble leaving his chest and he pressed her closer to himself.
Her many fingers were under his fringe again and her other hand was travelling up and down his back. His own hands tried to map her body as well, his one hand under her butt, the other stroking every piece of skin he could find. Suddenly she bent her arms behind her back in a way that made him cringe and then the upper part of her underwear fell down, leaving her breasts free for him to caress. His hands were busy but he used his tongue to lick between them and around the dark bud in the center of each one. He loved hearing her moan because of that.

Shepard's hips were moving in a dance that made him feel even more aroused, his penis hard between them and he was sure that they were approaching a point of no return. "Shepard," he whispered with a loving trill, "do you really want this?"

With a sigh she pressed her lips against his mandible and whispered "Yes, I want you Garrus and I'm not afraid. Let me show you." She jumped down and wiggled out of her panties. She trailed kisses on his stomach, her hands touching his waist and suddenly her hand was on him, stroking his length. Her fingers pumped and rubbed him, and he felt his whole self reduced to this pleasure, this need to be with her. He knees were shaking and she led him down on the floor.

For a second he thought that they could have walked over to the bed but then all thought left his head and he leaned against the wall as Shepard climbed on top of him. She lowered herself down on him, slowly taking his hard length inside of her. He moved his hips against hers but she stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"Let me lead," she whispered and slowly moved her hips, gliding him inside of her. He kept still, trembling and growling in holding on to his control. Finally she had him completely sheathed and began rolling her hips and he rumbled a sexual tone for her. She reacted by moving faster and whispered, "Yes, purr for me! You're vibrating and you're voice is so sexy and... oooh... you feel so good..." Her hips were moving faster and Garrus pressed his teeth against her clavicle, feeling her pulse with his tongue.

He saw her hand move to her clitoris and he decided to help her. With the knuckle of his finger he rubbed in slow circles around her nub and occasionally brushed over it with a fingertip. She was drawing in a breath with a short scream whenever he did that and she began to move faster with her hips. He felt her inner walls contract and he rubbed her clitoris faster. Her head fell backwards, her breath came in short bursts and he heard her say "I can't lead anymore, I... oh gods..."

She bent completely backwards and Garrus feared for a second that she would break in half, surely no one could put their shoulders on the floor with her back arched away and her hip still connected to a very aroused turian. But he realized that her scream came from pleasure as her vagina contracted around his penis, making him shudder.

"Spirits, Shepard, you feel so good." He groaned as another shudder went through her.

"Jane," she said, her voice hoarse and her breath coming in gasps.

"What?" He leaned forward to look at her face but he didn't get far before his hips stopped him from bending further.

"My name is Jane, call me Jane." She raised herself on her elbows, moving her hips, rubbing against him.

"Jane..." He tried the name, still unfamiliar. "Jane... I love feeling you, Jane."

*I love you, Jane.*
"And I love feeling you, Garrus. Now take me..." She smiled and moved away from him to free his legs and he scrambled to get them behind without breaking his spurs and to raise himself on his knees above her. She was leaning backwards on her elbows, her legs spread invitingly.

"What do you mean, Jane?" he asked with his mandibles wide.

She locked her hands behind his neck and pulled herself up and whispered in his ear. "Fuck me, Garrus. Take me!" She aligned her opening to his achingly hard penis and with a groan he lowered himself back into her. He had to take a harsh breath and still for a second because the sensations were just too overwhelming. Her hands under his fringe, her muscles grabbing him and somehow her toes were holding on to his legspurs. The way she arched her back and bit her lip and looked back at him with that wonderful smile... nothing had ever been this good.

He moved slowly at first but after a few thrusts he couldn't stop himself anymore, driving into her faster and harder, looking at her face for any sign of pain. But she moved with him, scratching his backplates, licking and biting his cowl, and he went faster and deeper and she raised her legs and pressed her thighs against his waist and her fingernails were digging into his shoulders. He felt the tension built up in both of them and when she came again with a hoarse cry, pulsing, contracting, he followed her, their voices mixing and he kept moving and pushing and she was milking him from the inside and he kept spilling into her until all tension left him and he collapsed onto his side, pressing his forehead against hers.

He had no words to express what he felt and what he wanted to tell her. He just held her, stroking her back and whispered her name.

"Jane..."

"Garrus..."

There was more in those names than they could ever say with any word of their languages.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! *fan's self* - I hope that was as good for you... ahem. I only wanted to write a short smut chapter and now look at all this backstory creeping in.

I wished I had come up with this "turians don't cuddle" thing earlier, then I might have mentioned it before. But this is what happens when you make things up on the fly, so let's just pretend I talked about it in Chapter 3 already, okay?

Just to make things clear, I don't think turian plates are razor sharp, I imagine them to be more like thick rubber and even softer in the genital region for both male and female. Evolution favors easy sex for procreation, so hurting yourself by rubbing against each other would be a disadvantage even for turians (I know that female cats might not agree...
about the painless sex bit, barbed penis, shudder...). But still, turians are a well
protected, almost armored species so unlike humans they didn't need to huddle up in
groups for protection, they could get on alone just fine back in the old days. It's not
instinctual for turians to group together closely, that's how I made up that they don't
cuddle that much.

Making up things in a make-belief world.

And thanks to Credete who I keep stalking to edit these smutty chapters.
The incessant beeping of his alarm clock woke Garrus from his sleep at the time that he usually had to get up to work. He rolled over and called up the menu with a wave to set it to "vacation time". Rolling back, he almost rolled on top of the human woman next to him, who had somehow managed to sprawl out and take up most of the bed. How a small human could take up so much space was a mystery. He shoved and pushed until she rolled over again and he settled back behind her, her butt pressing against his groin.

When she had settled, she sighed happily and wiggled a little. That movement was enough for the lower parts of his anatomy to wake up, ready and at attention. He groaned, this was getting ridiculous. It was like he was a teenager again, horny and insatiable.

After the breathtaking sex on the floor somewhere between the bathroom and the bedroom last night, they had managed to finally get into the bed, only to have sex again. Slow and tender, Shepard - no, Jane - riding him, kissing, scratching, her fingers between them and her face almost like she was in pain the moment before she came, sighing his name. And then his face on her neck, breathing her in, feeling the blood pump directly under her skin, her soft skin with her muscles flexing under his fingers and she held his face, her hands on his mandibles when he came, seeing her smile as the blissful feeling washed over him.

They had fallen asleep afterwards and he could still smell his dried seed on her skin; the sheets needed changing too.

He nuzzled her hair, inhaling her scent. She turned around, smiling at him. "Hey you," she said with a smile.

"Hey, Jane," he mumbled. He wanted to practice saying her name.

She turned all the way around and wrapped herself around him with now practised ease. Their blankets were still stuck between them and he pulled at them to feel her skin. Finally he had her unwrapped, relishing the feel of her cool softness against him. She put her leg over him, pressing her soft core against him. He bucked his hips against her and he was just about to try and enter her soft - oh so soft - center when she suddenly flinched and turned away.

"Ouch, oh!" She bit her lip and sat up to look at the insides of her thighs. Garrus looked down on
them too and was shocked to see the skin on her thighs scratched and irritated. The whole area looked uneven and was shining in an angry red. Now that he really looked, he noticed red irritation and many scratches on her waist and her shoulders, some of them even bleeding. With a horrified shriek he jumped out of the bed and ran to the closet where he kept the supplies for his armor.

He grabbed a pack of medigel and returned to Shepard. She had already gotten a little tube out of her vest and put some white substance on the inflammation on her thighs. Garrus stared at her, feeling helpless.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he whispered and his subharmonics sang wildly. "I'm sorry Shepard, I didn't... I didn't know..." He turned around, humming in shame and started to leave the room.

"Stay where you are, Garrus Vakarian."

Her voice was all command and he realized in this instant why people followed her orders. The turian military training ingrained in him almost made him snap to attention.

Her voice turned softer. "It's not so bad, human skin is just very sensitive. I've had irritations before." She took his hand and pulled him back to her on the bed. "Look, I've put hand-lotion on it and it's already starting to get better."

He looked down on her thighs but he couldn't really see a difference, it was still red and welted. Garrus felt bile rise up in his gizzard and he swallowed it down hard. "I can't do this to you again, I can't..."

"What? You're not going to have sex with me again?" She looked him straight in the eyes. "Garrus, look, I'm not allergic or anything, this irritation is just from friction. And we can reduce friction, we could use oil or something like that. I'm not injured, I just got some scratches. How about you put some medigel on those scratches?"

He nodded, still humming his shame. He had never thought that this could be the reason why he would lose her. Not his family exiling him, not the disapproval from other humans or turians, or just learning that they really didn't have anything in common, but the simple incompatibility of their alien bodies. He had been so stupid.

Her soft touch on his mandibles shook him out of his depressing thoughts. Her voice was deep and warm and she was humming. He recognized it, she was humming love, as best as she could with her human voice. She pulled his head towards hers and pressed her forehead against his. His voices left him and he didn't dare to move.

She stopped humming and whispered, "Don't run away from me, I just found you again, C-Sec-Blue."

He froze. The rush of his own blood was loud, like a storm in his ears. Memories, pictures, sighs in the darkness, the soft smell of arousal, her arousal, her voice, it all stumbled in his mind at the speed of light.

Could it be? The silence stretched long, and then even longer. Finally he asked: “Alliance-Red?”

She smiled and it was so bright that he felt like he had to close his eyes. "Yes, my armored turian, it's me!"

"But your hair - it's not red," Garrus said and even to him it sounded incredibly dumb.

Shepard threw her head back and laughed. "You do know that humans can dye their hair different
colors, right? At least I hope so, human criminals would have a field day if they knew that they only had to dye their hair to be safe from recognition by C-Sec."

Garrus snorted. "We rely more on DNA-traces and voice matching to catch criminals. But, yes I know that the color can change, I don't know why I haven't thought about it."

She grabbed him roughly by his arms and looked at him with desperate eyes. "I had been looking for you, when I came back to the Citadel. I wanted to find you again but I had nothing to identify you. All I knew was blue armor and a blue visor and a long, crested fringe. Well guess what, all of C-Sec wears blue, and a visor is not uncommon either. I thought it could be you when Nihlus introduced us but I wasn’t sure, I could hardly walk up to you and smell your throat. But you saw me in the light, why didn’t you say something?"

He stretched his throat in embarrassment, "Back then, I had no experience with humans, you all sort of looked the same to me. I tried to remember your face but it was just gone. All I knew was your bright red hair. I looked for hair like that everywhere for a long time."

"Why did you stop?"

"Because I started looking for black with a blue streak," he said, taking her hands and stroking her wrist where he felt her pulse beat under her skin. "I have never forgotten that night, have never forgotten you. You were my first..."

"First alien?" she asked with a laugh.

"Yes, first alien but also first... the first time that it wasn't just about release. It felt like more..." He didn't know how to put it into words, how he had been looking for her like for a piece that he needed to build himself.

"We didn't even know each other, we didn't really talk. I had no idea who you were, I had never been this close to a turian before," she said with a quiet voice. "It was ridiculous, but I just couldn't get you out of my head. I read up on turians, what I could find on the Alliance networks. It was mostly about your military, structure, strategies. That knowledge really helped me when I met Nihlus, I knew how to make a turian salute. Impressed the hell out of the turians."

"I sort of did the same, I learned about humans, how they acted, what their faces mean," Garrus said. "I got really into that and learned about expressions and micro-expressions. I'm considered an expert on humans at C-Sec because I can spot when humans lie."

She raised an eyebrow at that. "Now that is a useful ability to have I must say. But how could you have missed that humans can change their appearance as well, like with hair color?"

"I don't know." He shook his head, he couldn't understand it himself. "Somehow you and your red hair were inseparably in my mind."

She folded up her legs in a way that made him cringe, but apparently this position was comfortable for her. She laid her head all the way back and was shaking out her short hair. Her nakedness was obviously not bothering her, she saw no need to cover herself up.

Shepard had a far away look on her face when she spoke. "I had it blonde, almost white for a while. And it was longer than it is now. Back in the beginning of the N program it was bright red, as red as possible. But the higher ups convinced me that I was standing out like a beacon on fire on the battlefield, so I changed it. I dyed it black but it looked so boring, so I put in the blue streak to make it look a bit more... me."
Garrus put his hand in her hair, letting it slip through his fingers. It was about half as long as his fingers, not quite long enough to wrap it around them. "You had it longer?"

She leaned into his touch. "Yes, it was quite long. But when you dye it, it gets damaged after a while and it's not soft and shiny but scruffy. I could twist it in a tail and it would stay that way all day. If I keep it at this length it still looks and feels nice, and I can still dye it the way I want it. And I prefer not having an easy to grab handle on my head, I can never understand how women, who get in combat situations on a regular basis, can keep their hair long."

He tried to grab her hair and remembered that he had learned in combat lessons that humans felt pain when you pulled their hair. He pulled carefully and noticed how she followed his movement. It was like he could control her that way and he let go hurriedly. He didn't want to hurt her more than he had already done today.

Garrus noticed the scratches on her skin again, red marks everywhere, some with dried blood on them. He opened the medigel pack and applied the gel to the scratches. Her skin changed almost instantly, the scratches didn't look quite as angry anymore. Her shoulders and her waist had the most scratches and Garrus realized that they came from his talons. He kept them short and blunt, as it was custom for turians who worked with aliens, but he had neglected his care of them recently.

He sighed, "I'm sorry I scratched you, Jane. My talons are usually blunted but I had forgotten to blunt them again in the last week."

She kissed his mandible and he felt her smile. "I didn't even notice it when it happened, you had me distracted so well." She pressed herself against him, her arms around his cowl and she kissed the side of his face. He raised his head, giving her free access to his throat without even thinking about it and he hummed happily when she kissed the skin there. He began stroking her, feeling the softness of her skin.

She was so soft; too soft.

He took hold of her by her shoulders and made her look at him. "How can you want this? My skin-my plates hurt you. I'm scratching you, I might even draw blood one day just because my teeth are so sharp. How can you possibly like that?"

She looked at him and he tried to decipher the emotions on her face. Was it fear, did she fear him? But there was strength in her gaze, a will and a mind that were not easily scared. Her voice was strong when she spoke.

"Listen, I know this is not a fairytale romance. You are not going to change into a dashing blonde prince by a kiss from me. This is an interspecies romance and nobody said those are easy. But we will find a way because what we have, what we are - it's just too good. I'm not giving up if you don't."

Garrus felt like he was overflowing with emotions, too numerous to name them. He took an urgent breath and tried to find the words to tell her how he could never give her up. I love you, Jane, I will never stop loving you.

"I... I'm not giving up." He pressed his forehead against hers and felt a small amount of his marking scent releasing. Maybe it was too early for that but he didn't care. "I missed you so much. I was so afraid when I heard about Elysium. I'm not giving up."

"I'm glad. I missed you too," Shepard said with a smile. "I actually felt kind of silly, we hardly knew each other apart from, well... sex." She grinned at him. "But I missed you like... I don't know, like
I've been with you forever." Her face was deep red now and he recognized the embarrassment.

He stroked her face, still pressing against her forehead. "Don't be embarrassed, I feel the same way."

"Good," she whispered. Then she looked down on her thighs. "Now to the problem at hand. I'm afraid we have to take a little break to let my skin heal." She felt over the irritated area with her fingertips.

Garrus flinched when he looked down on the area. "How long will that hurt?"

She smiled at him. "Oh, it doesn't really hurt, it's just overly sensitive now. The lotion has already helped and if we put some medigel on it it will probably be fine in a few hours."

"And the scratches? There is blood..."

"It's just scratches, nothing bad." She was stroking his mandibles. "You worry too much. I know you turians think we squishy humans are weak but we are tougher than you think. Granted, we bruise easily but we don't let it bother us all that much."

Garrus leaned into her touch with a hum of worry vibrating through him. "Back in basic we had some Shanxi veterans talk to us about humans. One of them told us that he saw humans fall down, injured, losing half of their blood and still get up again to fight. We didn't believe him of course."

"Yeah, we can endure a lot if we have to. Some scratches are not going to stop me. Have you seen the big new one on my back?" She turned around and he noticed for the first time a line of dark red scratches, taped with skin grafts going from her right shoulder diagonally to her left hip. "I took a shot to the shoulder, the crappy shields managed to protect me but the punch knocked me back two meters. I fell against a steel beam and the armor cracked and cut into the skin. Hurt like hell. That piece of shit armor didn't even have medigel dispensers so I ran around with it for two days, it got infected of course."

Garrus stared at her back. Soft, pale skin, but there were many marks on her. Scratches, scars, it was a testament to the fact that the soft skinned humans were much tougher than they looked. He had seen that before with humans he had brought in at C-Sec, fresh from a barfight, bleeding all over the floor but still up and ready to fight.

He squeezed some medigel out from the pack and put it on the scratches on her back. "Put some on the skin grafts as well please," she said. He carefully applied the substance on the edges of the grafts and he noticed that they had already started to connect to the skin. They would soon be completely healed. After he had treated her back, he put medigel on the scratches on her shoulders. She held out her hand and he squeezed some medigel on it. She took care of the scratches on her waist. They worked silently together.

After he was done with her back and shoulders, he turned her around again and carefully spread medigel over the red irritation on her thighs. He couldn't help himself, he let out a low rumble as he stroked her. With her legs folded up like that he could directly see her glistening folds. She was wet and he growled arousal when her scent hit his nose.

He cleaned his fingers on the sheets and then saw the little tube with lotion she had used. Putting some of the lotion on his fingers he went back to the apex of her thighs. He stroked around her labia, opening her soft lips and circled around her clitoris. Her breath hitched and she held on firmly to his cowl.

"Garrus," she whispered, "you don't have to..." Her eyes were wide, staring at him.
"But I want to..." he growled.

"Okay, then don't stop..." she said with a sigh and fell backwards on the bed.

He moved up between her legs, keeping his hand between them. He used the bud of his thumb to circle around her clitoris. He thought about using another finger to enter her but he was wary of his talons. He had scratched her up once already.

He listened for her sighs and whimpers like it was the most wonderful music. She raised her head and smiled at him. "Garrus? Can you, maybe use your tongue?"

Garrus stopped moving for a second. "Have you seen my mouth? Hard plates, sharp teeth, does that sound like something you want down there?"

She giggled and fell back, her arms and legs spread wide. "Try it with your tongue if you like. I trust you, Garrus."

He felt a warmth roll over him. Trust. Trust was huge. She trusted him.

He moved close to her folds and sniffed. She smelled pleasantly and he dipped the tip of his tongue against her labia lips. It wasn't bad, so he took another long lick from the back all the way to the front, crossing her clitoris. She let out a moan that was downright scandalous. He licked her again and again, enjoying her taste and her moans.

" Spirits, Jane, you taste so good. I had no idea," he growled. His tongue lashed around her labia and over her nub and he licked up every bit of her. He saw her hands grabbing and tightening in the sheets. Her breath came in gasps, whimpering sounds telling him that she was close. He intensified his effort, licking up her juice and swirling around her clitoris. Suddenly her spine tensed and she arched away from the bed with a hoarse cry. He felt her orgasm, tiny drops of fluid dripped from her and he licked them up, loving her sweet and salty taste.

With a sigh she relaxed and her fingers freed themselves from the sheets. She raised herself up on her elbows and smiled at him. He moved up to her smile like it drew him to her. He had to kiss that smile. Finally lying next to her he pressed his mouth against hers, loving the feeling of her soft lips against his mouthplates. They kissed, her tongue stroking his plates, her fingers playing on his mandibles and when he opened his eyes again she was looking directly at him.

"You are perfect, do you know that?" she whispered, her voice still velvety deep. He rumbled his pleasure at hearing that, thinking of something to say.

"I've only heard handsome before but I'll add it to the list," he muttered.

She giggled and knocked his shoulder. "Cocksure little turian." With another giggle she looked down towards his groin, grinning. "Speaking of which, what do we have here?" she said and ghosted a fingertip over his erect penis pressing against her side. He groaned at the touch, he was so turned on, he could hardly think straight.

Her fingers closed around his shaft with familiar firmness and she whispered in his ear, "How about if we take a shower and take care of that in the best way that we know."

"Oh Spirits, yes please!" he groaned and almost threw her out of the bed, trying to get up as fast as possible. She laughed, deep and warm and ran after him, placing her arms around his waist and shoved him into the shower. She pressed herself against his back again, like she had done this morning. When the warm water trickled down on them, she touched him with her wonderful hands, her lips and her tongue caressing the skin between his backplates and she moved her hands down,
stroking, circling, and he lost himself in the sensations until the flood of pleasure overcame him.

"So, what are your plans for the rest of the day?" Shepard asked, stepping out of the bedroom and looking over to the kitchen area. Garrus was preparing himself some cava while he waited for the coffee and breakfast to arrive that he had ordered for her.

He looked over to her. His human girlfriend was wearing one of his white, sleeveless sleep tunics. The opening on top was too wide for her so she let it slip over one of her shoulders, making a very enticing display of her lovely collarbone that she probably wasn't aware of. When she stood, the tunic went all the way to the floor, looking indeed like a dress on her. She had taken a blue scarf from his closet and had tied it around her waist, accentuating it.

With a bit more decoration it would have looked like a dress a turian woman would wear for her bonding. He had to hold on to the kitchen counter for a second as his knees wanted to give out under him. "You look so beautiful." Like a beautiful bondmate.

She spun around once, swirling the dress and laughing. "You better not get used to this because I almost never wear dresses." She flashed him her smile again and in combination with the dress it made his head spin. "But I can wear this when I'm with you, if you like." She winked at him.

She carelessly jumped on the couch with her knees, completely unaware of the turians near heart attack he almost had. Placing her arms on the back of the couch and resting her chin on top of her hands she looked at him seriously.

"Can I stay here with you for my vacation? You don't have to hang around with me all the time, so don't worry, but if I could stay, I would pick up some clothes and my toothbrush from storage. I'm not going to bother you if you don't want it, you don't have to entertain me, you need your space and I respect that..."

He walked over to her in two long strides and bent his knee to get down on her level.

"Hush, woman." He pressed his forehead against hers. "You would make me very happy if you stayed here."

She sighed in relief. Her hands went to the back of his neck, stroking the soft skin under his fringe. "I'm so glad, I like being with you."

They stayed like that for a long time, her stroking his neck, him stroking her hair. When they broke apart, they were both breathing faster.

"About your plates and the friction they cause," she said, "do you have anything you could put on them to make them softer?" Her fingers were lightly touching the plates on his shoulder and his arm.

He tried to recall the contents of his medicine cupboard. "I have a salve for cracked plates but it smells kind of nasty."

She shook her head at that. "No, we don't want that. Wait," she opened her omni-tool and initiated a search. With a triumphant smile she showed him a shop-page she had found. "Look, there is a whole asari cosmetic line for asari with turian or krogan bondmates. I knew it! Asari skin may be not quite as tender as human skin but still - they have dealt with this problem before." She pointed to some
ointments on the translucent screen, "See? There is one for you, 'To soften the plates of your mate,' and there is one for me, 'To reduce friction on your sensitive skin'. I'll order it right away, it'll be here in a few hours."

She threw her arms around his neck. "I told you we would find a solution." Her smile lit up the room and he kissed her with everything he could give until he ran out of air.

"I will never doubt you again, Jane," he whispered as he pressed his mandible against her cheek.

"You better not!" she exclaimed, and there was seriousness hidden under the playful jab.

Garrus looked around his apartment and started a list of things he needed to buy today, now that he knew that Shepard would stay with him. He needed levo-food, levo-beer and other beverages. Did she need special soap? He definitely needed to buy a pillow for her, she had slept under the pillowroll last night.

Shepard had left after a set of clothes for her had been delivered. She had ordered civilian clothes because she wanted to wear something other than her uniform today. She had told him that she had to have another check-up at the hospital and then had to meet Captain Anderson for an informal talk. Anderson was more like a father for her, besides her aunt that had raised her. He had always looked out for her and her career, and had probably been just as worried about her as Garrus had been.

Later she was to meet friends, the ‘Badass-Girls Circle’ she called them. They wanted to meet after lunch and Shepard had promised to send him a message where they were so that he could join her later.

For now he had to write that report he had promised to Frank and then do some shopping. His omni-tool showed him a message from Frank and he agreed to meet him at the markets on the Presidium.

Garrus stared at his friend in disbelief.

"You're leaving C-Sec?"

They had sat down for a quick snack at a little cafe on the Presidium and his friend had just broken the news to him. "Why? What are you going to do instead?" he asked, a bit louder than he had intended.

Frank leaned back in his chair and fixed on him with his eyes. "Garrus, when shit hits the fan, you have to make a decision. And that decision is your own and yours alone to make. Sarah's death..." his eyes showed the pain he felt when he mentioned her name, "it made me question everything. I'm a fucking C-Sec officer and I couldn't even protect her! What are we doing here, birdy?" He leaned forward and pointed his finger at Garrus. "You and I, we are trying to do good, but we are not getting anywhere. Criminals walk away, grinning at us, while secret organisations rise to power and nobody knows about it."
They got some annoyed looks from other patrons and Frank lowered his voice. "I'm tired of cleaning up the mess, I'm tired of seeing the aftermath of some assholes decision to let a black-ops operation go rogue in the Alliance and nobody seems to be bothered by it. You know, I did some digging about Cerberus. You remember that story how a whole platoon almost got killed by Thresher Maws on Akuze? Cerberus appears in so many reports about Akuze it's not even funny anymore."

Garrus felt his frustration and knew what Frank was talking about, but was leaving C-Sec the right solution?

"So you're joining the Alliance again? Or going into politics? The politics will drive you crazy either way, you know it!" Garrus couldn't quite imagine his old partner, hotheaded and foul mouthed, as a politician but he had to admit the man sitting before him wasn't really his old partner anymore. Frank Johnson had matured and he was a man with a mission now. Garrus admired that, that he had found his purpose and decided to act on it.

"No, I'm going to be a journalist," Frank said with determination. "We need real news, not that stuff that Westerlund is calling news with the xenophobic bullshit they spread. I know this one guy, he has a small news site but with great potential to tell real stories. A human woman, Emily Wong, is working for him, she has a real knack for investigative journalism. I'm going to join her and we'll do some honest reporting. Getting down to the meat of the shit."

Every turian was raised to find his consilium, his purpose, and follow it. Garrus wasn’t sure if he had found his consilium yet but Frank seemed to have found his. This was something worthy of supporting his friend in.

“Yeah, you want to do that right thing, I know it and I’m not going to talk you out of it. You are my best friend and a good man, and you should do what you have to do. I know you will make this galaxy a better place.”

For a second old Johnson beamed back at him with a boyish grin and then he put his hand on Garrus’s shoulder as well and looked at him seriously. “Thank you my friend, that means a lot. I will aim for that and I know you will do the same. You will make a difference in this galaxy too, I know it.”

They both held the pressure on each others shoulder a bit longer, and then they nodded, dropping their hands. Garrus felt slightly dizzy, so many things in his life were changing.

Frank leaned forward and then asked in a low, conspiratorial voice, "So, this Lieu... - no - Commander Shepard. What is she like?" He grinned at him and Garrus knew he was not easily getting out of this interrogation.

Garrus and Frank had parted and promised to contact each other later. Frank wanted to meet Shepard and Garrus looked forward to spend some more time with his friends. He sent a message to Nihlus to see if he was around too.

He returned home to receive and store all the deliveries of the things he had bought. His kitchen was overflowing with food packages that could easily be heated. A crate full of human alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages was taking up space on his small countertop. He had to move it into the living room area and he realized for the first time that his apartment was not really made for two
people. Especially two people of different species.

As he put the new pillow on one side of his bed, his omni-tool chimed with a call. He looked carefully who it was. He knew that his sister had tried to contact him once but she had ended the call when he had taken it. He wasn't sure what that meant, either she didn't want to talk to him or his father was somehow preventing her from contacting him. Both scenarios were possible.

This time it was a call from Shepard and he felt a silly dash of happiness in his gizzard at that. *Is it always going to be like this?*

Shepard's face appeared on the screen, smiling at him. "Hey, Garrus!"

He spread his mandibles in a wide grin that she hopefully interpreted as what it was: The stupid grin of a turian hopelessly in love.

"Hey, Shepard."

"The girls and me are in a bar." She waved her arm around so that he got a shaky view of the inside of some bar. The camera panned over many glasses on the table and Garrus was sure that Shepard had drunk the contents of a few of them. "We sufficiently talked about you and your fabulousness and now the girls want to meet you. I'm sending you the coordinates. Don't worry, I already told them that they can only watch, they can't have you."

She suddenly moved her arm close to her mouth and by the darkness that the camera showed for a second he assumed that she had tried to send him a kiss. She giggled slightly and whispered at him. "They can't have you, only I can." Another giggle came from her before she moved the arm away from her face again. "I don't know if Nihlus is around, but maybe Frank could come as well? Not that they can compete with your fabulousness but they can take second place." She grinned sheepishly at him.

Garrus grinned back, he liked slightly drunk Shepard. "I'll take care of it, I'll be right there." He closed the call, smiling happily at himself. After sending messages to Frank and Nihlus he made his way to the coordinates that Shepard had sent him.

A short ride later he arrived at a bar on one of the wards, just off the Presidium. The room was dark but his eyes adjusted quickly. In the back of the room, in a booth partially obscured from the rest of the room, four human women were sitting on a bench around a circular table. They were laughing and drew the attention of almost everyone in the bar. Garrus noticed with a practised sweep across the room that most of the people were human, but he saw two salarians, a turian and a group of asari as well.

He made his way over to the booth and when Shepard saw him, she scrambled out of the bench. Two of the women had to get up to let her out, one had slightly darker skin than Shepard and long brown hair, the other had even darker skin and her curly black hair was cut very short. Shepard bounced over to him and pulled him over to the table by his arm.

She smiled her big smile and held his arm with both hands. "Ladies? That's him. Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec officer and soon to be ANIS investigator if people listen to me."

Three human smiles turned to him, eyes travelling up and down, unashamedly checking him out. At almost the same moment they all turned back to Shepard and gave a short nod of approval to her. Garrus felt like he had passed an important test just now.

The large, dark skinned woman with the short hair stepped over to him and grabbed his hand in a
rough handshake. "Hello Garrus, very nice to meet you." She pointed with her head towards Shepard who was remarkably quiet. "This one has been raving about you for the last hour, it's good to finally put a face to the subject of her infatuation."

The other women were giggling and the third one, whose hair was half black and half pink, purred. "And such a nice face he has..." The dark woman took a step back, "And those shoulders, gawd, to die for!" The woman with the long hair circled around him, looking him over, "Have you seen this waist?" She made an appreciative sound. Garrus stretched his throat. *This must be how asari strippers feel all the time.*

Garrus looked down towards Shepard with slight shock, had she told her friends about them? Shepard's face was deep red and she smiled at him apologetic.

"I'm Mary by the way," the woman said with her deep voice, "and you don't have to worry, we know everything." She made a sweeping motion with her arm that encompassed all of them. "No secrets and no xenophobes in Shepard's Circle."

Finally Shepard herself spoke up. "It's not Shepard's Circle, it's the Badass-Girls Circle!" Her hands squeezed his arm.

Mary shook her head and the third woman laughed. "Look at little Miss Humble here. Like it or not, this is the Shepard Circle." They all grinned at Jane and she threw her arms up in defeat.

Shepard went to get a chair for him that would be easier for him to sit on with his spurs. Mary stepped closer to Garrus and whispered, "You watch over her because she's important. She's gonna rule the world one day, mark my words." Her eyes pinned his in seriousness. Garrus nodded towards her. Shepard was going to change the galaxy one day, of that he had no doubt.

His human girlfriend returned with a turian style chair and after he had sat down he suddenly found his lap full of her. She gave him a sloppy kiss on his mandible and then looked forward, pressing her cheek against the wet splotch.

"Come on, Hyun Su, take a picture."

The woman with the half-pink hair held up her omni-tool and made a recording of them. Shepard turned her face back to him and when he had turned to her as well, she gave him a real kiss. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Mary was using her large frame to shield them from onlookers. With a relieved subharmonic rumble he let himself fall into the kiss.

They kissed till the women were making funny noises and told them to get a room. Shepard's skin was flushed red and with a sigh she let go of him and sat down on the bench next to his chair. Garrus had to take a few deep breaths to calm his gizzard down.

Hyun Su was fiddling with her omni-tool and Garrus held up his omni-tool towards her. "Could I have that recording as well?"

She smiled at him, "Of course, sweetie."

She transferred the files, she had made a video and turned some frames into still-pictures. There was a picture of their faces pressed against each other, grinning at the camera. Garrus thought he looked rather stupid. Another picture showed them kissing but there was one from the moment before that he liked best.

It showed them looking at each other, a smile on their faces and a look of promises in their gaze. He felt Shepard's hand on his and she quietly said, "That's my favourite."
Garrus looked at her. "Yes, it's mine too," he said and got lost in her brilliant smile again.

Chapter End Notes

I think I finally outsmutted myself now, so I could actually squeeze some plot in there.

It's impossible with these two, I need to tie them up or something, they go at each other like horny teenagers.

You probably learned more about dyeing hair than you ever wanted to know in this chapter. That's not even going to be the worst of weird human things Garrus will learn about.

With Garrus tongue and mouth, I have this feeling that I read lines like that somewhere so if I'm stealing from one of the many stories I read on this site I sincerely apologize. I will give credit if I find the story where the sentences came from.

Thanks to Credete for editing and suffering through all the smut.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for reading and commenting and bookmarking, you are all wonderfully supportive. Thanks go to Credete again who had to fight the universe to get this chapter edited.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A whole freighter full of dead bodies. That's the kind of sight nobody wishes to see before their first cava. Garrus was immensely grateful for the filters in his helmet as the krogan and asari corpses around him had already begun to decay. The floor was sticky with orange and purple blood and greenish fluids, mingled and congealed to form a multi colored gel.

Other than the sick gel on the floor and the blood speckles on the walls, the ship looked pristine. Even though the dead all seemed to be mercs with plenty of battle experience, they evidently didn't fight back. They had all died by headshots, some from the back, some from the front. Even the three krogan had been killed by headshots, vicious looking wounds in their headcrests, probably from a shotgun.

Garrus stepped over the bodies of two asari and looked around the cockpit. The dead pilot still sat in the chair, slumped back at a strange angle. The ship, originating from somewhere in the Terminus, had been programmed with a course to the Citadel and had jumped out of the Widow relay, slowly drifting towards it. The panels in the cockpit were still active from the last input that had been put in. Garrus had steered the ship from the co-pilots seat to leave the pilots inputs untouched. He checked over the navigation inputs, they looked simple and professional, practically textbook like.

He sighed and programmed a drone to trace the whole ship for DNA. He didn't expect anything useful, whoever had killed the mercs was probably just another merc, a freelancer maybe. He downloaded the ships logs and anything he could find of the inner ship sensors. Then he retraced his steps towards the airlock and advised the forensic crew to take pictures and samples of everything. He received the expected muffled replies that this wasn't their first time doing their job, and he spread his mandibles in a grin, forgetting for a second that they couldn't see it under his helmet. He made a short laughing sound instead.

Stepping out on the dock he released the clamps on his helmet and took it off. He breathed in the mostly clean Citadel air and made his way back to C-Sec. After checking the time he placed a call to Shepard back in his apartment. Frank had woken him early in the morning to tell him that he was on to get this ship into the docking area. Enough people had covered for him in the last two days so that when this rather unpleasant job came up, he had to do it. Without waking Shepard he had gotten up and had taken a shuttle towards the Widow relay.

The ship had jumped out of the mass relay, not answering the calls from Citadel control. No life signs had been detected. It was drifting, so someone had to board it and put it into controlled docking. That job had been given to Garrus. He had ordered the shuttle to drift alongside the freighter. After shooting an adhesive anchor over to the ship, he rappelled himself over to the airlock.
It had opened without delay, meaning that the door had not been locked. The inside of the ship was pressurized and heated against the harsh coldness of space but Garrus had still decided against taking his helmet off. One look at the multicolored goo on the floor had convinced him of keeping it on.

After maneuvering the ship into the docking bay with a slightly louder bang than he had wished, he had ordered C-Sec forensics to come on board. He didn't expect much to come out of it, a fight among mercs tended to yield the expected results of one merc alive when others were not.

His call finally was answered and the screen showed him a disheveled looking Shepard who made some noise in greeting him and then buried her face back into the pillow.

"Good morning sunshine," he called out in a greeting that he had heard in an old Earth movie. He liked that expression, it was close to the many turian endearments involving the sun over Palaven. Even turians who had never been to Palaven in their life would praise their mates with the beauty of the golden sun rising over the silver mountains of Palaven. 'Sunshine' was just close enough to that picture for Garrus without entering the seriousness of turian poetry for bondmates.

Shepard was clearly not in the mood for endearments of poetry, her answering grunt sounded more like a krogan in a bad mood waking up.

"Hey, sunshine, I just wanted to tell you that I'm at C-Sec today, there's food in the kitchen for you and there is even a coffee maker. I'm sure you know how to use that one." The word 'coffee' seemed to have magical abilities as the woman actually turned her face to her omni-tool and looked at him.

"Hey, Garrus, where are you?"

'I'm at C-Sec, I have to work today. How are you feeling?" he asked, remembering that Shepard had been more than slightly drunk last night. He practically had to carry her home and she had fallen asleep as soon as her position was close to horizontal.

An indistinguishable sound came from her and some words that his translator didn't attempt to make sense of. She raised herself up on her elbows and brought her arm with the omni-tool in front of her. That way she was looking down at him and her scruffy hair fell forward to frame her face. His talons were itching to comb through them. Finally she smiled a little at him but then scrunched up her face in pain.

"Ugh, headache," she said, her voice rough.

"There are pills on the table," Garrus said and he saw her searching for them.

She gave him a little smile again. "Pills against headaches and coffee - you are an angel." She sat up to take some of the pills and drank all the water he had put on the table for her. "When are you coming back, my angel?" she asked, now looking much more lively.

Garrus sent her his shift calendar for the coming week. He was aching - aching - to go to her right now, to kiss her smile and trail his fingers along her soft waist. But he actually had to show some effort at work this week to at least hit the average for this month. "I'll call you again later this afternoon and I'll see you tonight after my shift is done."

"I would like to do some workout today, maybe we could meet at a fitness center?" Shepard asked, her face disappearing for a second as she stretched. His perspective shifted and he found himself looking down on her almost naked form as she stretched out her arms. He groaned slightly.

"I usually work out at C-Sec's center, I can bring you along. I'll call you before I'll be heading there and we will meet at C-Sec. What are you going to do with the rest of your day?" Garrus felt like he
wanted to prolong the conversation, wanted to keep talking to her.

"First I'm going back to sleep. Then I'm going to slouch on the couch and read, and sleep some more. And then... I haven't decided yet," she said, falling back on her pillow and placing her arm next to her so that he could still see one of her blue eyes peeking over the pillow. "Thanks for the pillow, by the way, that was very thoughtful of you, my angel." That smile, again.

Garrus sighed, he was still standing in the docking area and he already got funny looks from the turian dockworkers who could recognize a lovesick smile on a turian. "I have to go now, Jane, I'll talk to you later."

"Alright, be careful." She winked at him and ended the call. Garrus breathed in, trying to calm his fast beating heart. He started walking again but urgent calls from the freighter stopped him.

"Officer Vakarian! Hello, sir!" Someone from the forensic crew was waving him back.

Slightly annoyed, Garrus made his way back to the ships airlock and fixed the young turian with an intense stare. "What?" He barked.

The young guy with the green markings looked at him unfazed and pointed inside the ship. "Your drone, sir, it's complaining about you leaving range."

Garrus stretched his throat in embarrassment, he had never before forgotten his drone anywhere. He trilled apologetic at the young guy for barking at him like that but the young turian just shrugged his shoulders. That was a distinctly human gesture and Garrus was surprised to see a turian use it.

He checked the drones progress on his omni-tool, it had swept over 90% of the ships area for DNA. He had to wait for a few more minutes until the drone returned to him and sent the data to his omni-tool before disappearing with a pop. The automatic search algorithms on his omni-tool went to work and Garrus could finally leave the foul smelling ship for good.

Back at C-Sec he took a quick look over the preliminary results of the DNA-Scan but so far it was like he had suspected. A bunch of dead mercenaries, some with long files at C-Sec. The only unusual thing about this case was that they all had died from very precise headshots. It looked more like a professional execution than a fight among mercs.

Garrus let the software churn away at the data and worked his way through the reports he had to write. As his father had always said, an arrest is nothing without the data trail binding it tight. Back in the beginning of Garrus's days at C-Sec, when his father was still a leading officer, his father had drilled that into him after one case had blown up in their faces. Aethius Vakarian had let a criminal named Kishpaugh go after Garrus had arrested him on shaky grounds. Kishpaugh was a criminal scumbag but evidence was hard to come by.

The resulting Vakarian shouting match in the C-Sec halls went down in the annals of C-Sec and was one of the reasons why the Executor had them never work together again. Garrus had been yelling at his father that he was so covered up in his rules that he didn't even know how bad the crime situation was on the Citadel. Aethius held against it with his tried and true rule of 'do it right or don't do it at all', ignoring how much shit went down in the lower wards while he sat at his desk, making data trails. His last words to his son about C-Sec was that he couldn't change the rules just because he didn't like them. They never spoke about work again after that.

Despite disagreeing with his father about the amount of data trails he had to tie together for a good case, he really did try to follow the mantra of doing it right or not doing it at all. Right now this meant mind numbing report writing, whether he liked it or not.
Two hours later Garrus was about ready to shoot the cava-maker or maybe just his cup. Something. Anything. Just to put an end to this.

He signed another datapad and sent the file to the database and decided to take a break. Outside in the main hall of C-Sec where the water dispensers and cava- and coffee-makers were installed, a small crowd was greeting him with friendly nods. Somehow his colleagues appeared friendlier towards him than usual. He had always been a bit of an outsider in the force. He was the only turian who had been friends with a human and had gotten some flack for it. Somehow that had changed.

Maybe it was the "All Together Festival", or something that Frank had done while he was in the hospital. Or maybe it was the attack on Elysium reminding everyone that every species faced the same problems in this galaxy. Garrus saw turians joking with humans, salarians talking agitated with asari and turians. He made a mental note to tell Shepard about it later. *She would love that.*

Only a few turians remained clustered in one area all by themselves, looking suspiciously at the C-Sec officers from other species. *You can't make everybody happy.*

Nodding another friendly greeting to an asari ex-commando and another to the turian next to her, he realized with shame that he didn't even know anybody's name. When it came to interspecies understanding, he really should put in more effort than just having a human girlfriend that nobody was supposed to know about.

He was searching for Frank but couldn't find him. In the back of the room he noticed the human Katrina Peters in an argument with the salarian Berdin Lerv and made his way over to them. Both of them had been assigned as a junior-team together, an idea that Frank had had. Two rookies were teamed together and got mentored by a veteran. That way they could make valuable experiences and still be under the watch of seasoned C-Sec officers. Peters and Lerv had been assigned to Garrus but as he had been suspended and then been kind of out of it after the attack on Elysium, another colleague had taken them under his wing; Garrus felt guilty about that.

As he came closer, he heard his name come up and when they saw him they both shut their mouths. The sudden silence was kind of embarrassing. Garrus looked between them with a smirk, fluttering his mandibles.

"Now what is going on and why have you been talking about me?" he asked and made his voice sound threatening with a deep thrum of his subharmonics. It had the desired effect of nervousness in the two people in front of him. Peters turned deep red and cast her eyes down, Lerv was blinking rapidly and his horns turned slightly green. He let them suffer for a bit before he changed his vocals to a more friendly tone. Lerv relaxed immediately, evidently having a good understanding of turian subharmonics. The human woman looked slightly confused but she gradually relaxed as well. Berdin Lerv had apparently decided that he would tell the whole story and in typical salarian fashion started talking right away and way too fast.

"We made a routine check down in the Zakera wards in the Factory district and we met a group of traders, checked their info, everything fine but there was one asari who looked kind of nervous..." Lerv rattled on. Garrus stopped him with a raised hand.

"Let's go into my office and you tell me everything there," he said.

Lerv looked like someone had stolen his cookies. "But I was just saying..."

Katrina Peters took his arm and pulled him along while Berdin kept on muttering about wasting time. Patience was not a salarian virtue.
When they had reached his office, Garrus sat down on his desk and motioned to Berdin that he was now ready to hear the story. The salarian spoke even faster than before like he had to make up for the lost time and Garrus turned to Katrina with a helpless look. She stopped her salarian teammate and handed Garrus a small datapad.

"The nervous asari handed us this pad when nobody was looking," Katrina explained, "and whispered that we should bring it to Vakarian. Then she went back to them." She gave him an apologetic smile, "We weren't sure if we should give it to you right away, we didn't know if it was legit, you were so busy, sir, and the name Vakarian is not exactly unknown at C-Sec. With you and your father..."

Garrus waved his hand, he didn't need to hear about his father's famousness at C-Sec. He turned the pad in his hand but nothing appeared on the screen. He looked up to the two young officers. "Next time someone has something for Vakarian, you inform me right away, okay?"

The pad suddenly sprang to life, "voice match confirmed" sounded out and writing appeared on the screen. It read, 'Help me Garrus, something is going on, maybe Red Sand or slavery. I can't leave, they'll kill me. Please help me! Don't trust anyone, they have connections at C-Sec. Dalinia'.

"Who's Dalinia?" Peters asked.

"An old friend who is not even supposed to be on the Citadel," he answered. He did not mention that she had also been a frequent sex partner for him. He turned to his young colleagues. "Tell me exactly where and how you got this datapad."

The human woman and the salarian man looked at each other and then started talking at the same time. He stopped them and then had Peters tell him first while Lerv was fidgeting beside her.

"We were doing a routine checkup on the traders in the Zakera Ward, in the lower Factory district, comparing orders and transport lists, the usual."

The salarian couldn't keep quiet anymore and took over, rapidly telling the rest of the story. "The asari had seen us and faked an accident with a cargo box. The contents, some kind of beads or beans spilled over the floor and as she was cleaning it up, she moved closer to us. Peters was crouching down to help her and the asari gave her the pad and said..."

The human woman took the conversation over again, slightly annoyed at having been interrupted. "She said, 'give this to Officer Vakarian, only him, no one else,' and then some human called her back."

Garrus thought about his options. He needed to help Dalinia, that was without question but he needed a team. According to Dalinia's warning he couldn't trust other C-Sec officers but he also couldn't go alone. He looked at the two rookies in front of him and sighed. "Dalinia warned me that these guys have someone at C-Sec to help them, so I can't ask any of the other guys. Do you two have combat training?"

They both straightened and said simultaneously, "Yes, sir!" Garrus had to smile a little at their eagerness. But then his smile turned to worry, they were so young, inexperienced. Hardly the kind of backup he needed to take up arms against a bunch of Red Sand smugglers.

Berdin Lerv spoke up. "But if you can't trust anyone, why do you trust us?"

Katrina Peters answered for Garrus. "Because we are hardly far enough up the foodchain to be helpful for a bunch of criminals. Bribing us would have served no purpose, we are clean by default."
Garrus nodded at that, it was true. "You two go down to the armory, armor up and pick your weapons. Limit yourself to two, maybe three weapons, you don't want to clank around like you're selling cooking ware. I'll meet you down there in a few minutes. Don't talk to anybody about this case, understood?"

Two eager, "Yes, sir!"'s were called out and the young man and woman disappeared. Garrus went through his options, he needed more than just two rookies without combat experience if he wanted to help Dalinia without getting killed. He called Frank, who answered after a considerable long time.

Frank had arrived in the bar late last night and Hyun Su and Luiza, the third woman in Shepard's Badass-Girls Circle, had instantly taken a liking to him. They had involved him in a complicated drinking game and when he had left with Shepard, the three of them were supporting each other to not fall down. Garrus had carried Shepard on his shoulder and together with Mary, who had been surprisingly sober, made sure that Frank got to his apartment and the girls to their hotel.

Waking up now, Frank looked considerably worse than Shepard had this morning and Garrus felt a little sorry for him. But he needed his help, he needed someone he could trust.

"Good morning, monkeyman. You have to get up."

"Fuck you, birdy," Frank grumbled with his voice almost inaudible. He didn't even open his eyes.

"Seriously, I need you down in Zakera Ward in the Factory District. Dalinia is in trouble, possibly Red Sand smugglers." An urgent trill left him that made Frank flinch.

"Why don't you ask one of the guys who isn't very hungover and practically still asleep?" Frank had at least raised his head now and his eyes were open.

"I can't trust anybody, they have an inside connection."

"Ah, fuck." Frank groaned as he got up. The camera picture switched off as Frank started moving about and Garrus heard him rattle a can of pills. Hopefully he had something that would sober him up quickly. His voice still reflected many drinks and lots of singing from the previous night.

"Send me the coordinates, birdy, I'll be there in twenty, I just have to grab a coffee on the way."

"Armor up and bring guns," Garrus reminded him.

"Fuck yeah," was the friendly reply before they ended the call. Garrus placed another call, he knew one more person who could help him and who he could trust.

His call was answered immediately and he was greeted with an intriguing view of a little dent on Shepard's stomach, a belly button he remembered her calling it.

"Hey, sunshine," he said, his subharmonics singing to her.

The camera turned up to her smiling face, "Hey, angel, you miss me already?" She was still mostly naked and Garrus couldn't stop thinking about that belly button he had never paid attention to. He regretted that now.

He groaned quietly. "You have no idea how much. But I'm calling for a different reason. I know you're on vacation but a friend is in danger and I can't trust anybody at C-Sec. Could you help me bust a bunch of criminals? You could even use your toys, it would be nice to have someone to interrogate afterwards."
She grinned. "Now that sounds like my kind of party. Send me the coordinates, I'll throw some armor on and meet you there with my girls."

Garrus was confused, "What girls?" he asked.

Her grin got even wider. "My guns of course. The ladies are itching for a nice dance." She blinked one eye towards him and then closed the call. He took a deep breath to calm himself and shook his head to shake out all thoughts of belly buttons and a naked girlfriend who called her rifles 'girls'.

As he went down to the armory to get his weapons, his omni-tool beeped with the results of the DNA traces his drone had collected. Garrus scrolled through the list of names and numbered designations for unknowns. Nothing out of the ordinary. Down to the bottom of the list came the names with the least markers on the ship and he was about to close the list as one name jumped out at him. He almost stumbled against a doorframe as he stared at it.

**Arterius, Saren (Spectre, current location unknown)**

Saren Arterius?

Garrus's mind was churning the name over and over again while the skycar traveled to the Factory district. Saren Arterius. The simple case of some dead mercs had suddenly turned into a highly classified investigation because a Spectre was involved. He send a short note about the case to Pallin, this thing had just elevated itself to, 'have to tell the boss about it' level.

He noticed Katrina and Berdin looking at him, probably confused why he had been so silent the whole time. He gave them a short grin to indicate that everything was fine and turned back to his omni-tool. He rechecked the information they had from the freighter that was now sitting at the dock. All he could see was that it had come from the Terminus system, made a few stops in between, probably to discharge the drivecore and then jumped on a programmed course through the relays to the Widow-Relay by to the Citadel.

Nothing in the navigation logs indicated at what point the ship had turned into a ghost ship, carrying only decaying corpses on board. Garrus snarled in frustration and noticed how Katrina looked at him in fear. He trilled apologetic and then realized that he would have to use words with the human woman.

"Sorry, forgot that you don't have much experience with turian subharmonics. I didn't mean to scare you. I just received information for another case that had looked so simple and now isn't anymore and now I'm... frustrated. The sound you heard had nothing to do with you."

Berdin cut in in typical salarian fashion. "Yes, using subharmonics with humans can be problematic. They don't really hear them..."

Garrus smiled at that comment and interrupted him. "Wrong, they can hear it. Can even copy some sounds but of course they have only one voice box so they can't underline their speech with subharmonics."

Berdin stared at him like Garrus had just told him that the Citadel was made out of chocolate. Katrina snickered at that and then looked at Garrus again with great interest. "So the sounds have individual meanings? Why is that not commonly known?"
Garrus tried to shrug his shoulders like he had seen the turian at the docks do and noticed that Katrina seemed to immediately understand that he didn't know. That was a practical gesture, it acted like a trill of uncertainty that a turian would make.

Katrina now looked even more interested. "So humans can make the sounds too?"

Garrus realized that he needed to be a bit more cautious with the information he was spreading. That Shepard was able to make voices that sounded like subharmonic hums might not be a common ability, he had to be careful how much he revealed about that.

"That's what I heard somewhere," he mumbled and turned back to his omni-tool. Luckily Katrina didn't pry further and Berdin was busily working on his omni-tool. Probably researching human voices and subharmonics.

The skycar came to a stop a block away from the warehouse where Katrina and Berdin had met Dalinia. Frank was already sitting on some container with his head leaned back against the wall; he seemed to be asleep. Another skycar stopped next the one where Garrus and his young colleagues were sitting in. Shepard waved over to them and he saw Katrina stare slack jawed. "That's Commander Shepard! What is she doing here?"

Garrus didn't even try to hide his smug grin. "I called her, I asked her if she could help us."

Katrina and Berdin gaped at him. "You know Commander Shepard and just called her?" Berdin asked, his voice slightly higher than usual.

Garrus's smug grin made his mandibles flutter.

Shepard stepped out of the car and as she made her way over to them Garrus saw her transform from Jane, his soft human girlfriend to the hardened Commander the rest of the world knew. She exuded an air of authority and strength as she strode over to them. With a nod she greeted Garrus and he knew that this was the professional side of their relationship. There would be no kisses here.

"Officer Vakarian, would you explain the situation please," she said, her voice friendly but confident. Garrus fluttered his mandibles once at her and he saw from the tiny tug at the corner of her mouth that she noticed.

"In a moment, Commander," Garrus answered and walked over to Frank, who was still asleep on the container. Somehow he had managed to fall asleep without spilling the coffee from the cup in his hand.

"Hey, monkey, wake up!" Garrus called out to him and to Frank's credit he woke up right away, still not spilling his coffee. He took one look around and as his eyes fell on Shepard, he visibly relaxed.

"Ah, come on, birdy," he said, yawning and stretching, "what do you need me for if you have Commander Shepard with you? You could have let me sleep."

"Well, I couldn't do it without your unique brand of happiness that you bring into my day," Garrus said with a grin. He collected his small troop around himself and projected a map of the building from his omni-tool.

"The building has two entrances. The back entrance is small and two of us should be able to cover it. I suggest Frank and either Katrina or Berdin take that side. The rest of us take out the guards in front and enter the building from there." He looked around and saw everyone nodding.

He brought up a picture of Dalinia next to the map of the building. "We are looking for an asari
named Dalinia, a friend of mine." Garrus saw that Frank threw him a meaningful look and that Shepard noticed it. She didn't say anything but there would be questions later, of that he was sure. "We don't know how many people are in there or how many of them are hostile."

Shepard spoke up. "Will you talk to them first or do we go in shooting?" She clearly considered this to be his show and let him be in command. He was grateful for that.

"Let's try normal C-Sec procedure first, we don't have a warrant but there could be someone in immediate danger so that gives us an entry. Let's see how they react to that. Our priority is to get Dalinia out but I would also like a search of the place. Dalinia suspects Red Sand so we keep our helmets on and let our omni-tools search for the stuff. Everybody clear?"

The two young recruits answered with an enthusiastic, "Yes, sir!" while Shepard and Frank just nodded.

He fixed Berdin and Katrina with a look. "You two stay in cover, is that clear? This isn't combat training, this thing can go sideways in a second and I don't want to have to worry about you two! Understood?"

The answer was a notably less enthusiastic, "Yes, sir" from the kids.

Frank took Berdin with him around the back and Garrus walked with Katrina and Shepard toward the front door. Two guards raised their weapons and Garrus saw from the corner of his eye that Shepard raised a heavy pistol that looked so heavily modded that it looked more like a machinegun. He noticed Katrina behind her fumble with her pistol and he got a very bad feeling about this situation.

"Katrina, fall back. Stay behind cover and look for anyone coming up behind us." For a moment it looked like she wanted to object but then she nodded and hid behind a container.

Garrus stepped forward to one of the guards and projected his badge. "Vakarian, C-Sec. We have received a distress call from this building that we have to investigate. Where is your boss? We would like to..."

The guard opposite Shepard suddenly raised his gun and started shooting. At least he tried to shoot before he fell down, clutching his shoulder, his gun clattering to the ground. The other guard met the same fate before Garrus even had his gun trained on him. He stared at Shepard for a second, she shot faster than anybody he had ever met.

She grinned at him and said, "I'm sorry, I forgot to ask, are we going for injured or dead?" The grin on her face had a deadly tinge to it.

"Let's go for injured for now but if they overwhelm us we have to go for killshots," Garrus replied, settling beside the door frame to peer inside. Shepard positioned herself on the other side and with a nod they both moved in.

The attack was immediate and brutal, shots whizzing around them and they both dove to the side behind cover. Shepard had taken her sniper rifle from her back, peered down the scope, and shot shoulders and arms into pieces. Another wave of humans stormed in from the other side, all of them armored and armed with shotguns. Shepard looked over to him and Garrus nodded at the question that she didn't need to ask.

"Yes, I think we go for killshots now."

"Understood, Vakarian." She shifted her aim and the attackers began dropping down with holes in
their foreheads. Garrus had a hard time keeping up with her. After a few minutes the attackers finally
realized that they needed a better position and took cover behind some crates.

Their comm units came alive with Frank muttering in their ears. "Guys, we're coming in, cleaning up
from behind. Don't shoot at us."

"Understood, Frank," Garrus answered and contacted Katrin outside, "Katrina, how's it looking?"

A confident voice came back. "I have made three arrests and the SWAT team is en route. This
entrance is secure."

Garrus didn't hide his surprise and looked over to Shepard who chuckled quietly, "I like that girl."

Garrus shook his head, "Human women are full of surprises, I guess."

Shepard looked over to him and he could almost make out her smile behind her helmet. A shot hit
her cover a bit too close to her head, speckling dust and shrapnel against her helmet.

"Permission to go in and kick some ass?" she asked with an angry snarl. He hesitated for a second,
could he really send her into the middle of the fight? But he knew that she was Commander Shepard
right now, not his mate that he needed to protect.

"Permission definitely granted," he said, trying to sound more sure of it than he was.

She grinned and jumped over the container and ran into the cover where the other humans were
hiding behind. Garrus's heart almost stopped. She still had her sniper rifle raised and used it for close-
range shots without really aiming. He flinched at that, this was certainly not how his father had
taught him to use the sniper rifle.

When she came closer, she switched to her vicious looking pistol and he saw a blade extrude out of
her armor. With a battle cry she jumped into the middle of the fight and carved her way through the
room. Garrus picked off any of the enemies that came up behind her back as she shot and stabbed
her way over to a set of doors. She was like a deadly whirlwind among them, jumping and sliding
from cover to cover and rushing into groups, decimating them with her knife and her pistol. He
couldn't stop a growl building up in him, just watching her made his plates shift.

The last five humans soon realized the futility of their positions and raised their hands in surrender.

It was suddenly eerily quiet in the warehouse. Footsteps approaching a door had them aim their
weapons again until they heard Frank calling them through the door. "Are you guys alright?"

"Yes, we're fine. The room is secured," Garrus called out and lowered his rifle. Frank and Berdin
stepped inside and put handcuffs on the remaining humans. Garrus checked his omni-tool, it showed
no sign of Red Sand in the air so he decided to take his helmet off. Shepard did the same and stepped
around the dead and injured, checking everyone over.

She raised her head towards Garrus. "I don't see any asari," she called out to him.

Loud banging and calls for help drew their attention towards another door on the side. Garrus and
Shepard positioned themselves on either side of it. Shepard overloaded the lock with a blast from her
omni-tool before Garrus could even begin hacking it.

He looked at her annoyed and she whispered, "Sorry" through the comm unit and smiled at him. Her
hair was sticking out and blood dripped off her armor. Garrus couldn't take his eyes off her. His
deadly warrioress, he wanted to shove her against the next wall and bite through her armor, among
other things.

The door slid to the side and Garrus pointed his rifle inside. "Everybody, come out now!" he called into the room. Slowly, one by one, six asari came out of the room dressed in typical asari dance dresses. At last Dalinia came out and Garrus sighed in relief. She recognized him right away and with a happy squee jumped up on him and wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

Shepard stared at them, one eyebrow cocked up. Garrus groaned in embarrassment but Dalinia apparently took that in a completely different way. She pressed her cheek against his face, shrieking, "Thank you, thank you for saving me!" Over and over again.

Shepard looked at them without any emotion showing on her face. He was keenly aware that this woman was dangerous and probably not amused.

Garrus carefully pried Dalinia's hands and legs off him and lowered her back to the floor. Dalinia stilled, noticing his unusual behaviour.

"What's wrong, Garrus? Aren't you happy to see me?" She looked at him confused.

He sighed, "Dalinia, I'm glad to see that you are well but..." He didn't know what to say.

She still looked confused but then suddenly she smiled again. Moving closer to him she whispered, "I see, you want to keep it a secret, don't worry, I'll show you my gratefulness later on." She stroked over the codpiece of his armor and Shepard noticed it. And she also noticed Dalinia's hand gently scratching under his fringe, making him shudder for a second. Shepard's lips were pressed together in a thin line as she watched every movement that the asari made.

He took her wrists in his hand a bit more roughly than he should have and spoke to her hurriedly, "Dalinia, that's not going to happen, I'm with someone. I'm glad you're okay but we won't be meeting... ahem... like that again."

Dalinia stared at him in surprise. "I see. Are you sure?" She lowered her arms, but cocked her head with a flirty smile.

Shepard stepped up to them and turned to Dalinia with a very friendly smile on her face. "Why don't you go outside to make a report with officer Katrina Peters. We would like to know everything about this operation here." Shepard still smiled. It was the kind of smile that made the room a few degrees colder.

Dalinia looked in the eyes and opened her mouth to say something. Shepard just kept looking at her, the smile slowly fading from her face. Any protest that the asari wanted to voice suddenly seemed to die and Dalinia, who had served drinks to drunk krogan without even flinching, suddenly shrunk back from the human woman. She nodded and turned away without another word.

Garrus looked at Shepard whose eyes followed the asari until she had stepped through the front door. With a jerk of her head she turned back to Garrus. "So... we were busting out your old girlfriend?"

Garrus stretched his throat and hummed insecurely. Shepard was mad, that he could see but he didn't know how he was supposed to deal with it.

"She wasn't exactly my girlfriend. We are friends and sometimes we would have sex... It didn't mean all that much." He glanced over to her as she stood next to him, not looking at him anymore.

"Friends with benefits, I see," Shepard mumbled. Her fists were opening and closing at her side. She
looked like she was about to explode.

"Shepard, what's wrong?" He asked to get her to look at him again.

She did and her eyes were like fire. "What's wrong? Come on Garrus, you're the expert on human expressions, don't tell me you don't know what jealousy looks like!"

He put his hand on her armored shoulder. "Shepard... Jane, you have nothing to worry about, that was all in the past, you have no reason to be jealous."

She looked at him again and he saw with relief that some of the fury had left her gaze.

"Reason? Who said anything about reasonable?" She threw up her arms. "Garrus, I know I shouldn't be jealous, I know we both didn't enter this relationship as virgins but... I can't help it." She raised herself on her tiptoes to whisper close to his ear. "If I ever see her touching you like that again, I will rip the tentacles off her head and stuff them into her fucking face!" An angry grumble left her throat and she turned around and stomped off.

Garrus needed a minute until he had the stupid grin on his face under control again.

Chapter End Notes

Look at that, I can write a chapter without sex!

The freighter story arc is based on a story that Wrex is telling in the game when Shepard talks to him on the Normandy. He mentions that he had met Saren once before when he was recruiting Mercs. It is never revealed why Saren was hiring mercs and what he was looking for, so I developed some story for that. Obviously we are not done with it yet. I am scrunching the timeline a bit, things are happening a lot closer together than in the original timeline.

That hidden blade extruding from Shepard's armor? Yes, totally stole that from Assassins Creed. If Leonardo could design that for Ezio, Shepard should have something like that too.

In other news, I say data trail and datawork on purpose because there is NO PAPER in the future! Paper is based on papyrus leafs that the Egyptians dried to write upon. Other species would have come up with something completely different, flat ironed jellyfish tentacles maybe. So, no paper trail, paperwork and all that. The future is all about data.
The minute Garrus and his little troop had entered the C-Sec halls, he received three urgent messages from Pallin to come see him immediately. The first message had ordered him to come and the next two messages came in quick succession, asking why he wasn't there already. Garrus left the processing of the arrested to Frank and hurried over to Pallin's office. Shepard raised an eyebrow in question as he ran past her and he trilled an apology to her.

Pallin's door was open and when he saw Garrus step in he closed it with an order through his omni-tool. That was unusual. His boss fixed him with a firm stare but he didn't show the familiar scowl of anger that Garrus had seen so often before.

"Vakarian. I received your report about the Katanga," Pallin said, looking down on a datapad with a scowl in his subharmonics.

Garrus was momentarily confused until he remembered that Katanga was the name of the ship full of dead mercs that he had to drive into dock this morning. "Yes, sir, I realize that the DNA-traces we found on board from Spectre Arterius have complicated this case."

"That is very true. Spectres, always trouble." Pallin kept staring at the datapad in his hand and was thrumming deep tones of anger.

Garrus didn't know what his boss expected of him, he was used to Pallin yelling at him in anger because of something he did or didn't do. But this anger seemed to not be directed at him, and he didn't know how to deal with that.

"Sir?" he asked to remind Pallin that he was still there.

His boss finally looked up and glared at him intently. "Vakarian, I have removed you from all other cases. I want you to investigate Spectre Saren Arterius, find out everything about him."

Garrus trilled his surprise and wanted to say something but Pallin stopped him and kept on speaking. "I know that all information about Spectres is classified but you won't work under C-Sec authority on this. This investigation is under Council Intelligence control, and you will be working with this new organisation, ANIS." He glanced at his datapad to verify that he got the name right. "So far ANIS is a human organization but they went out of their way to make it not human centric. The group you will be working with is under the lead of a turian, Jentarius Keggs, high tiered in our military and a former C-Sec investigator. The Council has agreed to take this group under Council
Pallin looked at Garrus and pointed a talon at the datapad. "This looks suspicious and you know that C-Sec will only run into walls investigating this because a Spectre is involved. I always despised Spectres, they are uncontrollable, power hungry. A team of investigators would be much better, for once the humans seem to have a good idea there. Humans, who would have thought..." Pallin was shaking his head while his subharmonics sang along.

Garrus had to hold his mandibles tight to suppress a grin. If only his boss knew that he had said almost exactly the same things Shepard had not too long ago. He felt giddy with excitement, it was really happening. Investigating a Spectre -- no one had ever done that. It took him a second to notice that Pallin was still talking.

"You will be working with Commander Shepard. Since you are friends that shouldn't be a problem I assume?" Pallin asked with a questioning trill. Garrus answered with a short trill, assuring his assumption. "Good," Pallin said and signed a datapad before handing it over to Garrus. "You will be under the command of Jentarius Keggs, report to him this afternoon and he will have your orders."

He leaned forward and looked into Garrus’s eyes, his mandibles tight. "Don't screw this up, Vakarian. You are representing C-Sec and the turians on this. We could make the Spectres redundant, build up a true Council force. This is big, Vakarian."

Garrus straightened his back and clasped his hands behind his back. He almost wanted to salute but decided against it, this was still C-Sec, not the military. "I will do my best, sir, don't worry."

A deep tone of amusement and satisfaction left Pallin and he opened the door behind Garrus. With a wave of his hand he sent him off, only to call him back when Garrus was at the door. "I'd like a progress report now and then, Vakarian. Don't forget where you came from."

Garrus nodded. "I won't forget sir." He sang his greetings and left the office.

Looking around the main hall he only saw Berdin and Katrina, surrounded by a group of young recruits. They were staring in awe, listening to the tales that the human and the salarian told. Garrus had to smile, not many young recruits could tell stories of being part of such a big operation. He couldn't see Shepard anywhere and opened his omni-tool to send her a message.

'Where are you? -Garrus'

Her answer came immediately, 'Armory, changing room, cleaning up. -Shep'

A deep growl rolled through him. She was cleaning up and his imagination was painting a very enticing picture of that. As fast as he could without running like a lovesick pyjack, he walked to the elevator and made his way to the changing rooms.

Unfortunately, as he stepped out of the elevator, he noticed that the whole area was quite busy. No chance for a quiet get together for them. He stepped into the changing room, nodding to the other people there. A faint whiff of her scent on his left side directed him around the corner behind a row of lockers. There on a bench she sat, still in her underarmor, roughly wiping the gunk from the pieces of her armor.

She raised her head towards him, smiling and almost making his heart stop with such a simple action. Her hair was sticking out in every direction, she smelled salty of human sweat and the blood of other people. She looked so sexy, it hurt.

He was aware of other people looking at them, turians, humans, asari and he suppressed his
possessive growl with all his might. Shepard acted like nothing happened and wiped at a scrape in her breastplate. She looked up and wore her perfect Commander Shepard face. Pointing at the scratch she asked, "Officer Vakarian, is there a workbench around here where I could fix that?"

Garrus trilled quietly at that. _Clever, Shepard._

"Yes, Commander, follow me please." He turned around and heard her walking after him out of the locker room and around the corner into the next room. It was barely more than a storage room with a small workbench, surrounded by materials and utensils to fix armor and weapons. It was hardly ever used, the armory had it's own work area and experts to fix weapons and armour. This small room was only for quick fixes in a pinch.

They stepped inside and Shepard put the pieces of her armor on the workbench. She turned around and they stood there, staring at each other, not daring to breathe. As soon as the door had closed behind them, they hurriedly closed the gap between them.

_Spirits, this is so wrong. And so right._

Hands were grabbing armour and fabric, lips crashed against mouthplates, fingernails and talons were scratching skin and they tasted each others breath as their tongues touched and wrapped around each other. Garrus growled and Shepard made almost the same sound as they kissed. She pressed herself against him, one leg wrapped around him above his hip and even though he couldn't feel her touch through his armor, he felt how she pressed herself as close as possible to him. They broke the kiss, panting. Shepard began to snap off his lower armor. Her underarmor was already all the way open in front and Garrus didn't even know when that had happened.

He trilled in frustration and with every bit of self-control he could call upon, he grabbed her wrists so that she couldn't continue on his armor. "Shepard, we can't." He pressed his forehead against her and breathed her in.

She pressed back and he wondered if his plates hurt her. But if so, she obviously didn't care. She changed the angle so that her mouth was pressed against his mandible and he shuddered at the feeling of her soft lips against it. Her lips moved as she whispered, "Why not, Garrus? I know I smell bad but..."

"Spirits, Jane, that's definitely not the problem. Do you have any idea how sexy you are?" He was breathing hard, still holding her wrists down to her sides.

She was standing very still, only her lips moving against his mandible. "Then why are you not inside of me right now?" she whispered in her deep and husky voice.

His growl filled the tiny room with the sound of desire. He took a deep breath. "Professional, remember?" Garrus slowly let go of her wrists and took a small step backwards. "Jane, if we have sex now, every single turian, krogan and probably even asari will smell you on me, and me on you."

She closed the gap again. "So? We spend time with each other, it shouldn't be surprising that we have some scent from the other."

"No, my sunshine, we would smell of sex and everyone would know it." He took another deep breath to calm himself down but it only filled his head with her scent and the smell of arousal that came from her. His lower armour was getting very uncomfortable.

"Oh fuck, damnit! Seriously?" Shepard took a step back and sat down on the surface of the workbench. She rubbed her thighs together and sighed in frustration. "Fuck the fucking fuckshit, I'm..."
so hot for you right now. Maybe I'm a bit of a pervert but seeing you with your rifle, so graceful and
deadly..." her hand was sneaking up under his fringe, stroking as she spoke, "...that really turned me
on.

When he spoke up himself, his voice was layered with deep thrums of desire. "Looks like we're
perverts together then. Seeing you fight, wild and deadly, you... Spirits, you have no idea what you
do to me." He struggled with the words but his subharmonics sang clearly of wild, untamed passion
as he pressed against her hand on his neck.

She pulled his head down towards her and kissed him. This time it was tender, soft little nibbles
along his plates, her tongue carefully wandering along his teeth. His tongue found hers and softly
they caressed and tangled around each other. Her hand kept on massaging his neck and his fingers
combed through her hair. They kept their bodies distanced, not touching except for their hands and
faces. It was like they had to keep up a spell that would be broken if they moved closer to each other.

With a slight pop, her lips left his mouth and they kept still in silence with their foreheads touching,
each keeping a hand on the others neck until their breathing had quieted down.

At last Shepard whispered, as if she was afraid to break the spell. "Here's what we will do: I'll clean
this armor here, and since I don't have any spare underarmor around, I'm going home... I mean... to
your place, to take a shower and put on some fresh clothes. You will have to take a shower here, far
away from me because I can't guarantee that I won't ravish you in the shower otherwise." She looked
up and grinned at him.

_She called it home._

Garrus hummed a low tone, trying to calm himself and her with it. "Alright, I... I'll see you tonight
then I guess. You better not have any other plans because I'm going to need you to..."

She giggled and put her hand on his mandible. "Oh, I'm going to need you too. I'll be waiting for
you." Her smile lit up her face and he felt his chest constrict.

_She waits for me_

_The wind will tell_

_The silver mountains see_

_As the sun rays fell_

The silly rhyme from an asari-turian love song invaded his mind. _Spirits, get a hold of yourself._

Garrus stepped away from her as if she burned him, he needed to step away from these emotions
before they could overwhelm him. It scared him what a hold she had on him, how much her smile
drew him in. He knew that this was more, more than just sex, more than desire. He was longing for
her, his mind was filled with her and he felt like he was losing himself. He couldn't imagine being
without her in his life.

How could they ever work together? How was he supposed to act around her if her smile grabbed
his heart and pulled his gizzard against his cowl? More and more he saw her as his bondmate, as his
altera dimidia that he would spend his life with.
This was way too early in their relationship. He couldn't put that kind of expectation on her, it wasn't fair to her. They just got to know each other and he was already fringe deep in feelings and dreams of their future together.

He took another step back and the cowl of his armor banged against the wall of the tiny room. Shepard looked at him with a slight scowl and Garrus silently cursed her perceptiveness. Her hand had left his face but she still held it up like she waited for him to come back to her. But he stayed back and slowly she let her hand fall down on her thigh. She was watching him critically and Garrus was hiding all his emotions by holding down his subharmonics and not looking at her.

She jumped off the workbench and stepped up to him. "Hey, big guy, are you alright?" she asked with a frown. "I'm sorry? I don't know, I don't want to pressure you, I'm not... sure what you..." She had raised her hand to touch his face but hesitated. She kept looking at him and he avoided to look into her eyes. Slowly her hand fell back down. With a deep frown on her forehead she turned around and started vigorously scrubbing at the pieces of her armor. Garrus stood behind her, feeling the gap between them widen.

This moment had taken an unexpected turn somewhere and he didn't know how to save it. He knew what his own problem was but something was bothering Jane as well. This was not the time and place to discuss the seriousness of his feelings for her. But he could not leave her like this. Her back was turned to him, her muscles tense on her neck as she sanded down the scrape on her breastplate.

He stepped up to her. "Hey, Shepard..."

"Yes, Vakarian?" Her voice sounded cold but he always had trouble hearing the emotions in human voices, he was much better with faces. "You should go, you'll draw suspicion spending so much time in here. With me." The last two words were so quiet that he almost couldn't hear them.

"Jane, please look at me."

She didn't, she kept looking down on her breastplate on the workbench. "I'm sorry Garrus, I didn't mean..." She stopped sanding and let her head hang down. "I know I've been barging into your life and making everything more complicated for you and I have no right to call your apartment home and taking up all your time..."

"Spirits, Jane, that's what you are worried about?" He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his nose in the curve between her neck and her shoulder. "I thought it was wonderful that you called my place home."

She turned her face so that she spoke against the side of his face. "You told me that turians don't like closeness and I know you guys have lots of casual relationships..."

Garrus stopped her by pulling her closer to him. Sometimes the universe decides the time and place for you. This is the moment, whether you like it or not.

"Jane, can we please agree that there is nothing casual about us?"

He heard her draw in a sharp breath and she stayed silent for a scarily long time. But then she said, "Okay, we are not casual. Definitely not casual." She turned around and pressed her face against his throat, her lips nibbling the soft skin there. "I was worried that I'm pestering you. The annoying, clingy girlfriend is not the part I want to be playing."

He fluttered his mandible against her face. "You can play that part with me anytime." She laughed at that and it was such a relief to hear that sound. "But you were right, I should go now," he said. He
licked at her collarbone one last time and pulled away. "I really need to take a shower."

She grinned at him. "A cold one?"

"Yes. No! What?" He was checking the seals on his armor and had not really paid attention. For a second he stared at her as she was laughing. He shook his head and turned around to leave. "I'll see you tonight at home."

Her smile warmed him deep inside.

"Yes, home," she whispered and her eyes stayed on his until the door closed again, separating them.

A few hours later, after showering, finishing up his data work and a quick lunch, he stood in front of a door close to the human embassy. The big letters above it said Alliance Navy Investigative Service in human writing on top and in Citadel common below it.

He straightened his back and stepped towards the door to trigger its mechanism to open for him. The doors parted in the middle and he stepped into a huge room full of desks with data terminals, sectioned off in groups of six by moveable half-walls. Screens were placed around the outside walls, showing news from different channels from all around the galaxy.

People were either sitting at their terminals or were bustling around, and he saw many working in pairs on a terminal, bouncing ideas off each other with low voices. Most people were human but he saw many turians and a few salarians. Only one dark blue asari with dramatic red markings next to her eyes noticed him and looked threateningly at him as soon as his eyes fell on her. She was beautiful in a scary way and the look in her eyes reminded him of Shepard.

The asari turned to an older turian who addressed her with a short sentence. She answered and then pointed towards him, making the turian turn around to him. He recognized him from a picture he had seen of him with his dad, only that he hadn't known back then that his name was Jentarius Keggs. Keeping his back straight he stepped towards the older turian with the white markings. He decided against a salute and dipped his head once instead. Keggs acknowledged him with an equal dip of his head and raised his arm in a circling motion. In an instant three people stood next to them, looking at him expectantly.

"Team, this is Garrus Vakarian."

He pointed to the dangerous asari. "This is Dania Va'sida." Pointing to a fidgeting salarian he said, "this is our tech expert, Terlin Mirhale, and this guy here," a tall human stepped up in front and showed his very white teeth in the biggest grin Garrus had ever seen on a human, "is Lorenzo Jorno."

Another gesture of the hand and the teammates went back to their desks. Garrus was impressed with the effectiveness of this hand communication. Keggs took something out of his desk and walked briskly towards the elevator. With a short jerk of his hand he beckoned Garrus to follow him. They stepped into the elevator and rode down in silence. Garrus looked at the older turian out of the corner of his eye. He didn't wear armor, which was unusual for a turian but his clothing seemed to be made of the same sturdy material that Shepard's vest was made of. Leave it to the squishy humans to develop clothing that even turians would consider instead of armor.
When the doors opened, he suddenly started speaking as he stepped out. Garrus hurried behind after him. "This area is for all teams, we have the forensics lab and the pathology down here." Shiny metal doors glided to the side and the familiar smells of death and disinfectant that came with a morgue hit his nose. An older human was talking to himself or maybe he was talking to the corpse in front of him while he cut and scanned the body of a salarian.

They walked over to the shiny metal table and Keggs introduced him. "Dr. Morten Webster, our pathologist, Garrus Vakarian, newest member of Shepard's team." This was the first time he actually heard him mention Shepard's name and he searched the turians face for any hint of disapproval or annoyance, but he didn't see any.

Dr. Webster held out his hand for a human handshake but then realized that he was wearing bloody gloves and pulled it back. "Now that would have been a silly mistake, wouldn’t it? So, all the better for you, you get spared from my silly human gesture. Let me see, I've been practising..." He straightened his back and dipped his head down once with a jerky movement. Then he looked up again like he was looking for approval. "Was that correct? Not too low or too long?"

He looked at Garrus expectantly and he realized that the doctor wanted to have his greeting evaluated. "Yes... fine. It was correct." Garrus nodded his greeting himself and he noticed Keggs next to him grin with a slight flutter of his mandibles.

The doctor looked very pleased with himself and turned back to the salarian in front of him. While he was working he was constantly speaking. "Interestingly enough I have noticed that many turians have adopted human gestures and I have seen turians shaking hands in greeting. At the same time some humans, especially ones who came from Earth only recently, avoid skin contact for fear of transmitting diseases. Now the asari of course have an entirely different..."

"Morty!" Keggs interrupted.

"Ah, yes, of course. You came here for my analysis of the poor souls from the Katanga." He took off the gloves and picked up a datapad to thumb through.

"Nothing unusual so far. They all died of very precise headshots, which in the case of the krogans, required a big shotgun to shoot through the headcrest. The asari and salarians all died from shots from a heavy pistol. It must have happened very fast, I found no defensive injuries. Two asari and one of the salarians fired their own weapons. Everybody else didn't seem to get the opportunity to defend themselves. They were all healthy, well fed and showed the normal wear and tear that you would expect from a merc."

He put down the datapad and looked up to Jentarius Keggs. "For further information you have to ask Pauline." With a nod towards Garrus, he walked back to the table with the open torso. As they walked out of the morgue Garrus again heard him talking quietly to the corpse.

Outside in the hall Garrus looked over to another door where loud music was playing. The sign on the wall said, 'Forensics'. Keggs didn't go towards that door but pressed the button for elevator. "Pauline Schumann is our forensic expert," he said, "you'll meet her some other time. So far she has ratified your findings, DNA traces from the dead mercs, an unknown trace and a trace from Saren Arterius. She also identified the guns that were used but that doesn't really help us, they are not registered."

The elevator arrived and they rode it up in silence again. When the doors opened to the office, the older turian waved the salarian over. "Mirhale, show Vakarian here to a desk with a terminal. I want him to find information about the Spectres, so see to it that he has access to all necessary databases."
"But sir, the council databases are classified, we don't have access to them," Mirhale said nervously.

Keggs turned around with an annoyed trill, "Can't you do something about that? Hack them?"

Mirhale was fidgeting and the orange spots on his horns looked a bit darker. "Well, sir, that would be highly illegal and kind of obvious with an investigation like this going on and..."

Keggs interrupted him with a growl and walked to a set of stairs the lead to a gallery level above. "I'll talk to the director, see if she can get us something. Give Vakarian access to everything we have so far and call Shepard, we have work to do."

The salarian looked around like he was hoping somebody else would take over the job of contradicting the boss, but his colleagues did not volunteer for that. "But sir, Shepard is still on leave..."

Keggs interrupted him with a slight chuckle, "And I'm sure she is already climbing up the walls out of boredom. Get her, I want her to work with Vakarian on the Spectre case." He made a wave with his hand again and entered a door on the upper floor.

Mirhale sighed and turned to Garrus. "Hi, I'm Terlin, and I'll be setting up your work account." He made a nod and Garrus nodded back.

"I'm Garrus, and thank you for setting me up."

Terlin typed something on a datapad and then held it out to Garrus for fingerprinting and signing. "No problem, it was easy enough. Sign this please - okay. Here are your access codes and this terminal already has all the information and evidence for this case downloaded."

The salarian stepped back to his own desk next to Garrus's. Garrus started reading; most things about this case he already knew. He turned his attention to the Spectres. All records about them were sealed, the Council didn't even give out information on how many there were. The Alliance had estimated that there were about 80 or 90 of them, half of them asari, and the rest salarians and turians in about equal numbers. The asari were usually recruited from elite commandos, the salarians all had STG backgrounds and the turians usually came from the Special Ops group Blackwatch.

Garrus knew that Saren could not have been a member of the Blackwatch, he was too young when he joined, actually the youngest Spectre to ever have been instated at the age of 20. He was also longest serving turian Spectre, his service time only outdone by a few asari Spectres. As a whole, Spectres tended to not get old and for Saren to survive for 24 years as a successful Spectre was a record in itself.

Garrus looked over what else he could find but without access to the Council’s database there was laughable little information about Spectres for him to read. With a frustrated hum he leaned back. Suddenly a familiar scent entered his nose and a voice that caused him to shiver spoke next to him.

She whispered, "Hello angel," and that silly dash of happiness bounced through his gizzard again.

He turned slightly in his chair and looked up to her. She looked like she was glowing from the inside. She smelled of some flowery shampoo, it reminded him of the scent from the red rose she had given him a while ago. He breathed her in and even though he wanted nothing more than pull her into a tight embrace, he held himself back and just nodded at her. She grinned and stretched out her hand in that human greeting, and as he took her hand in his, her thumb stroked the skin of his talon for a second.

It wasn't much but it was enough. There would be time for them later.
Shepard pulled up a chair and sat down beside him, close but not so close as to actually be touching him.

"So what do we have?" She asked.

Garrus made a vague movement with his hand towards the terminal screen and hummed annoyance. "Nothing. We know basically nothing about the Spectres since the Council keeps it all classified. Unless Keggs gets something going through the director, we have nothing."

Shepard flipped through the notes he had put together about the Spectres, and then moved over to the notes about the frigate full of dead mercs. Suddenly she froze and pulled up the information about the ship.

"Katanga? It was the Katanga?" She stared at the name for a second and then moved to the list of casualties. She highlighted the three dead krogan and brought up their pictures. "Wrex was on the Katanga, he wrote me a while back." Relief flooded her face as she didn't see him in the pictures. "He's not among the dead, good. But I know that guy, he is an Urdnot. Shame, he wasn't a bad guy, for a krogan merc at least."

"What's an Urdnot?" Garrus asked.

"Urdnot is the clan name. Wrex is Urdnot Wrex, it's a big and strong clan. But they kind of fell apart in two factions. Wrex is actually the one who caused that, he has some new ideas for the krogan, wants them to be more than just cynical battletanks. His own father lead him into a trap to shut him up and he killed him." Shepard explained.

"That... sounds very krogan-like, actually," Garrus snorted.

"I know, fulfills all the stereotypes," Shepard said with a laugh. "But Wrex isn't like that, he has different ideas for the krogan. I'm not sure why but he had to leave Tuchanka after that and can't go back until he has done something significant for the clan. This guy here travelled with him, I met him once."

She seemed to be lost in thought and Garrus spoke up. "Contact Wrex, let's ask him about his time on the Katanga. Maybe he noticed something, maybe he even saw Saren. It's the only lead we have for now."

"Yeah, you're right but he could be anywhere, could be beating up quarians in the Terminus system for all we know," Shepard mumbled while she typed a message on her omni-tool.

"I don't want to imagine how a quarian would look after he got beat up by a krogan," Garrus said with a grin.

"Oh no, geez... that was not very nice of me to say, was it?" Shepard said and looked thoroughly ashamed. "I hope they never put me on some kind of diplomatic mission, some disaster that would turn out to be."

"I'm sure you would do great," Garrus said with a smile.

She smiled back and shook her head. "Whole new wars would start with me standing in the middle screaming, 'I didn't mean it that way!', I can just see it."

Garrus wanted to disagree but got distracted by the scrolling text on one of the news screens. A human, probably the ambassador, was being interviewed and the text said something about humanity asking for a human Spectre.
"So humans are still pushing for a human Spectre? I thought this ANIS project was trying to make the Spectres unnecessary?" Garrus asked, pointing at the screen.

Shepard looked up and nodded. "That's plan B, I guess. The ambassador, Udina, is really in love with the idea. Hell, that idea dates back to when Anita Goyle was ambassador, she had already pushed for a human Spectre. I don't envy the poor sod they put into that position. The pressure on the first human Spectre is going to be unbearable." She turned her attention back to her omni-tool as she had received a message.

Garrus saw her initiate a call and the screen popped up with the face of the red krogan he had met before. His voice rumbled from the speakers. "Shepard?"

"Wrex?" was her answer. Both stayed silent for a second then Shepard started talking. "Wrex, you were on the Katanga a while back, correct?"

The krogan nodded on the screen. "Yes, we were five krogan. Skeev, Kerb and me from clan Urdnot, and Torket and Stake from clan Gerden. Why do you ask?"

Shepard sighed, "The Katanga drifted from the Widow relay this morning, everybody on board is dead, three of them krogan. I'm sorry."

Wrex made an angry grunt, "Stupid kids, I told them something wasn't right on that ship. Did you find a dead turian?" His eyes moved to Garrus on that question and he felt very uneasy all of a sudden.

Shepard looked with renewed interest into the screen. "No, but we found traces of one and we would like to talk about this turian, what he did, why he was on the ship..."

"I'm on the Citadel. Let's meet at the statue of the krogan battlemaster in ten." On the screen Wrex turned around and yelled at someone off screen. "Skeev, get up! We're going to meet Shepard." He turned back to face Shepard. "Be there. Bring your pretty turian along." With that he ended the call.

Garrus wasn't sure if he should feel insulted. Shepard was openly giggling. "Looks like Wrex likes you."

"How can you tell?" he grumbled.

"I'm sure he has never called anybody pretty before," Shepard said with a smile and got up, her hand brushing along his fringe as if on accident. She looked around the room and then called out to the tall human with the big smile. "Hey, Lorenzo, where is Keggs?"

"Lady Shepard, I regret to inform you that the master has not yet returned from his quest to woo the Lady of the upper deck," Lorenzo declared with a dramatic pose. Then he quickly looked around as if he expected someone to turn up behind him. When that wasn't the case, he visibly relaxed and stepped up to Shepard. The way he was looking her over made Garrus's plates itch. The dangerous looking asari rolled her eyes and Shepard grinned at her.

Shepard just smiled at the human. "Tell the boss that we are meeting someone who had been on the Katanga." She beckoned Garrus to follow her and walked over to the door. They stepped outside and found the hallway busy with many humans. With a brisk walk they made their way to the Presidium.

Garrus hesitated but he just couldn't stop the question tumbling out of his mouth.

"So this Lorenzo acts very familiar with you..." He tried to sound unconcerned but his subharmonics
were clearly growling with possessiveness.

"Who's jealous now?" Shepard asked with a smile in her voice. She grabbed his hand for a second and squeezed it. "No need to worry, big guy. Lorenzo is just a big flirt, it's kind of his act. It doesn't mean anything, he's a good guy, really. Speaking of big flirt..." She opened up her omni-tool and started typing out a message. "Maybe Nihlus can tell us something about Saren, I'll send him a message."

They kept on walking in comfortable silence along the Presidium lake, side by side, their hands almost touching. When the tall statue of the krogan battlemaster came into view, they saw two krogan in front of it, arguing quietly. Wrex looked rather amused, the krogan beside him was visibly agitated. They stopped next to them and listened to what they were talking about. The krogan that was talking to Wrex was clearly younger than him, his skin looked softer and didn't have many marks. He pointed to the lake in front of them and said, "Why have all this water here if you don't keep fish in it? We could have fresh fish, real healthy fish, not like the mutated things on Tuchanka."

Wrex turned to Shepard with an amused grin. "Shepard, help me out here, this little hatchling here thinks there are fish in the Presidium lake. Are there?"

Shepard laughed out loud. "Honestly, Wrex, do I look like the gardener here? All I know is that the lake is the Citadel's water reserve and there is a complicated recycling process involved to preserve it. They probably don't want fish pooping in there." She turned to the young krogan. "Skeev, right?" The krogan nodded. "Tell you what, Skeev, I'll ask someone who should know and find out once and for all." That seemed to satisfy Skeev and he turned his attention to Garrus, eyeing him suspiciously.

Krogan and turians were not known to get along well, after the turians beat down the krogan rebellion and infected them with the genophage. In the few weeks since he had met Shepard, Garrus had had more contact with krogan than ever before in his whole life. He was still not quite used to the ease with which Shepard handled the massive battletanks.

Shepard looked around to see if anybody was listening in on their conversation. But they stood alone in front of the statue. She turned to Wrex, "You were on the Katanga, you said something didn't feel right. Tell me about that. We are especially interested in anything concerning the turian Saren and whoever was with him."

The two krogan exchanged a look and then Wrex began to talk. "The Katanga was run by a freelancer called Gartica, an asari matriarch, a long time in the business. We were on a fuel-station near Illium and heard that she was hiring. Had nothing better to do and needed the pay so we signed up. Later she told us that a turian was financing the whole thing and he sent us on assignments. Most of the time we were raiding freighters and pirate ships. Then he came on the ship himself and we went to an archeological dig site. He went down, took two asari and Kerb with him. Came back with nothing, but the place was smoking. Kerb later told me that the turian kept asking about prothean stuff and got quite mad when they had nothing for him, just some marks on a wall. Kerb said the turian blew the place up."

Shepard opened a picture of Saren on her omni-tool and showed it to Wrex. "Is that him?" Wrex took one look and nodded.

"Yeah, that's him. Looked angry all the time."

Shepard chuckled at that. "I heard that's his speciality. So why did you leave?"

"I knew he was rotten to the core when I met him. After that dig site we took down a massive cargo
freighter, huge haul. It was volus trading vessel, they had lot's of guards but they were no match for
us."

"What kind of cargo did they have?" Garrus asked. The krogan both looked at him with the familiar
scowl that all krogan had for turians, but Wrex answered him.

"I saw nothing important, food, medical supplies, a few weapons but nothing big. This Saren was
moving through the ship like he was searching for something. I was checking the bodies over for
credits and valuables and I heard him talk to himself in the next room. He had expected something to
be there and it wasn't. Was really mad about that."

"He was talking to himself?" Shepard asked.

"Or maybe over the comm, I don't know, there was nobody there with him and he never spoke to us.
Later an asari matriarch joined him and they were hissing at each other. I had a really bad feeling
about them and I got the hell out of there. Skeev here came along but Kerb didn't want to miss out on
the credits. Now he's dead, dumb kid, and every other merc on that ship too." He turned his head to
the side and looked at the krogan statue. "Looks like my instincts were right." Skeev made an
approving grunt.

Shepard gave Wrex a slap on his arm. "I'm glad you're listening to your instincts, old man."

"That's how I met you, little girl, so I know it's a good thing," Wrex rumbled with honest affection in
his voice.

Shepard grinned at him. "You're the only person in this universe who's allowed to call me a girl, my
friend. Take care of yourself and don't go too far away, I may have something coming up where I
could use you."

"I'll be here for a while. Take care, Shepard." With a nod to her and to Garrus he turned around to
leave, Skeev following him. The younger krogan turned around once and called back to Shepard.
"Don't forget about the fish!"

Shepard raised her hand with her thumb pointed upwards and yelled back, "Trust me, I'll look into
it."

Garrus chuckled at that. "You really want to find out for him if there are fish in the lake?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's how you become friends with a krogan. You do something for him to show
that you are trustworthy and reliable. We humans don't have the genophage baggage that makes the
krogan so hostile towards turians, so it's actually quite easy to become friends with a krogan for us."

Garrus stretched his throat. "Yes, the genophage certainly has not made us friends with the krogan.
But it was necessary at the time, the krogan were out of control."

Shepard looked thoughtful towards the huge statue in front of them. "Maybe it was, but is it right to
keep them suffering? Wrex once told me that this statue represents the values of the krogan: honor,
loyalty, courage, fortitude. All of that has been lost since the Krogan Rebellions and the genophage.
In a few hundred years they might all be gone." She turned around and looked him in the eyes.
"Maybe the situation called for drastic measures back then. But to let a whole species slowly die out?
That's just cruel."

Garrus didn't know what to say, he had never really thought much about the genophage. It was just a
historic fact for him, he had never questioned it. Shepard had turned to her omni-tool and he decided
to not push the subject further. He needed to make up his mind about this himself.
A call came in on Shepard's omni-tool and he saw Nihlus looking at them from the screen. The red turian spread his mandibles in a wide grin and looked like he wanted to jump out of the screen to give them both a hug. "Hello my friends! What do my favorite warriors want from me?"

Shepard smiled and made a tiny noise that sounded like an apologetic trill. Garrus stared at her, it still surprised him that she could make sounds like that.

Nihlus beamed at her. "Very good! So, what are you apologizing for?"

"We need to talk to you about Saren."

The smile fell from Nihlus face. "Ah, futuo, that's always an unpleasant subject. What do you want to know?"

Shepard looked at her notes and then turned back to Nihlus. "Why is he interested in prothean stuff?"

"That's... you know he really wasn't, his brother was more into that before he died. At least that's what he had said once. But lately... I met him a few days back and he is..." Nihlus was clearly uncomfortable talking about his old mentor like that. His subharmonics were wavering all over his voice. "It's like he is obsessed. He's changed, something is going on with him."

Nihlus sighed and Garrus made a sympathetic hum. Nihlus hummed in answer and went on, "There is something else. He has a new ship."

"What kind of ship?" Garrus asked.

"Huge, like a dreadnought," Nihlus said and both Shepard and Garrus gasped in surprise. "I've never seen anything like it, the shape... it looks like an animal."

Shepard looked over her shoulder towards Garrus as if she wanted him to tell her what kind of ship that could be, but he could only shrug. He had never seen or heard about a ship that looked like an animal. He moved closer to the screen, pressing the side of his face against Shepard's cheek. He felt her press back and enjoyed the warm feeling flowing through his gizzard.

He turned his attention back to Nihlus. "Do you have scans of the ship or a picture?"

Nihlus smiled at them and nodded. "How do humans say? You little lovebirds? I have scans, my lovebirds, and I will be on the Citadel by tomorrow night. Let's meet at your place, Garrus, and I will give you everything I have. Now stop smooching, you are making me jealous. Poor, deprived me."

Shepard laughed. "Hah! As if you would ever be deprived, I'm sure there is an asari purring right next to you just this minute."

Nihlus let out an amused chuckle. "You know me too well, my dear. See you tomorrow." With a trill he ended the call just as a blue hand appeared, stroking his fringe.

Garrus moved back from her and leaned back against the guardrail, turning all this new information over in his head. Shepard settled next to him, leaning back in the same way. He looked down on her, the shimmering reflections from the water made moving patterns on her black hair and he wanted nothing more than to run his talons through it.

Suddenly she spoke up. "What do you know about protheans?"

"Only what I learned in school, ancient race, probably built the Citadel and invented the Mass Relays, went extinct 50,000 years ago... that's about it. And you?"
"Oh man, not a thing, I have a hard time keeping up with all the alien races that are still around. I skipped the ones that are extinct!" she said with a laugh. Her fingers were raking through her hair, making her unique scent rise up to him. He groaned quietly and she looked up to him with a smile.

"You're vibrating again," she whispered, leaning her arm against his side. "Let's go home and watch a documentary about protheans. I'll be learning something and then get bored and fall asleep on your shoulder."

"Sounds wonderful," he said with a content rumble in his subharmonics. It still made him ridiculously happy that she called his place, 'home'.

Chapter End Notes

altera dimidia = the other half, soulmate
futuo = fuck

A few cameos in this one, did you recognize them? I had so much fun with that, I hope you did too.

The lines from Wrex about Saren are in part taken from the game, slightly altered. The description of the krogan statue is also from the game, according to the wiki, Wrex says that if you look at the statue with him. He never did it with me.
Garrus and Shepard took the transit train down along Tayseri Ward, standing side by side, watching the high rising buildings go by. They passed a beautiful, sprawling building and Shepard asked him about it. He loved how her eyes filled with childlike curiosity. He explained that it was the Dilinaga Concert Hall, one of the greatest concert halls in the galaxy, known for it's excellent acoustics.

"What kind of music do they play there?" she asked.

"I'm not exactly the expert here, I'm more knowledgeable when it comes to the sound of gunfire," he answered. "But I know that they have asari and human ballet there, and old serious music from turians. Again, not really my thing."

"Yeah, not mine either," she said with a laugh. "There goes the romance."

"What?"

She brushed her hand over his and smiled at him. "Don't worry, it's just a thing from old Earth movies, the man takes the girl to the opera and she's moved to tears by it and they hold hands... it's all very romantic." She shook her head. "It's not really my thing, I would probably fall asleep during the performance."

The train shook slightly and she leaned against him for a second.

"But you can take me to the gun range anytime and play me a song with your rifle," she whispered. Her alluring voice made his plates move under his codpiece. He had to clamp his mandibles tight to his face and urgently held on to his subharmonics. A turian standing at the door was already looking at them suspiciously.

Thankfully their stop came up and they walked the rest of the way to his apartment building. A conversation about gun mods was bubbling between them, neither of them really paying attention. They looked at each other and it didn't matter what they were talking about.

As soon as they had entered the elevator, their conversation stopped and they only stared at each other with hungry eyes. They were alone and Garrus let his subharmonics growl and sing freely. She answered with touch, her fingertips brushing featherlike over his mandibles, his throat, his fringe, anything she could touch that wasn't covered by his armor.

When they finally arrived on his floor, Garrus felt like he was about to burst from desire. She walked in front of him towards his door, her hips swinging enticingly. He fumbled with the entry code, his
higher brain function had evidently shut off. Shepard was giggling quietly and moved her fingertips under his fringe, making him groan even more.

Finally the door opened and the pieces of his armor began falling to the floor before the door had closed again. Her vest followed, one shoe got kicked across the room, the other left on the floor with her pants, looking like a snake with a big head. Her fingers moved efficiently over the seals and clasps of his armor until only his underarmor remained, his erection straining angrily against it.

She palmed his penis through the fabric and at the same time let her panties fly from her toes. His hand found her wet folds and he touched her carefully. Her moan made the underarmor unbearable to keep wearing; as fast as he could he shrugged it off and returned to his woman. She had thrown off her shirt and her bra and finally - finally - naked skin pressed against hot plates and they both sighed like two addicts getting their drugs.

They were still standing in the middle of the room, halfway between the sitting area and the kitchen. Strong arms wrapped around each other, her face in his cowl, his mandibles in her hair. Her hands moving up and down his back and he tried to snake his hand back to the apex of her legs. He licked her neck and carefully nibbled the skin on her collarbone. Her breath came in gasps and she pulled him back towards the kitchen counter to lean against it.

When she had settled with her back against the counter, he moved back and licked down from her shoulder to her breast, circling the little nub in the middle. Her moan drove him crazy. Suddenly she pulled his face back up and kissed him, hard. With one foot she touched his legspur, making him shudder and she asked, "Does it hurt if I put my weight on there?"

"What? No, quite the opposite actually... aah." He finished the sentence with a shockingly loud yell of passion as she climbed up on him like on a tree, gripping his spurs with her toes.

With a grin she growled, "Fuck foreplay," and lowered herself down on his very hard penis. Her moan was as loud as his.

"Yes!" she cried out. "In me! So good!" She firmly held on to his cowl to gain some leverage and rolled her hips. Garrus almost came from that move alone. She kept on moving and lowered herself up and down, bending her knees and standing on his spurs. The pressure there made waves of pleasure run through him. She moved faster, harder, and she smelled so good and she moaned and he couldn't hold back anymore. His nose pressed against her cheek as his orgasm ripped through him with force. Faintly he noticed that he scented her again.

He had to hold on to the counter to not lose his balance. She was still moving, one hand between them, furiously rubbing herself and after a minute she came herself. She yelled out incoherently and held onto his cowl for dear life. She was still moving, rutting against him, giving him wonderful aftershocks with those muscles inside of her. With a sigh she came again and then slammed herself against him and bit into his cowl, holding him with her teeth.

Deep, hidden emotions of days long past welled up in him and he almost bit her himself. Just the softness of her skin held him back.

Her teeth released his cowl, leaving little dents in the cartilage but she had not broken the skin. She settled her ass on top of the counter and Garrus pressed his forehead against hers. They stayed like that for a long time until their breathing had gone back to normal.

Shepard was the first to speak. "That was like torture, being right next to you all day, not allowed to touch you. Whenever I looked at you, I just wanted to feel you inside of me. I could hardly concentrate."
Garrus pulled his head back to stare at her in disbelief. "I thought that only happened to me."

"Are you kidding me?" She laughed. "I wanted to jump you all day."

He slowly let himself slip out of her and she grabbed a cleaning rag to catch their juices flowing out of her. He made a mental note to do some serious cleaning to this counter soon. But not now, now he just wanted to hold her.

He picked her up from the counter and carried her over to the couch, her legs over his hips. Before he could sit her down, she threw a towel on it to sit on.

"Still dripping, you know?" she said with a laugh. He grabbed a blanket to cover her and wondered if he should get a second one. She always felt cold to him but he knew that humans had a lower normal body temperature than turians.

"Are you warm enough?"

"Hell, yeah! Your place is always so warm, I could walk around naked and never feel cold. Palaven must be an oven if you are used to these temperatures."

"Turians don't like it cold, we keep our houses warm and we actually do walk around naked a lot of times," he said, sitting down next to her.

"Hmm, how distracting that would be..." she murmured into his ear, placing soft kisses on the side of his fringe. A shiver went through him.

He pulled her closer to him, spreading the thin blanket over them. "You want to watch that vid now?"

"About the protheans? Sure. But I'll probably fall asleep."

Garrus smiled, he liked the thought of her sleeping on his shoulder. "That's okay, we can watch it again some other time. Just rest."

She sighed happily and cuddled up against his side. "I love that you watch over me," she murmured and Garrus's heart made a jump.

I love that you let me.

She grabbed a pillow and put it on his cowl to settle the side of her face against it. He laid his head carefully against hers. With a wave of his hand he turned on the big screen and started the vid. He had his windows programmed to follow the day-night-cycle of the Presidium and not the cycle of Palaven. The windows glass panes were already tinted dark, simulating a night time that the wards never had.

The speaker on the screen had said no more than five words when already Shepard had fallen asleep.

When Garrus woke up again, the window panes were already removing the tint, indicating that they had slept on the couch for the whole night. At some point he had moved his legs up and was now lying sideways with his head on the armrest. Shepard was lying on top of him on her stomach, wrapped in the blanket like a cocoon, the pillow with her head on it stuck in his cowl. He had no
idea how she had even gotten into this position.

He carefully moved her to the side and let her slide off behind him. She snarled in her sleep and he chuckled. As soon as she had the couch to herself, she spread out and took it up completely. Garrus was still amazed by that ability.

He got up and went into the kitchen area. As he set the cava and the coffee machine to work he remembered his mental promise from last night and sprayed some cleaning solution on the counter to wipe it clean. Even after wiping all horizontal and vertical surfaces, his sensitive nose still told him of the sex of the last night.

He issued a command to the ventilation system to clean the air. Before the system started working, Shepard raised her head and looked over the back of the couch towards him.

"I smell coffee," she said with a hoarse voice. Shepard was clearly not a morning person.

The ventilation system kicked in and took most of the smell out of the room. Garrus looked over to Shepard. She had wrinkles on her face where folds from the couch or blanket had pressed in. He thought it was amazing how her soft skin could change like this and then return to its original state.

She got up and stretched, clearly not bothered by her nakedness. Raking her fingers through her hair, she traipsed over to him and took the cup of coffee he held out to her. Garrus stepped over to her and nuzzled her hair. She leaned her weight against him and kept drinking her coffee. They stood silently like that for a long time. Garrus considered this to be a perfect morning.

When Shepard had finished her coffee she looked much more lively. She stretched up and placed a kiss on his mandible, before making her way into the bathroom.

"I'm taking a shower. Then we could have breakfast and afterwards make our report to Keggs about what we have learned of Saren so far. What do you think?" she asked.

He nodded his head. "Sounds like a plan."

She disappeared behind the door and Garrus walked over to the window to look outside while he drank the rest of his cava. Outside the Citadel arm stretched out before him, lights twinkling. His apartment was on the 32nd floor, far above the atmospheric layer of the wards. Up here the building was sealed against the outside, the protective layer of gas over the atmosphere and the mass effect fields holding it in place almost thirty floors below him. If he squinted, he could see the faint blue ripples in the gas, caused by the mass effect fields adjusting. It looked like the patterns on Shepard's hair when they had been standing by the lake.

He would have to tell her soon how serious his feelings were. Already he had scented her and he not even told her. Turians may not be known for their romantic abilities but if he couldn't trust his own instincts, what could he trust?

Garrus had no reference for his feelings, no chart to scale them against but he knew deep in his gizzard that there would never be anyone else. It may not be the turian way and there may not even be a turian word for this, especially not when it involved a human. But there is no other name for a binary system of two stars, revolving around each other in the grip of their own gravity, than love.

He was shaken from his thoughts by hearing Jane call out for him. He stumbled to the bathroom where he was greeted by his human girlfriend's face full of soapy bubbles and white foam on her hair. He touched her hair and her cheek curiously, surprised how different it felt. She smiled at him and asked with an alluring tone in her voice, "Care to join me, my angel?"
Are you hesitating, stupid turian?

Eagerly he stepped inside the shower, closing the translucent door behind him. She turned the water back on, it was a bit colder than he usually liked it but he wouldn't complain. Not when he could use the soft sponge he had bought for her and wipe away all the soapy bubbles and suds, caressing her skin. Not when she leaned her back against him, her head resting on his cowl. Not when the sponge fell to the ground, his hands busy with her mounds and her labia. Stroking, circling he brought her to climax, catching her as her legs gave out under her. Turning around she climbed him again and lowered herself onto him like she had done before. But this time there was no urgency, no desperate roughness. This time she was sliding softly, slowly. Only when his own release rolled up to him did their movements become more frantic, desperate, and his roar got even louder when she bit into his cowl upon their climax, her vagina contracting around him.

He set her down again and she leaned against him, her face against the side of his cowl and her hands stroking the plates on his chest. She talked quietly over the rushing of water around them. "I love how soft your plates become, absorbing the water."

"And I think it's fascinating that your soft skin is water repellent," he said, stroking softly over her shoulder. Her collarbone stood out and he turned and lowered himself down to nibble at that beautiful curve. Her hands held his waist, strong and firm like he loved it. It gave him a warm shudder to think how well she already knew his body and what he liked.

The shower gave a warning beep about the excessive use of water and they stopped it with a sigh. He let her step out before vibrating his skin to let the water fly away. She turned around with surprise on her face.

"What are you doing?"

"Shaking off the water."

"You can do that?" she asked curiously. He did another tremor and she giggled. "Like a dog coming out of the pool."

Garrus snorted at that. "Our plates absorb water and by vibrating we can get rid of most of it. The rest has to dry off with a sonic fan or a towel. What do you do?"

"We use a towel to soak up the water. I could dry in a sonic fan as well but you have to give me something now because I'm making a puddle on the floor here." She pointed to the floor and there was indeed a growing puddle of water. She wiggled her toes and they made little splashes in the water. Garrus thought that was adorable, the many toes looked like they had a life of their own.

He snapped himself out of his fascination with Jane's toes and threw a towel on the floor for her to step on and took another one to dry her with. He had come to love her skin and now he wanted to touch it all the time.

"You've ruined me, do you know that?" he whispered at her.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "I ruined you? What did I do?"

"I'm a turian, I'm supposed to prefer rough plates and hard angled hips. But you are soft and round all over and I..." he nibbled her weirdly soft earlobe, "can't get enough of you."

And I love you.

"And I should prefer unplated skin and flat voices but I can't," she whispered against the skin of his
"You have ruined me just as much." She pulled his face to hers and kissed him.

Their tongues connected and it made his plates shift again and he scolded himself inside. He felt like an insatiable teenager and he didn't want her to think that he just desired her for her body. And they didn't have that much time anyway. He broke the kiss and nuzzled her hair while she placed kisses on his mandibles.

"We should probably get going, we need to see if we can find out more about Saren before Nihlus arrives," he mumbled into her hair.

"Yes, you're right."

Neither of them moved.

He felt her take a breath as if she wanted to say something but she stayed silent. He pulled back to look into her face. There was a serious look on her face, and her mouth opened again with words that didn't come out. He tipped his tongue against her upper lip and she took a gasping breath.

He put his hand on her cheek. "What is it?"

She took another breath and the words came tumbling out of her, "You and me... it feels so right... you make me so happy!" She placed a kiss on his mouth and ran out of the room. Garrus felt a rush of pure joy flow through him and he had to laugh at the same time. They were both equally incapable of putting their feelings into words.

Stepping out of the bathroom, he searched for her and heard her cursing in the bedroom. With a chuckle he stepped up to her, stopping her from kicking the box with her clothes because it wouldn't open.

"Let me help you," he said quietly and the annoyed frown on her face made way for a little smile. Together they managed to release the wedged lid and Shepard picked out fresh jeans and a shirt to go under her vest. When she got up, he wrapped his arms around her and murmured into her ear, "You make me happy too", his voice underlined with deep rumbles of affection.

She leaned back against him and her breath came in a happy sigh. Garrus's subharmonics sang to her, affection, desire, love. Eventually she freed herself from his embrace, placing a kiss on his mandible and made an apologetic trill.

"We have to get going, angel," she said.

He nodded. "I know, give me a minute to get dressed." He turned to his cleaning closet but realized that his armor had not made it into the thing last night. His armor was spread out in pieces all over the floor of the living room and the kitchen area. "Futuo! I didn't disinfect my armor last night. I have to do a quick cycle now, otherwise I'll smell all day."

"Alright, I'm getting us breakfast, but you have to write down what you want. I don't want to bring you children treats or something like that," Shepard said as she put on her shoes.

"Hey, there are perks to having a girlfriend, I'm getting breakfast brought home," he said with a chuckle, sending a few orders to her omni-tool. He began picking up the pieces of his armor from the floor. A slap on his ass made him shriek and Shepard jumped away with a giggle.

"Yes, there are perks, boyfriend, many perks," she called out with a laugh and he took note of the emphasis on the word boyfriend. She smiled beautifully at him and left him standing with a warm feeling spreading inside of him.
At the ANIS-office they had just managed to give their report to Jentarius Keggs before he had to run off with the team. Before he left, he ordered them to speak to the director and that was where they sat now, waiting to be called into her office. The secretary had entered the directors office and they sat alone in the hall. Sitting next to each other, their hands touched and secretly they were stroking each others hand.

Garrus almost regretted when they got called in, ending their little moment. As hard as it was to hide their feelings in public, he loved the little secret touches they had.

The director was a tiny human woman with a slim, hard face. Garrus immediately sensed that she was not to be underestimated. The woman stood up and held out her hand towards him.

"Garrus Vakarian, I'm Jana Schaefer, Director of ANIS."

Garrus took her hand, trying to make his handshake firm but not too much. Her hand was smaller than Shepard’s, and while still strong, it was clear that the director had spent the last years more behind a desk than on the battlefield. After shaking his hand, Shepard and her exchanged a silent handshake as well.

The director sat back down and indicated to them to sit down. Garrus took note that one chair was of human design and the other of turian design. He was sure that that was not a coincidence, everything at ANIS was practically screaming of interspecies collaboration. The humans truly wanted this to work, accommodating all species in every way possible.

The director looked at them expectantly. "What can you tell me about Saren Arterius?"

Shepard took the lead and laid out their knowledge. "Saren was on board of the Katanga for a short time, we know that from a krogan merc named Wrex, who had signed up but left without pay because he had suspicions. According to Wrex, Saren had hired the mercs to raid ships and he came on board when they went down to an archaeological dig site. He was looking for prothean stuff, we don't know why. He left that place in ruins. Same thing happened on a volus freighter that they raided on his call, he was looking for prothean things but didn't find any. We will meet with Spectre Nihlus later on, Saren was his mentor and he may be able to tell us more."

Garrus nodded to show that he agreed with this summary.

The director leaned back and thought the information over. "I find it deeply disturbing that a Council Spectre is raiding freighters and archeological dig sites. We have to inform the Council of this but we need more evidence than what a krogan merc is telling us."

"Wrex would never lie to me," Shepard said angrily.

The director raised her hands to calm her down. "I'm sure, but it will still not be enough to convince the council. You have to find out more, find another witness. If we want to convince the Council that their favorite Spectre has gone rogue, we need rock-solid evidence."

Garrus nodded again. "Agreed, so far we only have hearsay. But without access to the Council's database we can't find out where he has been and what his connections are."

The director showed a dangerous smile. "I might be able to help with that." She turned to Shepard.
"The asari councillor, Tevos, will grant both of you access to the Spectre database for one hour. You can't copy any data, only read." Shepard opened her mouth to ask a question but the director stopped her. "Of course, she asks you to do her a favor for that."

"Of course," Shepard grumbled through clenched teeth.

"She wants you to speak to the asari Consort Sha’ira. She has a delicate problem that needs a careful solution," the director said and sent a message to their omni-tools.

Shepard looked more annoyed by the minute. "Not sure if I'm the right person for this job." She grumbled something unintelligible. Garrus was a bit surprised by her annoyance, he would have to ask her about that when they were alone.

The director showed a slight grin on her face. "I'm sure you can manage. I trust Mr. Vakarian here to remind you of your diplomatic talent once in a while."

Shepard's snorted once and then gave a curt nod. Garrus nodded as well and they both left the office after receiving the necessary contact data. They left the building and Shepard sighed loudly.

"Now I have to kiss up to this asari..."

"What exactly is your problem? You're acting like this is a punishment."

"Yeah, I know, I'm being irrational." She sighed and raked a hand through her hair. "I admit it, I'm wary of the asari. Something about them rubs me the wrong way. I know, everybody loves them and I'm supposed to be all for interspecies understanding, but the asari..."

"Really?" Garrus asked with disbelief, "You are best friends with krogan, have a turian boyfriend, but you get xenophobic with asari? Everybody loves the asari."

"I know and I'm not talking about individuals, I mean Jinala was really sweet and I have met other, perfectly nice asari. But politically I just don't trust them. You know, I have a friend who does social studies and he told me how you have to watch a society for many generations to see if changes take and what developments are dominant. And now look at the asari. They founded the council along with the salarians. One of the longest living species with one of the shortest living. It's like they're watching an experiment unfold. While the salarians rush through generations, the asari keep on living and watching. The only other species living as long as them are the krogan and they are sure as hell not letting them get anywhere close to the Council. Did the asari even change the councillor once, since founding the Council?"

"I'm not sure, how old is Councillor Tevos?" Garrus wondered.

"I don't know either. It feels like they just watch, you know? Watch and judge. They grant a few embassies here and there but they only let the turians on the Council after you guys practically singlehandedly cleaned up the fuckshit with the krogan, which they had caused themselves."

They walked in a brisk pace towards the Presidium. Shepard looked at her feet and kept her voice low enough so that only Garrus could hear her.

"If the asari gave up the council, what would happen? For the asari this is still a first generation experiment, they could say it failed and move on."

They crossed the Presidium and made their way over to one of the bridges that crossed the lake. Shepard kept on talking. "And what do we know about the asari, how does their society work?"
They slowed down and Garrus pulled her to a bench on the bridge to sit down. He had the feeling that Shepard needed to get these thoughts out of her head.

"Did you know that when you visit Thessia, they assign a guide to you who takes you around and tells you where you can look and where you can't?"

"That's not unusual, to have a guide to show you the sights," Garrus interrupted but he knew that was not what she meant.

Shepard rolled her eyes at him. "I don't mean a tour guide, this guide is there to watch where you're going. You are not free to go where you want on Thessia. They say there is no poverty on Thessia but if there was, nobody would ever see it. What about economics? They have a monopoly on biotic technology and they export eezo. So where are the factory workers, the miners, the refinery workers? Do miners live in the same luxury as the temple asari? What about asari who are not as smart as others? What if they don't believe in the same goddess? They display this front of total peace and unity but I don't believe the world works that way."

Garrus's mandibles fluttered in a grin, it amused him that she had put so much thought into this. "I honestly don't know and never wondered about that."

"Why are you grinning about it like that?" she asked, grinning herself.

"This, this questioning, wondering, it is just so very human. It's the most wonderful, most interesting and most annoying characteristic of your species," Garrus said with a laugh and for a second he put his arms around her shoulder and pulled her towards him. Just for a second. On the other side of the bridge a turian clamped his mandibles to his face and made a disgusted hum.

He let her go and grinned at her. "Are you done now?"

She shook her head and wrinkled her nose at him. "No, I'm not done." She sighed. "You know, I can never talk about these thoughts because I don't want to come across as some sort of xenophobe. I don't dislike asari as people, but there are so many mysteries around them, they make me suspicious. Like what is it with their tendency to work as dancers and prostitutes? Not that I'm condemning that but surely there are more things a smart asari could do."

"Yes, I have been wondering about that myself," Garrus murmured. He even once had asked Dalinia about it but she had evaded the answer.

Shepard moved a bit closer to him and talked even quieter. "Ok, far fetched conspiracy theory here. A long time ago on Earth there was a spy called Mata Hari who worked as an erotic dancer and seduced important people and got them to tell her secrets. What if asari worked like that? Not all of them of course. But think about all the secrets an asari could get from a willing participant through one of their Embrace Eternity things. They could read it directly from your mind and you wouldn't even know it."

Garrus wanted to object but the words got stuck. Shepard wasn't the first who had asked this question, in fact when the turians met the asari back in the day, there were deep running suspicions for a long time against the mind melt. But somehow, after a while, nobody questioned it anymore.

"They have an oath against unwanted mind probing. It sounds... I want to say unlikely but maybe it isn't..." Garrus had to admit that her reasoning sounded quite convincing.

Shepard nodded. "Yes, I think it's weird that nobody wonders about that. Like the Consort, she is a professional... companion to important people and they say that she has great political influence."
How? How can she be influential if she isn't using the secrets, that those important people let her see, to her advantage?" She shook her head and looked at him. "So now you know my dirty secret, Commander Shepard is an asariphobe. I'm very sorry."

"So far you haven't shot any asari or yelled at one, I reserve my judgement for later." Garrus grinned at her. He really couldn't see her as a xenophobe, asking questions was not wrong.

"Yeah, thanks for the confidence. I'll try to control my urges," she grumbled sarcastically.

"Have you ever been with an asari? Sexually I mean?" Garrus asked, his subharmonics humming. Shepard nodded. "Yes, once. It was very nice, sure, but this whole mind connection thing makes me uneasy. Afterwards she looked at me like she was scared of me. I don't like it if people probe around in my mind's secrets. It's not a pretty place, I'm sure."

He nudged her in the side with his elbow, "Hey, why would you say that? I'm sure your mind is chaotic and crazy but still very pretty."

"Charmer," she said with a laugh.

They both got up and walked towards the place where the Consort resided. As they got closer, Shepard's back became straighter and her face hardened, with her chin stretched forward. It was fascinating to see how she slipped into the persona of the hardened Commander.

They were led to the Consort Sha'ira by her assistant after waiting for a short time. The assistant kept on stressing what a great honor it was to see the Consort without any waiting time and how glad Shepard should be to even meet her. Garrus could see that Shepard became more uncomfortable by the minute.

The Consort herself was breathtakingly beautiful and had a soft manner that made her appear unassuming and friendly. Garrus could see why powerful men and women would like her. She had a way of taking herself back and letting the other person feel safe and comfortable.

It didn't work on Shepard at all. She kept her distance and her face showed no emotion.

The melodic voice of Sha'ira floated through the dim lit room. "One of my clients, a turian retired general named Septimus Oraka, has been seeing me for years and he wanted our relationship to become more than it can ever be. In his anger he is now spreading lies about me, revealing confidential information about Xeltan, an elcor diplomat. To Xeltan it looks like this information came from me and it damages my reputation greatly." The Consort had a pained look on her face. She took a step towards Shepard and took her hand. "I ask you to be discreet and caring. Septimus suffers and I don't want him to suffer more but you have to convince him that his behaviour is wrong. He needs to admit to Xeltan that he had discovered this information himself, that it did not come from me. Will you do this for me, Commander Shepard?"

"Yes, I had already promised to Councillor Tevos that I would help you," Shepard said with a nod. She stood very still but she didn't pull her hand away. Somehow she appeared more calm and relaxed. "Do you know where I can find Oraka?"

The consort's warm voice embraced them even more. "He seems to spend most of his time in Chora's Den, drinking a lot. I am very glad that you will help me, Shepard. Please come back and see me when you have spoken to Septimus." She released her hand and and took a step backwards. They said goodbye and walked out. Outside they stopped and Shepard looked at her hands with wonder.

"Wow, did you feel that?" she asked.
Garrus felt the last tingles of Sha’ira’s presence fall away. "Yes, her voice did something. I felt safe, content."

"She is good. She made me all warm and calm inside. I can see why she is so revered." She sighed. "Well, let's see if we can find Oraka. Take me to the bar, Garrus. Pretty sure you still know where that bar is, right?"

Warm memories from a long time ago floated up in his mind. "Oh yes, I do, Alliance-Red. Yes I do."

Chapter End Notes

Yay, Sex! You thought I would deprive you but you were wrong! And then I went into sweet-romance-cuteness overload, I hope nobody got a toothache from that.

And Shepard isn't quite the guardian of interspecies understanding? Who would have thought?

About Garrus's apartment above the atmosphere; according to the Codex:

The Wards are open-topped, with skyscrapers rising from the superstructure. Towers are sealed against vacuum, as the breathable atmosphere envelope is only maintained to a height of about seven meters. The atmosphere is contained by the centrifugal force of rotation and a "membrane" of dense, colorless sulphur hexafluoride gas, held in place by carefully managed mass effect fields.

Seven meters, for all you non-metrics, would be at about three stories high, a bit under. I think this is so cool.

Also in the Codex it says that only the Presidium has a day-night cycle, the wards stay bright around the clock.

I imagine that people can program the window panes in their apartments to get dark, following a certain cycle. It would be done with something like LCD's, like they are used in auto darkening welding helmets. You could even program them to make patterns, looking like a silhouette cut-out. So you would program it to follow the cycle of your home planet or you could follow the Presidium's cycle like Garrus does. I imagine Garrus had it on Palaven's cycle for a while but the Presidium's cycle was just easier for him and his work shifts. And it was also a way to disengage himself from his family on Palaven.

I'm thinking way too much about this.
"So, do you think I should talk to Septimus or should you?" Shepard asked as they slowly walked over to the elevator that would take them down to the markets.

"The Councillor and the Consort want you to do this," Garrus answered.

"Yes, but he's a retired turian general, wouldn't it be better if another turian spoke to him about honor and how to deal with rejection?"

"Turians are notoriously bad at dealing with emotions like love and rejection. Sunshine, you weren’t there but let me tell you, when I thought you had left me, I was in a bad place. Just ask Frank and Nihlus. I'm not sure I can be of much help," Garrus said with a slightly embarrassed trill.

Shepard put her hand on his armored arm. "I'm sorry I made you feel bad but I had thought..." She shook her head at the memory.

"You know that I never meant it that way."

"I do now," she said quietly. She turned her head and gave him one of her blinding smiles that always made him miss a breath. She had put some dark color on her eyelashes, pronouncing them and making her pale blue eyes look even more intense. He couldn't look away and almost bumped into the elevator door.

In the elevator, a newscast mentioned reports about ominous incidents in the Exodus Cluster and the Armstrong Nebula. These reports mostly came from mercs, who were always eager to tell spooky stories to Citadel reporters, so no one actually took them serious. Still, the human colonies in these outer reaches were always under a threat and the Alliance was spreading itself thin, trying to protect them all.

The doors opened to the upper markets, and the smells from many people of all kinds of species, many of which could really use a shower, attacked Garrus's nose. He looked over to Shepard and saw her wrinkle her nose, so she noticed the smells too. It was quite the contrast to the clean and bright Presidium. While the Keepers kept the station functional and even managed to keep the lower area clean, the upper and lower markets still suffered from the mass of people in them at any given time.

They passed the market stands, ignoring the salesmen calling out to them with their newest deals or fighting with angry customers. They went down a set of stairs into a hall full of mercs and businessmen of the more shady kind. These were the lower markets, a bit more dirty, a bit less legal. Garrus felt very uncomfortable in his C-Sec armor and ignored the hostile looks he got as best as he could. Shepard beside him was tense, her hand on the pistol on her side, but she still walked like she owned the place.
Passing a krogan who looked even more angry than krogan normally do, they got out of the room and into an open corridor connecting different parts of the lower wards through passageways, tunnels, elevators and a transit train. From the other side of a walkway over a nauseating deep gap in the Citadel's structure, loud music spilled over to them and with a short look over their surroundings they went to the club.

Chora's Den was still one of the more shady establishments on the Citadel, always under surveillance by C-Sec. Which did nothing to prevent the illegal deals and the frequent injuries over disagreements about those deals happening there.

Garrus nodded his head towards the window in the surveillance alcove where he had spent a lot of time when he was still a rookie at C-Sec. It was also the place where he had met Shepard for the first time, and where he had had his first sex with an alien, two strangers who never told each other their names. The memory made a warm shiver run down his spine.

Shepard looked at him with a tiny smile and he noticed that her face was flushed pink. She probably had the same thoughts as him.

They fell in step next to each other, each protecting the flank as if they were in hostile territory. Which wasn't far off the truth, many patrons looked warily at Garrus's armor and had their hands on a sidearm. Garrus knew that the club had fallen into new hands recently and now belonged to a human named Fist. It was also well known that Fist was an agent for the Shadow Broker. Since the change in ownership, the clientele in the club had taken a turn for the worse. Garrus wondered why C-Sec didn't show more presence here.

The whole place was built in a circle, the bar in the middle and tables with cushioned sofas arranged on the outer wall. The music was loud and obnoxious, asari dancers writhing on the tables to it. They laughed and giggled but the sleazy looks on the patron’s faces made Garrus feel uneasy. He thought back to the questions that Shepard had about the asari and he had to agree. Why did young maidens do this? It was one thing to be more open and relaxed about one's sexuality, but it was something else entirely to be looked at like a walking-talking sex-toy.

A quick look around showed them all kinds of species but Garrus soon spotted an older turian sitting on the side close to the entrance. He pointed him out to Shepard, he wore expensive clothes, a purplish robe draped over his shoulders and his fringe. It made him look very much out of place in such a seedy environment. On the table in front of him five tall glasses stood empty, the sixth glass, half full with the pink sparkle of an asari-style cocktail, was in the turians hand.

It was hard to tell whether a turian was drunk or not if he was sitting down. Drunk people walked the same way across every species but the rigid faces of turians and their normal, stiff posture made it hard to tell their drunkenness while sitting. But Garrus could tell that the general was well on his way to a gigantic hangover the next morning and closing in on falling over without memory right now. Chora's Den was probably the worst place to do that.

"We have to get him out of here," Garrus whispered to Shepard. "He'll fall over soon and who knows what will happen to him then."

"Is he really that drunk?"

"Oh yes, I'm not sure if there is any point in talking to him right now," Garrus said. He stepped up towards the general and made his voice and the underlying harmonics sound authoritative. "Sir? Come with us please, we have a few questions for you."

The general snapped his head up. "Leave me alone, you unplated youngling." His speech was so
slurred that Shepard looked at Garrus confused, apparently her translator gave up on Septimus's speech. The General raised the glass to his mouthplates but forgot to close the sides of his mouth, dripping the pink liquid all over his robe. With a frustrated groan he patted himself down with a napkin but failed in getting any of the sticky liquid off his robe.

Garrus grabbed his arm and pulled him up, Shepard supporting him on the other side so that he wouldn't fall face first into the table. He was mumbling some protests but let himself be led outside. They went over the walkway to the corridor, his spurs occasionally catching on Garrus's, and placed the general on a bench where he slumped forward. Garrus pulled him back against the wall before he could fall off the bench.

Shepard snapped her fingers in front of his face and the general stared, confused by the strange sound coming off them. "General Oraka. Can you hear me?" she asked but as she watched his head loll she shook her own head. "You are right, Garrus, there's no point in talking to him now. Would cava sober him up?"

"Yes, it might. A huge glass of water would probably also help. Should I get some?" Garrus still had to hold the general up, he looked like he was about to tumble over.

Shepard straightened up. "No, I'll get it, you stay here with him, maybe he will talk to you. I can't understand him anyway." She turned around and went into the lower market hall. Garrus noticed that the general had his eyes open and looked rather interested after Shepard. He made a warning growl and the general turned his face to him.

"Don't worry youngling, I noticed your scent. I won't pursue her. I also smelled her on you. Looks like you got a good thing there." The turian general looked a bit more awake by now and Garrus hummed his concern. "Leave me in my sorrow, youngling, just leave me."

"I can't do that, General," Garrus said and trilled to get the general's attention. "I'm Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec, and that was Commander Shepard of the Alliance. The Consort has asked us to speak with you."

"The Consort, yes." He closed his eyes for a second and sighed. "I've seen a lot of horrible things in my days and there's only one woman in this damn galaxy who helps me forget it. Her. And she doesn't want me."

Garrus hummed sympathetically. "If you... adore her so much, why do you spread lies about her?"

"I love her!" The general looked up as Shepard came back with a cup of cava that he eagerly took and drank. He sat up straighter and yelled at Shepard as if it was her fault. "She rejected me. Me! Septimus Oraka, general of the turian fleet!"

Shepard didn't take kindly to getting yelled at. "Some general you are, moping in a bar. What would your troops think, seeing you like this?"

Septimus fluttered his mandibles and his subharmonics underlined his words angrily. "The troops can kiss my leathery backside. All I wanted was to retire and be with her. I deserve that." He hissed and turned to Garrus. "Look, youngling, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but don't waste your time."

His posture broke and he fell forward, leaning heavily on his elbows on his thighs. His voice got quiet and his subharmonics changed to grief. "The one place I always felt at peace was with her, but now..." A low, sad keen was all he could do.
Shepard squatted down in front of the general and looked him in the eyes. Her face showed sympathy but she hummed a line of tones that told a turian to get his act together. Oraka stared at her with genuine surprise. He made a short trill and Shepard repeated her hum. It had the desired effect, the old turian raised himself up.

He still stared at Shepard who slowly got up again. "Straighten up and act like a general?" he asked. Shepard nodded. "Maybe you're right, Commander. Sha'ira is worth it, even if she won't have me back."

Shepard took his arm and pulled him up. "Get up and get moving General."

Septimus nodded and wiped down his robe. "Alright, I'll go to her... after I've had a cold shower. Or two." He lifted the cup of cava. "Here's to soldiers acting like soldiers. Thanks Garrus, thanks Commander Shepard. You know Commander... you might make a good general yourself one day."

He took a datapad out of his pocket and handed it to Shepard. "Take this to the elcor diplomat, Xeltan. I spread his secrets and made it look like they had come from Sha'ira but on here he will see how I really got my information. That will exonerate Sha'ira and he may see that he needs to up his security protocols."

Shepard made a turian salute and Septimus made one as well. With a short look to Garrus he said, "Commander, could I have a word with Vakarian here alone? I'll send him after you in a minute."

She nodded and went back into the lower market. Garrus didn't like the idea of her waiting there alone and he growled at Septimus to hurry him up.

Septimus only fluttered his mandibles in a grin. "Does the Commander know?"

"Know what?" Garrus growled.

"That you scented her. Does she know what that means?" Septimus grinned even wider, knowing from the confused trills that Garrus couldn't stop, that he had been right. "So she doesn't know? Every turian who comes close to her will know that she is to be your bondmate and she has no idea? How do you think she will react when she finds out?"

Garrus groaned and his subharmonics were extruding fear and embarrassment. "I'll be in a world of pain, probably."

Septimus came up close to him and sniffed. "I can also smell her on you. Did you have sex in your armor?" The general hummed, pleased with himself. "I had no idea human women were so adventurous. Maybe I should broaden my horizons."

Garrus growled uncomfortably. "I have to go. Spirits watch over you, General." He dipped his head and walked quickly over to the door to the lower markets. Behind him he heard the general laugh.

"Good luck Garrus. Hold on to the good thing you have."

As the door closed behind him he saw the general walk over to the transit terminal. He looked sad and Garrus felt sorry for him. To love and be rejected, nobody deserved that.

The door closed behind him and he scanned the room to make out Shepard. He discovered her in a corner of the room in deep conversation with a krogan - of course! - over some gun mods. As she saw him, she walked over to him and waved a goodbye over her shoulder towards the krogan. "See you later, Jax."
The krogan looked at him suspiciously and suddenly sniffed the air. A laugh rumbled through him. "So that's him. Ha."

Shepard looked at him confused and then at Garrus but he shrugged his shoulders and pretended to not know what's going on. They went back up the stairs. Once they were on the upper level, Shepard went over to the huge window that overlooked the ward toward the ends of the Citadel's arms. She stared out in wonder.

"So many people, so many species. We humans had begun to conquer space like 200 years ago, maybe? And now look at this, this spacestation, larger than some planets, people from all around the galaxy and we are among them all. It's kind of overwhelming." She kept looking out, her arms leaning on the railing. Her face full of the childlike wonderment that he loved to see. She looked so beautiful to him.

He scrambled for a breath, his chest constricting once again. "Yes, overwhelming." He agreed but he didn't mean the station.

She finally pushed herself away from the rail and looked at the direction markers on the wall. They took an elevator up to the Presidium and as they stepped out he noticed how Shepard looked around confused.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"The embassies, are they this way or that way?" She turned to the left and to the right, looking for something and then turned on her omni-tool.

He snorted in amusement. "Are you lost?"

She sighed. "My sense of direction isn't all that great. I always have a map on my omni-tool. Let me see..."

Garrus put his hand on her back and gently pushed her in the right direction. "Come on sunshine, I know where we have to go." He smiled at her. "Never would have thought that you needed someone to guide you to the right places."

She turned to him and whispered with an underlying tone. "There are certain places I would like to guide you to right now."

He stumbled and silently cursed the people in the corridor to the embassies because he really needed to press this woman against the wall and bury himself in her. As they entered the elcor embassy he was glad that he wore his armor, it did hide certain things.

The huge, grey elcor spoke in the typical, slow drone that all of his species had. It clearly drove Shepard up the wall, her foot impatiently tapping, her arms crossed in front of her chest to prevent her hands from fidgeting. For an occasional sniper, Shepard was surprisingly impatient. Not that he was much better when it came to conversations with an elcor.

She presented the case to him and the diplomat droned, "Unbelieving. I know this Septimus and he could not learn my secrets. The only way he could learn them is from the asari Consort."

Garrus noticed how Shepard almost rolled her eyes and took a breath for a probably more snappy retort and he felt her pain. To cut the ordeal short he snatched the datapad out of her hands and showed it to the elcor. "As you can see, we have proof. Septimus himself has given us this information and he recommends that you update your security protocols."
Xeltan twitched some of the fleshy appendages in his face and droned, "Confused. This is difficult to fathom. Dismayed. Anyone can discover my secrets."

Garrus tried to calm him. "Septimus Oraka is a retired general, he is a powerful man, with good sources. I'm sure for anybody else, this information would not be easy to find."

The elcor kept on worrying about the information and his complaints about the Consort. He left to talk to her as hurriedly as someone of his kind could, stomping out and making the walls rattle with his steps.

They walked out after him and found themselves alone in the hallway. In a fluid motion they both turned to the other and embraced. Arms wrapped around each other, Garrus nuzzled Shepard's hair and she pressed her face into his cowl. They didn't need words.

Shepard's omni-tool chimed and she growled a string of curses that his translator didn't get. With a sigh she answered the call in audio only, her face still pressed against his chest.

"Yes, sir?" She asked, her voice making clear that she was talking to a superior. An unfamiliar voice answered from her tool.

"Shepard, could you see me for a minute if you're around? I'm at the ambassador's office."

"We are just around the corner, sir, we'll be there in a moment." She closed the call and took Garrus's hand to pull him behind her as she walked towards the set of doors leading to the embassy halls. When the door opened, she let go of his hand but he stayed behind her, watching over her, protecting her. It felt right.

They made their way to the human embassy. Shepard looked over her shoulder and indicated that he should come up to her side. "That was Captain Anderson. I had sent him a message this morning that I would like to talk to him about a turian he had worked with."

"Why? Did he have anything to do with Saren?" Garrus wondered.

Shepard had small grin on her face. "Well... it's all oh so very classified, as you know. But on the Alliance side every little fart is documented, even if they don't mention the names of everyone involved. I had a search algorithm about operations involving the Council, the turian Hierarchy and the Systems Alliance. Anderson's name turned up as having worked with a turian on a big mission with a scientist, artificial intelligence and what not, and somehow it all turned into a disaster. It's pretty much the only bad mark on Anderson's resume."

"What is the name of the turian?" Garrus asked.

"There is no full name but it is shortened to S.A." Shepard said with a smirk. She put up a grainy, fuzzy picture, taken in an angle from the top, on her omni-tool showing a dark skinned human and a white plated turian. "I also found this picture, not a good one but I'm sure that Mr. Skullface here is a younger Saren."

It was hard to tell but the overly long mandibles stretching out on the side of his head looked at least like Saren's. Garrus was intrigued, he never thought that Saren would ever have worked with a human.

When they arrived at the human embassy, a man left the room, who Garrus recognized as the human ambassador. His face showed a forced smile as he looked at Shepard and greeted her with a nod and a snarled, "Commander". Shepard answered with an equally snarled, "Ambassador". The ambassador ignored him and Garrus couldn't help but think that it was deliberate.
They entered and Shepard's face turned softer, showing a real, friendly smile. "Anderson, Captain, my Captain!" she called out and in a display of complete disregard for protocol and rank, she pulled the dark-skinned man into hug. Anderson looked surprised for a second but then returned the hug.

With a giggle Shepard stepped back from him and made a proper salute. "Sir, it's good to see you."

Captain Anderson saluted as well. "Likewise, Commander, nice of you to come so quickly." He turned his attention to Garrus and extended his hand towards him. "You must be Garrus Vakarian, it's very nice to meet you." Anderson was older and slightly taller than Shepard. Garrus saw the intelligence of a soldier in his eyes but also the caution of experience. This man did not easily make friends.

Garrus took his hand and shook it. "It's nice to meet you too, sir." He stepped over to Shepard's side and Anderson directed them both to a set of chairs around a conference table to sit down.

He could tell that Anderson was guarding his features, while he was obviously glad to see Jane Shepard, he also looked tense. Garrus decided to watch his face closely for the signs of lying in human faces that he had studied so well. He discreetly set up his omni-tool to make a recording of the Captain's face.

Anderson settled down on the opposite end of the table and made a small pile of datapads in front of him. With a sigh he looked up and addressed Shepard directly. "You know, I do get a warning flag messaged to me if someone tries to access files I have categorized as classified. Adding your message this morning, I'm almost dreading to ask what the hell you are working on, Shepard."

Shepard grinned mischievously. "Vakarian and I are part of an ANIS investigation about the Spectres. Especially Spectre Saren Arterius." She leaned forward and fixed her pale blue eyes on him. "Tell me about the mission you had with Saren."

Anderson pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "How do you even know?" He groaned. Then he looked up. "You didn't, did you?" Shepard's lips twitched. Anderson shook his head and murmured. "Fell for the oldest trick in the book..." Shepard's grin only got wider.

Anderson leaned back and looked at some spot on the ceiling. "I can't tell you any details, but... back then the Alliance had a research facility on Sidon in the Skyllian Verge. I can't say much but there was an emergency, missing scientist, just what you expect from a secret operation falling over. The ambassador Goyle wanted me to investigate and also be tested as a Spectre candidate. Saren was assigned to test me. We went after that missing scientist who had apparently changed his subject of interest and had some old artifact in his possession..."

Shepard’s back tensed. "What kind of artifact?"

"I don't know for sure, Kahlee said it was old, maybe even older than the protheans. The artifact and his research about it was lost in an explosion." Anderson sighed and pinched his nose again. "Saren made a damning report about me, said I endangered the mission. I barely managed to get out with Kahlee, before he destroyed the place and all evidence. The artifact and the research were lost and Saren made it look like my fault. The Council put the idea of a human Spectre back into the drawer and hasn't taken it out again so far."

Anderson got up and went to the window overlooking the Presidium. He stayed silent and appeared to be deep in thought. There was something in his posture that spoke of defeat, regret and a deep sadness.

After a few minutes he pulled himself out of his mood and turned back to the table. His attention
focused on Garrus. "I may have been known to have a non-favourable opinion of turians for a few years after the experience with Saren. I... I can't erase that but I want to make it clear that I have learned that Saren is an exception among the turians, not the norm."

Garrus acknowledged that with a dip of his head. Shepard spoke up with a snort, "He's an asshole, sir."

Anderson let a small smile play on his face before he turned serious again. "Even worse," he said, "his behaviour is intentional, he knows what he's doing, unapologetically. He has no regard for life, only the mission and his advantage." He sat back down again. "You have to be careful if you plan to go after him. I'm not the only one who gets flags mailed to him if someone accesses the old files."

Garrus and Shepard shared a look. They had to work fast if Saren knew that he was watched now.

Shepard looked up to her Captain, who was also her friend. Her face didn't show her Commander mask, she looked like a girl who had to interrogate her own father and didn't want to do it. "Is there anything else you can tell us? Could Kahlee have more information for us?"

Anderson suddenly leaned forward and slammed his hands flat on the table. The pile of datapads toppled over, some clattering to the ground. "You will not, under any circumstances, contact Kahlee Sanders!" he yelled angrily, "She is under my protection and her involvement in this case is classified. Not even I have had contact with her for the last 18 years. She doesn't have any further information for you and you will not contact her. Is that clear, Commander?"

Shepard straightened in her seat and loudly replied, "Yes, sir! Crystal, sir."

Anderson's features softened and he pushed himself away from the table. He had that deep sadness on his face again and Garrus couldn't help but wonder what Kahlee Sanders had been to him. Shepard got up and walked around the table to Anderson's side, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry for dragging these old stories back out," she said softly. Anderson padded her hand with his own and for a second his shoulders sagged forward. He suddenly looked years older.

With a nod to her he composed himself again and indicated for them to follow him to the door. "You have to go now. Ambassador Udina will be back soon and I have a confidential call to make before that." He took Shepard's hand and looked at her warmly. "Take care, Shepard. Oh, and your aunt Marianne would like to hear from you once in a while. She calls me sometimes to hear what you are doing and I would prefer if you told her yourself." He had a scolding look in his eyes and Garrus noticed with amusement that Shepard squirmed like a schoolgirl who hadn't done her homework.

"Yes, I'll write her," she mumbled, staring at her feet. With a nod to Anderson, Shepard and Garrus left the room, letting the door close behind them before they began to talk.

They took a few steps away from the door. Garrus turned to her, "Did you know that Anderson was supposed to become a Spectre?"

"No! I never heard about that." Shepard shook her head. "We talked so much through the years but he never mentioned that. He also never mentioned this Kahlee, I wonder who she is."

"Are you going to try to find out who she is and what she knows?" Garrus asked.

"No, I think we should respect his wish. And it was a long time ago, I think we should concentrate on Saren's recent actions." Shepard began to walk slowly back to the Presidium and they stayed silent for a while.
Finally his curiosity overcame him and Garrus just had to ask, "Who is aunt Marianne?"

Shepard wrinkled her nose for a second. "After Mindoir... after my parents had died, aunt Marianne took me in and gave me a home. She was my mother's sister, lives in the outskirts of Chicago, a city on Earth, runs her own furniture business. We..." Shepard sighed, "we didn't get along all that well. It was mostly my fault, I was an angry teenager with posttraumatic stress disorder, full of fear, anger, loneliness. She didn't have any children of her own, never wanted any, and suddenly she had an angry, hormonal teenager in her house."

Shepard stopped at the lake and looked ahead, her eyes unfocused. "She liked to cook, to sew, to decorate and she tried to make me interested in these things. There she was, talking about recipes and all I ever did was practice Taekwondo kicks in the basement."

"What's Taekwondo?" Garrus asked, settling against the rail beside her.

"Martial arts, lot's of kicking and punching. I practised that for hours, I was so angry all the time. On good days I just played games. The rest of the time I was constructing things, printing them and putting them together." Suddenly a small smile danced over her face. "There must be boxes full of little constructions that I made. I wonder if Marianne still has them. The only thing we did together was cooking and eating dinner. It made me a decent cook at least."

"You can cook?" Garrus had not expected that.

"I'm no chef. But I can follow a recipe without setting things on fire and I can usually whip up something edible with the stuff that is there. It won't be fancy but it will fill you up. I could cook something for you." Shepard suddenly looked up. "Of course, I would have no idea how things taste for you. How many tastes do turians have?"

"What do you mean?" Garrus asked, trilling confused.

"We humans can taste sweet, sour, bitter, salty and umami on our tongue. What about turians?" Shepard asked, her face full of curiosity again.

"Turians taste sweet, suavis, sour, bitter, amarus and salty. Also on the tongue," Garrus said.

Shepard looked at him thoughtful. "What is suavis and amarus like?"

Garrus had to think about that for a minute. Suavis was just suavis, how should he describe that? "Suavis is kind of sweet and tasty, a very pleasurable taste."

Shepard nodded to that. "That sounds kind of like umami, only umami is more on the salty side for us."

"Amarus is a dark, bitter taste, very unpleasant. It's not just bitter, it's worse. Turians can tolerate things that are bitter but things that are amarus are inedible for us." Garrus had to shudder just thinking about the taste.

Shepard laughed a little. "Is that why turians don't like human coffee? Coffee is quite bitter but maybe we don't taste it like you do."

"That could be true, I never understood how anybody can drink that vile stuff." Garrus smiled at her. "But I tolerate the smell because I see what you are like before you have had any in the morning."

Shepard grinned. "Yeah, you don't want to argue with the morning monster before it has had coffee."
"Wouldn't dream of it," Garrus grumbled and wiped a strain of hair from her face.

She smiled at him and he spread his mandibles in a smile at her. He wanted to press his forehead against hers but he didn't dare. Not out here in public, and not without talking to her about his scenting.

Shepard suddenly saw someone and walked over to a turian who was picking weeds out of a flower bed. She knelt down beside him and dipped her head. The turian looked slightly suspicious but acknowledged her greeting with a dip of his head. Garrus walked over to them and greeted the old man as well.

"Are you the gardener here?" Shepard asked.

The older turian raised himself up and pointed around the Presidium. "I'm one of the gardeners. I'm responsible for the flowerbeds on the whole Presidium."

"They look wonderful, so beautiful," Shepard said in earnest. "Do you happen to know if they keep fish in the Presidium lake?"

The gardener laughed. "I usually only get this question from krogan. No, there are no fish in the lake, it's the Presidium's water reservoir and they try to keep it as clean as possible. The only things living in the water are plants. I made a few flowerbeds for marsh plants on the shore, right over there, you see?" He stepped up to Shepard to direct her view and suddenly sniffed. With a jerk he turned around and stared at her. Then he turned towards Garrus and he knew that the gardener was taking in his scent to compare it to what he had just smelled on Shepard. His eyes widened and his mandibles hung slack when he realized that her scent came from Garrus.

His subharmonics chirped a mixture of confusion, disgust and amusement as if he couldn't decide on the right reaction. Garrus hissed at him to keep quiet but it was already too late. Shepard had her arms crossed and looked with furrowed brows back and forth between the two turians.

She made a nod towards the gardener and thanked him for his information and then roughly grabbed Garrus's arm and pulled him over to a quiet corner on a walkway over the lake. Garrus was kind of relieved that they were in public, at least she probably wouldn't shoot him here.

Hopefully?

With her arms crossed and leaning back slightly she looked at him, her eyes piercing. "Garrus Vakarian, I get the distinct feeling that there is something you want to explain to me. And don't you dare say that you don't know what I'm talking about! Every turian and krogan sniffing at me, you know damn well what I'm talking about. Spill it."

Garrus squirmed under her intense gaze, stretching his throat. "I scented you. Turians and krogan can smell that."

"You did what? What does that mean?" Shepard asked, her voice a bit higher than usual.

He sighed. "I didn't plan it, it just happened, ehm, in the heat of the moment..."

Shepard looked at him critically and opened her omni-tool, typing in a search. She read the result and her eyes got wide. She looked up to Garrus. "The Extranet says that we are engaged now. The fuck?" She stared at him and he couldn't quite understand the emotions flying over her face. There was confusion, fear, anger and something else. She took a breath and then hissed, "And it just happened? Does that happen often? You do that with all your women? You didn't mean it? Or did you? And why didn't you tell me? What the hell, Garrus?"
"This is not the place," he snarled and grabbed her arm and dragged her over to the C-Sec headquarters. She pulled her arm out of his grip and angrily growled at him but she followed him into C-Sec. Silently they stomped through the hallway, ignoring people looking at them, until they got to Garrus's old office. Luckily it was still unoccupied and he locked the door behind them.

Shepard had her arms crossed again and the look on her face was quite hostile. Garrus took a careful step towards her. "Shepard, I'm sorry I didn't tell you that I scented you." Her face turned a little softer. He took a deep breath, trying to come up with an explanation. "Scenting is not a purely instinctual action but close to one. It's a way to signal to other potential partners that this one is not available anymore. I did it... as I said I didn't plan it..." He lost his way, burned by the angry look she gave him.

He took another step towards her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Jane, I have never done that before with any partner. I don't know what came over me... You drive me crazy, you make me lose all sense of reality and I..."

Suddenly she smiled, making his gizzard jump. She raised herself on her toes and put her hands on his mandibles, stroking them with her thumbs. Pulling his face towards her she kissed him softly, suckling on his mouthplates. Her voice was husky as she whispered, "You silly, romantic turian. Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Well for one, you're usually armed..." he said, fluttering his mandibles in a relieved smile.

She laughed, lowering her head and he realized that she offered her forehead to him. He lowered his head as well and pressed against her with an urgency that was slightly ridiculous. He felt his scent release and he sighed in relief that he didn't need to feel guilty about that anymore.

Jane moved away from his forehead but held his head down and pressed her nose against it, sniffing. "It smells... different," she whispered. "It's kind of metallic, different than your usual scent." She looked him in the eyes. "I wish I could do that too. To you." He forgot to breathe.

She grinned. "I could put on lipstick and cover you with kissmarks, telling the world that I kiss this turian and no one else!" She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him all over his face.

There it was again, that feeling that something behind his cowl wanted to explode.

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Chapter End Notes

Aaaww, they are just so cute!

Most of Septimus's lines about Sha'ira and Xeltan's are from the game, they were just too good, but I changed the setup a bit.

How do turians close the sides of their mouths for drinking? Damned if I know, maybe they can raise their gums? Have internal lips on the sides? Let's just ignore this for now, I'll come up with something later. Stuff like this keeps me up at night.

The story about what kind of things turians taste? I completely made that up, so no
canon-panic please. I just thought that they are more into sweet things, since they are almost made of dextrose.

The story of Anderson working with Saren, Kahlee Sanders and what the artifact had to do with Saren's obsession is told in the book 'Mass Effect: Revelation' by the lead writer of the Mass Effect video game, Drew Karpyshyn. In case you haven't read that yet, you should, it's very good.

Constructing things and printing them? Well, in the future everybody will have a 3D-printer of course! (I want one...)

suavis = sweet and tasty
amarus = very bitter
They made their way over to the Consorts chambers again. Walking side by side, their hands almost touching. Shepard was wiping absentmindedly over her forehead and suddenly stopped walking. Garrus had to skid to come to a halt beside her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You scented me again," she stated.

"Yes?"

"That wasn't very smart, was it? You said that every turian and krogan will be able to smell your scent on me. Not exactly keeping things a secret, right?"

Garrus stretched his throat. "I'm tired of this secrecy. Can't we just stop it?"

"No, Garrus, we can't. It's not the time yet, every turian who smells that could turn hostile towards us. Humans and turians are still hung up on the old war." Shepard punched her finger into the breastplate of his armor. "We have to be professional, remember? We want to be taken seriously, we want to make a difference, we want to show people that it can work."

Garrus trilled slightly embarrassed. "You're right, I know.You may have to use turian soap to get it off and even then... it's quite persistent," he murmured.

"Alright, we let the Consort know that things are taken care of, then we go home for a short time so I can wash and we can eat something. After that we go back to ANIS and collect on that favor from the asari Councillor."

Garrus chirped his agreement and they started walking towards Consort's place. Her assistant was very excited again and fluttered around them happily talking away about how amazing the consort was and how lucky they should feel to see her so soon again. Shepard turned her back to her so that she couldn't see how she rolled her eyes.

The Consort finally interrupted the stream of words by calling them over. She directed them to a sitting area this time and asked them about Septimus. Shepard nodded at Garrus, and he gave short a summary about what the general had said. After he finished, Shepard relayed the reaction from Xeltan. The Consort nodded at that.

"Yes, I have heard that he has tried to contact me. I will call him to give him the opportunity to speak of his error and clear his mind," Sha'ira said with her melodic voice. Garrus felt once again how her
voice and her mere presence calmed him. He saw it in Shepard too, the tension falling off her shoulders.

She thanked them with many, beautiful words that neither of them really paid attention to, as it didn't matter what she said. Her voice was so soothing. The spell broke when she wanted to put her hands on the sides of Shepard's face to mindmeld with her. Shepard jerked away and jumped up. Sha'ira looked truly confused and it brought an honesty to her face that made Garrus realize how much of her normal persona was just an act.

The Consort got up slowly and carefully stepped closer to Shepard. "I want to express my gratitude by offering you the pleasures of a meld with me. I can assure you that it will be wonderful for you and it would be an honour for me."

Shepard took a step backwards and held up her hands. "Thanks, but no thanks. I'm sorry but I... eh... don't feel comfortable to receive such a gift from you. We already have an agreement with the Councillor and that will be enough for us. I'm glad we could help you."

Garrus stood up and placed himself beside her, an odd feeling rising in him that she needed him there with her.

Sha'ira had her face under control again with a calming smile. She took something out of the box on the table and handed it to Shepard. "Please take this locket from me as a gift for you. It may be useful to you one day." She looked up to them and it appeared as if she was studying them. "I see. Your bond is strong, I can see it clearly. May the Goddess Athame watch over you two."

With a tiny bow she left them and they made their way back outside. Shepard was looking at the trinket in her hand and then put in her pocket. She typed something on her omni-tool for a minute and sighed before she closed the screen again. Garrus wondered what she had written but he had noticed that Shepard always took notes and wrote things down. If it was important, she would surely tell him.

They walked over the walkway to a transport hub to take one of the trains running along the Tayseri Ward. Garrus thought back to what the Consort had said. "What do you think she meant by 'your bond, I see it clearly'" he wondered.

Shepard seemed to think that question over. "Maybe she can see different electromagnetic wave lengths. There are people on Earth who say that they can see the Aura of someone, sort of like a light of their personality. I never believed that to be true but maybe the asari see different than us." She looked up to him. "Maybe you see different than me."

Garrus thought about that. "I think I read somewhere that humans and turians have comparable range when it comes to colors but humans can't see in the dark."

Shepard nodded at that. "True, night vision goggles are a human invention, turians don't really needed them. My friend Hyun Su, remember? You met her..." "Badass Girls Circle, I know," he said with a smile. "She took that picture we like."

"Yes, her." Shepard smiled. "She worked with asari in bioengineering and she said something interesting a while back. We describe asari as blue, maybe light- or dark-blue but that's about it. Asari have like 25 different names for shades of blue, so to them they all look different, they have different shades of blue." She looked up to him and she had that childlike curiosity on her face again that he had come to love. She was once again typing something on her omni-tool. "I'm writing that down for later, I'm going to look up what asari can and can't see."
They had arrived at the transit hub and entered a mostly empty wagon. They sat down next to the window and Shepard leaned her head back. To Garrus astonishment she had fallen asleep before the train even arrived at travel speed.

Garrus heard the water rushing and stamped all thoughts about the water pearling on her skin out of his mind. They didn’t have time and he really needed to stop acting like a hormonal teenager. He took off the upper parts of his armor, stretching his arms and rolling some tension out of his shoulders.

The food he had prepared for each of them stood in color coded bowls on the table, her bowl in red, his in blue. He had picked Shepard's after the picture on the package. It was something with fish and vegetables, a common combination in turian meals as well. Her fish looked really strange though. Maybe they ate it differently than turians. He turned to his omni-tool to research human food when he realized that the recording, that he had started when they spoke with Anderson, was still running. He stopped it and skipped backwards to the talk with Anderson. He wanted to look at his face when he spoke of Saren but suddenly something else drew his attention. He let the recording play from the point where they left the embassy, the camera algorithm struggling with finding a focal point and the right framing. When he had moved his arm too much, the camera turned off completely, only recording short snippets whenever they walked.

When they had stood still, waiting for the train and while they sat on the ride, the camera turned on again. The algorithm focused on different faces, assuming an intent behind the filming.

A naked arm suddenly crawled over his shoulder and Shepard, smelling of turian soap came up behind him, pressing her face against the side of his fringe. He pressed back against her, feeling heat rush through him. She was saying something but his brain did not register anything but her touch. He groaned a deep rumble.

He turned around, grabbed her upper arms and pulled her over the back of the couch. With a laughing shriek she fell into his lap. She was naked, her skin still slightly damp. He pressed her against his chest, burying his nose in the crook of her shoulder, stroking her back and her waist with his hand. He heard her sigh and she somehow wrapped her body around his, molding against him. Her skin was so soft and her fingers were massaging all the right places under his fringe. He was losing himself in his arousal.

Shepard turned her head to kiss his mandible and then whispered against it. "Hey. I said, we should get going."

Garrus let his subharmonics growl deeply in his chest, feeling her shiver from the vibrations against her skin.

"Can't hear you, naked woman," he rumbled and licked her jaw line up to her ear. She reacted with a deep, lustful moan.

But then she pushed herself away from him and he reluctantly let her go. "No, no, no. I'm not showering yet again," she said and jumped away from him.

Garrus let out a sad subharmonic wail and he could see her react in empathic sadness. He stopped
himself, "It's alright, I'm just messing with you. But please, put some clothes on," he groaned, "You're really testing my reserve here."

She giggled, which made her breast jiggle and then turned around to walk to the bedroom, swinging her hips in a comically overdone way. He had to sigh. *This woman is going to be the death of me.*

A short time later she came back in her normal pants and a rather colorful T-Shirt. It had bright red and yellow shapes on the front and some writing on it. His translator was not helping him. "What does it say on your shirt?" he asked.

"Your translator not telling you?" She pulled the shirt down to straighten it. He shook his head. A mischievous grin spread on her face. "Well, it says 'I fuck turians'."

"Please tell me it doesn't."

She laughed out loud. "No, it doesn't but now I think I totally need a shirt like that." She sat herself down next to him and picked up her red bowl. "The thing on my shirt is a graphic like it was used in old comic books. It was to indicate a sound or a something like that. This one here says 'Ka-Pow', like someone gets hit." She was silent for a minute as she shoveled her food into her mouth. He studied her face as he picked his own vegetables from his bowl. When she chewed, her whole face seemed to work at that.

She looked back at him, halting her fork just before her mouth. "What?"

"Is it good? Your food, I mean?" he asked.

She seemed to think about that question. "Well, it's not bad but I think I could make something like this myself and it would taste better. But it's quite good for something readymade."

"Why does the fish look so weird?" Garrus wondered.

"What do you mean? It's cooked, for most fish, the meat turns white when it's cooked."

"Ah, that explains it," Garrus said. "We hardly ever cook our meats."

"Oh, I should make you some sushi with dextro fish one day," Shepard said before slurping the rest of her meal out of her bowl.

"I would like it if you made something for me if I can make something for you too one day," he said to her and it made himself feel warm inside to think of them working side by side in his kitchen.

"Cool! Hey, when Nihlus comes tonight, I'll cook something for you two," Shepard said enthusiastically.

Garrus hesitated for a second with his answer. "But you can't even taste it like we do!"

"Don't worry, I'll follow a recipe and you can do the final tasting. If it sucks we can still order something." She grinned at him, her tongue darting out to catch some residue from her food.

"Alright." Garrus nodded and transferred the video from his omni-tool to a large datapad. "I wanted to show you something. I had started a recording when we were talking to Anderson and forgot to turn it off."

"Why did you record that?" Shepard looked at him confused.

"You remember that I'm considered an expert on humans and lying? That's how I do that. I watch
the recording afterwards and look for signs, tiny microexpressions," Garrus explained to her.

"So you expected Anderson to lie to us?"

"I didn't mean that disrespectful..."

"No, good thinking," she said with a sigh. "I'm always way too trusting when it comes to friends. You are right, he could have lied to us, I never even thought about that."

Garrus picked up the datapad to hold between them. "But that's not what I wanted to show you. I had forgotten to turn it off and it kept on recording the whole time. To and from the Consort, at C-Sec and the way home. Now look at this, I let it play a bit faster."

He started the video. On the screen the focus point of the camera was jumping from face to face, sometimes catching a face in the distance, sometimes a person up close. On the screen Shepard went over to the gardener and knelt down beside him.

"Stop video," Garrus called out. He pointed to a turian in green clothing standing on the bridge in the distance, apparently reading something on his omni-tool. The camera had not focused on him so it was impossible to see where he was looking.

"Remember him," Garrus said and continued the video. On the screen Garrus and Shepard were arguing and then walked over to the C-Sec entry. Shepard pointed the turian out on the screen, lazily walking in the distance. When the on-screen Shepard and Vakarian left the C-Sec building and walked over to the Consort, the camera had turned off. But when they left the Consort's chambers, the green-clothed turian was leaning against the rail, reading on his omni-tool again.

Shepard looked up to Garrus and then back to the screen. "This guy was following us!"

Garrus nodded. "Yes, I didn't find him as we walked to the train hub but he was on the train, see?" He fast forwarded the video up to the point where the train was taking them down the Tayseri Ward to his apartment complex. "You had already fallen asleep, which I have to say is a strange habit of yours."

"Hey, that's the first rule of Basic. Sleep whenever you can, you might not get another chance anytime soon. Moving vehicles always make me sleepy and I trusted you that you wouldn't just leave me on the train." Shepard planted a soft kiss on his mandible before turning back to the screen.

Garrus enjoyed her gentle touch with a soft trill. He let the video advance up to the point where they had left the train. The green-clothed turian sat away from them, looking intently at his omni-tool screen. "He's not looking at us but he's definitely following us."

Shepard tilted her head. "I think he has us on camera. He's looking at the recording on his omni-tool."

"Spirits be damned, you are right. But why is he following us?" Garrus kept looking for their follower but he couldn't spot him anymore. The recording switched to audio only while they were walking to his apartment building. As they stood in front of the elevator, the camera turned back on but their stalker was nowhere to be seen.

"I don't think he followed us to find out where I live," Garrus murmured.

"No, that's not exactly a secret. Do you think Saren contracted him?" Shepard asked. "Anderson said that he would get notified if someone accessed the old files."
"I don't know, that seems almost too subtle for someone like Saren."

Shepard nodded, "Right, he could just address the council directly and ask why someone was poking around in the old stuff. Hiring someone to watch us, what would that gain him?"

"Compromising pictures?" Garrus wondered.

"But he can't know if that would really bother us. No, I don't think Saren is behind that guy, if anything he would probably do it himself because he trusts no one," she said. "Who else could be interested in the two of us?"

The realization hit him square in the chest. "Oh no. Spirits take me, I know."

Shepard turned to him. "Who?"

"My father. Ancestors be damned, this is exactly what I should have expected from him." He put his face into his hands, growling his anger.

Shepard looked clearly surprised. "You father has hired someone to spy on you? Why would he do that? I mean, he could just call you, I'm sure he knows that."

No, he couldn't.

Garrus didn't want to explain what his denial of his fathers decretum had truly meant. That his father would never call him because as a good turian son it would have been Garrus's duty to initiate the contact. That the breakup with his family was not something he could fix with a simple call.

"I think... this is more about you," he said quietly.

"Oh." Her face scrunched up in deep thoughts. "He's spying on me? He must be really worried about my bad influence."

Garrus swallowed whatever he could say to that. Shepard had no idea how serious his father was taking this. He would have to talk to him soon to stop him from doing anything drastic.

Shepard was putting on her shoes and her vest and fixed her heavy pistol to her side. "He's overdoing a bit, don't you think? Maybe you should just call your old man. Clear the air. He obviously wants to know what's going on. Anyway, we should get going, I want to cash in on that favour from Tevos."

Garrus nodded and put his armor back on. His thoughts were spiraling out of control, he had thought himself to be safe from his family. But it was obvious that the older Vakarian was not about to let his son go on with his own life so easily.

They walked through the upper markets because Shepard wanted to look at a new pistol scope she had heard about. Garrus really didn't see the point of a pistol scope if you had a sniper rifle but Shepard apparently wanted her pistol to be the ultimate weapon for every purpose. She walked over to a volus merchant with determination and greeted him.

The volus strained his back to look up to them and his breather rattled. "Greetings, Earth-clan,
greetings, Palaven-clan, what can I do for you?"

"I want to look at pistol scopes," Shepard said, pointing to a section of the kiosks shopping menu.

The volus took a wheezing breath. "Ah, yes, I have a wide variety of scopes. Here," another wheeze, "take a look." He opened a crate with different scopes and Shepard began looking at every single one. With a wheeze the volus started speaking again. "So, Earth-clan, you just came here from one of the colonies?" Wheeze. "Noveria maybe? Or Feros?"

"No, why would you think that?" Shepard asked confused.

"Oh, nothing. I just heard that people seem to be leaving those colonies." Another wheezing breath. "I hear a lot of things. Maybe if you are looking for information," wheeze, "I may be able to help you as well." He was apparently very proud of that and seemed to try to straighten his back. On a volus that looked kind of funny and Garrus turned his face away to not give away his amusement.

"I'll keep that in mind. What is your name?" Shepard said with the corners of her mouth twitching.

"The name is Expat, Earth-clan."

"My name is Commander Shepard." She looked at him seriously and Garrus could not see a hint of arrogance or amusement in her features. "I'll be taking this scope, please deliver it to this address. I may come back to you for information."

The volus took a long, rattling breath. "Glad to be of service, Commander Shepard."

With a nod they both turned away and made it just around the corner before Shepard broke down in a fit of laughter. She held her stomach like she was in pain but she was laughing so Garrus thought that she was probably okay.

"Oh man! I can't..." She was trying to catch her breath, still giggling. "Wasn't he just the cutest, little wheezing potato you have ever seen? And so seriously proud."

Garrus fluttered his mandibles in a grin. He didn't know what a potato was but he could imagine. "It's hard to take the volus serious sometimes," he had to laugh. "But if I remember correctly, we had something on file concerning Expat. I think he works for the Shadow Broker or has at least contact with him."

"Well, damn, I'm falling for stereotypes again, am I?" Shepard said with her brows furrowed angrily. "I should be better than that. Just because he is small and round, I think he is not dangerous, what a stupid thing to do." She kicked against the wall in anger. "I'm always the first one to call people on their stereotypes, and I'm not even better, for fucks sake."

Garrus put his hand on her shoulder. "Hey, at least you didn't show it when you spoke to him."

"Thanks to my pokerface." Shepard ruffled her hair and then they both started walking again. Leaving the market area, they came out on the Presidium and made their way over to the ANIS building. As they passed the statue of the krogan battlemaster, Shepard suddenly turned and ran over to a group of krogan. Garrus grew slightly uneasy but he thought it better to keep his distance. A human among them was probably easier to accept for a bunch of krogan, than a turian.

Shepard, looking tiny and frail in comparison, had of course no problem among the huge creatures. She talked to one young krogan who Garrus recognized as Skeev. She hit him hard on his hump as she left and the whole group was laughing. Garrus shook his head, her connection to the krogan was still unfathomable to him.
She came back to him and they continued their path. Shepard still grinned. "Skeev was really disappointed that there were no fish in the lake." Her face turned more serious. "I wonder where Wrex is, he didn't want to tell me. I hope he's not doing some stupid merc job."

"He doesn't really have that many options though."

"True. Still, if I want to recruit him, he needs to be, well 'clean'." She made air quotes with her hands. That was one of the human gestures that had found its way into the repertoire of many species in record time. "The Alliance will throw a fit otherwise."

"What would you want to recruit him for?" Garrus wondered.

Shepard squirmed. "Ah, it's still classified..." She pulled his head down so she could whisper close to his ear. "I can't tell you details but there's going to be a ship. An awesome, awesome ship and we will be on it."

"What are you talking about?" Garrus looked at her confused, her face so close to his and her eyes full of excitement.

"Can't say more. Be patient," she whispered. Next to them a turian growled aggressively, obviously unhappy how close together they stood. Another turian passed them, making a disgusted sound with his subharmonics.

"Looks like we stopped at Judgemental Corner, we better find our way back to Modern Times Road," Shepard said loudly with a grin and brushed shortly over his hand before settling into her walk by his side. Garrus trilled his amusement at her remark and to show the other turians that he also didn't care for their opinions.

Spirits, I love her.

Back at ANIS, the office was mostly deserted, all the teams otherwise occupied. Garrus and Shepard walked up the stairs to visit the director and they had to wait a little. He held her hand, his thumb stroking the soft skin between her own thumb and her many fingers.

The door opened and he let her hand drop from his. The director stepped out, looking them over with stern but friendly look. She waved them over to follow her as she walked to a room on the other side of the gallery.

"Councillor Tevos was very pleased with how you handled her request," the director said to them. She let them into an office with a single terminal on a table and two chairs. Garrus noticed two cameras on opposite sides of the room pointing at the table.

The director indicated to them to sit down but then called Shepard back to her to ask a question. "The councillor has relayed from the Consort that you refused the mindmeld. Anything I should know about?"

Shepard looked straight at her without showing any emotion on her face. "Just personal preference, ma'am."

"Alright, suit yourself. That terminal will give you access to the council database. You can take notes
but they will be confiscated and reviewed before they are handed back to you. No pictures, no video. You have one hour."

With that she issued a command from her omni-tool and the terminal sprang to life. Shepard and Garrus eagerly leaned forward and Shepard typed in 'Saren Arterius'. The screen filled with many entries, a list of all assignments and an entry about his personal background.

They both looked at each other for a second and with a nod, Shepard activated that link. The list was extensive and Garrus decided that it was unnecessary for both of them to look at the same stuff, so he opened a second window on his side and started to look through the list of assignments. Saren had been around the whole galaxy on his assignments. About half of his jobs did not come from the council, he just happened to come across a situation and intervened under his Spectre authority. Garrus had the suspicion that not all of these situations were as clear cut as his reports made it look.

Shepard was looking through a financial list on her side and had her face scrunched up deep in thought. "Wasn't the Arterius family kind of cast out?" she asked and Garrus leaned over to her side to look at the entries she had opened.

Garrus tried to recall what he knew about the Arterius family. "The Arterius family was not exactly influential but the brothers had both made a name for themselves around the time of the Relay 314 Incident. Later Saren's brother, Desolas, somehow went mad, destroyed most of their property and lost most of the families fortune. After he died, Saren associated the clan with another one, because he couldn't stand on his own."

"Yes, it says here that the Arterius clan is now part of the Serpentin clan. But he didn't take on their markings," she said.

Garrus hummed his surprise. "That's actually kind of insulting. It seems like he doesn't like his new clan. He prefers to go barefaced instead of taking on new markings? That is a true slap on the fringe."

"Being barefaced has some kind of stigma, right?" Shepard looked at the screen thoughtfully. "Weird that he prefers that to the new clan markings. But then he never had markings. He happily uses their resources though. He is rich now, did you know that?" Shepard said, pointing at a list of firms Saren had invested in. "He has significant investments in Armax Arsenal and Haliat Armory on Palaven. And it says here he is financially invested in ExoGeni on Feros, Terlegin on Digeris, Binary Helix on Noveria... Help me out here, Garrus, why does this sound so familiar?"

Garrus also felt like had heard those names before. Then it dawned on him, "The volus merchant, Expat! He asked whether you came from Feros or Noveria."

Shepard stared at him for a second before she spoke. "Yes. Colonists are leaving there, turn up on the Citadel, most of them human, a volus merchant-shadow broker contact knows about that... is this just a big coincidence? We look up where Saren has his money and we find two, mostly human colonies under corporate administration. Saren is surely not investing in these companies out of the goodness of his heart, he doesn't even like humans."

"We should ask Expat about the colonists he met, get some names from him so that we can find them," Garrus said.

Shepard nodded, a grin playing around her lips. "Yes, let's talk to Exy-Potatsy, he..." she broke down in laughter, "I'm sorry, I can't... I shouldn't... I'm sorry..." She took a deep breath and wiped her eyes.
Garrus shook his head, the volus were a client race for the turians and didn't look unusual to a turian. Garrus himself had seen plenty when he was still a child. For a second he wondered if she had ever laughed like that about turians. The thought stung.

Shepard suddenly stopped laughing and stared at him wide-eyed. "Now you're wondering if I ever made fun of turians like that." Her hand covered her mouth as she stared at him aghast. "Oh god, I never... I'm a horrible person." With a look towards the camera, clearly aware that they were being watched, she grabbed his upper arm, squeezing it. "I never laughed about turians like that and I will not make fun of other races ever again. It's wrong and I know that and I don't want to be that kind of person."

"Okay," Garrus said, a relieved trill in his subharmonics. "I wouldn't think you to be that kind of person." He put his hand on her arm and squeezed lightly. Slowly the tension left her face and a tiny smile returned.

Garrus looked at the clock on his omni-tool. "Let's use the time we have left to look over Saren's recent activities. We need the locations and what he said in his reports. And let's cross check his reports with the times in the logs from the Katanga."

They feverishly collected dates, read reports and tried to get as much information out of the database as they could. Before they got logged out, Shepard looked up which Spectres had worked with Saren. Only Nihlus name turned up. Garrus noticed how Shepard hesitated to look up information on Nihlus.

She looked over to him. "He's a friend. I don't want to find out secrets about him that he is not willing to tell to my face."

"I understand. Let's just check the times and then we can ask him ourselves about those meetings."

She sighed and began writing down the dates. "It always gets messy if friendship is involved," she murmured.

Garrus felt a knot of fear, would they one day come to a situation where their feelings for each other would collide with an investigation?

The terminal beeped three times and then shut off. Shepard dropped the datapad on the table and shoved back her chair. "Fuck, that wasn't enough time." She got up and began pacing in front of the door. "We have to review what we know as long as it is fresh." She looked at the camera on the other side of the wall and spoke directly to it. "I want my datapad back as soon as possible."

The door opened, indicating that they should leave. They went to the desk that Garrus had used on his first day and began talking. They poured out everything they still had inside their heads, comparing it, drawing a rough timeline of the last two years of Saren's activities.

It was exhilarating, feverish work against their own brain limitations. He loved it.

On the way back home, Shepard and Garrus both received a message from Nihlus, that he couldn't come tonight and would bring breakfast tomorrow morning. Shepard decided that she still would cook something for him and they went on a turian food market to buy the necessary ingredients. The turian salesman almost forgot to charge them, he was so dumbfounded by the concept of a human
cooking for a turian.

Each carrying a bag of groceries they went back to Garrus's apartment. On the way he thought that he saw the turian again that had been following them this morning but he wasn't sure. Shepard was very quiet, apparently deep in thought. Garrus was also turning all they had learned today around in his head. He felt tired, it had been a long day.

As they entered his apartment, Shepard was full on yawning, he could see right down her throat. They put the groceries on the counter and both fell down on the couch. Garrus stretched his arms out and Shepard leaned against him, laying her head against his cowl. He was just about to say something when he noticed that she had already fallen asleep. Her ability to fall asleep on the spot was uncanny.

Garrus let himself relax as well and he nuzzled her hair, taking in her scent. He didn't notice it but he must have fallen asleep because he woke up from the chime of his omni-tool, announcing a call. He sighed and answered the call even though he couldn't see who it was. The screen lit up and showed him the face of his sister.

"Solana! I'm so glad to hear from you," Garrus called out and he realized in that moment how much he had missed talking to her. "How are you doing?"

"Oh brother, I'm doing fine. I should thank you, you know." Solana trilled a pointed remark at him. 
"Ever since you moved up to worst son of the universe, I can pretty much do what I want."

"You're welcome, sister. Glad I could help improve you life," Garrus sighed. Next to him Shepard stirred, waking up from their talking.

Solana tilted her head and chirped a question at him, if he was okay, if he was feeling well. Garrus answered with a trill of his own, calming her, telling her that he was fine.

"What are you doing brother?" Solana asked with a sigh, her subharmonics singing a sad tune. 
"Mother is crying at night, father is even more angry and cynical than usual and guess who has to take his jabs every night at dinner."

"I'm sorry Solana, I never meant for you to suffer because of me," Garrus said. He suddenly became aware of big, human eyes looking at him. Evidently Shepard had woken up and she was clearly confused. Then she noticed that he was talking to his omni-tool and turned her face to look at the screen.

"Um, hello? Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude," Shepard murmured and moved to get up.

Solana called out from the screen. "Hello! You must be 'the human', as my father says." She made the mock-airquotes and Garrus was astonished that that gesture had made it all the way to Palaven. 
"I'm Solana, Garrus's sister."

"Nice to meet you, Solana. My name is Shepard, at least that's what I like people calling me.. ehm.. I let you two talk." She hurriedly got up and disappeared into the bathroom. Garrus wondered why she was so nervous.

"Spirits, what did you tell her? I'm not going to eat her," Solana said with a trill that said that she felt slightly insulted.

"Well, the last contact she had with our family was with father calling her an 'it' to send away." Garrus growled at that memory.
"Oh futuo, I guess then it's understandable." Solana shook her head and straightened up. "Listen, I tried to contact you before but father was monitoring everything I did and blocked every message I tried to send you. I can only contact you now because he is out of range."

"What do you mean, out of range?"

"They passed through the relay, mother and father are on their way to the Citadel," Solana said.

Garrus felt like something had hit him on the head. "What? He's coming here? Why?"

Solana threw her head back. "Don't be stupid, brother. You know our father, he wants to have a nice, friendly talk about the errors of your way." Her subharmonics were openly mocking him. "And he brought mother along for some extra friendly psychological warfare."

Garrus felt a deeply instinctual flight reaction and had to get up to pace in front of his window. "If they just passed through the relay, they'll be here in three days."

Solana looked thoughtful. "Well... I had to hack his encryption first, that algorithm took more than half a day. So I think they will be there in about two days."

Garrus trilled in disbelief. "Since when do you know how to hack?"

Solana answered with a harsh growl. "Since when do you know nothing about me and what I do anymore? Oh right, since you left!"

"Alright, alright, I'm sorry, Solana." Garrus sang his embarrassment, he had truly neglected his sister. They had been close when he had lived on Palaven, even when he was in the military they had stayed closely in contact. But when he left for the Citadel, contacting her felt like having his old life intrude on his new life, and he avoided talking to her because of that. "Could you get a private address, where I can contact you without father knowing about it?"

"You know how he is, he wants to know everything about what we do at all times. It has gotten even worse, now that you denied his decretum." Solana made a long sigh. "But I'll try. You should get one too, don't think he wouldn't try to monitor yours as well."

"Yes, I will. Contact me with your new address and I will call you on that one from my new address." Garrus fluttered his mandibles in a wide smile, it felt good to talk to his sister again. "Thank you for warning me."

"What are you going to do?" Solana asked with a sad chirp.

"I have to face him," Garrus growled.

"Spoken like a true turian. You better prepare your human girlfriend for the storm of unfriendliness coming her way." Solana trilled a farewell and ended the call.

Garrus stopped pacing and looked out of his window. The glass was turning dark again, dimming the lights from the Citadel and the Nebula. He suddenly felt very tired but full of unspent energy at the same time. Soft steps behind him made him turn around. Shepard came up to his side, leaning her head against his arm.

"So, that was your sister," she stated.

Garrus put his arm around her and pulled her close to his side. "Yes, she warned me that my father and my mother will be here in about two days."
"To visit you?" Shepard asked.

Garrus snorted at that. "Yeah, right. More to yell at me for disrespecting my family and to convince me that I should be a good turian and find a turian mate."

"Now that sounds like fun," Shepard said sarcastically. "I better find a place to stay then to avoid them."

Garrus was shocked. What did she mean by that? She was leaving him to let him face his parents alone? "I thought... aren't you going to stay with me?"

Shepard freed herself from his arm and turned to face him. "I'm not fighting with your father. That's a fight I cannot win. I know that may look cowardly to a turian but I really see no point in talking to him. He won't change his opinion just because we look so nice together."

"But he will be attacking you and everything that humans stand for! You have to defend yourself." Garrus felt like the ground was falling out under him. He couldn't understand her.

Shepard crossed her arms in front and looked angrily at him. "Why? His opinion of me doesn't matter to me. I don't care what he thinks of me or humans in general. I'm with you, not him and if he hates me that is his problem, not mine. I'm sorry that you have to suffer from him but I don't care what he thinks."

Garrus threw his hands up, how could she say things like that? "That is my family you are talking about. Those people define who I am."

Shepard looked confused. "You define who you are, not your father or your mother or aunt or whatnot. Only you and your actions define who you are."

She began pacing in front of him. "If there is one thing that I learned, it's that people don't change. They don't change their opinion unless they want to. Your father is not coming here to be convinced by us, he's coming here to vent his anger and I don't see why I should let him yell at me. Nobody yells at me."

Garrus felt anger rise in him. "This is not as easy as you think."

Shepard shook her head. "I think it's very easy. Why do you let your father walk all over you like that?"

"You don't understand what family and clan mean to a turian." His voice was louder than he had intended to.

Shepard's eyes narrowed to angry slits. "Because I don't have one? Is that what you're trying to say?"

Garrus knew she was unfair. "Have you told your aunt about me? What did she say?"

"Why does it matter?" She turned her back to him.

It was just like he had thought. While he was breaking up with his family, becoming an outcast from his clan, she had not even told her one relative that she had a turian as a boyfriend. "You are such a hypocrite!" he yelled. "You expect me to abandon my family but you can't even admit to your aunt that your boyfriend is a turian."

"You really think that of me?" Shepard had raised her voice as well.
"What else can I think? Have you told her? Have you?" He was yelling loudly now and in the second he realized how wrong that was, he saw Shepard's face harden.

Her voice was dangerously quiet. "Nobody yells at me like that. Nobody."

He couldn't stop himself. "Tell me!"

"What's the point?" she snarled and grabbing her vest from the back of the couch, she ran out of the door.

The door closed behind her and he was left standing in the middle of his living room, alone with his anger.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Here, have a cookie, we'll get through this together.
Chapter Notes

Just for Cemosh, so that she didn't have to wait for the chapter so long, I edited this one real fast!

Now, let's fix this mess.


See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Anger still burning inside of him, he stared at the door. How dare she? As soon as things didn't go her way she just left. How cowardly of her. That went right along with her unwillingness to face his father with him. It looked like his old instructors had been right after all, humans were cowards and had no honor.

Something inside of him recoiled at these thoughts and his anger was replaced by a gut clenching uncertainty. What was happening to them? He always felt so in tune with her that it was deeply unsettling to have lost that connection now. Why did she not see what it meant to break with his family like that?

Because you never told her, never explained it to her, you stupid turian.

His anger was slowly superseded by a feeling of despair growing in his chest, making him keen in sadness.

He leaned his back against the window, overwhelmed from his conflicting feelings. He was angry at her for just leaving like that, he was angry at himself that he had never explained this and he felt so very afraid that he might have lost her.

Garrus looked around, the sad keen filling his gizzard. Her armor lay stacked in a corner and he noticed her shoes and socks next to the couch. Had she run out without shoes? She was out there in the Tayseri Ward on bare feet?

He finally got control of his limbs and put his armor back on. He needed to find her, needed to tell her why all this was so important. Like he should have told her right away.

He left his building and stood in front of the entrance, unsure which direction to take. Where could she have gone? She could have taken a skycar or the transit train out of the ward but he hoped that she was still around.

After looking around helplessly for a few seconds he finally remembered the tracing programs on his
omni-tool from his time at C-Sec. They were not quite legal but very helpful. He called up Shepard's omni-tool signature and set the trace up for it. The result would not give him her exact position but would at least tell him the general area.

With a beep the program showed him a circle superimposed on the map of the Tayseri Ward, very close to his current position. He sighed in relief, at least she didn't walk far on her naked feet. He had no idea if her feet would hurt from the rough surface on the walkways. Turian feet were plated. The top of their feet was a bit more sensitive than the underside, but not like human feet. From what he had seen he knew that Shepard's feet were just as soft skinned as her hands.

He looked around and began walking to the right, following the walkway to a little shopping area. There was a bakery there that sold human coffee and sure enough that's where he found her. She was sitting at one of the small, circular tables, her naked feet crossed under her chair. Her shoulders were hunched forward and she looked smaller, as if she tried to disappear. She stared at something on her omni-tool, her hands wrapped around her steaming coffee cup.

He couldn't describe the feeling welling up in him but he felt like the ground became uneven all of a sudden, making him stagger.

Garrus took a deep breath and made his way over to her. He sat down on the chair opposite to her. She didn't look up. They sat in silence for a long time, him looking at her, her not looking at him. She sat still like a statue.

He tentatively trilled a little love note at her, testing for her reaction. He saw her fingers tighten around her cup. When she started speaking, her voice was hoarse and quiet like a whisper. "I feel like it should be raining."

He had no idea what she was talking about. "Rain? On the Citadel?"

A tiny smile played on her lips. "I know it can't rain on the Citadel but it would fit the cliché so much. Like in an old romance movie, sitting in the rain, my hair stuck to my wet face, you would sit down beside me, trying to mend the broken pieces..."

He felt a painful stab in his chest. "Are we broken, Jane?"

"You yelled at me, I... don't like that," she said, her voice stronger now.

"Why?"

"Why I don't like getting yelled at? No special reason..." She looked him in the eyes now. "I think it shows a tremendous amount of disrespect, yelling at someone. It means that you don't consider that person worthy of talking to, you think that person is below you, too dumb to listen to you."

Garrus stared at her in shock. "No! I would never think that of you! I was..." He noticed that his voice got louder again and stopped himself. After a long, deep breath and a clearing growl from his gizzard he started again. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, Jane. I didn't mean to be disrespectful, I was just so angry. Maybe turians have a different anger response than humans."

Shepard looked up and regarded him with her childlike curiosity again. "Maybe you're right. I shouldn't impose my human conceptions on a turian, I guess. But I..." She sighed. "I'm sorry Garrus, I really don't know what I'm doing. All I know about is one-night stands and friends with benefits. This... what we have... I have no idea what to do with that."

He carefully placed his hand next to her coffee cup and after a second her hand slid down to rest on his. "I don't know either, Jane, we have to figure this out as we go. Please come back home, so we
She showed him the screen of her omni-tool. "I did some reading about turians and what family and clan mean to them. Maybe I should have done that before..." She scrolled through some information, stopping on a graphical family tree. "I had no idea. I'm sorry that I never cared for that. There seems to be some fundamental difference at work here."

"When you didn't want to face my father with me I felt... betrayed. I would never think of you as a cowardly person but it felt like it for me," Garrus said.

"I didn't realize how important that was for you," Shepard said and then made a tiny, apologetic trill. He wanted to take her in his arms so badly. His chest was aching for her.

She looked at him again, a strange look in her eyes. "Can you actually be a turian with me?"

"What do you mean?" Garrus asked with a surprised trill.

She made a vague gesture towards the translucent screen on her arm. "The way turians are described here... it doesn't sound like you at all. You are always so careful, sensitive..." She looked at him quizzically. "Do you have to alter who you really are all the time? Can you even be a turian with me?"

"Not a good one, I guess." He chuckled but stopped himself when he saw the hurt in her face. "No, that's not... Spirits, I'm going at this all wrong. I have never been a very good turian, I've been refusing the 'turian way' for a while now. A lot of things you read on the Net is based on old legends, stereotypes, I never felt like those applied to me. I like who I am with you."

She squeezed his hand for a second and her smile warmed his heart. "I'm so glad to hear that. Because I really like who you are." She got up. "I'm sorry I ran away like that. Can we go home now?"

"You think you can walk all the way back with your feet like that?"

She looked down on her feet and wiggled her toes. "Why, because I don't wear shoes? Sure I can walk, as long as I don't step on something sharp I'll be fine."

They walked back to his apartment, side by side.

Garrus shook his head. "But your feet are sensitive. I mean, I remember the things you do to my spurs with your feet," a deep groan left his gizzard at that memory, "and you can still walk over terrain like that?"

"Humans have been running around barefoot for thousands of years before the invention of shoes," Shepard said with a smile. "I told you, human skin is sensitive but not algesic." She looked up to him and let her smile linger.

He was so glad to see her smile again.

Suddenly she looked past him and her face turned serious. "There is that guy again. The turian who's been following us around. I've had enough of this!" She ran over to the guy, her naked feet almost completely silent on the ground. The turian didn't even realize at first that she was speeding towards him and when he noticed it, he hurriedly tried to get away. He sidled around a corner but Shepard and Garrus were right behind him.
Shepard slowed down and showed him her friendliest smile, "Hello there! We just want to talk to you."

The turian looked around nervously but he seemed to realize that he couldn't really get away. "What do you want?" he asked aggressively.

Shepard still showed her smile, friendly, with a hint of deadliness. "We have noticed that you are following us and we would like to know who ordered you to do so." She stood in front of him and Garrus behind her, a step to the side. The turian had nowhere to go.

The man looked around and, failing to see an escape route, took a step towards Shepard. He hissed at her, "I don't know what you're talking about." His subharmonics were full of disgust and Garrus felt anger rise against him, that he was insulting Shepard this way.

Shepard stood perfectly still, unfazed by the turian coming so close to her. She held her arms to the side and it looked relaxed but Garrus noticed that her body was tense, like a predator, ready to attack. Her voice was perfectly calm. "We have you on video. I wonder how much you would like to spend a day at C-Sec, explaining why you followed a C-Sec officer and an Alliance officer around all day."

The turian didn't say anything but his subharmonics were practically screaming curses at her. Suddenly he took a step back and lashed out with his talons towards Shepard's throat. Garrus saw to his horror that his talons were not blunted. He jumped forward and called out a warning to her but she had already ducked under his arms and blocked his attack by hitting his arms hard with her lower arm. Her other arm smacked forward and punched the turian in his waist. Buckling over in pain, he tried to slash her with his talons again but she was already gone. She had stepped away with a graceful turn and now jerked her leg up and kicked the turian on his mandible with her heel so fast, that Garrus didn't even see her leg move.

The turian crashed against the wall from the force of the kick and slipped down on his side in a daze. A wail left his throat but he swallowed it in panic as he realized that Shepard had come up behind him and held a knife to his throat. Garrus loomed over him growling a warning but he felt slightly dumbfounded, it all had happened so fast.

Shepard's voice was quiet in a chilling way and she spoke directly into the stalkers ear canal. "Now let's try this again. I happen to know where I need to cut you so that you bleed out in under three minutes and I suggest that you don't test me. Who paid you to follow us around?"

The turian had lost control of his subharmonics, crying like a child in panic. He was moving his hands but a slight stab that drew a bit of blue blood on his throat stopped him. Suddenly he looked at Garrus. "Got a call. He didn't say his name, transferred the money," he pointed at Garrus, "sent me a picture of him and said to look for him and a human woman and take video footage."

Shepard was silent for a second and then asked, "Was it a vid-call?"

"Yes."

"What did he look like?"

The turian looked up at Garrus again. "Looked like him, same markings."

Garrus cursed under his breath. So his suspicion had been right, his own father had hired the stalker. A stalker who had tried to attack and maybe even kill Shepard, his Shepard! A deep, angry growl left his gizzard and he saw the other turian's eyes widen in fear.
Shepard stepped back from the man and held the knife loosely in her hand. "You can go now. I'm sure we're not going to see you again, right?" The turian nodded and stood up slowly. Shepard looked at her knife, letting the light reflect on it and she spoke like she didn't really care if anybody listens. "I want you to tell him that the next person following us will come back to him with a hefty hospital bill attached." The light made a bright streak on her face and she had a smile playing on her lips that brought a chill to Garrus's spine. "Now you better go before I think of new ways to use this knife on you," she said and turned away.

Garrus fell in step beside her, looking at her face. With relief he saw the mad smile fall from her face and get replaced by her real smile that he loved so much. It was like she switched out her personality. He lowered his head and nuzzled her hair for a second. "You can be quite scary."

She laughed. "It's just an act, the insane, cold killer-lady is much more disturbing than the righteous Alliance soldier. Scares the guys who think they are so tough. But I love how you only have to do that sub-growl to make someone piss his pants in fear."

"I think that was more your doing," Garrus said honestly. He never wanted to be on the receiving end of that mad smile.

She laughed, "Nah, I can tell you from experience that this performance worked much better with your turian madness backing me up."

"He's going to tell my father that you are insane and dangerous," Garrus said with a sigh.

"That's a reputation I can live with." She shrugged. Suddenly she looked up. "Is that going to make things more difficult for you?"

"Can I say it can hardly get any worse without sounding like a whining youngling?" He sighed dramatically.

Her laugh calmed his mind like a warm shower. She smiled, "Oh, you just have to do that terrifying growl to go along with it to compensate." Her hands moved up to his face but she stopped midway when she realized that they were back on the busy walkway. She dropped her hand with a sad smile. "Let's go home."

"Yes." He looked down on her feet. "I could carry you if your feet hurt."

She grinned, "Hey, I just kicked a spiky turian with these feet, the walkway has nothing on me."

"That was quite impressive actually, do you have some secret biotic force behind those kicks?"

She waved her hand. "Nah, Taekwondo, remember? I'm a well trained kick-ass."

They kept on walking and the silence between them began to unnerve Garrus. He looked down on her face, she was chewing on her lower lip. He decided to break the silence and address the pink volus in the room. "We need to talk about this problem with my family."

She sighed, "Yes, we have to. I guess I'm missing some vital piece of information here." She squeezed his hand for a second. "There was a post on the Net that said that the movie "Fleet and Flotilla" would be good way to introduce the subject. We could watch that."

"My father has actually tried to forbid me from watching that movie," Garrus said with an embarrassed trill.
"Really? Forbid you?"

"Yes, I heard that a lot of traditional turians want to ban the movie for poisoning young turians minds. My father plays right along to that song." Garrus shook his head, thinking back to that conversation.

They had arrived at his apartment building. As they waited for the elevator, Garrus had to ask the one question that was burning on his mind. "Shepard? I'm sorry, I have to know, did you tell your aunt about me?"

Shepard looked up to him. "Yes, I wrote her after we had seen the Consort." She scratched the back of her head. "She wrote me right back. She reacted just as you would expect someone to react who hasn't even left her hometown in all of her life. The only reason why she isn't constantly calling me is because I always block her calls."

Garrus felt like an idiot. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"No, it really doesn't." Shepard took his hand as they stepped into the elevator. "She is who she is. She is not stupid but she is a bit ignorant. Has never seen an alien in her life. She's not going to change all of a sudden, so I'm not fighting about it with her."

"I... I'm afraid I can't be that... removed. Maybe that is a fundamental difference between humans and turians," Garrus said.

"Not necessarily. In some human cultures family is still very important. For me..." She hesitated, like she always did when the subject came to the death of her family. "Not anymore."

They arrived at his place. As soon as the door had closed behind them, Garrus took her by her shoulders and pressed his forehead against her. Her hands went up to his face and were stroking his mandibles. Slowly the tension fell off both of them.

After a few minutes they pulled apart. Shepard went into the bathroom to wash her feet while Garrus took his off armor and put on a plain long tunic.

When she came back, she stood in the middle of the room, as if she was unsure what to do. Garrus stepped over to her and carefully pulled her into his arms. She relaxed against him with a long sigh. He let his subharmonics rumble in deep vibrations and felt her press closer to him.

He put his talons under her chin and lifted her head to look at her. "Is there any way that we can salvage this evening?"

Her smile lit up her face. "Well, I'm hungry and I heard there is a movie I should be watching."

He smiled back at her. "That sounds like an excellent combination. Let me provide you with all that you wish for." He went into the kitchen area, hearing her feet softly pitter-pattering on the floor behind him. He suddenly felt her hand on his butt and made a tiny shriek.

She giggled. "You are wearing a dress again." Her hand moved under the rim of his tunic. "And no pants! Naughtly little turian."

"It's a tunic, a perfectly normal piece of clothing for a turian. We don't necessarily need pants because we don't leave our genitals dangling out there unprotected." He fluttered his mandibles towards her in a grin. Her hand kept on resting on his naked butt and her fingers were drawing tiny circles between his plates. It was very distracting.
"What do you want to eat?"

"Something with cheese," she said, looking past his side.

"What is cheese? Humans eat it a lot, I've noticed." Garrus picked a package of readymade food for her and himself and placed it in the radiant heater.

Shepard looked thoughtful for a second, "Cheese is made of milk and... well... it gets old and thick and milk is... you know what? You really don't want to know, trust me."

She snuggled up against his side and Garrus pulled her closer with his arm draped around her. In that moment Garrus was convinced that everything would be okay. There would always be interspecies awkwardness, things that were weird and strange to the other but they would not let those things keep them apart.

He nuzzled her hair and whispered, "We will work things out, right?"

She pressed her cheek against his cowl. "Yes we will. We will work things out, again and again."

Garrus hummed his love for her with his subharmonics.

The credits of, "Fleet and Flotilla" appeared on the vid screen and Jane turned to Garrus.

"Okay, nice romantic movie, I'm a total sucker for happy endings anyway but, revolutionary? The turian guy did what he had to do for the love of his life, and for that message traditionals want to ban the movie? I don't get it, he didn't do anything unusual, I think."

Garrus stared at her. He saw quite a lot of parallels to his own life in that movie and it baffled him that Jane didn't see it. "He denied his parents decretum! They had a beneficial match and a promising career set up for him and he turned away from that to be with her!" He could hardly put into words how incredible that was.

Jane furrowed her brows and said with determination, "So he didn't do what his father wanted and set out to find his own path - that's what youth does! That's how it's supposed to be, the young ones question the old rules and traditions and mix things up and that's how society can progress."

Garrus had to laugh. "Really? That's normal for humans? That explains so much!" He shook his head. "Our society is built on strict rules. Parents plan their children's life until they are mated themselves. To turn away from that, to deny the decretum was - until very recently - unthinkable. It's not the turian way. For a young turian to go against his family could result in him or her being expelled from the clan."

Jane looked at him. "You keep saying that, 'deny the decretum'. What exactly does that mean?"

"A decretum is like an order in the military, only from your family. It's unthinkable to not follow it. To deny it is like an insubordination against your commanding officer." He searched her face and for a second he saw panic cross her face.

"So if you deny it, your family or your clan could exile you?" She looked at him with astonishment. He nodded. She stayed quiet for a while, and Garrus saw the emotions flicker across her face. "What
happens to an exile?” she asked quietly.

“An exile will lose everything, his history, his heritage, his friends will turn away from him. It used to be practically unthinkable that a turian would risk that. We are raised in the believe that we are nothing without our clan, without the guidance of the elders.” Garrus wanted to say something to wipe away the look of horror on her face but he couldn't think of anything.

She didn’t look at him when she spoke again with her voice hushed. “How do you progress if the rules never change? We had societies on Earth that considered women to be lesser creatures than cattle, with no chance to ever do something with their lives.” She began moving her arms and hands as if she was trying to pluck words from the air. "There have been times in our history where your place in society was determined by your skin colour, gender, place of birth. Hell, 300 years ago, we still had slavery! But as new generations grew up these things changed and we progressed. We became better people. And we still fight prejudices and the youth still fights against rules they don’t understand, and the old ones complain about the young ones and say how everything was so much better back in the old days. And that is a good thing, it’s how it’s supposed to be, because it is change!” Her voice had gotten louder towards the end and she ended her sentence with her arms wide, like she wanted to embrace all the changes.

Garrus felt like he had learned everything he ever needed to know about humans from these sentences. Why they were so curious, so demanding, always questioning the rules. He loved how confident she looked.

He needed to assure her that turians weren't frozen in time. “Things are changing in turian society too, only very slowly. The first time when the rules had to be adapted was when the asari appeared and the quarians after that. Turians falling in love with someone from another species was a huge thing, Spirits, I don’t think turians even had a concept of romantic love before the asari appeared. And if the enormous success of, “Fleet and Flotilla” with young turians proves anything, it’s that turians are beginning to like the idea of rebelling against old rules.”

She looked at him and he felt like falling into her gaze. The expression on her face showed sadness and love and pure panic, and the combination made his gizzard clench in fear. He knew what she was about to say and he didn't want to hear it.

“T’m sorry Garrus, I never meant for this to happen. I never realized that I took you away from your life, your family. You have a family, a clan! Being with me...” her voice broke, “being with me will make you lose all that. I can’t do that to you!” She moved to get up.

"Stop!” He called out much louder than he had intended. He took a deep breath to calm himself down and took her hands in his. "You are not walking away again. Don't do that to me, Jane. Hear me out."

She settled down and nodded, her eyes slightly wet.

"I have been trying to get away from my family and all the rules for the longest time. I tried to find a balance, talking to my mother and my sister but staying out of reach of my father here on the Citadel.” Garrus had to sigh. "Of course, that was an illusion, he got me this job at C-Sec, so that I wouldn't enter Spectre training, and I'm sure he had people send him reports about my doings all the time. I should have made my separation more clear to him, I should never have done any of the praecipit convenire he kept arranging. I tried to live two lives at once, being a good turian son and being me."

Shepard had a faint smile on her lips and he felt so happy to see that, and he pulled her towards him. He held his forehead against hers and sighed when he felt her press back at him. The relief fell over
him like a warm cloak.

"I had this great life here on the Citadel, with Frank as my best friend and all the fun I could wish for. It was easy to forget that the old Palaven rules could catch up with me one day."

Shepard laughed quietly. "Judging by how we met, I can just imagine what kind of fun you're talking about."

"You would know it, I'm sure," he growled.

She snickered. "Oh yes." She moved closer to him and kissed his mandible. "Let's not talk about our naughty past. When your father arrives, what would you like me to do?"

Garrus nuzzled her hair before moving back to look her in the eyes. "I would like you to be here with me. Don't hide, don't make him think that you aren't brave enough to face him."

"That's what he would think?" She looked thoughtful for a second. "Alright, if you want me to stand by your side, I will, but I won't just stand here and let him yell at me. If all he does is yelling, I'll leave."

"He will still think of you as cowardly then," Garrus warned.

"As I said, I don't care. He won't like me, no matter what I do. He thinks me a coward? Why should I care? Nothing I do will change his mind. What is there to gain in a fight like this?" she asked.

Garrus searched for an explanation to try to make her see his point. Suddenly it came to him, Shepard was a soldier after of all. "Sometimes it's not about gaining ground, sometimes it's about holding the line."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Holding the line? Yeah, I get that." Her hand caressed his mandible. "Angel, I will do anything you want me to, but do you really think you can convince him to accept us being together?"

Garrus felt his shoulders sag in defeat. "Somehow, I still think I can talk to him but in the back of my mind I know that he will not change his mind."

Her face came closer to his and while her hand was still playing on his mandible, she placed soft kisses on his face. "If you want me to hold the line with you, I will, my Angel." Another soft kiss on his mandibles sent shivers down in his gizzard. "Now, let me loosen up those tight mandibles, and other things."

Her voice had that husky, deep undertone that drove him wild and he felt his lower plates almost snap open. Her hand touched him and a finger was tracing the slit. His erection was already working itself free.

She turned to a box on the couchtable and took out a bottle with lotion. He had completely forgotten that she had ordered the plate-softening lotion. She squeezed some on her hands and rubbed it over the skin of his thighs and over his genital plates. Her fingers, now slick with lotion, traced along his opening slit and she moved two fingers inside, tracing his penis while her other hand was stroking his waist. Her lips now had his mandible between them and she was sucking on it. The sensations overwhelmed him, his subharmonic growl vibrating through him.

"Oh yes, keep doing that, growl for me," she whispered.

He kept his gowl going and she shuddered against him. He licked along her jaw till he had reached
her earlobe, flicking it with his tongue. With a growl of her own she turned her face and kissed him under his eye. She moved down with her kisses and found his mouth waiting for hers. Their tongues met, softly dipping against each other.

They both began to grab each other, desperately, urgently, craving the touch of the other. She had pushed his tunic up and he pulled it over his head. Her clothing was in the way and he still struggled with taking it off. Lucky for him, Shepard was just as impatient, pulling her shirt over her head and pushing her pants down in a quick motion. Her bra fell down and Garrus pulled her underpants down, noticing with a pleased hum how they were soaked.

He traced his tongue down towards her stomach, determined to finally get more familiar with that little dip, belly button, as she called it. Circling the tip of his tongue around it, she suddenly squirmed and laughed and grabbed his head. With a high pitched voice she screamed, "That tickles! Tickles!" She was wiggling like a fish and Garrus had to laugh out. With a scream she jumped on him and tackled him down.

Her one hand was massaging his pleasure spot under his fringe, the other hand travelled down again towards his erection that had long since come out from his plates. She was holding him, slowly pumping while she twirled her tongue around his mandible. The sounds that came from his throat sounded feral even to himself, and he noticed that she stared at him.

He tried to break through the fog of lust, his voice hoarse, "I'm sorry. I usually don't sound like that."

She made a purring sound that sounded like pure sex before she spoke. "You know I like it when you're loud." Her hand still had him in a firm grip, very slowly rubbing him. She pressed her mouth against his throat and he felt her lips move as she spoke, "I love the sounds you make. You sound so wild. You should lose control like that more often."

His breath hitched in his throat. "That's not a good idea, I could hurt you."

Her body pressed against him, her mouth next to his face, she whispered, "I trust you. Don't stop yourself." Suddenly she pulled hard on his fringe while pumping his penis in quick strokes.

The pain from his fringe clashed with the sweet sensation from his groin and with a feral roar he threw her to the ground. Pure lust focused on her. She crashed on the floor but she kept squeezing his fringe, her other hand had moved to his waist, holding onto him with force and with a harsh groan he sheathed himself inside her. His mouth went to her neck on pure instinct, open, hungry for her, he pressed his teeth on her collarbone. His last bit of self-control held him back and he didn't bite down but the damage was already done. His sharp teeth had scraped her skin and he saw with shock her red blood bubble out of the wound.

"I'm sorry, Jane, let me..." He moved back but she wouldn't let him go, her legs wrapped tight around him. With an angry snarl she pulled herself up to him and before he could even think she had her mouth on his neck and bit down. A feral growl came from her as she bit harder and harder. It hurt like hell, her blunt teeth squeezing the skin until she finally broke it and drew blood. She pulled back with a triumphant grin, a wild look in her eyes, blue blood dripping from her lips.

She grinned at him and quietly spoke. "Are you a turian?"

He could only nod. She dipped her finger in a drop of blood in the corner of her lip and drew a line with it from under her right eye over her nose to her left eye. "Then be a turian. My turian!" she whispered hoarsely.

His world disappeared. The sounds his subharmonics made were foreign even to himself. Some
removed part of him was astonished at the loss of his higher brain functions. The more basic part of
him took in her scent and roared as he penetrated her deep and hard. He was driving into her,
pushing her across the floor with his force. Vaguely he noted that she was screaming in pleasure,
encouraging him with shouts of, "More!," her hands clawing on his arms and shoulders. She pulled
his head down again, pressed her collarbone against his mouth and he bit down. Her scream of pain
mixed with a cry of pleasure as she clenched around him, hauling him along with his first orgasm but
he didn't even slow down.

She held onto him, meeting every thrust with a push of her own hips, panting, yelling incoherently.
He roared with her, his throat raw, the metallic taste of her blood in his mouth. His talons scratched
her skin, her nails scratched him, she bit him again, her toes held his spurs.

She dipped a finger in the bitemark on her shoulder and drew a line across his nose with her blood.
That was not a turian tradition and as far as he knew it wasn't a human one either. But this was a
mark, if there ever was one.

*She marked me with her own blood!*

He felt the contractions in her vagina getting tighter as he pushed harder and faster, and the tight grip
around his penis from her insides made it almost painful to move. He thrust into her as she screamed
and clawed at him and he came again, hard, his seed bursting out of him. He was growling her name
and he heard her whimper his. She still held onto him and his arms were shaking from the
exhaustion. With a groan he collapsed to his side, pulling her along with him without leaving her
body. They were both heaving in air. He still felt her contractions.

She snuggled up against him and softly kissed along his cowl, her hand drawing lazy circles on his
waist. Occasionally she made a satisfied sigh and pressed even closer to him. Garrus felt himself
slowly return to his full brain capabilities. He still had the taste of her blood in his mouth and he
carefully lifted his head to look at her shoulder. Puncture marks from his teeth dotted her shoulder
and bloody scratches were all over her skin. He cringed. She noticed his reaction and looked at him
sternly.

"Don't you dare apologize," she said. "I wanted this, it was amazing. I would have told you to stop if
I had not wanted it."

"I'm not sure I would have heard you," Garrus whispered. "I was not thinking clearly anymore, there
was only you and this desire..."

She purred, "Hmm, you make a girl feel wanted."

"I thought the wanting was kind of obvious," Garrus purred back at her.

She chuckled and moved, to slowly let him slip out. She had grabbed her shirt and held it between
her legs, soaking up their juices. "One of these days we should have sex in your bed."

"Says the wild human, who tackled me to the floor."

Shepard grinned at him. "I didn't hear any complaints." She yawned. "I think we should go to sleep
now."

He pulled himself up to stand beside her. "I agree, let's get ready for bed." He looked at her face, the
blue line of his blood still bright on her skin. Carefully he traced the line with his talon. He didn't
want to say that he wished that the mark wouldn't get off.

He felt her finger tracing her bloody line on his face. She raised herself on her tiptoes and kissed him.
She took his hand and pulled him behind her into the bathroom. As she stopped in front of the mirror, he stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her. They both looked at their faces in the mirror, each painted with the others blood.

He burned the picture into his mind, to never forget it.

Awesome cover made by Spyke1985 (ActuallyFenHarel), inspired by the scene in front of the mirror.

Chapter End Notes

Happy?

A few notes:

1. Jane doesn't like getting yelled at, just because. No, Jane is not a tragic survivor of a yelling rapist or anything like that, I'm really, really tired of the 'every strong woman is a rape survivor'-trope, so our Jane here is not that. Seeing your family die at 16 is bad
enough, we don't have to add to that. She came to be a strong woman on her own.

2. Jane likes it rough sometimes. Which means in no way ever that we will enter some 50-shades-of-abuse territory here, no and no and No.

3. The act with painting each others faces with blood was inspired by Chapter 3 of 'Violence, Voyeurism and Vigilantes' by efleck, better written of course, such an awesome scene in a great story.
Chapter 22

So, I was in the hospital, as one does to get her appendix taken out. I didn’t have access to my laptop and I was bored and I had story in my head, so I had to write the first half of this chapter with a pencil on paper like a cavewoman! Twentyseven pages, over 4800 words, written by hand. Can you believe it? I think the last time I wrote so much by hand was sometime in the eighties. Because we didn’t have computers, kids!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The annoying beeping of his omni-tool woke Garrus from a deep sleep. His bedroom was bright, the windows transparent and the omnipresent light of the Widow-Nebula streaming in.

After a few seconds he registered the beeping and realized that someone was ringing his door. He called up the picture and saw Nihlus waving at the door-camera. Garrus hesitated shortly but eventually issued the command for opening the door. Nihlus strode in, his subharmonics singing a cheerful greeting. Garrus answered with a more quiet tune. Beside him, wrapped up in her blanket, Shepard stirred.

Garrus pushed his blanket away. Having his own blanket had proven to be necessary, Shepard always wrapped herself completely in her blanket like in a cocoon. He moved over to her, raking his talons through her hair. He whispered in her ear, "Hey, sunshine, we have to get up." Her eyes sprung open, her body suddenly tense. But then she relaxed, recognizing the situation as not dangerous. She groaned roughly and pulled the blanket over her head.

In this moment Nihlus stormed into the room, still singing while he loudly called out, "Good morning, my little lovebirds!"

Shepard groaned annoyed and Garrus chuckled. "Unless you have brought coffee, I would advise you to be more quiet."

Nihlus just laughed, "But of course I brought coffee, I would not dare to meet the human krogan otherwise."

Shepard made a short grunt, "Alright, I'm getting up."

Garrus climbed out of bed with her but Nihlus put a hand on his arm to hold him back while Shepard left the room. He turned to Nihlus with a questioning trill and was taken aback by the anger Nihlus sounded at him.

With an angry hiss, Nihlus pushed Garrus back on the bed and loomed over him. "You stercus eating paedor, what were you thinking?"

"What are you talking about?"
"Don't play dumb with me, you hurt her, bit her, scratched her, you unplated piece of..."

Garrus raised his hands. "She wanted me to..."

"She wanted you to hurt her? Don't tell me such futuo! You unworthy..."

A commanding voice came from the door, "Stop it, Nihlus."

Shepard stepped over to them, white toothpaste on her lips. "Garrus didn't do anything I didn't want. He never would, I know that." She placed her hand on the cowl of his armor and pushed him away from Garrus. "I wanted him to be rough, I wanted him to be a turian with me." Nihlus stared at her, his subharmonics confused and astonished. "Look, it's just a few scratches, we put medi-gel on them last night, they will be healed in no time. Now, can you please let my man live?" She grinned at him and with a warm smile to Garrus, left for the bathroom again.

Nihlus took a deep breath and turned to Garrus to offer his hand, to pull him up again. He trilled an apology that Garrus acknowledged with a hum of his own.

Nihlus grabbed his lower arm and looked him in the eyes. "I hope you know how lucky you are."

Garrus nodded, "I know, sometimes I can't really believe it."

Nihlus sang another apology. "I shouldn't have assumed... you are not that kind of person." They both heard the shower start in the next room.

"Don't be so fast in your dismissal," Garrus said with a sigh. "We had a fight last night and things didn't look so good for a while. I yelled at her..."

"Oh, futuo, she really doesn't like that!" Nihlus called out. "What did you fight about?"

"My parents are coming to the Citadel to see me and somehow we had different ideas of how to deal with that."

"Different?"

"She didn't want to face my father with me. She thought there is no point because he wouldn't change his opinion anyway."

Nihlus nodded. "And you thought she would leave you alone with him out of cowardice."

Garrus felt ashamed. "Yes, I felt betrayed. She is normally so fearless, why would she shy away from this confrontation?"

A thoughtful hum came from Nihlus. "Humans have a different view of fights. They will enter a hopeless fight to save someone but they will always question if there is a good reason for it. If they feel like there is nothing to gain, they will mostly avoid it. Human commanders have a lot of troubles with soldiers who refuse to follow an order without some proper explanation."

A surprised trill left Garrus, to not follow an order, what an astonishing idea. He pulled on a tunic and sighed. "We talked about it, she did some research and I think she got the idea that I couldn't be like a real turian with her. She got really wild last night, she bit me first."

He leaned his head to the side to show Nihlus where she had bitten him and Nihlus made a surprised tone. "You should put some medi-gel on that, it looks kind of nasty."

Garrus nodded, carefully feeling around the bite. He stepped over to a small mirror to look at the...
mark himself and cringed. A big, black bruise had formed around the bite. He dug out some medi-gel from his closet and spread it on. With relief he saw the bruise slowly fading.

He turned to Nihlus, calling him back from the door. "Does a bite mean something in human culture?"

Nihlus hummed thoughtfully. "I don't think so but shouldn't you ask Shepard about that?"

Garrus stretched his throat. "You're right. This whole communicating thing turns out to be really important."

Nihlus made a sound that congratulated him on his wisdom with a hint of sarcasm, as he left for the living room.

Garrus followed him. He saw Shepard on the couch in a shirt and pants, her hair still slightly wet, glistening. She held a cup of coffee in her hands and turned to him with a smile.

_Spirits, that smile._

Nihlus placed a few bags on the coffee table and sat down in the armchair. Garrus got himself and Nihlus a cup of cava and refilled Shepard's coffee. As he sat down beside her, she raised her face towards him and placed a kiss on his mandible. He nuzzled her hair in return.

Each of them picked breakfast pastries from the color-coded bags. Some lighthearted smalltalk was exchanged between them about current events on the Citadel. The turian teacher Atika Birdan and one of Anderson's staff were organizing another turian/human festival and Shepard's face lit up in excitement.

"I hope we can visit the festival together this time," she said.

Garrus hummed his reassurance at that. The last festival was overshadowed in his memory by the attack on Elysium and his fear that Shepard had been killed.

After they had eaten, a silence began to stretch between them. Nobody wanted to start the uncomfortable conversation about Saren Arterius. Shepard finally ran out of patience.

"Nihlus, we have found some things about Saren that are... disturbing or at least confusing. We need some information from you."

Nihlus trilled uncomfortably. "Some events and assignments are classified, classified by the Council, not even an ANIS investigation gives you access to that."

Shepard nodded, "We know that. But we have some dates we want to check with you." She transferred the list of dates that Garrus and her had written down from memory after their session. "Please check if you accompanied Saren on any of these missions."

Nihlus pulled up his own notes and began to compare. Garrus watched him carefully. Turian faces were not as expressive as human faces, but even turians had certain tells. A twitch of a mandible, a subconscious hum of the subharmonics, those were the tells of turians. Garrus saw that Nihlus was very uncomfortable.

Suddenly a change was visible. Nihlus looked confused and his subharmonics sang out in annoyance. He turned the datapad around so that they all could look on it.

"I was present on most of these official missions. I remember Saren leaving me occasionally and
doing things on his own. He was sometimes gone for days. We've stopped at Feros and Noveria but I never left the ship there. He said that he just needed to take care of some things."

Nihlus now enlarged the section of the timeline that involved the Katanga, the ghost ship. "I wasn't with Saren anymore then but I had received a message from him about the dig site."

Garrus trilled his surprise. "He still messaged you? I wouldn't have thought that he still kept contact with you."

Nihlus sounded out that he understood Garrus's confusion. "While Saren is clearly an asshole, as Shepard always puts it, I am probably the closest he has to a friend," Nihlus said with a sad hum. "Even after I became a Spectre, I have received a few messages from him."

Nihlus suddenly looked extremely uncomfortable and Garrus held his breath. He was sure that Nihlus was about to tell them something significant.

"He had invited me on his new ship," Nihlus said. "It's not a ship from the Council and he never answered my questions where he had gotten it. He kept asking me about prothean artifacts. I have never been interested in prothean things, I don't know why he asked me about that." He stretched his throat, showing how uncomfortable this conversation made him. "I got the feeling that he wanted to recruit me for something, but I kept asking questions he never answered. The closer we came to the ship, the more removed he became, distracted. At some point, when the ship had just come into view, he sent me away without any reason. I managed to get a picture from afar."

He projected a slightly fuzzy image on the big screen in front of the window. The ship didn't really look like a ship, Garrus thought, it looked organic.

Shepard was just as surprised as him. "That's a ship? Is something like this in any of the databases?"

Nihlus shook his head. "No, I checked everything, no ship like that has ever been registered."

Garrus zoomed in and tried to improve the picture. He let an algorithm analyze the reflection of the outer materials. It came back with a lot of unknowns, organic/metallic alloys and non-organic structures. He couldn't make sense of it.

Nihlus leaned over to see the results on Garrus's omni-tool. "Don't think I didn't try that. The materials match nothing we know, at least as far as we can tell from the reflections."

Shepard was busily typing on her omni-tool, searching for clues. She tapped one entry and put it on the big screen, next to Nihlus's picture.

"This is an entry about aliens, who have uploaded their minds into virtuality, I don't even understand how that works. But they left their organic bodies behind and transferred themselves." She scratched the corner of her mouth with a fingernail. Something she always did, when she was deep in thought, Garrus had noticed. Sometimes she would catch a fingernail between her teeth, not chewing it, just holding it.

She took the finger from her mouth and pointed it to the screen. "What if they found a way of uploading themselves to machinery? And then, if you merged machinery with organic material, you'd come up with something like this."

Nihlus shook his head, "I think that seems to be a little far fetched. As far as we know, those virtual aliens are peaceful and they only transfer themselves to voluntary organics or pure virtual environments. Something like the scale of this - unheard of."
Shepard looked at Nihlus and then turned to Garrus, her face showing a helpless plea. He realized that she was uncomfortable to ask Nihlus more questions, just like she had been when they were looking up information in the Council's database.

He spoke up. "Nihlus, what is going on with Saren? We have witness reports that he blew up an archeological dig site. He hired a merc ship to raid freighters. That ship has since turned up at the Citadel a few days ago and everyone on board is dead. Even for a Spectre above the law, that is in no way right."

Nihlus's subharmonics broke out in a cacophony of anger, sadness and foreboding. "Honestly, I don't know," he called out. "Saren was always ruthless but he wasn't plain cruel. Hiring a merc ship for raids, that is not his usual manner. He may not have much regard for lives if they interfere with the mission, but sending out mercs to raid freighters... are you sure? Is that witness of yours reliable?"

Shepard answered that question with confidence, "Yes, he's reliable in my opinion."

Nihlus hummed angrily. "Probably one of your damn krogan friends."

Shepard shrugged. "Doesn't change the facts. The ship turned up, full of dead mercs and Saren's DNA was found there. Add the witness account to that and it makes way too much sense to ignore."

Nihlus let out a tune of despair. "He has changed in the last half year, you know? For a while it looked like we were almost friends, he kind of opened up to me. But then we went back to Palaven for a short break between missions."

Nihlus got up and stepped over to the window. He stared out to the ward, light reflecting on his face. "He went back to the Arterius estate. It's mostly in ruins after whatever his brother Desolas did there and the place is fenced up. He could have sold it or rebuilt it but he never did. One day he left me and went to the estate. I didn't see him for two days. Then he was back, not a word, nothing about what he had done there. We left shortly afterwards and he was different, more removed. I heard him talking to himself when he thought I was sleeping and he'd never done that before."

Shepard looked thoughtfully at Nihlus and then to Garrus. "I think we can say that Saren is not a madman but something happened on the Arterius estate that changed him." She got up and placed a hand on Nihlus's shoulder. "You said he asked you about prothean things. What did you talk about?"

Nihlus let out a short laugh. "You know, I never cared about the protheans. I'm not interested in their history. They lived 50,000 years ago, I have more pressing concerns today. But they left us the relays and the Citadel so I can't deny that they still have an influence on us. I'm no archeologist, so whenever I find something on a mission, or when Saren and me found something, I called in the scientists. The Council has a group of asari scientists on call for things like that, so I would just relay the message to Council administrations and they would deal with it. But..." Nihlus suddenly looked thoughtful and his second voice called out in surprise. "I've forgotten but now I remember - there was a site on Therum, I think, where he asked me to delay my message to the Council."

"Why were you there originally?" Garrus asked.

"We received a distress call from a mining team that they were getting attacked by pirates. We were in the area so we went to their aid. By the time we arrived at the mining facility, it was almost too late. The whole place was raided and the remaining miners had locked themselves up in the mine. We killed most of the pirates and the rest took off. We managed to secure some of the equipment and called in the mining company, I forgot who it was. When we freed the miners, they showed us some markings and devices they had uncovered. Saren wanted to look at them and asked me to delay the call to the Council. I hadn't even realized that the things looked prothean."
"Did Saren say anything about it later?" Shepard asked.

"No, he didn't talk about it at all. That was shortly after we had been to Palaven and about three months before I became a Spectre." Nihlus trilled out a sad note. "He also has new biotic implants, they give off a strange glow. He's really changed."

Shepard looked at him thoughtfully and Garrus could see in her face that she still had many questions. But apparently she wanted Nihlus to tell her on his own accord, so she didn't ask him any more.

Nihlus straightened his back and turned away from the window. "Well, my little lovebirds, I have to go. I may have time later, I'll let you know," he said, spreading his mandibles in a forced smile.

They said their goodbyes and watched him walk out.

Garrus turned to Shepard. "Tell me what you think."

She smiled at him and let her finger drop from the corner of her mouth. Then her expression turned serious again. "I think, he isn't telling us everything. There is something more." She sighed. "He doesn't want to tell me - us, and that disturbs me more than it should." She sat back down beside him and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I know he doesn't have to tell me everything, I mean us, but he is my friend, our friend, he should trust us."

Garrus hummed for her and felt her relax against him. "Maybe there are some things he isn't clear about himself. I'm sure he will let us know if he thinks something is important." He tried to sound confident about this but he really wasn't. He didn't know Nihlus well enough that he could read his subharmonics in every nuance.

Shepard turned towards him and in one fluid motion crawled up on him until she straddled him. Her hands were on his face, her thumbs rubbing circles on his mandibles. She placed her lips on his mouth and kissed him. Those soft lips, that adventurous tongue, he loved this so much. The world was slipping away, only the two of them in the light from the Citadel remained, kissing, stroking, moving against each other.

One of her hands was moving along the side of his fringe to the back of his neck as they continued to kiss. Her lips gently sucking on his mouthplates, his tongue dipping in and out of her mouth, a little shock running through them whenever their tongues touched. Her tongue moved along his outer gums, touching, stroking and a deep moan left him. His hands found her hair and the skin on her neck.

She moved like fluid over him, her many fingers igniting every nerve on his skin. His hands crawled under her shirt and he carefully, very lightly let his talons scratch over her back. She arched her back with a joyous sigh. When she leaned forward again, her mouth landed on his neck, planting little kisses there.

Close to his ear she whispered, "We should get going."

He hummed loudly, sounding out his arousal. "Then you should probably stop doing that."

Shepard hummed a low grunt that sounded very much like his own. "I can't, too much beautiful, sexy turian in my hands."

He moved his head back to look at her. "I'm beautiful to you?"
"Yes you are! So beautiful, all hard edges and strong, and that metallic shine... beautiful." Her gaze was travelling over him with awe.

He sang out his love for her with his subharmonics. "That's good because I think you are so beautiful, so soft and rounded, strong and flexible." He was still a bit surprised by that himself, but he truly thought of her as beautiful. He resisted the urge to scent her, so that she wouldn't have to take a shower again.

Her brilliant smile lit up her face and she kissed him again.

He felt his plates loosen and groaned. "Shepard, you need to stop doing that, or we won't be leaving this place for another hour."

She grinned. "Hmm, tempting." With a last peck on his mandible she slid off his lap and went looking for her shoes.

Garrus went into the bathroom for a quick shower to wash off her scent. He also needed some cold water to get his plates to close again. Before they had gone to bed last night, he had had the sense to put his armor into the disinfect closet. As he took the pieces out to snap them on, he looked over to what Shepard was wearing.

Her pants were made of some flexible, thick material, sort of like what her vest was made of. She wore a thin, long sleeved, white shirt with red stripes on the sleeves. She was putting on black boots, snapping them closed and he noticed her hiding a small knife in the shaft.

"Why do you never wear armor?" he asked, snapping on his gauntlets.

She laughed. "Why do you always wear armor?"

"Turians always wear armor, it's normal for us. It means that you are always ready to fight, always prepared."

She snickered, "As if you guys aren't already naturally armored and protected against attacks. Hell, you are even armed, if your talons aren't blunted. Of all species beside the krogan, you could run around naked and never be in real danger."

"And you of all species should be in armor all the time, soft and squishy as you are," Garrus said.

She looked at him thoughtfully. "I guess you're right. But so far, no one has developed armor that can be worn all day without getting uncomfortably hot all the time." She raised her hand to touch the skin on his throat. "Turians don't sweat, right?"

"Sweat? What do you mean?"

"Humans regulate their temperature by sweating. Our skin excretes salty water to cool off. You must have noticed that whenever I was, ehem, worked up." She grinned sheepishly and Garrus grinned back the same way.

"I've noticed that you tasted salty." Now that he thought about it, he remembered the beads of water on her face and on her back when they had sex. He had not really paid attention, it was just one of the alien things about her.

"How do turians regulate their temperature?" she asked with her childlike curiosity.

"We can easily deal with heat by raising blood circulation. Our plates shield us from heat radiation
and by circulation we cool off the areas that are unplated. That works up to a certain point of course, too much heat can cause us to overstress our circulation, causing heart problems." He had his talons stroke through her hair. "We don't do so well in the cold."

"Yeah, humans neither. Freezing can kill us pretty fast." She ghosted her hand over his fringe, as if she was copying his movements. "Anyway, humans sweat and that makes wearing armor all day a sticky, uncomfortable mess. There is actually some new armor in development by Ariake Technologies that promises a new ventilations system. If that works as promised, I might wear that all day." She raised herself on her toes and gave him a kiss on his mandible. "Let's get going. I want that datapad back to do some more research."

Garrus nodded. He snapped on his weapons as he saw Shepard snap on her heavy pistol to her belt. They left the apartment, walking side by side.

In the back of his mind, Garrus counted down how much time they had left until his parents arrived. He certainly didn't look forward to that confrontation.

At the ANIS office, they found their datapads on Garrus's desk. They checked the data on it and found some of their entries wiped. It looked rather arbitrary, in some cases, only names were erased, in other cases names were left intact and dates had been deleted.

They looked at each other and laughed, the information in their own heads was much more valuable than what was left on their datapads.

They sat down in front of their terminals and spent the next two hours with research. Shepard looked into Saren's investments while Garrus looked into the locations they had learned from the session the day before.

They worked in silence, only occasionally sharing a look and a smile. The other team was not there. Garrus had not really realized until one of the strangest human females he had ever seen walked, or rather danced into the office. She wore high laced black boots, a white labcoat and a slim top with strange markings. Her black hair was separated into two braids. All over her clothing, decorative jewellery was jingling and she had a friendly, almost childish smile on her face.

She hopped over to him and extended her hand. "Hi! I'm Pauline."

Garrus took her hand and smiled at her, hoping she would recognize it on his face. "Hi. I'm Garrus."

Her smile never faltered, so she probably recognized his smile. Shepard waved over from her desk. "Hi, Pauly."

Pauline turned around in a pirouette. "Where is everybody?"

Shepard shrugged. "We don't know. Nobody was here when we got here."

The woman turned around again, her braids flinging around. "Well, if you have anything to check over, give it to me. I will find all the secrets, no matter where they are hidden."

Garrus nodded at her. "We will keep that in mind."
The strange woman danced towards the elevator and waved towards them before she disappeared. Garrus gaped after her until he was woken from his trance by Shepard's laughter. "Close your mouth, Garrus!" She grinned at him.

Garrus flustered. "I wasn't... I didn't..."

Shepard almost fell out of her chair laughing. "Relax big guy. Nothing wrong with looking, Pauline is quite the sight."

He let out a breath. "That was the strangest human I have ever seen. Human diversity is quite astounding."

Shepard grinned. "Oh, you have seen nothing yet."

"She is the forensics expert?" Garrus asked.

"Yes, and she is the best."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Shepard let the datapad drop on the desk. "I think I've done all I can. How about you?"

Garrus skimmed over his list. "Give me another twenty minutes."

"Alright."

They kept on working, each concentrating on their task. Garrus was looking over police reports, hospital files and sometimes local news posts from places where Saren had filed reports about. There were discrepancies between his mission reports and the local reports. While it was clear that Saren always got the job done, his methods often left a trail of destruction behind. He would always catch or kill the criminals, hired mercs or pirates but without regard for civilian casualties. Local authorities were rather cautious in their praise of his actions. Garrus had made a simple list that put the numbers from Saren's reports next to the reports from local sources. The discrepancies were obvious.

Garrus sensed Shepard's presence behind him before her arms snaked inside the cowl of his armor. She looked over his columns with interest. "Can you put dates next to the rows?" She asked, pointing at the columns.

Garrus nodded and added the dates. Shepard looked critically over the list. "Around that time, Nihlus became Spectre, right?"

Garrus checked for the date. "Yes, after that, he was alone." After that date, the list became noticeably thinner.

"He didn't do much for the Council anymore," Shepard said. "In fact, he has not taken a Council mission or brought in a report for three weeks now."

"That could be just a lull in activity." Garrus didn't really believe that himself. Shepard wordlessly pulled up a report about pirate activity in Council space. There was no lull visible, and a search of local news posts showed plenty of Spectre activity.

"So it looks like Saren is avoiding Council work," Shepard murmured.

Garrus hummed thoughtfully. "Wouldn't the Council notice when their top Spectre is not working for them anymore?"
Shepard had her arms still around his cowl. Her breath on his neck made him shiver a little but it was also soothing. Her being with him, working together, it felt so natural.

She made an approving hum to his question. "He must have a real fan on the Council, someone who covers for him," she said. "You know, it may be just my prejudice, but the turian Councillor would be the first to come to my mind."

Garrus nodded. "Let me just check something." He searched for recent connections between the Sparatus family and the Arterius, respectively the Serpentin clan but he didn't find any.

Shepard shook her head. "Go further back. Like back to the time when his brother lived."

Garrus broadened the search, enjoying the soft feeling of her skin against his neck. The search algorithm returned no entries concerning Saren but it brought up a connection between Sparatus and Desolas, Saren's brother. There was a short report about the attendees of a high profile military academy. The accompanying picture showed young, serious turians in academy uniforms. Most of them had colorful colony markings, only two turians were barefaced.

One barefaced turian, long, fleeting plates on his forehead and extended Valluvian horns on his mandibles, stood next to a dark plated turian with extensive white markings. Garrus recognized him as the young version of Councillor Sparatus. "So it looks like Sparatus knew Desolas Arterius from his academy days. Maybe he feels obligated to cover Saren out of some promise or old friendship to his brother."

Shepard nodded. "Yeah, that would explain why he can operate like that without ever getting questioned by the Council."

"Agreed." Garrus nodded. Thinking about this situation, he could actually understand why his father was so against Spectres. That he didn't want his own son to join them had probably as much to do with their dangerous lifestyle as it had to do with them being unruled and uncontrollable. Still, he would have been a different kind of Spectre.

Shepard pushed herself upwards and stretched her back with her arms above her head. "I think my head is stuffed now. We know a lot of things, we have a feeling for Saren now and we can't proof shit. I need a break."

Garrus logged out of the terminal and stood up. They were alone in the office, so he took her in his arms, relishing the feeling of her turning soft in his embrace. A small sigh came from her and she pressed her cheek against his mandible. Garrus cursed his armor, preventing him from feeling her softness against his body. He nuzzled her neck before letting her go.

She smiled up to him. "Let's take a walk, I got so many things in my head, I need to turn them over for a while."

"Yes, I'd like that. And we can also make a little detour to our volus friend Expat, ask him what he knows," Garrus said as they walked to the door.

She nodded, already deep in thoughts. They walked silently next to each other, both of them thinking over what they knew.
The volus Expat was unfortunately not quite as forward as he had been before. His behaviour had turned into fearul, he seemed deathly afraid especially after Garrus had mentioned the Shadow Broker.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Palaven-clan," he wheezed and began to hurriedly pack up his merchandise. Shepard stepped forward and lowered herself into a crouch to face him.

"Don't worry, we don't want to cause you any trouble. It's just that you mentioned the colonies Feros and Noveria and we would like to know what you heard about them."

The volus wheezed a few times, before he answered. "I haven't heard anything directly, Earth-clan," wheeze, "but I know a merchant who deals in real estate. He told me that he got many new customers," wheeze, "Earth-clan like you, coming from those colonies."

"Could I talk to him?" Shepard asked. "Here is my contact, please ask him to call me."

The volus merchant was fidgeting from one foot to another. Finally he wheezed out an affirmation. "But I can't promise that he will call you," he said with his helmeted head hung low.

"I understand." Shepard nodded and raised herself up again. They left with a short farewell.

They walked back towards the Presidium. Shepard abruptly spoke up. "Sometimes I wish I had my own ship. I would fly to those colonies and look at this myself. All this investigating on second hand information drives me nuts, I want to go out out there and really see what's going on."

Garrus grinned. "We would need a Spectre for that. Maybe you should apply for that."

She laughed, "Oh hell no! First human Spectre, I can do without that pressure, thank you very much!"

They went to a café for a quick lunch. Shepard had something she called 'Noodle Soup' while Garrus treated himself to a dish of fishes, promised to be fresh from Palaven, according to the waiter. The fish was raw, as it was custom for turian food and lathered with a spicy cream. He picked one up with a two pronged fork and slid it in his mouth, enjoying the crunch of it's bones and the blood mixing with the spices. When he opened his eyes again he caught Shepard staring at him, her spoon frozen halfway towards her mouth.

He tilted his head in question, "What?"

She lowered her spoon back to the bowl. "I'm trying to decide whether that way of eating looks frightening or erotic." She tilted her head to the side, mirroring his movements. "I guess, I just have to get used to it." She returned to her soup, carefully blowing on the spoon with pursed lips. Garrus found that fascinating, such conduct being impossible for turian mouthplates.

They kept eating in silence, both of them looking fascinated at the others way of eating. At some point, they both broke out in laughter at the situation.

Their omni-tools lit up, indicating a call from Nihlus to both of them. Shepard got up and moved a chair next to Garrus, to look on his omni-tool with him. Nihlus greeted them from the translucent screen with a huge grin.

"Hello my lovebirds!" he called out, his mandibles spread wide. "Do I have a surprise for you. Meet me at Docking Bay 23."
"Why?" Shepard asked.

"Ah, no telling, just be there!" Nihlus twitched his mandible in a grin and ended the call.

Shepard looked like she was about to burst from excitement. "Oh, I think I know... You're gonna love it! Come on!" Their food forgotten, she ran to a transit hub with him and ordered a skycar to take them to the docking ring.

"What is it?" Garrus asked, feeling left out of the excitement.

"Shh, in a minute, you'll see." She jumped out of the skycar and ran through the security station, only stopping to say her name at the terminal. Garrus followed her, saying his name as well, hearing the faint 'voice match confirmed' behind him as they entered the dock.

On the dock he almost ran into Shepard who had stopped still. They stood in front of a ship unlike any Garrus had ever seen. The hull of the ship had a sleek, curved design with the wings angled downwards to the side like it was custom on turian frigates. The design looked familiar and alien at the same time. The ship was painted in black and white, a red stripe on it's side under the name. In human writing, big bold letters spelled out the name: NORMANDY.

Shepard stared at the ship in awe, one of her hands over her mouth. "Oh my god, she's beautiful!"

"She?" Garrus wondered.

"Yes, ships are female and she is a beauty," Shepard said, taking his arm and pulling him along with her. "Look at the guns, it's a brand new GARDIAN system and she has a mass accelerator gun as well. She has a new kind of drive core, huge, twice the size you would normally fit into a frigate. Does she look familiar to you?"

Garrus tilted his head. "Yes, in a way, the design reminds me of turian fighters."

She grinned at him triumphantly. "Exactly. The ship has been designed by human and turian engineers cooperatively. It's a brand-new ship type, designed for covert solo missions. If she is successful, they will build many more of her. This is the ship I couldn't tell you about." Her enthusiasm was infectious, Garrus found himself feeling just as excited as her.

"And you think we can both serve on this ship?" Garrus asked, cautiously hoping for it. To serve on a ship like that would be a great honor.

"Yes, I think we can get you on there. You see, Captain Anderson is getting command of the Normandy from Captain Zander very soon. I have spoken with Anderson about multiple species on the crew before and he is at least not against it. The Council has sponsored the construction of this ship so it should be natural to have members of all Council species on board." She put her hand on his mandible for a second. "I can't promise anything of course, but I will move hell and water to get you on board."

There was a tiny knot of fear in his gizzard, it had felt so good, so right, to work together during the past few days. He didn't want to miss that. And he definitely didn't want to go back to C-Sec.

The airlock door opened and Nihlus waved at them with a big smile. "Hello my friends. Would you like a tour of this pretty little ship?"

"Who are you calling little?" Shepard asked, running into the airlock. She could obviously not wait to get on the ship. Garrus followed her just as eagerly. The disinfection cycle ended and they could finally enter the inside of the ship. To the left was the cockpit, filled with holographic controls
glowing orange, a pilot seat and a co-pilot seat. While it did look fairly normal for all that Garrus knew about cockpits, he took note of the fact that the seats were clearly made for humans.

They turned to the right and entered the command deck. Garrus noticed that the CIC was placed towards the back of the ship and had a raised platform, as it was custom on turian ships. As far as he knew, that was a uniquely turian design and he wondered how well it worked for human command style.

As Nihlus approached the platform, the holographic display in the middle changed to a galaxy map. Shepard stepped up on the platform beside Nihlus. She tested the display and started moving through the database, making herself familiar with it. When she looked up, she caught Garrus looking at her and made a shy smile.

Nihlus motioned to them to follow him as he led them further towards the back into a large room with chairs and a holographic communications port. Nihlus pointed towards it. "The Council had requested this, it has a direct connection to them."

Shepard looked confused. "On an Alliance ship? Why would they need a direct connection to the Council?"

Nihlus looked slightly embarrassed and Garrus could tell from his subharmonics that he had let something slip that he wasn't supposed to. "I will explain later. Let's look at the rest of the ship." He ushered them out and down a set of stairs to the second deck.

Nihlus gave them a tour through the mess, showed them the location of the captain's cabin and the medical bay. Garrus wanted to look into the main battery but the door was locked and Nihlus trilled apologetically that he was unable to open it. They made their way down with an elevator to the lowest deck, the cargo hold.

Garrus found his interest suddenly piqued, not only was there a well equipped weapons repair bench on one side, but there was also a Mako parked alongside the hull of the ship. Garrus had heard about these vehicles, armored and well armed like a tank, but much more maneuverable and agile than that. He was itching to take a closer look at it, this thing even had thrusters and atmospheric shielding. It could be dropped from atmospheric flight onto a planets surface and manage short flights with it's thrusters. The only problem usually was to get the thing back on board, it needed to jump towards the ship in atmospheric flight, close enough for the mass effect cables to latch on and pull it back in. That kind of exercise needed a good pilot and a good driver.

He realized that he stood lost in thought when Shepard called back to him from a door next to the elevator.

"Hey, drag yourself away from that thing, we are getting to the heart of this baby."

Garrus hurried after her and descended down a short ramp to the engineering level. He found Shepard standing in the middle of the room, staring in awe at an insanely huge drive core. The thing looked massive, like it was supposed to go into a much larger ship.

"How did they even fit this thing into this ship?" Garrus wondered aloud. Shepard seemed to be unable to form words, her mouth stood open but didn't move. He suppressed a chuckle, she looked like she had just been given the nicest present ever.

Nihlus stepped up to them. "This is the Tantalus drive core. It makes this ship one of the fastest spaceships ever, extremely maneuverable in the hands of a skilled pilot. But it also powers one of the best features of this ship - a stealth drive."
Shepard's eyes went wide. "A stealth drive? For real?"

Nihlus nodded with a grin. "Zero emissions for up to three hours in operation or even days while drifting. Of course, the ship will still be visible but it will not show up on any scanners."

"That is so awesome." Shepard looked like she wanted to hug the drive core. "Isn't it awesome?" she asked, turning to him. Garrus chuckled.

He whispered quietly, "Yes, sunshine, the way you look at it I wonder if I should be jealous."

Shepard giggled quietly. "Don't worry, he won't replace you."

Her omni-tool pinged with a message and Nihlus twitched his mandibles in a grin. "That should be your order for the Normandy's shakedown run in two weeks."

"XO under Captain Anderson," she whispered in awe. Garrus was proud of her and fearful at the same time. If she went on the Normandy, where would that leave him?

She looked up to him and he recognized the same thoughts in her face. "What about Garrus? I want him on board too, and Anderson knows that."

Nihlus trilled, embarrassed. "There is a slight problem with Garrus's current status. The Normandy will operate as an Alliance ship with Council sponsoring. For Garrus to join, he would either have to be hired as a mercenary or ordered on board by the turian Hierarchy. Unfortunately, Garrus isn't military at the moment, he's still C-Sec."

Garrus hummed angrily, of course C-Sec would cause him problems.

Nihlus continued. "The best way for Garrus and his future would be, that he rejoined the military and joined the Normandy as an official representative for the turian Hierarchy. That way, he will have a rank and will continue to fulfill his duty as a turian."

Shepard looked at Nihlus with a frown. "Let me guess, it will take a while to get that sorted, and he can't join right away?"

Nihlus made a tone of uncertainty. "With luck it could work. We still have two weeks." He trilled at Garrus. "I already put a request forward and the Hierarchy is willing to accept you. But the transfer to the Alliance takes a bit longer to work it's way through the bureaucracy."

Garrus sang out his hope with his subharmonics and there was a bit of triumph in there too. Leaving C-Sec and rejoining the military, and then transferring to the Alliance, it was a perfect list of things to annoy his father. It felt like a coup for independence.

He looked towards his girlfriend and caught her looking at him in worry. He knew what she thought about, she would go on the Normandy, with or without him. Not only was it an order, it was also a great career chance, one he would never ask her to miss. Even if he couldn't go with her.

She took his hand in hers, her thumb stroking the skin between his thumb and second finger. "We will find a way, just give it some time," she said with a hopeful smile that warmed him from the inside. "We will be together, no matter what."

Nihlus made a rude sub-noise that made Garrus involuntarily flinch. "The sweetness between you two is sickening," Nihlus said with a grin. "I will personally see to it that Garrus gets this transfer, if only to prevent Shepard from kidnapping him. She would probably start a war between humans and turians just to get you."
"Yes, I would. Not even a question," she purred, sliding up to him and placing a kiss on his throat.

Nihlus made an amused trill. "Please don't make a mess on the drive core, you strange kids. I'm going up to the mess hall and I expect you two there in five minutes. After that, I send the engineers back down and you better not give them a show that could scar them for life."

Shepard giggled quietly as Nihlus left, the door sliding shut behind him. The blue light of the drive core reflected on her black hair and the blue streak was shining even brighter. She pushed him against a station on the side, ignoring the angry beep from it. His codpiece suddenly felt very tight.

She pulled his head down and kissed him hungrily. He was really glad that she didn't wear armor as he chucked his gloves to the ground and let his hands roam under her shirt, stroking her waist and letting her hair slide through his fingers. They still kissed, desperately, their tongues touching and stroking, her oh so soft lips nibbling and sucking on his harder mouthplates. She climbed up on him, her kisses moving to the sides of his mandibles, her hands stroking under and over his fringe.

An amused trill left him. "Is it the drive core? Does that turn you on?" he murmured, his breath blowing over the skin of her throat. He noticed the fine hairs on her skin standing up.

"Yes. No. Yes, the drive core... the light, the hum, so hot... but it's you." She kissed along his mandible. "Only you."

She suddenly stopped and pressed her forehead against his, breathing hard. They stayed like that until they heard steps coming down the ramp to the door. In a fluid motion she slid down and stepped away from him, straightening her hair with a quick move of her hand. She walked towards the other door, Garrus picking up his gloves and following her, just as the door opened. Three humans, all of them carrying tools and reading datapads, entered as they left the room.

Shepard snickered quietly. "I can't believe he really sent down the engineers. He's going to pay for that. One day..."

Garrus watched her, his heart beating fast. That mischievous grin was another favorite of his.

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Chapter End Notes

The expression Valluvian horns is supposed to describe the striking long extensions on the mandibles that Saren has. I got that expression from Velasa and her great Sidonis story 'Love is a Wicked Creature'. She says she has it from Smehur and the MissfireAnon's works. It always comes back to Smehur when it is about Saren.

I had this idea of Shepard getting turned on by the drive core and then... somehow I wrote a story about Tali and the drive core. If you're interested, check my profile.
Anyway, next up, Vakarian senior should show up, don't you think? That's going to be... interesting.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

*I was procrastinating writing this chapter so much. I don't deal well with conflict and Garrus's father... I was about ready to throw it all down and set it on fire halfway through. I actually hated it.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So, do you think we have everything we need?" Shepard asked, looking over the bags of food spread out in the kitchen and spilling into the living room.

"I think we can feed a platoon with everything we have here," Garrus answered. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I didn't hear any suggestions from you how turians welcome their boyfriend's parents, so we are stuck with the human tradition now. I cook something for them, and they can complain about it to you later and we will all sit around the table, awkwardly trying to come up with something to talk about. And the one rule for that: don't mention the war." She gave him a weak smile. "At least that's how it always goes in the movies."

Garrus had a slight panic attack, basing potentially life changing moments on movie scenes did not sound like a good idea. But she was right, he did not have any better suggestions. Normal turian procedure would have been to bring his potential mate to his parents, not the other way around.

He started to sort the ingredients by amino-style and by course order. Four piles of food just about fit on the counter, leaving no place to actually prepare the food. With a sigh he put four boxes on the floor and moved everything off the counter.

Shepard came over and helped him. "It's getting a bit cramped in here, isn’t it?"

Garrus looked around and nodded in defeat. With all the extra food he needed for Shepard, he had had to stack crates full of levo-food against the wall, making the place look like an unfinished store.

"This place was never meant for more than one turian, you know?" he said, fluttering his mandibles at her.

She grinned at him. "Not leaving, sorry."

He stepped over to her and nuzzled her cheek. "Wouldn't let you, sorry."

Shepard laughed out and made a dramatic pose, waving her arm and acting like she was fainting. "Help, help, the big bad turian is holding me captive!" With a big sigh she fell backwards against the couch and tumbled over the backrest. Garrus caught her arm and pulled her back up, ignoring her dramatic shrieks mixed with laughter.
He pulled her close and kissed her like he had wanted to all morning, while they had been grocery shopping.

*Spirits, kissing must be the best human invention ever.*

Shepard let her hands wander along his fringe and he cursed his armor for preventing him from feeling her body pressed against his. He calculated in the back of his head if they would have time for some more intimacy. His parents would not be here for another two hours at least and her scent was everywhere anyway.

He made a decision. Who knew how this day would turn out and he wanted to have at least one good thing to remember about it.

His hands slid under her shirt, pushing it upwards but he stopped and tilted his head at her in question. He knew that she recognized this kind of turian body language and would know what he meant. With a bright smile her hand went to the latches of his armor but stopped before she opened them and she tilted her head in question herself.

He chuckled and whispered, "Yes!" with a slightly urgent trill at her. A breathy laugh came from her and she whispered, "Yes!" herself. In an instant the pieces of his armor fell loudly to the ground and her shirt tumbled on top of the pile. Shepard's pants slid to the ground, just as his codpiece fell down. She didn't bother with his leg and arm greaves and she still wore dark socks on her feet.

But that didn't matter. All that mattered was, that he could finally feel her, feel her body pressed against his and her hands touching the plates on his back. In a, by now, familiar move, she jumped up on his hips, standing on his spurs.

She was teasing him, moving her wet folds slowly over the tip of his penis. She looked him straight in the eyes, her mouth in a wide grin. Garrus leaned forward, carefully keeping his balance and moved the tip of his tongue lightly over her lips. The shape of her mouth changed, he still found it fascinating how much movement she had in those lips, and her own tongue peeked out to meet his. Her concentration had shifted and Garrus used this moment to pull her down and sheath himself inside of her.

The sudden move caught her off guard and the moan that left her heated his blood even more. She was so wonderful, so sensual, she always gave him everything, never held back.

Holding her tight to him, he carried her over to the bedroom. Every step made her gasp, it seemed to rub her in just the right way. To test that theory, he stopped and made a turn around the room. When he had arrived back at the bedroom door she was panting and moaning and Garrus knew that she was close to come. He hurriedly carried her to the bed and went down on his knees to sit her down. She was holding on to his neck, her nails digging into his skin, her eyes wide in wonder. He loved that look on her, like she couldn't believe what she felt.

He leaned her back, to give himself a good angle and slowly drove into her. Almost immediately he felt her tighten around him and her moans turned into passionate yells. She held on to him even tighter and pressed her face against his mandible, rolling her hips. That move made him explode in passion, and he groaned out his orgasm in three hard thrusts.

Slowly they calmed down, their faces pressed together. He felt her smile against his mandible and she whispered, "Hey, Angel, I'm not going to leave you, just because your dad will make some nasty remarks."

He stilled, how did she know of this fear in him? "What do you mean?" he asked, trying to sound
She leaned back and put both her hands on the sides of his face. "Don't think I didn't recognize the urgency. This was, 'at least I have something nice to remember, even if she leaves me' -sex. And I'm telling you that you don't need to worry." She placed a row of kisses on either side of his face. "I'm not leaving you because of your father." Another row of kisses. "I'm not leaving you."

Garrus swallowed. He wanted to say something, tell her how his cowl was bursting from all the feelings for her but he couldn't form any words. Only his sub-voice was singing his love for her loudly, telling her everything that he could not say.

Her voice copied his hum, singing love like he did. Garrus pulled her close and thanked all the Spirits that they had let him meet this woman.

Shepard let her finger trace over his markings. He was still kneeling between her legs, his naked torso inviting her hands. Her touch was soft but he had noticed that she pressed into his skin a bit more than in the beginning. She probably took into account that his skin was so much thicker than hers.

"Tell me about your markings," she whispered.

"What about them?"

Her eyes met his. "I remember you said that Batius let the family lines of his markings fade. What lines of your markings are colony and which are family?"

He traced his markings with a talon from memory alone. He had had them since he was 13 and he usually touched them up himself. He knew them well. "The thick line here from one side to the other with the dot on top here is colony. The shape on the sides with the little dash here, on my mandibles, is family. They go together with the markings below my cowl."

Her eyes followed his talons and then she traced the lines again with the bud of her finger. "What about Nihlus? The markings on his face are so large..."

Garrus thought about the large pattern, he had once learned all colony markings in school and tried to remember the lines. "His colony markings are on the sides, I think. The family lines are on his forehead."

"I always wondered about something. The turian councilor has almost the same markings as Nihlus, are they related?" Shepard asked, one eyebrow raised higher than the other.

Garrus had to smile at her expression. "They are from the same clan, I think, but not directly related. You might see many turians with similar markings who don't even know each other if the clan is big. My clan is rather small, you don't see my markings often."

She followed the lines under his cowl with her fingertip. "So they fade, that means they are not tattoos, right?"

"Tattoos?"

"Humans use needles to inject ink under the skin. That way a tattoo is permanent, it doesn't really fade."

Garrus tried to wrap his head around that description, knowing what he did about humans skin. "Doesn't that hurt?"
"Oh, yes, it does," Shepard said with a grin. "That is part of the process, to endure the pain to get it. I wanted to get a tattoo on Elysium, in celebration of my N7 rank. But the attack... I didn't get round to it. But I want to get a tattoo soon."

Garrus shook his head. "Humans, you get stranger the more I know about you. Our markings are not tattoos, the paint kind of etches into the plates but they need to be touched up regularly. Otherwise they fade."

"So, you paint them with a brush?"

"Yes, some people like to have an artisan do it for them, but I usually do it myself."

Shepard looked over his markings with a fascinated look. "I'd like to watch that. When you paint your markings."

Garrus nodded. "I'll paint them again in two days, I'll let you watch then."

He began tracing her scars with his talon. Her most prominent scar was cutting through her right brow, but she also had a faint slash on her chin. "Where are these from?"

"The one on my eyebrow is from my first assignment as an N4. I almost lost a teammate on this stupid pirate camp. They had the whole place rigged with explosives and Svend triggered one. I managed to pull us behind a tree trunk but some shrapnel hit us. This cut was from a piece of metal, searing hot. It cut me and cauterized the wound right away, I didn't even bleed." Her finger felt around her chin to find the faint line there.

"This one is really old, I was ten, I think. I ran outside and tripped over the last step. Cut my chin and bled all over the carpet like a stabbed pig. Face wounds bleed like crazy."

Garrus could see the grief rise in her as she was thinking back to a time where she still had a family. "Unless you make the cut with searing hot shrapnel," he said, trying to bring some morbid humor into her thoughts. It worked, she gave him a little smile.

With a sigh he carefully pulled her head towards his and pressed their foreheads together. This time he heard her start the love-hum and his hum fell in tune.

A buzz from her omni-tool finally pulled them apart, he raised himself up and sat down on the bed next to her. She huddled herself against him as she called up the message.

"Ah, the team roster. Let's see, who we will be working with." She scrolled through the list. "Alenko, of course, I should have known. Pressley, hmm, not sure I know him. Oh, and Jenkins! Glad to see him on board." She turned around to look at him excitedly. "I had been assigned to him for a week to teach him shooting at the N-Academy, he's a fun kid. So excited to see some action. A bit careless, I hope he has learned to use cover by now. Him and Alenko will make a good team."

"Who will fly the girl? Moreau? Oh, right, Joker!" A happy smile spread on her face. "I keep forgetting that he has a real name, Joker is great, awesome pilot. You'll like him."

Garrus nuzzled her hair, he loved how it felt on his mandibles. He tried to distract himself from the fear that he may not accompany her on the Normandy. "Why did you say that you should have known that they put Alenko on the crew?"

Shepard sighed and scooted lower so that she was lying across his legs, her head resting on his thigh.

"Kaidan Alenko is an Alliance guy through and through. He's so much, 'by the book', he probably
recites the rules for breakfast. Not to say that he isn't also a damn fine soldier, an incredibly strong biotic. But I'm much more relaxed with the rules, his unofficial second job probably is to watch over me and keep me inside the guidelines." She looked up to him and her blue eyes were shining.

"I'm a bit of a loose cannon, as the higher-ups like to say. Alenko is their perfect soldier and if it weren't for the Blitz on Elysium, he would have passed me in rank by now, I'm sure. Soon he will rush past me and I'll be under his command." She grinned mischievously. "So I have to enjoy it as long as I still can that I outrank him and can boss him around!"

Garrus stroked her cheeks with the back of his fingers. "So, Alenko is the better soldier?"

"As in following rules and orders? Definitely," Shepard said. "I have a long list of complaints for insubordination on my file. I'm not exactly the Alliance’s dream soldier, Kaidan is."

She sat up and looked to the window, her face serious. "I have no illusions about me and the Alliance. I joined the Alliance because they saved me on Mindoir. Anderson took me under his wing, visited me at my aunts whenever he could and told me stories how the Alliance is making the galaxy a better place. And he didn't do it to influence me, Anderson really believes that."

She turned back and looked Garrus in the eyes. "So of course I wanted to join the Alliance. Before the attack on Mindoir I had no idea what I wanted to be one day, something with tech, an engineer maybe. The Alliance could give me that along with the combat training, so I joined them. If some pirates had rescued me and taken me under their wings? I'd probably be a pirate or a merc today."

Garrus was surprised, he had assumed that being a soldier had always been her dream job. For a turian, it was never even a question whether he or she would join the military, every turian served the Hierarchy in some way after turning 15.

Shepard continued. "I'm not that much of a romantic that I think that the Alliance is making this world all better but, yes, I'm glad to be on the good side most of the time. The Alliance is not some club of do-gooders, they did horrendous stuff during the First-Contact war just like every military in times of war and there are some shady Alliance black-ops groups around. But on the whole, they do good stuff, laws and justice and all that."

She got up and they walked back to the living room, picking up clothes and pieces of armor. Shepard kept on talking, as if she had wanted to say these things for long time.

"I know that I could have just as well turned out to be a pirate, I could have ended up on the other side of this gun. That's always in the back of my mind. That pirate over there is probably just some kid who took a different turn than me somewhere."

Garrus was astonished. He had never taken her for a mindless killer but he also had not thought that she was so understanding of her enemies. As he picked up the pieces of his armor he wondered what his life would have been like, if he had not grown up on Palaven. If he had been some barefaced kid, with no other perspective for his future than the Blue Suns. Would he be a merc today, working for the highest bidder? Would he be the one in Shepard's scope?

She was raking through her hair, she did that often when she was agitated. "But of course, when it comes down to it, I don't have whole lot of mercy in my heart for pirates. We always have choices and choices are what make us. That kid took a different turn but he stayed on that path. That was his choice."

She had put all her clothes in a pile on the couch and put her arm around his waist, leaning her head against his cowl. The pieces of his armor were in a pile on the floor and he took off his greaves to
add them to it.

Shepard kept on talking. "I like to believe that I would have left the pirates, that I would have had my moral compass pointing me in the right direction, away from that life."

He made a questioning trill and she nodded, "Yeah, it's easy in hindsight and we will never know but I still think leading that kind of life is a choice at some point. A choice you have to own up to. And it might mean that you stand on the business end of my gun one day."

Garrus put his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "And that's a very unhealthy place to be, I happen to know."

She giggled and gave him a kiss on his forehead before moving away from him. "So shower and then food preparation?"

"Sounds good," he rumbled. He followed her towards the shower, determined to not let her go into the shower alone. He loved showering with her.

"Is this right?" Shepard asked, looking curiously at the casserole. They had marinated the artificial dextro-meat in a special sauce that Garrus had made after a recipe he had found in a cookbook. He hoped it was at least comparable to the sauce that his mother had always made. Apparently it looked very strange to Shepard but he considered her own casserole to look very weird too.

Shepard had made a small casserole with something she called Lasagna and it was covered in that synthetic stuff called cheese. To him, it looked like some kind of mud with yellow sheets and the cheese gave off an unpleasant aroma. But his food probably smelled just as strange to her as hers to him.

The dextro meal was far more elaborate than hers. They had a starting dish of gemarsu soup, the kind his father had often made. A main meal with the marinated kalkenda meat and bazellas and a dessert. The dessert they had bought, Garrus did not have the right equipment in his kitchen to make frothed telhyla.

He felt as if he was on a mission that he had not prepared for. He had messaged his parents, telling them that he was expecting them, and that Shepard and him invited them to dinner in his apartment. That way he had made clear that he would not hide her, not try to cover up their relationship.

But he could not make any prediction about how the dinner would go. This was uncharted territory, he had never even spoken about relationships with his parents before, let alone introduced someone to them. And now he was throwing all traditions out of the window by inviting his parents into his home to introduce them to his human girlfriend.

And he had not even told her that he loved her and saw her as his mate.

This evening had only one direction to go and it was towards disaster.

Garrus had put on his best formal suit, dark blue with yellow offsets. Luckily it still fit him perfectly. Shepard was actually wearing a dress, and by the way she was pulling at it all the time, she was clearly not used to it. The dress had been a real surprise, it looked vaguely turian but Shepard had said that it was human, influenced by an old earth culture. It was called Han-style, something that
apparently came from an Earth country called China.

The dress was dark red, with black borders and it wrapped around her body and was closed with a bow on the side. The sleeves were long and wide. A yellow scarf was draped over her shoulders and fell loosely down the sides. The dress and the scarf went all the way down to her ankles, leaving just enough of a gap to the floor so that her feet in small red shoes were visible. The shoes had a higher heel and it made her walk differently, a bit like a turian.

The dress was not overly sexualized like many asari dresses were, but it still showed enough of her curves for Garrus to appreciate it. And the shoes - the shoes were doing things to his imagination that he could hardly put into words. Just thinking about her walking around naked, only wearing those red shoes, her lean legs, how her gait would change - it was enough to make his plates shift.

Fluttering his mandibles he tried to clear his head of these thoughts, not quite successfully.

They had set the coffee-table, because Garrus didn't have a dining table and he even had to borrow a couchchair from a neighbour to have enough seating. They had put the food in the oven to keep it warm, and now they could just wait. While traffic between the relays was quite regular, docking at the Citadel could be a bit unpredictable, so they didn't know exactly when his parents would arrive.

Shepard settled down on the couch and flipped through vids on the big screen. She was extremely nervous, he could see that from miles away. Just as nervous as him.

He sat down next to her and took her hand away from her mouth, before she actually bit through her nail. "It's okay, Jane. We will get through this, none of this is your fault."

She gave him a crooked smile. "You know, I've had life-threatening missions that I felt more confident about than this." She leaned her temple against his shoulder. "Let's run away. I'm sure there is a transport going to Illium right this minute."

He chuckled. "Not sure I like Illium. How about if we go to Earth?"

Shepard had to laugh. "You have no idea what kind of a hell-hole that planet is, do you?" She turned to him. "How large is Palaven's population?"

"About 6 billion, I think."

"Earth has a population of more than 11 billion. The planet is covered with cities, huge, ugly, sprawling complexes, full of people, noise and pollution. There is a reason why moving to the colonies is so popular for people from Earth," Shepard said.

Garrus let his talons rake through her hair. "I still would like to see it one day. See what kind of world has brought these horribly nosy humans into this galaxy."

Shepard laughed out. She was about to answer when the door chimed to announce a visitor. They both froze and stared at each other. Simultaneously they jumped up and began to straighten their clothes. Garrus looked at her and whispered, "Are you ready?"

She shook her head, "No, can I jump out of the window?" Her grin was a bit shaky but she stepped up beside him to face the door with him. With a nod to her, Garrus issued the command to open the door.

His mother stepped in first, followed by his father. They both halted in their steps and just looked at them as the door closed behind them. Garrus noted with some fatalistic amusement that the four of them must look very strange, standing there in two pairs, facing each other. Finally, Garrus made a
respectful nod to his mother and greeted her with a friendly trill. He saw some of the tension fall from her face as she answered with a trill of her own and stepped forward to take his hands.

"Son, I am glad to see you are well," Talina Vakarian said to him and she lowered her forehead towards him like she had always done when he had still been a small child. He was taller than her now and had to bend his knees to get down to her to let his forehead gently rest against hers for a second.

They stepped apart and Garrus nodded respectfully towards his father. Aethius Vakarian made a short trill and said, "I'm glad to see you well too, son." They both turned their eyes to Shepard who looked like she was about to faint.

Garrus stepped closer to her and put his hand on her back. He felt her react to his touch by straightening her back and some of the tension left her face. She took a breath, probably to greet his parents, when his father spoke up with an angry rumble. "Can't she talk?"

His mother hissed at him to quiet him down. Shepard looked between them and then settled her gaze on Talina Vakarian. She nodded and spoke, her voice sounding more confident than the slight tremble under Garrus hands suggested. "Matra Vakarian, Dome Vakarian, I am glad to meet you, my name is Jane Shepard. Please, come in and have a seat."

Garrus was surprised that she knew how to address his parents by using the correct turian expressions. He saw that his parents were equally surprised. Talina moved towards one of the chairs but Aethius stopped her with his hand on her cowl.

He stepped in front of Shepard, using his superior height to loom over her. He showed his teeth in an unfriendly version of a turian smile, indicating that he did not take her serious. "If you are the one who my son has been willing to give up his clan for, I expect to be addressed in the proper way," he shouted at her even though his face was just a few centimeters apart from hers.

Shepard showed incredible control by not even flinching. She held his gaze, stubborn determination on her face. Garrus opened his mouth to say something, only to feel his mandibles fall slack as he heard his wondrous human girlfriend answer in the turian main dialect Palaveni:

"I am honored to meet the parents of my mate." She took a step back and turned to Talina and gave her a humble bow while she made a trill that expressed how honored she felt. Aethius was left standing with his mouth open.

With a small smile playing on her lips, and Garrus knew that she was damn well aware how much she had nailed this moment, she indicated the two chairs for his parents to sit on. Garrus and her settled down on the couch on the other side of the coffee-table and Shepard began filling three bowls with the soup.

Aethius and Talina Vakarian looked both slightly dumbfounded. Talina was the first one to find her composure again. She looked at Shepard with a friendly smile as she handed her the bowl and asked, "Is this a human tradition, to invite the parents of your mate and make them food?"

As his mother mentioned the word 'mate', it finally sank in for Garrus what exactly Jane had said. She had called him her mate! His mind was reeling. Did she know what that meant? They had not even spoken about that yet, did she really mean it or was it just a phrase she had found in a dictionary? Maybe the word had a different meaning for her? Or it didn't and she had meant it exactly as she had said.

A small nudge on his arm brought him back to reality, realizing that Shepard held out his bowl for
him, one eyebrow raised in an amused question. He took the bowl, looking into her eyes, trying to find an answer to all the questions in his mind. She turned her attention back to his mother to answer her question.

"I have to admit that I have no experience with this, but I believe, yes, this is a common human tradition. As far as I know, you are expected to dislike the food and worry that your son will never be fed right from now on," Shepard said with a bright smile. Talina looked unsure from her to Garrus and back and finally laughed out. Garrus felt some of the tension fall from his shoulders when he heard her laugh. Both Garrus and Shepard joined in her laughter.

The older Vakarian did not join, but Garrus could tell from his hum that he was amused as well. The laughter of his wife had always been the one thing that could break Aethius's bad mood.

Shepard went to the kitchen counter and began to prepare the plates with the main meal. Garrus noticed that Aethius was watching critically every step Shepard made, while Talina was more watching him.

The rest of the meal went on in silence, only interrupted by a short compliment from his parents on the food. Luckily the sauce had turned out to be just the right amount of spicy. Both his parents looked curiously at Shepard's food, which she was wolfing down hungrily, until she caught everyone staring at her. Her face turned pink and she started to eat a bit slower.

Garrus was about to get up to get the dessert when Shepard's omni-tool chimed loudly, indicating a call. She excused herself and went into the bedroom. As soon as the door had closed behind her, Garrus found himself under the intense stare of both of his parents.

He swallowed. "I appreciate that you didn't yell at her," he said to both of them.

His mother turned to his father with an angry hiss. "Well, some of us do have manners."

Aethius looked at his food, a tiny, defensive growl coming from his subharmonics. "This is a very clever tradition, the humans have here. It makes it almost impossible to go into an argument without negating the hospitality granted to us. We would come off as ill-mannered. Very clever." He turned to Garrus. "You do know that this, choosing a human as your mate, has consequences. Far more severe than you might think."

Garrus waited for him to continue. But they were interrupted by angry yelling from the bedroom. They could only hear bits of the conversation but it was clear that she was upset, about something that she had thought to be already taken care of. Garrus felt worry in him rise, he had the distinct feeling that this had something to do with him.

Shepard stormed out of the bedroom, an angry frown on her face. She stopped and visibly fought for composure. "I'm sorry, but I have to leave. I've been ordered to get on board immediately. They have pulled the shakedown run of the Normandy forward and I have to leave right away."

Garrus stood up but froze when he saw and felt the pain in her eyes. She stepped up to him and took his hands in hers. "You can't come with me. Your transfer has not been approved yet and they won't let you on board. I'm so sorry, there's nothing I can do."

Garrus nodded, "I understand." She stroked his hands once and then ran back into the bedroom, probably to change. He let himself fall back onto the couch and he couldn't stop the sad keen that left his throat. His parents both made a worried trill at him.

Suddenly they both started talking at the same time. Aethius asked, "She is ordered on board the
Normandy? The new stealth ship?" while Talina asked, "What transfer was she talking about?"

Garrus sighed. "Father, how do you even know about this ship? I thought it was a secret project between the Hierarchy and the Alliance?"

Aethius made a smug tone. "You underestimate my connections. How do you think we ever got you a praecipit convenire with the niece of the Primarch? Not that you made anything of that incredible opportunity..."

"Aethius!" Talina called out piercingly. It became quite clear that she had ordered her husband to behave before they came, which explained his unexpectedly civil behaviour. She turned back to her son, her features turning soft. "What transfer did she mean? Are you leaving C-Sec?"

"Frankly, I've already left C-Sec. For the past few weeks I've been working with Shepard for ANIS, an interspecies agency for criminal investigations that the Alliance has founded. We have been investigating the Spectres," Garrus said.

Aethius made a surprised trill. "Spectres? You investigated the Spectres? Did you investigate Saren Arterius too?"

Garrus shook his head. "I'm not going to ask how you know about that but yes, we also investigated him. But since he is a Spectre, everything he touches is classified. We were sort of at a dead end. Shepard's assignment to the Normandy was a new development, I'm not sure if we will continue our investigation. But it is a great opportunity, the first turian-human collaboration on a new stealth-frigate."

He looked towards his mother, the one who never wanted him to go to the military after his mandatory service. "To join the Normandy, I needed to re-enlist with the Hierarchy and get officially transferred." He didn't fail to notice the hushed keen his mother made. "I know you don't like this, mother, but I don't want to miss this chance and I want... I want to be with her, with Shepard."

My mate.

Aethius took a breath to ask something but in this moment Shepard came out of the bedroom in full armor. She was an impressive sight, her dull, dark grey armor with hard angled shoulder guards. A red stripe with white borders went down her right side, a sign for her N7 rank on her chest. She had a sniper rifle, an assault rifle and her heavy pistol snapped on and her helmet under her arm.

Garrus got up and walked over to her, to take her in his arms. He felt more than heard her sigh. He nuzzled her hair and hummed for her. When he stepped back, he saw the worry in her face.

"What's wrong, Sunshine?"

Shepard sighed. "I'm not sure, I just have a bad feeling about this. I wish you could come with me. It's... I would feel better if you were around."

"Hey, this is just a shakedown run, what could happen?" Garrus said.

Shepard's voice turned hard. "But the thing is... have you ever heard of an emergency shakedown run?"

Garrus shook his head. That did indeed sound strange.

"See? Me neither. Something is very wrong here, I don't like it," Shepard said.
She turned towards his parents and made a small bow towards them. "Matra Vakarian, Dome Vakarian, I'm very sorry that I have to leave so early. It was a pleasure to meet you both."

She turned back to Garrus and gave him a kiss on his mandible. Garrus took her face in his hands and pressed his forehead against hers. With a quiet hum he released her and she walked towards the door.

Talina Vakarian stood up and walked after her with fast strides. "Shepard, may I walk you out?"

Shepard looked confused towards Garrus and then back to his mother. "I'm sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Don't worry, I'm sure I can keep up," Talina said and her subharmonics made clear that she did not ask for permission. Shepard shot him a panicked look that Garrus could only answer in the same way and he shrugged his shoulders. That earned him a frown from his girlfriend, telling him that he was not helping.

"Well, if you insist. Please hurry, a transport is waiting downstairs for me," Shepard said and with a last panicked look she left with Talina Vakarian following behind her. Garrus turned back to his father, who made a thoughtful trill.

"She is right, you know. There is no such thing as an emergency shakedown run," Aethius murmured.

"Yes, I know," Garrus answered. His subharmonics sang a clear song of his worries.

Spirits, please don't let anything happen to her.

Chapter End Notes

Taking a page out of Blade Runner and Firefly, I'm assuming that China will have a huge influence in the future. I made up the dress Shepard wears after pictures of fashion during the Han-Dynasty on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanfu), as fashion always returns to and reuses motives that have been there before.

Thanks to Rama-Kay for helping me to come up with some turian names for the food.

And thanks to Credete, who I keep nagging all the time to edit with me.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Back when I published this chapter for the first time on ff.net, there had been a rather long break between this and the last chapter. I had spent that time reading and learning about writing instead of doing any writing. As I'm editing and reworking these chapters for publication here, I like to believe that the writing noticeably improved around this time, I actually began to get the feeling that I knew what I was doing here.

As for the story developments: We are now at the point that the game-story begins and this chapter started out with Garrus basically just waiting for Shepard to return. That's boring. So I decided to bring the action to Garrus. Unlike in the game, where shit happens to Shepard alone, in this AU, things are happening everywhere and Garrus and friends will play a more active role.

So, on with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I hope that this delay in transfer is not your doing," Garrus growled at his father. He had not been able to sit down again, instead he was pacing between his kitchen area and past the couch, back and forth.

Aethius Vakarian watched his son, quiet concern humming in his subharmonics. "I swear, I had nothing to do with it," he said, stretching his throat. "I heard about your reenlistment but I did not interfere. I wanted to, believe me and many would have seen it as my duty as your father to do it but..."

"Why didn't you?" Garrus stopped pacing to look at his father. He realized for the first time that his father was old. He still had the air of authority about him that Garrus remembered from his childhood but he wasn't quite as imposing anymore.

The older Vakarian spoke with a soft voice. "You mother has reminded me that old traditions are not worth losing my son to."

"That didn't stop you from hiring someone to stalk us and record video footage," Garrus hissed at him with an aggressive undertone. The fear inside his gizzard for his mate was easily replaced by anger at his father's behaviour. It was much easier than thinking about Shepard and what could happen to her.

His fathers trill told him that Aethius was embarrassed at being caught. "I just needed to know if you... if you and her..." A shrill tone of confusion left him.
Garrus stared at his father, he had never seen or heard Aethius Vakarian struggle for words. Conversations with his father had always felt more like well rehearsed speeches, presented with conviction and the belief of undeniable truth in his subvocals. The insecurity his father showed now was very unnerving.

Aethius rose from his seat and clasped his hands behind his back. It was a familiar pose, one that Garrus instantly recognized from his younger days. This was his father as he knew him, about to deliver a scathing speech to his son. "I needed to know if you were serious. I wanted to see if this was just a phase of devious... experimentation. You are of course aware that your mother and I... had very different plans for you and I needed to know..."

This speech was not so well rehearsed as others that Garrus had heard. His father's subharmonics told of his confusion, his inability to understand the situation. He had to suppress a triumphant trill at having made his father feel this way. It was a petty victory over this authoritative figure in his life and he felt ashamed for himself for feeling this way.

His father turned and looked out the window. The light of the Nebula filtered in through the patterns of the window pane, slightly darkened to reflect the day and night cycle Garrus had programmed them with. The older man looked like a turian statue in front of it but his posture was wrong. His shoulders were slumped forward in one of the universal signs of defeat.

"The galaxy is changing, son. And I don't mean just because the humans have entered the field with their curiosity and their annoying habit of questioning everything. There is more." Behind them the door opened for Talina to come through. Aethius nodded at her but continued talking. Garrus felt torn, he wanted to know what his mother had said to Shepard but he didn't want to destroy this rare moment of clear words from his father.

"Things are changing on Palaven, and for turians in the colonies," Aethius said with a sigh. "The young are questioning the rules."

"I'm hardly part of a movement, father," Garrus interrupted. He didn't exactly keep up with current events in the turian homeworlds and made a mental note that maybe, he should pay more attention to things like that. He doubted that he would miss out on major revolutions but smaller things, that did not get reported by the big news sites, would probably go unnoticed by him.

His mother put a hand on his shoulder, a soft trill coming from her. "We know son. But somehow, you are not the only one who happens to do things differently. Many from our clan and friends have similar stories to tell. Young turians, acting restless and unwilling to follow the old rules..."

Garrus leaned down to nuzzle his mothers fringe for a second, a habit calling back from his childhood when he had to stand on his toes to do that. Now he had to lower his head to reach down to her. "Let me guess, and people say it's all the humans fault?"

His father had turned around to them and nodded his head. "Yes, some do. A new species entering the Council systems, especially one as loud and demanding as the humans... they have had quite the effect. It has happened before, like when we came in contact with the asari or the quarians but that has all been so long ago, we, the turians, have forgotten."

Garrus turned to his mother, "What did you say to Shepard?"

She looked at him. "I needed to make sure that she is serious. Because I saw how serious it is for you." Her hand cupped his right mandible and the soft hum that came from her told him how much she worried for him.
"I... nothing you will say can change what I feel," he whispered.

"I'm not trying to change your mind," Talina said. "She cares for you, very much. And I like her."

"You do?" Garrus said with a stupid undertone in his sub-vocals.

"Yes, I do, she seems courageous and open-minded and I would like to get to know her better." His mother shot a stern look towards his father on that, and Aethius very wisely did not comment.

Garrus felt strangely relieved. "Thank you."

Suddenly the worry about Shepard and this strange emergency shakedown run came rushing back. He had to sit down. His mother trilled at him with concern and he couldn't answer with something calming. The dread he felt in his gizzard just would not go away.

"We will go to our hotel now," Aethius said, taking his wife by her arm. "Please contact us tomorrow after you work, we would like to spend time with you."

Garrus agreed and let his parents out. As the door closed behind them, he finally let out the sad keen that had been sitting in his throat since Shepard had left.

Garrus woke up on his couch, squinting at the light flowing in as the windows removed the tint. He checked his omni-tool for new messages but Shepard was obviously under a communications lockdown. At least he hoped that she would have contacted him if she could.

He had taken the day off yesterday and used it to show his parents around the Citadel. His father had shown him his old route that he used to take on his patrol through the wards. The old man was recalling old cases, telling stories of who he had arrested where and what had happened afterwards. Garrus couldn't remember the last time he had seen his father so excitedly happy.

His mother wore a good-natured smile, seemingly happy to see her husband so relaxed. But Garrus didn't fail to notice the looks she gave him. Her mandibles trembling slightly, quiet concern in her subharmonics. Garrus decided to try to find a way to talk to her alone soon, he had not really spoken to her since he had left Palaven.

In the evening he had brought his parents to their hotel and had spent the rest of the evening on his couch, working on a program on his omni-tool. It kept his mind off Shepard and what could possibly happen to her. He missed her fiercely.

Garrus got up to get ready for work. He felt lost. He was officially working for ANIS but without Shepard, he felt like he didn't really belong there. Still, he could hardly stay at home just because his partner wasn't there.

On the way to the ANIS office near the human embassy, he sent out a message to Frank, realizing that he had not spoken to him in a while. His friend answered him with a call after a few minutes.

"Look who emerged from the depth of the fields of love!" Frank called out in his ear.

"I'm sorry Frank," Garrus sighed. He was aware that he had neglected his friend in the last few weeks. "How are you?"
"Good, good. Left C-Sec, gave out cookies for everyone."

"What? When was that?"

"Last week, you were already busy being a big shot ANIS agent," Frank answered with a chuckle. "I sent you a message but you must have missed it."

Garrus looked annoyed at his omni-tool, messages from Frank should have been marked with a 'friend'-tag, he shouldn't have overlooked them. "I'm sorry Frank, I don't know why I didn't see that. I'm on my way to ANIS, can I meet you later?"

"Hey, why not, birdy? I'm working at the desk on the news-site today, you wanna meet over lunch?" Frank asked.

Garrus smiled, hearing his old nickname. He had missed this simple banter between them. "I don't know what I'll be doing, I have to ask the boss what he wants me to do today."

"Alright, talk to you later," Frank said and ended the call.

Garrus stepped into the big ANIS office and for a change found it busy with people of all kinds of species. People were tripping over themselves, handing out datapads and huddling over them with other agents. It was impressive to see, asari, humans, salarians, and turians working together. In the middle of the room Garrus's boss, Jentarius Keggs, sat calmly at his desk, overseeing the chaos around him with the occasional flick of his mandibles.

His eyes fell on Garrus and he waved him over. "Where's Shepard?" he asked with an impatient undertone.

"She got ordered on board the Normandy last night, Sir," Garrus said, keeping himself straight like a good turian soldier. For all his relaxed demeanor, Keggs still had that air of authority around him that the turian military cultivated so very well.

"The Alliance needs to work on their communications," Keggs grumbled, his eyes fixed on the terminal screen in front of him. Garrus thought for a second that he had forgotten that he was still standing there, until Keggs made a handwave towards the human agent Lorenzo Jorno. "You'll be working with Jorno and Va'sida."

Lorenzo Jorno and the dangerous looking asari Dania Va'sida simultaneously stood up and attached weapons to their light armor. Garrus was a bit surprised, so far they hadn't even heard about having a case yet. But apparently the handwave had been enough of a signal, so Garrus checked his guns and armor as well.

Keggs turned to his omni-tool, typing something and their own omni-tools flared up with the case information. "Small frigate, turian, has sent emergency messages about an attack by dead humans. Came through the Widow-relay half an hour ago. We are going to investigate."

Jorno turned around with a grin on his face. "Dead humans? They've been attacked by zombies?"

Garrus paused on the unfamiliar word, waiting for the translator program to give him some references.

Va'sida, the asari, seemed to be not patient enough for that. "What are zombies?"

Jorno raised a finger. "Zombies aren't real, they are just part of human pop culture," he said with a huge grin. "Undead humans, infected and degenerated, who attack uninfected humans to bite them, thereby making them zombies too. They are like a wild horde, stumbling, no clear direction but they
multiply so quickly that they overrun the humans who are not infected.”

Garrus decided to join the conversation, he didn’t want to be an outsider in this team. “Turian pop culture has something like that too.”

Jorno raised his eyebrows in surprise and interest. “Really?”

“Yes, they are incredibly strong monsters, vaguely turian-like looking, who draw energy from the surrounding environment and dispense it to their company of transformed soldiers to strengthen them. They’re called Marauders,” Garrus said.

“Interesting,” Lorenzo Jorno said. “With turians it’s an organized company of overpowered soldiers and with humans it’s a horde of flesh-eating savages. Feels like that should tell us something, but I don’t really care. Zombies are a staple of human movies and videogames since the twentieth century of our time. They make for perfect enemies, no one needs to feel guilty about shooting them because they are already dead.”

“Why would anybody feel guilty about shooting an enemy in a videogame?” Dania asked confused. Garrus had wondered the same.

Lorenzo sighed. “Let’s talk about the ways humans can worry about violence and... you know what? Let’s not. Humans worry a lot, that’s all there is to say about it.”

“I thought it was questioning what they did a lot?” Dania said.

“Those go hand in hand, don’t you think?” answered Jorno, throwing a look to Garrus as if to see whether he agreed or not. Garrus nodded, humming his amusement, even though he was unsure if Jorno and Va’sida understood his subharmonics. He got a friendly smile from Lorenzo Jorno and an almost friendly looking nod from Dania Va’sida in return. Garrus counted that as a win.

“Enough.” Their boss walked past them, in full armor and a helmet under his arm. “Helmets and air-supplies. There may be an infection or a leak. Close quarters weapons. Let’s go.”

Garrus thought about leaving his sniper rifle behind but he would have felt naked without it. He had an assault rifle and a pistol on him and took a helmet from a supply locker on the way out. Luckily, all armor connections were standardized, so it would fit on his armor.

The ship was a dark shadow against the light of the relay. Garrus strained his neck to see it through the window of the shuttle. He had the shuttles sensors transmit to his omni-tool and when he checked the readings, they told him the same thing that his eyes had told him. The ship was dead. No energy emissions, hardly any heat transmissions, no light, not even a single spark. From the outside the ship looked a bit shot up but structurally intact.

Lorenzo was looking at his omni-tool as well. “Some impact marks on the hull but no structural damage, as far as I can tell. I’ll make a scan of the marks when we are closer, see who shot up the ship.”

“Take a trace off it for Pauline,” Keggs said. Lorenzo looked like he wanted to protest but his boss just looked at him with his mandibles tight. It was either that expression or the short sub-vocal growl that convinced Lorenzo to keep his mouth shut.

He sighed. “Sure, I just love zero-G dancing around dead spaceships,” he mumbled under his breath.

The pilot spoke over the comm system. “I’ve hailed the ship on all channels, no answer. I also don’t get any answer for docking requests from the ships VI so I can only let you out close to the platform,
"Understood," said Keggs and put on his helmet. "Check your seals." They all put on their helmets and had the suit systems run a full check for space worthiness.

The pilot positioned them in front of the stern hangar door and after depressurizing the cabin, they opened the door to let themselves float slowly over to the dark ship. After attaching themselves with cables to the ship, Dania started working on the door panel to prepare the door.

Keggs ordered Lorenzo to walk on the side of the ship to collect the trace on one the impact marks. Lorenzo's feet began to glow blue as a mass effect field formed to keep him attached to the hull. He slowly walked along the ship's side, extending the cable behind him. Garrus saw him make a scan and then scratch at a part of the hull's surface.

When he came back to the platform, he made a grimace at them. "We should have taken Terlin with us for this."

Dania laughed out. "He would have thrown up inside of his suit," she said over the comm.

Keggs raised a hand, quieting them down and drawing their attention back to the door. After a nod of his head, Dania let the door open. It opened quietly, no hiss of pressurized air, no atmospheric compensation. After floating inside, Garrus spotted a panel in the light of his flashlight and was surprised to see it respond immediately when he pressed a talon on the input pad.

Dania had let the door close again and the room was completely dark except for the light of their flashlights. Garrus found the controls for atmospheric pressure and the gravity generators on the terminal. There were no error messages.

"Sir?" he called out to Keggs. His boss came over to him, looking over his shoulders. "Sir, the ship seems to be intact, someone has vented the atmosphere and turned off gravity on purpose. I could turn them back on from here. The ship still has energy."

He heard his boss voice over the comm and behind him at the same time. "Do you get readings from the whole ship? Are there lifesigns anywhere?" Garrus let the ships VI do a full scan. It was a simple VI, barely more than a bunch of programs thrown together but it worked effectively enough.

Garrus let out a surprised trill. "I'm getting readings from one section of the ship that still has atmosphere. I get one life sign in a room near the CIC."

"So someone is still alive. Good," Keggs said. "I'd like to have atmosphere and gravity back but turn the gravity on slowly, we don't want that last survivor to crash to the ground. Lights would be good too."

"Alright, sir," said Garrus with a nod, only to receive an angry hum in return.

"Stop calling me sir all the time," Keggs said and turned away. Garrus looked after him in confusion and then turned to Lorenzo, who had walked over to him, glowing yellow from his omni-tool.

He switched his channel to Lorenzo alone. "What else should I call him?"

Lorenzo looked up. "We call him Keggs or boss."

Garrus turned his comm back to everyone. "Turning on atmosphere," air hissing through vents confirmed his announcement, "lights..." the room lit up, "and a fifth of G gravity." He felt the slight pull from the ground and aligned his body perpendicular to it. Now that the lights were on, they
could finally see all of the room they were in.

The hangar was empty. Not a single object was in the big room, no boxes, no containers, not even a single screw. But the walls and floors had marks on them, bullet holes and energy burns. There was also blood, blue blood.

"Looks like the turians fought here," Dania said, taking pictures and scans from the marks on the walls. She pointed to deep scratches in the floor. "Whatever had been in here, it got vented out through the hangar door."

"I agree," Keggs said. He was checking the door to the inside of the ship. Garrus raised the gravity to 35% of council G. It made it easier to walk but they were still bouncing with every step. He programmed it to rise slowly to 90% in the next 10 minutes.

"Let's see the rest of the ship. Do all rooms have atmosphere now?" Keggs asked with a look towards Garrus. Garrus made a connection to the ships VI via his omni-tool and walked over to the door.

"Unless a room is sealed airtight, they should all have atmosphere by now and gravity will be at 90% in a few minutes... Boss," Garrus said, listening to Keggs's subharmonics for a reaction. According to the almost quiet undertones, he didn't object to Garrus calling him boss.

Keggs took off his helmet and collapsed it and attached it to the back of his armor. Dania, Garrus and Lorenzo did the same. With a nod towards the team, their boss pressed the panel to open the door and stepped through as soon as the gap was wide enough, his pistol raised in front of him.

Lorenzo and Garrus followed him, pointing their pistols up and down a hallway that seemed to run alongside the ship. There were boxes and broken furniture scattered everywhere, piled up in front of the vents. Garrus started to scan the piles when Dania called them back into the hangar.

"Guys? I'm getting some very strange readings here," she yelled, causing Keggs and Garrus to turn back, while Lorenzo stayed in the hallway, only looking at them over his shoulder.

"What is it, Dania?" Keggs asked, kneeling down beside her. Dania scanned a section on the floor that had some sticky fluid on it but it wasn't blue like blood. Looking around, Garrus noticed a few more spots of the greyish fluid on the floor and on the walls.

"The scan identified it as a synthetic fluid," Dania said, showing the read out on her omni-tool. "I had a comparision run against the database through the Extranet connection from the shuttle and the only entry this fluid matches to by 90% is 400 years old." She looked at the readout again, as if she couldn't believe it herself. "It says, it's the geth?"

"Geth?" Keggs and Garrus asked simultaneously. They all looked at each other in confusion. From the door Lorenzo called out. "Should I know what geth are?"

Dania stood up and shouted over to Lorenzo. "If you knew anything about galactic history you would. The geth are an artificial intelligence, invented by the quarians. They run on mobile platforms. That could be where the fluid came from."

Garrus spoke up, how the quarians had lost control of the geth had always been an interesting story for him. "The geth became sentient and revolted against their makers. The quarians had to give up their home planet and the whole galaxy now has to deal with the uncontrolled AIs."

"But the geth haven't been beyond Perseus Veil for over 400 years," Keggs said. He didn't need to say more, they all asked themselves the same question. Why were the geth here?
"Let's check the rest of the ship and find that survivor, maybe he can answer a few questions."

The trek through the ship took a long time. They opened every door, checked every room. The first rooms were empty but when they came up to the next level, they began to find corpses. Turian soldiers, ripped apart by an unknown enemy. They took pictures, scans and trace samples of every dead soldier but Garrus knew that these injuries looked like nothing he had ever seen.

Their weapons were not all empty but they had been shot multiple times. The dead turians had limbs missing, many had their necks broken or had bled to death. It didn't smell, the lack of atmosphere had prevented any decay. The dead looked like they had died just recently. Blue blood was glistening, not because it was fresh but because it was unfreezing.

They hadn't found anymore geth fluid but they found traces of an unknown fluid. Something black, that scanned as part synthetic, part organic.

As they got closer to the CIC, Garrus's omni-tool flared up with a transmission. He was about to ignore it when he saw that it came from inside the ship. He opened it and called over the rest of the team. "I have a transmission here from inside the ship. It says: Don't open anymore doors, there might still be husks in there. Please help me, I'm in the med-bay." He looked up. "What are husks? Does he mean geth?"

Everybody shrugged their shoulders. "We have to find this survivor and ask him," Keggs said. With his pistol raised, he moved up the stairs and opened the doors to the CIC level. There were more corpses, as cold as the others. Garrus assumed that the CIC had been vented of atmosphere as well. Apparently only the med-bay had been kept under life-support.

The group walked over to the med-bay, carefully stepping over corpses and makeshift barricades, their pistols raised despite not seeing any threat. The door to the med-bay showed a red panel and the windows were tinted dark. With a nod towards him, Keggs ordered Garrus to access the door and Garrus went to work. The lock had been encrypted but it was a simple algorithm, nothing that a simple cracker program couldn't handle.

The door opened and the familiar smell of sickness and decay assaulted their noses. Two bodies were lying on the beds, one a turian and the other a female quarian. Keggs and Garrus both made a surprised trill, a quarian on a turian ship was unusual. The quarians had a bad reputation in council space after they had lost their home planet to the geth and were forced to live on the resources of other species.

Not many turians would let a quarian live on board. She may have even been a stowaway, not able to afford the passage to the Citadel. Garrus wondered if she was the cause of this disaster, if she had brought something on board. Finding traces of geth and then a quarian was just too much of a coincidence.

Garrus and Dania scanned the bodies. The turian was dead, according to Garrus's scan, for at least two days already. The quarian was alive but exhausted and woke up when Dania touched her shoulder. She jumped up and screamed but stopped as she looked at them, her bright eyes behind her mask huge white circles.

"You're real? Alive? Are the others..." Her head whipped from one to the other, her voice coming in gasps from her speaker.

Keggs stepped forward, looking into her mask without any resentment in his subharmonics. He looked calm, friendly even, and Garrus felt bad for his prejudiced opinion about the quarian. So far they didn't know whether she had anything to do with this.
"What is your name?" Keggs asked. The quarian looked around, her gaze hesitating on Garrus and Lorenzo a bit longer. Then she turned back to the turian in front of her.

"My name is Tali'Zorah nar Rayya. I'm on my pilgrimage and on my way to the Citadel."

The boss nodded. "My name is Agent Jentarius Keggs of the Alliance Navy Investigative Service. Can you tell us what happened here?"

The quarian was wringing her hands and lowered her head. "I met one of the Lieutenants, his name is... was Gatius Bicatin, on an ice planet near the Crescent Nebula," she whispered. "We were both scanning for a geth presence there, something that had turned up on the scanners. He was better equipped of course and managed to find the upper half of a geth platform with an intact memory core. That is an incredible find, usually geth self-destruct if the platform is damaged and destroy their memory core. I wanted to make a scan, download the data planetside but the Lieutenant insisted on bringing it on board. The captain allowed me to come too."

"Did it activate and cause all this?" Garrus asked with an accusatory undertone. You didn't just drag geth parts on board a ship, everybody knew that.

"No, it's dead, look, it's right over there." The quarian pointed to a table in the corner, where a box stood that looked like it contained scrap metal. On closer look it turned out to be the "head" of a geth platform. It was inactive and not connected to any kind of powersource. It still made Garrus very uneasy.

"We met a ship close to the Crescent relay, it looked human built. They hailed us and the captain allowed them to dock with a shuttle in the hangar. And then..." She curled up on herself, pressing her hands against her stomach. After a shaky breath she continued. "Then the shooting started, the squad in the hangar said something about geth and dead humans attacking them. I was in the messhall when the alarms started and then suddenly these things came through the door."

"The geth or the dead humans?" Keggs asked, his voice and subharmonics showing no hint of disbelief.

"No geth up here, just these... not really humans. They looked like they had been humans once, but now there were tubes growing out of them and blue lights on their bodies and in their eyes, and they attacked so fast, just ripping and clawing at the soldiers. They were so fast and so strong and..." A cry came from her speaker and she pressed her arms against her stomach.

"How did you end up in here?" The question came from Lorenzo who suddenly stood between Keggs and Garrus.

"The messhall was overrun and the Lieutenant," she pointed to the dead turian on the bed next to her, "pulled me into the med-bay and shot the husks. He locked the door but he was injured. I tried to help him but he was too badly hurt, the infection spread through his body so quickly, he died yesterday, I think, I don't know, what day is it today?"

Keggs ignored her question. "Who vented the ship?"

"I did," Tali answered, "it took me a while to hack into the VI from the terminal here but I could scan for life-signs and control the life-support system. When I saw that all the turians were dead and the husks kept coming to the med-bay, trying to break the windows, I sealed this room and vented the atmosphere. Lieutenant Sertus had programmed the emergency beacon before he lost consciousness."
Suddenly she jumped up and grabbed Kegg's arms. "The pilot! The cockpit is sealed, she has spoken to me, she told me that we had made it through the relay and that help would be coming but now she doesn't answer any more!"

Keggs turned around, "Garrus, Dania, I want you to check the remaining rooms, see if you can find one of these husks, I would like a closer look at them. Lorenzo, go to the cockpit and find the pilot."

Garrus took his pistol back in his hand. "We are calling them husks now?" he wondered.

A small grin played on his bosses mandibles. "Tali'Zorah has discovered them so I think she gets the naming rights. And I refuse to call them zombies."

Lorenzo shook his head at that. "Zombies don't have tubes growing out of them and blue lights are not their thing. Zombies would be inappropriate as a name," he lectured as he checked his weapon.

Garrus shook his head and followed Dania, who had already left the med-bay. They moved up to the next level, the crew deck. More dead turians with claw marks, body parts ripped off, were in their path. Garrus opened one of the washrooms, checking every corner. Even this room had scorch marks on the walls from fighting. A dead woman was visible in one of the showerstalls, twisted in unnatural ways. Garrus turned away, trying to erase the picture in his mind how her beautiful purple markings were covered with blue blood.

A scream from the hallway startled him and only then did he realize that Dania was not behind him anymore. He barged out of the room and looked down right towards where the scream had come from. Dania was fighting with a husk, backed up against the wall on the other side of the hallway, and holding it away from her with one hand on its throat, her other hand bashing it with the butt of her pistol. The thing was clawing at her, making rattling groans, its mouth gaping, trying to bite her arm. Garrus saw pieces of her armor fly away, it was just tearing away the gauntlets on her arm and the pieces that protected her sides.

Garrus knew that he had only seconds before the claws would find flesh, infecting her with who knows what. He was too far away to reach her, so he let his pistol drop and took the sniper rifle from his back, aiming while it unfolded and in the millisecond it beeped its readiness at him, he took the shot. The husk's head exploded in black fluids and the body stilled and dropped to the ground.

Dania slipped down the wall until she hit the floor, desperately wiping at the black fluid on her face until the red markings were visible again. Garrus ran towards her, fumbling a pack of medi-gel from his pockets. She kicked the dead husks once and then turned to him.

"Thank you. That was a nice shot." Her breath came in gasps. "Really nice shot." She kicked the body once more and then took Garrus's offered hand to raise herself up from the floor. They both looked at the headless thing in front of them. It looked human shaped but somehow transformed. It was dark-grey, with marks that had glowed blue when it had been alive and synthetic tubes visible on it's body. Black fluid was oozing out of the pulp that had been it's head.

"There's another one in that storage room over there, a dead one," Dania said and pointed into the room next to them. "Looks like the room had vented and this thing got stuck on a lever. It suffocated, I think, so it does need air, I guess? That's at least something, they are not undead or unable to die, they need air to breath like all other living beings."

"And a headshot kills them too," Garrus said. "That makes them sort of like living but I have really hard time to consider these things to be living beings."

He took pictures and scans, when suddenly his omni-tool chimed. It was message from Shepard and
he didn't hesitate to read it.

[Hi Angel! I wanted to let you know that I'm okay. Still on comm lockdown, can't tell you anything. We are about to go planetside on Eden Prime. Something weird is going on. Take care, my angel.]

Garrus looked around, taking in the dead turians, the scorch marks on the walls, the husk's body in a pool of black fluid and sighed.

_Weird doesn't even remotely cover it, sunshine._

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Chapter End Notes

I hate those husks, they give me the creeps.

I'm not using Tali's backstory from the comic, I've only used the name of the relay and that she was on an ice-planet from that.
As the shuttle turned away from the dead ship, Garrus kept looking at the small quarian. Someone had given her a blanket that she pulled around her purple suit, her gloved hands clenching in the fabric. It was hard to tell how old a quarian was, the mask covering her face made it impossible to guess her age. Her voice sounded young though to Garrus, and the fact that she was on her pilgrimage supported his guess.

Even though he couldn't see her face, the way her body seemed to try to fold in on itself, spoke of the great distress and trauma she had experienced. The girl had seen horrible things and Garrus was sure that they had not heard all of it yet. It was unfortunate that she would have to relive this experience but until the pilot had regained consciousness, she was the only witness they had.

The quarian was fiddling with her omni-tool and Garrus remembered that she had spoken about an intact geth-memory-core. "Tali'Zorah? Did you manage to copy the contents of the geth-memory-core to your omni-tool?" he asked, keeping his voice as quiet and calm as he could.

Still, the girl almost jumped out of her suit in shock. Her white eyes were shining bright behind her purple tinted mask. "Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, I could extract part of it before it burned out. The data is encrypted of course but my algorithm managed to extract a few files so far. One is a map, another is a voice recording."

"Could you transfer the files to me?" Garrus asked, holding his arm with the omni-tool out. She hesitated and Garrus wished again that he could see her face to understand why. He knew that quarians were naturally careful, almost bordering on paranoia. They weren't well liked in the galaxy, having fallen out of favor after losing their home planet to the geth.

The frantic escape had left them with very little resources and as refugees they soon were seen as beggars and thieves. The turians especially held some harsh prejudices against quarians. As the only other dextro-amino species in the galaxy, turian colonies were the natural destination for the quarian refugees. Back in those days, the turian Hierarchy had refused to grant them asylum and only reluctantly gave up resources so that the quarians could equip their life-ships.

Resentments from those times still held today. The suspicion that Tali'Zorah displayed against him had probably been ingrained in her from childhood days. Just as it had been for him and every other turian he knew. Quarians were thieves and could not be trusted. That's what he had learned.

But Shepard's influence had made him question his old prejudices, the concepts and ideas he associated with other species. If she could overcome them, he could do it too.

"Would you copy the data over to my tool?" Garrus put as much friendliness into his subharmonics as he could. "I promise, I will not take it away from you."

She nodded and pressed a few controls. Garrus watched his own interface, expecting an acknowledgement of the file transfer. But nothing happened.
"I'm sorry," Tali'Zorah whispered, "it seems the interface protocols of my tool are not compatible with yours. I will have to run an update first."

Garrus sighed. "You said you found a voice file, could you play it for me? And I would like to look at that map you mentioned."

She still hesitated, he could see it in her posture. She didn't trust him. He couldn't really blame her, she didn't know him and he was a turian.

Lorenzo had watched them from the side and leaned forward. "I would love to hear that voice file too." For some reason, his voice made the quarian relax and Garrus wondered how he did that. The human suddenly took her gloved hand and put his other hand on top of hers. "Nobody is going to hurt you, I promise."

Tali'Zorah nodded and issued a command to her omni-tool. Static hisses sounded out and a distorted voice came up. The file was badly damaged, the words mostly not understandable. But there was something to the voice that gave Garrus chills. He knew that voice from somewhere.

"It's a turian," Garrus stated. "I feel like I have heard that voice before but it's too distorted to be sure. But it's definitely a turian. He is... satisfied, happy, kind of proud of himself."

Lorenzo looked at him with raised eyebrows. "How can you tell? I can hardly distinguish individual words."

"The subharmonics. They sound out our emotions."

Lorenzo nodded at that. "Yes I know, believe me I can tell when the boss is angry by the vibrations of the elevator doors from his subharmonics," he said with a grin, "but I couldn't even hear the subharmonics under all the distortion."

"Must be that superior turian hearing," Garrus stated, watching out of the corner of his eye if his joke would get well received. He was still new in this group and unsure of his status. Lorenzo and Dania looked at him critically for a fraction of a second and then laughed out loud. Tali'Zorah looked from one to the other and Garrus saw some of the tension in her shoulders disappear.

She leaned forward again and put the map on display. It looked unfamiliar to Garrus, he could make out some buildings, and a large, circular area with many buildings and machinery around. A search algorithm could compare it to known places, but since they didn't even have any indicators on where in the galaxy this place was located, a comparable search could take days.

He noticed that the map was shaking in front of him and as he looked up to the quarian, he saw that she was shaking all over. It was impossible to tell whether she was crying behind her mask but the way her body was shuddering, he was fairly certain she was. Dania noticed it too and moved over to sit beside her. She put her arm over her shoulders and pulled her against her. She stilled for a second and then relaxed, faint sobbing coming from her speaker.

"Did I do this?" she whispered. "Did I cause all this by taking the data?"

Dania looked at them before answering, it was clear that she wanted to help but did not want to tell a lie. "We will find out the truth, we will find out what happened." The normally fierce asari looked a bit helpless, trying to give the small quarian the support she needed.

The shuttle slid into the dock and they all stood up when they heard the docking clamps attach. Jentarius Keggs had not said anything on the flight, just stared out of the window. Now he stepped up next to the quarian, his large frame intimidating and protective at the same time.
In front of the elevator at the docks entrance, two turian C-Sec officers waited for them. Garrus wondered who had called them or if they were just here to investigate the ghostship. But then he realized that the ghostship was just this minute being pulled into another dock to get investigated by forensic experts. When they approached with Tali’Zorah, the C-Sec officers stepped in their path and Garrus realized why they were here.

"We will escort the suspect through immigrations and register her," one of the officers said with a harsh snarl in his subharmonics. Garrus studied his face but he couldn't recall if he knew him. The other officer roughly grabbed the quarians arm only to let her go again when he heard the subharmonic hiss that came from Keggs.

"She is not a suspect but a witness," Keggs said.

"We still have to register her, quarians need to be tracked on the Citadel," the other officer whined. "Her omni-tool has to get a tracer."

Keggs growled at him impatiently. "We will take care of that, we don't have time for this now." He started to move past the officers with Tali’Zorah at his side but was stopped by the first officer stepping in his way. Garrus was slightly impressed by his stubbornness, not many turians would stand their ground against the rage that was rising up in Keggs's subvocals.

"I'm sorry sir, but we have to register her at immigrations, it's the law." The officer tried to sound strong but his subharmonics quietly betrayed him, sounding out his fear. Keggs stared at him, unmoving. But the officer didn't back down so that Keggs finally stepped to the side and with a nod allowed the officers to take Tali’Zorah.

They took her between them and led her to the elevator. As the door closed behind them, Garrus heard one of them mumble, "I don't understand why they make such a big deal about a suit-rat."

There was an angry hiss behind him that told him that his boss had heard the remark too. "Garrus, Dania, I want you to get our witness from the immigrations office as soon as they're done with her," Keggs said, already stepping into the next elevator with Lorenzo. Dania and Garrus quickly followed.

At the C-Sec Headquarters level they separated, Keggs and Lorenzo walking over towards the embassies and the ANIS office, Garrus and Dania making their way over to the immigrations offices.

The area was fairly quiet, most people could come and go on the Citadel just by having the id on their omni-tool scanned. Only a few people were called into one of the rooms for further questioning and Garrus had to admit that most of them were quarians and krogan. There was no denying the prejudice against them in C-Sec.

Dania gave him a slight punch with her elbow and when he looked at her she tipped her head towards two turians in C-Sec armor. Garrus recognized them as the officers from the dock. They stood around, looking bored. When they noticed Dania and Garrus looking at them, they nervously clamped their mandibles to their faces. Garrus felt dread rise in him, this did not look well.

"Where is Tali’Zorah?" he asked, stepping in front of them. They looked around as if they expected the quarian to turn up all of a sudden. Finally, one of them looked at Garrus and spoke. "We... we seem to have lost her."

"Lost her?" Garrus couldn't believe what he heard. Dania shouldered him aside and grabbed the turian roughly by the cowl of his armor. She was smaller in size but her anger radiated from the blue glow around her hands.
"You lost our witness?" she hissed at him. "A young quarian, practically a girl, in possession of vital information for our case and you lost her?" Her fists were glowing blue and she pulled her arm back, ready to punch the turian in the face. Garrus stepped up to her and let out a soothing hum. To his relief she reacted and slowly let go of the turian.

Garrus faced the officers and felt himself fall into the familiar C-Sec stance. His subharmonics commanded their attention and they actually straightened as if he was a superior officer. "I want to know exactly where you lost her and what happened," he growled at them.

"We came out of the elevator and she was right between us and we asked her her name and had her call up her id on her tool." The turian, who had acted so arrogant on the dock now sounded quite embarrassed. "And then suddenly there was a very bright light and when we could see again, she was gone."

Garrus sighed, a light bomb was a very old trick that worked especially well on the light-sensitive eyes of turians. "Did you scan for her?"

"Yes, sir, but she has no tracer on her tool and the suit-rats run their own weird protocols on them, we can't connect to hers and so..."

"So you couldn't find her with a simple id scan?" Garrus snarled. They didn't even put any effort in it. "Did you try calling for her? Maybe she would have answered to suit-rat?" he spat out.

The turians looked at him confused, clearly not seeing what he was getting at. This time, Dania had to calm him down, pulling at his arm and leading him over to the elevator. With a sigh he activated his omni-tool and began scanning the area. Of course, quarians in their enviro-suits never left any traces, having no skin-cells or hairs to shed outside of the suits.

As it was expected, they couldn't find any hint, how and where the quarian had disappeared. The area in front of the elevator was wide open and had pathways leading away to all the main areas of the Citadel.

"She could be anywhere," Dania sighed. Garrus snapped his mandibles to his face to keep his teeth from gnashing loudly. Of course she had run away from two turians who called her a suit-rat, probably threatened her and acted just like she would have expected turians to act towards her.

"Where could she go?" he wondered. "She doesn't know anybody on the Citadel and she probably doesn't have many credits on her."

"She would probably look for other quarians," Garrus mused. He tried to remember if there were any places on the Citadel where quarians meet. Few quarians stopped at the Citadel, ever since their embassy had been closed. Their reputation was bad, they were seen as outcasts and thieves. Garrus could not think of any place where he had seen more than four quarians together at the same time.

Dania looked at him expectantly but Garrus shook his head. "Sorry, I have no idea where she could be. Let's keep looking and I'll ask someone at C-Sec if they heard about a quarian on the run." There probably wasn't any point in asking any of the turians but he wanted to ask Katrina Peters and Berdin Lerv. As a human and a salarian he hoped that they had not yet picked up all the prejudices in C-Sec.

He contacted Peters through his omni-tool and laid out his problem. She answered a short time later, without any new information but promising to look into it with Lerv. Dania and him circled around the immigration area, looking for the purple quarian suit without much hope.
After two times walking around the whole perimeter and asking pedestrians if they had seen the quarian, they gave up. Nobody remembered to have seen her, nobody had noticed her. She was either very good at hiding or people just didn't pay attention to quarians.

Dania sighed. "We're not going to find her around here. If I were on the run like her, I wouldn't stay anywhere close to this place." She said and began walking towards one of the ward exists. "Let's ask around the food courts that serve sterile dextro paste. She will have to eat something at some point."

"Good idea," Garrus said and fell in step beside her. He started to feel comfortable around the asari and she didn't appear quite as dangerous anymore. The determination in her strides reminded him of Shepard and he felt a strange pang of fear in his gizzard that he couldn't explain.

His omni-tool chimed, announcing a call. It was Frank, and Garrus answered it while they kept walking towards the elevators to Zakera Wards.

"Hey human, what's going on?" he asked like he had always done with Frank Johnson.

His friend answered with a snort. "Hey turian. I wanted to meet up with you later but I got a news thing to do, I don't know how long that will take."

"Oh, Mr. Reporter at work," he teased, "what exclusive story have you managed to find?"

Frank let out a laugh, "Well, it's hardly exclusive. There's been an attack on Eden Prime and my boss wants me to..."

"Wait, what?" Garrus interrupted him, a chill running down his spine. "Eden Prime?"

"Don't you get the news? The colony has been attacked, the Alliance is somehow involved..."

"Shepard is on Eden Prime..." Garrus voice was more like a whisper and he desperately clawed at the wall for support. His knees felt weak. Dania looked at him suspiciously while she called up news feeds on her omni-tool.

"Shepard is? Oh fuck," Frank said, his voice full of worry. He typed something on his omni-tool and Garrus noticed that he had received coordinates. "See if you can come here, I can show you everything I have. We can connect to all the major news sites from here."

"I don't know if I..." he stuttered, unable to think clearly.

Dania gave him nudge. "Go, take care of things, I'll tell Keggs that you are investigating Shepard's situation. She's part of the team, we want to know what's going on with her as well." She gave him a smile, "and we all know that you have a very personal interest in her well being. So go."

Garrus tried to give her a grateful smile but his mandibles felt frozen to his face. He ran towards a transport hub and jumped into a waiting skycar, punching in Frank's coordinates. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself, there was nothing he could do and a panic attack was not going to help anyone. Shepard was a professional, she knew what she was doing.

Still, he couldn't help but check his omni-tool for messages from her, taking note of the date of her last message. He realized that the message had reached him late, it had been queued during space flight until they were close to a comm buoy. There was no other message.

He knew that she was soldier, that she was trained for this, but he couldn't help but worry about her.
Frank let him into the office, shortly putting his hand on his shoulder in wordless support. If anyone knew what he was going through, it was Frank. They both settled down on some office chairs in front of a big terminal. Five screens were projected in front of them.

Three screens showed grainy pictures from security cameras, the other two had news feeds from the two major news stations on the Citadel. The reporters from the news sites had the same grainy pictures running in the background that Garrus saw on the screens in front of him. In other words, nobody knew anything.

Frank fiddled around with the controls and then suddenly stilled. He looked at Garrus, biting his lip. Garrus had never seen Frank so conflicted. "Birdy, I know you can't give me classified information but since you let it slip that Shepard is on Eden Prime, I'm pretty sure that means the Normandy is there. I don't want to get you in trouble but that would be such an awesome story for me, the hero of Elysium on the first human-turian frigate, fighting on humanity's most successful colony... this could be my break, birdy!"

He turned to face Garrus. "Listen, you are my friend and I will help you in any way I can," he said, "but it would be easier for me to justify to my boss that I'm giving out my sources if I could tell him I got something in return. I can offer you all cameras on Eden Prime and don't ask me how." Frank held his gaze and Garrus for the first time became aware of the shift in their friendship, now that they didn't quite work on the same side anymore.

"Let me contact my boss," Garrus said, grateful for the distraction. He had stared at the grainy pictures long enough, knowing that he would not see her on them but still searching for her.

Keggs answered with vid, his mandibles clamped tight to his face. "What?"

Garrus unnecessarily straightened his back. "Sir, I can get access to all cameras on Eden Prime through a friend at the press but I would have to tell him about the things we know." He left the sentence hanging.

He saw Keggs look over his shoulder. "Mirhale, how fast can you get access to cameras on Eden Prime?"

Mirhale's voice came tinny over his omni-tool. "Sir? We would need a warrant first, I don't know how long that will take. And if you ask me to hack into all the networks, apart from that being highly illegal..."

Keggs turned back to his omni-tool. "Tell him what we have. Protect the witness of course and, Vakarian?" His face came really close to the camera and Garrus felt his stare going right into his brain. "Find her."

"Find who, sir, Shepard or the witness?" Garrus asked, feeling immensely stupid.

His boss snarled. "Both!" and ended the call.

Frank looked at him, a grin playing on his lips. "Sounds like a fun guy to work for," he said. "So, what do you have for me? It sounded way more interesting than I thought."

Garrus stretched his throat and began. "I don't have much for you on Shepard but I have something else. But let's begin with Eden Prime. The Normandy was supposed to have it's shakedown run in about two weeks. With luck, I would have been on board by then. But they called it up early, the day
before yesterday, saying that it was an emergency."

"An emergency shakedown run?" Frank raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

"Yes, we both thought that to be very strange." Garrus took a deep breath. "You don't even know
the best of it. When they called her, we were having dinner at my place with my parents."

"You're shitting me!" Frank looked like his eyes were about to pop out. "Your parents? With you
and Commander Shepard? That's a story I need to... not now but I want to know all about that."

"That's pretty much all I know about the Normandy, I only know that Shepard was or is on Eden
Prime from a message I got from her. And that message had been delayed and I haven't heard
anything since then." A sad keen escaped from his subharmonics as his chest constricted in fear.

Frank turned back to the screens and put different security feeds on each of them. "Maybe we'll see
something if we look at feeds from three days ago. I already saw something about an excavation site
where they found some kind of structure." He pointed to a feed that looked like it had been made
with an high flying scanner. Independent cameras like that were supposed to work as early warning
systems for natural catastrophes or attacks. Some people criticised those cameras as observation
systems that put innocent citizens under surveillance at all times.

That Frank had access to these cameras was highly illegal and Garrus decided not to think about how
he had managed that.

The camera showed a big, circular area where many people were cleaning a long structure lying in
the ground. From what he could see in the frame that Frank froze, it was a long spike. It looked like a
stone pillar that had fallen to the ground. Garrus took note of an impressive security detail around the
site, not only Alliance soldiers but also asari commandos.

The area looked vaguely familiar to Garrus and it took him a moment to recall where he had seen this
kind of setting before. With a gasp he realized where and quickly typed a message to Lorenzo on his
omni-tool.

'Check a map of Eden Prime, the excavation site. Does it remind you of the map that Tali'Zorah
showed us?'

A minute later the answer came from Lorenzo: 'Yes it does! What the fuck?'

Garrus closed the conversation with a short remark to get back to him later. He returned to the
screens with an angry growl that made Frank raise his eyebrows at him. He had just found a
connection between the ghost ship and Eden Prime, and he had no idea what to make of it.

Frank sped up the feed from the camera until it passed over the excavation site again. About an hour
had passed and things looked normal. They kept looking at the feed, watching the hours pass in a
few minutes.

"I'm sorry there isn't more to the story," Garrus said, his eyes staying on the screen, "but I have
something else."

Frank tore his eyes away from the screens. "Well, spill!"

Garrus let his mandibles flutter into a smile. "A ghost ship came through the relay this morning."

"Yes, I know," Frank said.
"We went on board to investigate," Garrus kept his voice neutral and watched his friend out of the corner of his eye. "The ship had been under attack." Frank looked up in interest and Garrus let the bomb drop. "We found traces of a geth attack and something similar to zombies."

Frank almost fell out of his chair. "Zombies? Geth? What the everliving fuck?"

Garrus grinned, and for a moment he could forget his worry and watch the astonishment on his friend's face as he relayed the story of the ghost ship. He described the husks in detail, the geth fluid they've found and finally came to the part of finding a living witness.

"A witness?" Frank looked even more excited now. "Can I talk to her? Who is she?"

Garrus let out a sigh. "She's a quarian. We have to keep her identity secret for now, we don't know enough about this case, she might be in danger and... we lost her."

"Lost her?" Frank laughed out. "You lost your only witness? Oh, you've fucked up, birdy." He looked like he wanted to say more when suddenly his eyes snapped back to the screen, "Wait, what was that?" His fingers flew over the controls and the fast video playback stilled. He rewound, on the screen the footage moved backwards until a few pre-fab buildings came into view. Frank zoomed in on the picture, it became more grainy but was still good enough to make out details.

Garrus moved up next to Frank and squinted at the screen. His visor was enhancing and desaturating the picture, and he struggled to get the strange creature on the screen to match with any he knew. He looked closer and suddenly he remembered a picture from history files that he had read back in school.

"That's a geth!" He called out, watching the smooth movement of the machine on the screen.

"What?" Frank asked, his head tilted as if the angle would help him to see the object clearer.

"That's a geth, I'm positive," Garrus called out again. "There's another and there... Spirits, what is it doing?" The camera showed them a geth setting up a shiny object, something like a big tripod. Before they could make out what they would do with it, the camera had moved away and travelled over farm fields. The sounds of annoyance that came from both of them were strangely alike, only one full vocal and the other sub-vocal.

Frank sped up the recording and switched the other screens to recordings from near the excavation site, syncing up the time codes. "They're everywhere! Look, there as well, and they keep setting up these... things."

He kept typing and wiping over the controls, switching out feeds on the screens. Garrus jumped from one to another, trying to see everything. The geth attacked, meeting practically no resistance. Even the security forces seemed frozen, unable to deal with the strange mechanical creatures. The colonists stood no chance at all, they were being slaughtered. For some strange reason the asari commandos had disappeared. Garrus wondered what had happened to them, they at least would probably have been able to fight the geth but he could not see them anywhere.

The camera drone passed over the excavation site again which was crawling with geth and littered with corpses. The geth seemed to clean up the dead bodies and were moving the giant spike. They both looked fascinated at the working geth, they clearly had a purpose and it had something to do with that excavated spire.

Before they could see what the geth did with the object, a flash of light appeared on all screens and all camera feeds were dead.
Frank and Garrus both jumped forward and furiously fiddled with the controls. "What happened?"
Garrus asked.

"It's not on our end," Frank said, rewinding the feeds a few seconds, "I had the feeds synchronized, remember? Something has taken them out all at once, planet wide."

"Planet wide? How is that even possible?" Garrus kept checking the feeds at random intervals but they remained dead.

"Maybe an EMP pulse," Frank grumbled. "Must have been something huge. I wish we had sound, there must have been something..."

They both kept staring at the screens, fast forwarding to see if the feeds ever came back. "That must have been the time where the Alliance called out the Normandy," Garrus mumbled to himself, "a planet wide drop in communications, no wonder they were in such a hurry." He typed a message on his omni-tool to ANIS. "My boss needs to know about this, this is big."

"What the hell is going on, birdman?" Frank asked, his eyes still glued to the screens. "Geth? Geth in council space? Add in your story with the husks and that we haven't heard anything from Eden Prime... I have a really bad feeling about this."

The fear came back like a stab in his cowl. The pain wasn't real but the fear and his sub-vocal cries were.

Shepard. Jane.

Frank put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Garrus, really, I'm sorry." He gave his arm a small shake. "Let me know how I can help, okay?" With that he turned back to the controls. "I get something from Eden Prime now, some cameras seem to have recovered, let's see what it looks like... oh fuck."

Garrus hissed through his teeth, the camera feeds that had previously showed them a lush, peaceful colony, now showed a warzone. Most of the prefab-buildings had been destroyed, the whole infrastructure seemed changed. Even roads were destroyed and there were fires burning.

Thankfully they could not see many dead bodies, but that fact made Garrus strangely uneasy. Something was nagging him about that in the back of his head but he couldn't figure it out.

The camera feeds showed them Alliance soldiers, going through the destroyed buildings with their guns drawn. They obviously still expected problems.

"Look, those things," Frank pointed to the screen that showed one of the silvery tripods, "it is extended now. I wonder what that is." On the screen a soldier placed something at the bottom of the tripod and jumped behind cover. Both Garrus and Frank flinched when the tripod blew up in an explosion. "I guess they don't want to know what it is," Frank said sarcastically.

"Or they do," Garrus grumbled. Maybe these things were too dangerous to keep intact.

"Hey, Garrus. Hey, calm down!" Frank's voice came to him from far away. He had almost punched him in the face. He was in the gym, punching the big bag, marked "turian". After he had started pacing in Frank's small office, his friend had chased him away and ordered him to work off this
energy.

He had lost track of time, and a look on his omni-tool revealed that he had been here, pounding into
the bag, for over an hour. It had helped, he did feel better. The fear was still there but it didn't feel
like it wanted to burn out of his cowl anymore.

"Okay, I'm okay, sorry," he huffed, puffing out his plates and fringe to cool off, "any news?"

"The Normandy is coming into port."

"When?" He rushed over to his friend. Finally, something was happening, finally he would know.
He would know, he would see her!

"In an hour. Maybe faster, they could be coming through the relay as we speak," Frank said, taking a
hasty step back. Frank was not a small person, but even he flinched away from a puffed up turian
coming at him like he wanted to wring the information out of him.

Garrus stopped himself and stepped back. "Sorry, Frank, I'm..."

"Shut up, Garrus, it's okay." Frank gave him a punch on the arm.

Garrus could actually feel that and it reminded him that he wasn't wearing armor. "Let me get
cleaned up and..."

"...and we can go to the docks right away. I know you would not want to wait anywhere else,"
Frank said, turning away and checking his omni-tool.

"Thanks." In times like these you knew who your good friends were.

He hurried to the washroom, ran through the shower and was back in armor and outside in record
time.

Frank was already waiting for him and showed him a C-Sec memo. "The Normandy is just coming
in."

"How do you have access to C-Sec memos?" Garrus asked with amusement.

"Ah, you don't want to know, you just don't." Frank grinned at him and turned off his tool.

They walked over towards the docks, and it quickly became clear by the amount of Alliance security
and C-Sec that walked in the same direction, which dock they had to go to.

When they arrived, pressed among C-Sec officers, Alliance soldiers, and various news reporters, the
doors to the docking bridge remained closed. Around them, camera drones hovered and reporters
were typing into their omni-tools. Garrus wondered vaguely how they all had found out so quickly
that the Normandy had come back, and if any of them knew what was going on.

As he was just about to ask the person next to him what he knew, the doors opened and Captain
Anderson stepped through. The doors closed behind him before anybody could see the Normandy.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the press." Anderson's voice immediately demanded attention and his
posture spoke of the authority he held. But Garrus wasn't called an expert on humans for nothing, he
noticed the strain in his voice, the nervous tension under his eyes. The Captain looked like he had not
slept in a while. "The Normandy has just returned from Eden Prime. Eden Prime has been attacked
by an unknown enemy, who has escaped. We have suffered the death of Corporal Jenkins. Spectre
Kyrik and Commander Shepard have been injured. They will be taken to the hospital immediately...

Anderson spoke some more about a press conference to be held and about clearing the area for the hospital transports but Garrus didn't hear him anymore. The blood rushing in his ears drowned out all sounds, and only when Frank punched him in the side did he notice the loud subharmonic cry he made. People around them looked at him and Garrus clamped down on his cries of despair.

The Alliance security and C-Sec began clearing the area. Garrus walked against the tide, Frank behind him, until a gun pointed at his face made him stop. He looked around in desperation, he could not possibly leave. Not now, now that he could almost smell her, almost feel her. Not now when she was injured, Spirits knew how bad.

"Captain Anderson!" he yelled out. He wasn't the only one calling after him but somehow Anderson turned around and his eyes were searching the room until he found Garrus's eyes. There was a hesitation, a tiny pause that already felt like the floor was dropping under his feet, but then the Captain nodded towards the guard. The soldier lowered his weapon and stepped aside to let them through and smoothly stepped in front of the next person who wanted to tag along.

Captain Anderson waved them over, ignoring the shouts of protests from the other reporters. Frank's face was controlled but Garrus knew that he was grinning inside.

"Come here, Vakarian." Anderson said, turning his back to the crowd. "I'm letting you see her because I know she would punch me in the face if I wouldn't. And I think..." The man looked suddenly more like a worried father than a commanding officer. "I think she needs you. Maybe you can help her."

He turned to Frank and his face had lost the soft compassion from a second ago. "But you are from the press, why should I let you in here?"

Garrus tore his attention away from the door that still separated him from his love. "He's my friend, sir. And a friend of Shepard and Nihlus. He..."

"He will not disclose any secrets," Frank spoke up. "Sir, I'm Frank Johnson, I'm new at this job and I surely don't want to fuck up my chances. If you want to keep the mission a secret, then I will only be here as a friend. But as you can see by the crowd over there, there aren't really any secrets on the Citadel. Let me make a report and you will have full control over what I publish. The truth will come out whether you like it or not but I can offer you that nothing will slip without your approval."

Garrus could see in Anderson's face that the passionate speech had won him over, but he hesitated for a few agonizing seconds before he nodded. "Very well, Frank Johnson, looks like this is your lucky day."

With a few strides he led them back through the doors and onto the docking bridge. Frank was still thanking the Captain when the doors closed behind them and the noise from the commotion on the other side suddenly stopped. He could now see into the short docking entry of the Normandy. Two stretchers hovered in there, along with two humans with activated omni-tools watching over the injured on the stretchers.

There it was again, that fear, that pain.

Garrus wanted to run towards the stretchers but Anderson held him back. "Listen, son. There was a working piece of prothean technology on Eden Prime, something like a signal booster, a beacon. Shepard came in contact with it..."
His brain caught up with the words. "Prothean?"

Anderson looked him in the eyes and Garrus could see how worried he was. The fear in his gizzard felt like a burn.

"Yes, prothean. It made contact with her, touched her mind somehow. We don't quite know what happened but she screamed something about death and then fell unconscious. She has woken up occasionally, but she didn't know where she was and didn't recognize anyone. And what she says doesn't really make sense either." Anderson's voice had gotten quieter and quieter. His grip on Garrus's arm made his knuckles turn white, and would have been painful without armor.

Garrus hummed in fear. "Are you telling me that she has lost her mind?"

"We don't know. Dr. Chakwas can give you the details but she thinks that she somehow got lost in her own mind." Anderson pulled on his shoulder to make him look at him. "Talk to her, son, be her guide. I know how close you are, I saw how she looked at you." Anderson turned his gaze back to the stretcher. "I know this girl and she is the bravest and strongest woman I know. She has chosen you and I hope you know what a treasure that is."

"I do," Garrus whispered. *Sunshine, what happened to you?*

Anderson looked at him again and Garrus recognized the desperate plea in them. "Maybe if she hears your voice, it will guide her back. Just.. talk to her, give her something that she remembers."

"I'll try, sir, I will do anything," Garrus said, moving over to the stretcher. "Where is Nihlus?"

Anderson flinched. "Nihlus has been shot. In the head. That's him on the other stretcher."

_Nihlus has been shot in the head?_

Frank spoke up, Garrus had completely forgotten that he was there. "What happened to Spectre Kryik?"

The female human, who was obviously in charge spoke up. "He was shot in the head and is in critical condition. I would like to have them both transported to the hospital right away."

Anderson spoke over his internal comm to someone and then nodded towards the doctor. The stretchers started to move out, the one with Nihlus on it first. He was almost not recognizable, his head covered with bandages and a breathing mask. The other stretcher moved behind it, a male human next to it with dark hair. He looked up to Garrus and waved him over.

"I'm Kaidan, Kaidan Alenko. I wish we could have met under better circumstances." He held out his hand and Garrus took it without looking at him. He could finally see her and his eyes would not leave her face again. "Shepard spoke a lot of you, I hope... I hope you can help her."

He finally pulled his eyes away from her and saw the guilt on Alenko's face. "What happened?" he growled out, harsher than he had intended. They were moving through the empty hallways, cleared by security and finally entered the elevator.

"I'm Kaidan, Kaidan Alenko. I wish we could have met under better circumstances." He held out his hand and Garrus took it without looking at him. He could finally see her and his eyes would not leave her face again. "Shepard spoke a lot of you, I hope... I hope you can help her."

Kaidan raked through his hair. "It was my fault. She pushed me away from the beacon and it caught her. It should have been me who..."

"Stop blaming yourself," the doctor called over harshly, "Shepard did what she had to do and nothing will change that." She turned to Garrus. "Hello. My name is Karin Chakwas, I'm the chief medical officer on the Normandy." She extended her hand and Garrus shook it, noting her firm
"Let me tell you what I know," she continued, moving her omni-tool over Nihlus’s body. "They are both stable. I have sedated them to ensure a safe transport. Nihlus has been shot in the head and I cannot make promises to his recovery. I will know more once I can use the hospital’s equipment. As for Shepard..." she sighed and raked through her hair in a similar fashion as Kaidan had done. Garrus knew that this was a typical movement for humans in distress. "Physically she is fine. It's her mind that is the problem." She looked up to Garrus. "I really hope that your presence will have an effect on her but please, don't expect any miracles. We know nothing about that prothean force and how she can recover from it."

In a striking turian move that reminded him of his own mother, she placed her hand on his mandible to cup his face. "I'm very sorry, dear. I will do everything I can to bring her back. Please, have hope, be strong for her."

His voice was rough and his subvocals sang out a quiet tune when he answered. "Thank you, I will."

He moved to the side of her stretcher and took Jane's lifeless hand into his. He lowered his head so that his mouth was right next to her strange ear. "I'm here, Jane, I'm here." He knew she would not answer because she was still sedated but he still hoped beyond reason that he would see some kind of reaction.

She remained still and the burning pain in his chest made him whimper.

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Chapter End Notes

Sad chapter ending is sad. We all have to be strong now.

Thanks to Credete for editing. You would not believe how much time we spend on forwarding versus fast forwarding. And there isn't even real tape involved!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Just a short little chapter this time, since we all want to know what happened to Shepard.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"Vakarian. Garrus Vakarian, wake up!" Dr. Chakwas's voice seemed to come from far away. Garrus startled awake with a gasp, almost jumping to his feet. It took him a second to realize that he was in the hospital room, at the bed where Shepard slept in her sedated state. He had fallen asleep in the chair, next to the pile of his upper armor. It had been two days since the Normandy had pulled into port.

Two days where Dr. Chakwas had tried to wake Shepard every few hours, only to sedate her again when she began screaming. Garrus had talked to her, yelled, anything to make her hear him but she had kept on screaming, her head whipping around, her eyes unseeing and wide in panic. Only when the sedatives kicked in again did she look normal for a second. Garrus held on to that fleeting look that he might have imagined when her eyes met his and were not filled with utter panic, just before they rolled into the back of her head.

It pained him like a knife in his gizzard to see her like that. He had tried to distract himself with work, running all over the Citadel with Dania, trying to find the quarian Tali'Zorah. He had thought that he'd done a good job, but after a few hours the director called him up and ordered him to stay with Shepard, so that everybody else could actually get some work done. Garrus had been surprised by her understanding, a turian leader would never allow himself or his subordinates this much sentimentality.

After initially getting some strange looks, he was now an accepted presence in the hospital room, mostly thanks to Captain Anderson. Garrus had heard the exchange in front of the door. They had not realized that he could hear them.

"Captain Anderson?" That had been Alenko's voice, the Lieutenant who'd been with Shepard on Eden Prime. "Can I ask you about the C-Sec officer at her side, Garrus Vakarian?"

"They are in a relationship. What else is there to know?" the captain answered. "I was hoping that his presence would help her, and he... I'm sure he needs to be here."

"Permission to speak freely, Sir?" There must have been an acknowledgment from Anderson because Alenko continued. "Are you okay with that? I'm sorry, Sir, I..." the Lieutenant's voice was flustered and Garrus could almost see him raking through his hair.

"It is hardly my place to judge, is it?"

Alenko answered, his voice strong again, "With all due respect, Sir, I think it is. You are almost like a father to her, and wasn't Vakarian supposed to be assigned to the Normandy too? Would the Alliance accept her having a relationship with him, a turian nonetheless?"

At this point Garrus had to clamp down on his subharmonics, to not growl out his anger.

"As far as the Alliance is concerned..." came Anderson's voice booming through the closed door, "right now I'm the Alliance, and I surely don't have a problem with whom she chose as her partner. And Alliance regulations are only concerned about superiors taking advantage of subordinates, we don't have a problem with established relationships."

Dr. Chakwas voice came up, quiet amusement in her tone, "But you did have a thorough check run on him."
"Of course. Very thorough." Garrus could hear the slight grin in Anderson's tone before his voice became harsh again. "Do you have a problem with him being here? Or with him being a turian, Lieutenant?"

"No, Sir. But I know several people in the Alliance that would have a problem and I just wanted to know where you stand, Sir," Alenko said.

The conversation ended at that point and Garrus wondered what Alenko was really thinking about him. He had not noticed any resentments from him but he decided to look at him a bit more critically.

He realized that Dr. Chakwas was speaking to him. "... see an improvement."

"I'm sorry, doctor, could you run that by me again?" Garrus stretched his neck, trying to loosen the strained muscles.

The doctor raised an eyebrow and patiently repeated what she had said. "I have been monitoring her brain waves constantly and something is changing. We still don't know what exactly is going on in her head but it seems like she manages to fend off the foreign wave patterns that I have seen since she came in contact with that beacon. I actually see an improvement."

Garrus looked at Shepard, she appeared to be sleeping, just like she had the whole time the doctor had kept her sedated.

Dr. Chakwas put a hand on his arm. "I want you to talk to her. I am going to monitor what happens when you do."

"I've been doing that, doctor," Garrus mumbled, "I talked to her but nothing changed." He knew that he should not give up hope but it still tasted like failure in his mouth. His love, his mate, helpless and trapped in her own mind and he could not help her.

"I just told you that it did change something," Chakwas scolded him, "so keep doing that. Talk to her, sing to her, anything. Her brain waves change when she hears your voice. I'm letting the sedatives flush out of her system and I want your voice to guide her back." She ushered him back to the chair next to the bed. "This isn't a fairy tale, Vakarian, but there is still hope."

Garrus wasn't quite sure what a fairy tale was but he settled back into the chair that he had spent the most of the last two days in and took her hand in his. He tried to think of something to say but his mind was blank.

"Shepard, I'm here, I... I..." A frustrated trill left him. "I don't know why I can't find the words. I have so many things I want to tell you..." Another trill with a low hum came from his gizzard. It was easy to express his feelings in his subharmonics but it was near impossible to find the words.

"Do that again," Dr. Chakwas ordered from her terminal.

"Do what again?"

"That subvocal hum. I see an effect in her brain wave patterns." Dr. Chakwas eyes did not leave her screen and her hand waved an impatient pattern in the air.

Garrus suddenly felt self conscious. Subharmonics were usually uncontrolled, subconscious expressions. He had a bit of trouble to make them as his main expression now. He leaned forward and hummed.

"Yes, good. Keep going." Dr. Chakwas stepped over to him and scanned Shepard with her omni-
tool. "I know this is awkward, Vakarian. I wasn't joking when I suggested that you sing to her. Turian singing uses subharmonics as a second harmonic voice and it looks like those have an effect on her."

Garrus wondered how this human doctor knew so much about turians. She turned to him and smiled. "I'm the leading medical expert on turians in the Alliance. I'm fairly certain that Spectre Kryik owes his survival to my knowledge and abilities."

Garrus acknowledged her explanation with a nod, he was quite impressed. While asari doctors were known for their interspecies studies, he had never heard of a human doctor being an expert in a non-human species.

Of course, singing on cue was just as hard as speaking on cue and it took him a little while until his brain came up with the melody of a recent hit song from an asari-turian pop band. He was botching it at first, but he slowly got the sub-harmonics settled and added the rather stupid lyrics with his main vocals. Garrus had never been in a singing class but he'd been complimented on his singing voice before. He actually managed to do quite well on this song.

Dr. Chakwas smiled at him, encouraging him onward while she continued scanning over Shepard's body. For long, agonizing minutes nothing changed. Garrus started the song over, more confidence in his voice this time and laying more power in his subharmonics.

The hand, that he held in his, twitched. He noticed it before he even heard the sharp intake of breath from Dr. Chakwas. She frantically typed something on her omni-tool, while she nodded to Garrus to continue.

Another twitch, a flicker from Jane's eyelids. Her hand suddenly grabbed his with all her strength. It was almost painful. Garrus steeled himself for another attack of nightmarish screaming spasms like they had experienced the few times before when Dr. Chakwas had tried to wake her.

Garrus kept singing the stupid song, the words meaningless, his subvocal hum carrying the tune. It was different his time. She did not spasm, she did not heave in air to scream it out again as loud as she could. Her eyelids fluttered and her breath was calm. She still held his hand, her grip strong but not painful anymore. Garrus let himself hope that finally, this time, she would really wake up.

When her eyes opened and locked onto his, he was relieved to see them as normal as they had always been. The few times before, when she had opened her eyes, a greenish light had shimmered in them and she had not seen anybody. This time, her eyes had the familiar greyish-blue tint that he knew.

She looked at him and the song got stuck in his throat. She tried to speak but her throat seemed to be sore, no wonder after all the screaming she had done before. She began coughing and Dr. Chakwas helped her to sit up. Her hand never left his.

Finally, her throat was clear and her voice was only slightly raspy when she spoke to him: "Hey, my Angel. You're here!"

Garrus's subharmonics trilled out whole songs of his happiness. "Yes, I'm here Sunshine, Spirits, I'm so glad you came back." He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against hers.

"I heard your voice, I heard you sing," she whispered, "was that an old song that your mother sang to you when you were young?"

"Spirits, I wish I had thought of that," Garrus chuckled, his forehead still on hers. He had no
intention of changing his position soon. "It's just a current pop song from an asari-turian band. They
sing about how they can't share food and how unfair that is."

Shepard burst out laughing and behind him he heard Dr. Chakwas quietly snicker to herself. "Well, it
was the most beautiful song I have ever heard," Shepard said, still laughing. "You should sing more
often."

"I'll do anything, Jane, anything for you," Garrus blurted out before he could stop himself. He
wanted to pull away but she did not let him. Her hand had crept up to the back of his head and she
was holding his head with her hand under his fringe. Her soft lips met his mouth plates and he felt
himself fall into the world of only her and her kiss.

A soft cough from the doctor made them break apart. "If I could get access to my patient now, I need
to run some more tests on her. I'm glad that you are back with us, Shepard, but I have to make sure
that it stays that way."

"Of course," they both said in unison, slowly pulling apart until only their hands were still touching.

Dr. Chakwas passed her omni-tool scanner over Shepard's head. "Can you describe what you saw,
what happened when the beacon touched you?"

Shepard let her head fall back on the pillow. "Touch is a good word, it felt like something touched
my mind, injected thoughts directly into my head. It's like a vision, that takes over my mind." She
squeezed Garrus's hand harder. "It feels like it's supposed to be a warning but I don't understand it,
it's... pictures, coming way too fast and too bright. It felt like my head would burst from the amount
of information."

"How does it feel now?" Dr. Chakwas asked.

"Like I locked it up in a box. When I think about it the pictures, they all come rushing back..." She
suddenly pressed the palms of her hands against her temples and let out a choked scream. Garrus
searched her eyes for that terrifying green glow but they stayed normal. With a sigh she relaxed and
let her hands drop again. "But I can push it back into the box now." One hand found his and he
squeezed it reassuringly.

With a gasp she tensed. "Nihlus! What about Nihlus?" She asked, the grip on his hand so very tight.

"He has a good chance to survive with almost full functionality of his face," Dr. Chakwas said,
pulling up charts on her omni-tool. "I had to use extensive cybernetics to repair the damage. That will
look a bit rough unfortunately, I had to use the resources the Normandy had, which wasn't much.
Luckily I had stocked up on turian synth-blood and dextro-transplants, but the cybernetics were
originally not meant for facial reconstruction."

"What about... brain damage?"

"As far as I can tell, he might have trouble with the movement of his arm and leg on his right side.
As for other injuries..." She paused, looking over the charts on her omni-tool again. Garrus
appreciated that she was precise and truthful in her statements, he had never liked it if doctors told
patients that everything would be fine when it was clearly not.

She looked up from the display and looked first Shepard, and then him in the eyes. "The scans do
not indicate any problems concerning memories, speech or personality. But brain damage is still an
area of medicine where we can't really predict anything. I expect him to wake up fairly soon, and
then we will know more."
Shepard's face showed her relief. "So you think he has a chance to recover?"

Dr. Chakwas showed a small smile on her face. "Yes, I think so. But I can not guarantee..."

"Of course not, doc, I understand. I think his condition should remain a secret for now," Shepard said. Garrus wondered what the point of this secrecy was.

Dr. Chakwas nodded. "Captain Anderson agrees, he has already put a ban on any news about Spectre Kryik's condition."

"Alright doctor," Shepard threw the cover to the side and attempted to sit up but fell back on the bed, "whoah, dizzy. Doc, I can't work like that."

"Good, I wouldn't let you anyway," Dr. Chakwas said with a friendly smile that did not hide her stern look at all.

"But doc...!"

"No, my dear, you are on bedrest for at least another 10 hours. You will rest, you will sleep naturally without the aid of sedatives, and then I will examine you. Then - and only then - will we talk about the conditions of your release from my care."

Shepard clenched her fists in frustration. "But doc, I really need to..."

"Yes, I know, you really, really need to do something, and knowing you, after a few minutes someone will probably shoot at you. You are in no condition to fight and that's final." Dr. Chakwas's voice was friendly but firm, and any other retort that Shepard wanted to make, died when the doctor raised a finger and looked at her sternly.

Shepard made a huff of frustration but settled back under the thin blanket, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Garrus had to suppress a giggle, she looked so much like a pouting child, she actually reminded him of his little sister. Only without mandibles.

The doctor walked towards the door. Before she left, she turned around and fixed Garrus with a look. "Vakarian? You have ten more minutes to talk to her and then you need to leave. Commander Shepard needs to rest."

"Yes, ma'am," Garrus answered, involuntarily straightening.

As the door closed behind the doctor, Shepard pulled him back for another kiss. He felt her soft lips again, he had almost forgotten how wonderful they felt. Her tongue dipped against his and his subharmonics hummed in bliss. Her hand stroked under his fringe and her other hand traced the plates on his cowl. Her tongue tangled with his and he managed to wrap his own around hers. The feeling was overwhelming, he wanted to drink her in, press her body to his and finally feel whole again.

With a raspy sigh he left her mouth and pressed his forehead to hers. This move had become so natural to him, as if they were truly bonded already. His scent released before he could stop it. "Jane, my shining sun. I... I missed you so much..."

"I missed you too."

"I thought you were injured or dead, I was so worried."

Shepard chuckled quietly. "I'm hard to kill, you'll see. I'm like weeds, you can't get rid of me."
"I would never want that."

"Me neither," she whispered, pressing once more against his forehead.

Garrus held his breath to stop himself from yelling out his happiness. Only a trill sang out from him and every turian in close proximity would have known exactly what he meant.

She laid her head on his cowl and sighed. "I have so much to tell you, I don't even know where to start."

"I saw footage from Eden Prime with Frank, I saw geth and that spire they moved," he spoke into her hair, careful not to tangle up his mandibles in it.

"That was the beacon that put these visions into my head. So the geth had moved it? I had wondered who did that." She leaned back on the bed and her face showed exhaustion and pain.

"We saw it on the camera footage, just before some kind of EMP took all cameras out planet wide."

"I have never before seen a geth in my life and we had no intel. We lost... I lost Jenkins. A geth turret just mowed him down." She stared at the ceiling and Garrus could see a tear forming in the corner of her eye. "He was just a kid, Garrus, and he had been born on Eden Prime! He was on his home planet, had hardly taken ten steps and... end."

Garrus just held her hand, knowing that he could not say anything to make her feel better.

"And then we ran into geth and these... zombies."

"Husks. We call them husks."

"How... what?" Shepard looked like she had swallowed a bug.

"Lorenzo educated us that zombies are different, and Tali'Zorah had called them husks, so we settled on that name." Only after he had said it he realized that Shepard had no idea what had happened while she was on Eden Prime.

"Garrus, what the fuck are you talking about?"

Garrus sighed, time was running out, Shepard looked very tired and there was so much that they still had to tell each other. "Why don't you finish your part of the story first and then I will tell mine. Let's just say that I know what husks look like, trust me." His subharmonics vocalised the shudder that went through him.

She still looked at him confused but continued talking. "Alright, we ran into these... husks and geth and we picked up another soldier, Ashley Williams. Good shot, she was a life-saver. The geth killed the people and then put them on these big pointy things, and when they came down, they had turned into husks, it was horrible." She closed her eyes for a second.

"And Nihlus, fucking Nihlus! I'm so mad at him, I would punch him in the face if he had not gotten it shot off already." She punched the mattress once before looking up in guilt.

"Sorry, that was a horrible thing to say but, damn! Before going groundside, we get a hazy transmission from Eden Prime, and we see this ship that has strange protruding arms in front. It reminds me a little of the ship he showed us as Saren's, but it's hard to tell."

She raised her finger. "So what's the first thing Anderson does? Scan's the database for that ship, of
course. What does Nihlus do? Twitches his mandibles and starts to suit up. No question as to what kind of ship it is. I'm sure he recognized it but he didn't say anything." Her forehead had settled in deep frowns, her eyes showing anger and worry at the same time.

"So we go groundside and Nihlus goes alone! Gnarls something about working better on his own and jumps out ahead of us. Why the fuck would he do that?"

Garrus shook his head, "As a Spectre that might be true..."

"Yeah, but it's still stupid. And it pisses me off!" Shepard suddenly took hold of his hand again. "We made our way to his position, husks and geth all over the place and there was this shot... we found Nihlus on the ground, blood everywhere." She shuddered at the memory and her hand clenched around his. "He was dying. The back of his head... a witness told us what the other guy looked like..."

He stared at her. "And?"

"It was Saren."

"No." Garrus whined out in disbelief. "He is his teacher, his mentor, his friend even..."

"Who else would Nihlus turn his back to?" Shepard said, her voice very quiet. "And the ship, and Nihlus’s strange behaviour... how many white turians come to your mind?"

"Futuo!" Garrus called out in realization. It could only have been Saren. "How can he do that? To Nihlus, his student, his friend?" Garrus felt horror creep up his spine, to betray a friend, cowardly shooting him when his back was turned... no proud turian would ever admit to such a thing.

Shepard kept on talking quietly. "I called the Normandy back and Dr. Chakwas took care of him while we ran after the geth and Saren, we found the beacon and it glowed green."

Garrus remembered the green glow he had seen in her eyes but decided not to mention it.

"Kaidan came too close to it, it pulled him towards it and I pushed him away and... well, it caught me instead." Shepard grinned sarcastically. "What a brilliant move on my part."

Garrus assured her with a hum. "That's part of your job, isn't it?"

"That's part of the job-description? That I have to catch all mind-fucking, green-glowing beams? Nobody told me!" She smiled at him and Garrus felt warm happiness spread in his gizzard. He had missed her smile.

Garrus went over everything she had told him. "So you are keeping Nihlus’s condition a secret because you want Saren to think that he killed him?"

"Yes, I want to see and hear how he reacts, when I tell him that Nihlus is dead."

Garrus nuzzled her hair, making her giggle a little. "At C-Sec we say that humans are the best liars in the galaxy."

"Oh, and I'm the best of the best!" She grinned at him. "You should have seen me, lying to Miss Lacroix why I could not possibly do my homework!"

They both laughed and Garrus felt like something that had held his mind in a crushing grip for the last days, finally broke. He laughed and hummed with her and for a while they stayed silent, her
head under his mandible, just smiling.

Her face turned serious again. "There is something else that's bothering me."

"Really?" Garrus let out a sarcastic snort. "In a story with geth, prothean beacons and turian betrayal, something is bothering you?"

"Yeah, I know." Shepard made a weak smile and let her eyes fall down. "Just think about the picture. Saren Arterius, the Council's best spectre, standing maybe two metres behind Nihlus. He aims for his head..."

Garrus hissed through his teeth. She was right, the picture did not work. "He wouldn't have missed."

"Exactly, he wouldn't have. But he did shoot, just a little to the side. Why? Did he change his mind? Did he hesitate at the last second?" Shepard let go of his hand to scratch the back of her neck and winced at the strain that put on her shoulder.

She yawned and smiled at him sheepishly. "I guess Dr. Chakwas was right, I'm really tired."

"I'm surprised she hasn't shown up and kicked me out yet." Garrus flared his mandibles at her in a smile and hummed. He was sure that she understood the feeling of relief he sang out for her. Her smile warmed him up inside.

Shepard took his arm and placed it over her shoulders. With a sigh she settled her head into the crook of his arm. "Now tell me your story. And make it exciting or else I'll fall asleep."

Garrus smiled down at her. She needed sleep and nothing would make him happier than having her fall asleep in his arms. "So, after you left and I had taken care of my parents for a day, I went back to ANIS. We got called out to investigate a ghost ship, I went over with Keggs, Lorenzo and Dania. It was cold and empty, the atmosphere was vented and..."

Her breathing had gotten light and even; with one look at her and the readout from his visor he saw that she had fallen asleep. He stopped talking and only hummed for her. This time he hummed the melody of an old song that his mother used to sing when he was still a little boy. He could not remember the words but the melody flowed easily from his subvocals.

A little smile played on her lips as she sighed in her sleep. He knew that he should lay her back on the bed but he couldn't. Not when he finally had her back.

He would not let her go.

Chapter End Notes

Fluffy reunions are fluffy. We all needed that, right?
Poor Crede had to give up on sleep again to edit this chapter. This time I added too many commas. I don’t know how that happened.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

This chapter came to life in pencil on paper at the beach in Denmark.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Garrus returned to Shepard's side after hours of briefing and debriefing. Multiple directors, bosses and former bosses wanted to know about the attack on Eden Prime and the ship that had arrived at the Citadel with the husks and geth-traces on board. Director Schaefer of ANIS had decided with Captain Anderson to keep Nihlus's status a secret, but to freely give out all other information. This was probably as much a show of goodwill as it was simple desperation, nobody had any idea how the attack on Eden Prime and the empty ship with the husks and geth-traces were connected. By throwing the information at everyone, hopefully someone would come up with an explanation.

So far the the latest consensus agreed that the husks on Eden Prime and the ones on the security vids from the ship were of the same kind. Since they had seen them being made on those metallic spires on Eden Prime, someone had to have brought them on board the ship. The traces of geth fluids and the witness report they had managed to get from Tali before C-Sec had "lost" her, linked that job to the geth.

The Citadel was in uproar. The geth! In Citadel space!

It took only about an hour until the first special geth-protection programs appeared on the market and traders began advertising their weapons as geth-killers. Security firms and mercenaries advertised themselves as bodyguards against geth attacks and people began hoarding supplies and weapons.

C-Sec formed a special task group to deal with the panicked calls from people all over the Citadel who were convinced that there was a geth lurking around in the maintenance tunnels. It always turned out to be a keeper; one of the many ancient robots, who was doing it's job of keeping the Citadel clean and intact, unimpressed by the poor C-Sec officer who had to chase after him.

Garrus was pretty sure that the Council was not happy about this development, the Council had always preferred to keep things secret as long as possible. This freely giving out information was not their usual way of handling things. In other cases, the Council had only given out information when they had been forced by some news leak. A whole line of investigative reporters lived on the secrecy that the Council tried to hold up.

Yet another human change. Garrus wondered if they even realized how much they influenced and
how much some people hated that.

Garrus looked at Shepard’s sleeping face, her mouth pressed into the pillow, slightly open. Salvia was wetting the pillow. She had called it drooling once and had been quite embarrassed about it. He didn’t understand why, but he had noticed that humans had a tendency of feeling embarrassed about bodily functions that they had no control over. Humans tried to control everything, a whole line of implants was designed to control hair growth for instance. They were willing to infuse their bodies with tech in ways that before had only been known by the quarians.

She moved in her sleep turning her body around. He smiled, watching her curl herself into the cover. No wonder he needed his own blanket, she was wrapping herself up completely.

Garrus returned to the program on his omni-tool, changing a few parameters and then watching the variable returns for expected and unexpected results. He felt himself slip into the zone of concentration that he loved so much, just concentrating on little parts of the program, fitting things together and testing them. It was soothing work.

He was so deep in his zone, that he didn't notice for several minutes that Shepard was awake and watching him with an amused smile.

"Hey," she said with her smile lighting up her face, "what has you so concentrated?"

"Just an update to a game I released a while ago. I had promised to update some stuff but it kind of fell off my list." Garrus added a few comments to remind him where he left off and closed the program. When he looked up, Shepard was staring at him.

"You released a game?"

"Yes, a while back but I'm still adding things to it. It's just a hobby. I have a few people following my site for it and they had gotten worried because I didn't update in so long." Her dumbfounded look made him grin.

Shepard still stared at him, her mouth open. She realized it herself and snapped it shut with a smile. "You made a game?"

"More than one, actually. It's a hobby. But this one is my biggest." Garrus started the game on his omni-tool to show her the title screen of ‘Wandering Lights’.

"Wow." Shepard looked at the picture with delight but then looked up at him with a strange expression that Garrus could not quite interpret.

"What?"

"I just realized that I don't really know you." She said. "I mean I know you... but I don't really know you."

She was right, he thought, they had stumbled into this relationship with faster-than-light speed, driven by desire, curiosity and a feeling of belonging. But they really did not know much of each other.

"Well..." He wondered what he should tell her.

"Let's change that, show me this game of yours." She raised the back of her bed so that she was sitting upright and leaned against his shoulder. Garrus was slightly annoyed that he had not taken off his armor.
He pulled up some screenshots from the game and a file where he had roughly outlined the, admittedly flimsy, storyline. "It's a labyrinth, you play a turian hero that has to find his or her way through it and I made up riddles and puzzles that you have to solve to open doors and such. And there are monsters of course, those you have to fight. I read through some old legends and designed them to look like the monsters in there." He showed her pictures of the monsters, he was quite proud of the design and it had taken him a long time until they looked like that.

"That looks very cool!" Shepard said as she flipped through the screenshots and design models. "What does the hero look like?"

Garrus showed her the character screen of the male and female version, and told her about the algorithm he wrote that let the hero improve during the game and the logic puzzles and riddles he made up. It had been a while since he had someone to talk about his game besides his sister, and Shepard looked absolutely fascinated. He talked about his ideas and the story, and she asked questions and made suggestions. He had never had someone like that, who loved to hear him talk about his game like that.

She smiled up to him. "Can I play it?"

"Sure, I can just transfer it to your tool."

"You are giving this away for free?"

"I am, but I sold the first version, the base game, for a few credits while I was still at school. I actually made a little money with the game, I was so proud of that. The game was part of a graded project at school and I was pretty good at developing. After basic, I wanted to get an apprenticeship at a game developer but..."

"Why didn't you?"

"The Vakarian clan is known for their soldiers and police officers. Serious occupations that support the Hierarchy." His subharmonics hummed out a sad tune.

Shepard took his hand. "Making entertaining games..."

"...does not support the Hierarchy like it is expected of a Vakarian," Garrus continued.

Her thumb was stroking the softer skin between his fingers. "So you went to C-Sec instead."

"I actually wanted to stay in the military, go into information analysis and cyberwarfare," he said, still looking down at her strange little fingers stroking his hand.

"Would that have been acceptable?"

"For the clan? Yes, but not for my mother. She lost a brother on a pirate patrol in the Terminus Systems and she is terrified that she would lose me or my sister in an attack. So C-Sec was the most acceptable position and my sister is an engineer at Armax Armory."

"Is C-Sec that much safer than the military?"

"Not really, but for my mother it is." He took her hand up to his nose to nuzzle it, taking in her scent. He wanted to take her in his arms but he was not sure how well she was.

Shepard leaned forward and placed a kiss on his forehead. It was a strange gesture, like a mixture between a turian forehead touch and human kissing. His subharmonics sounded out the shudder that
"That explains what she said to me," she murmured.

"What did she say?" Garrus asked.

"First she asked me how serious I was. I had the distinct feeling my life depended on the correct answer for that." She smiled up to him. "I guess my answer was okay or else I wouldn't be here. Then she made me swear to take care of you and to protect you. She said something about not stopping you from choosing your own way again, that she had done that before and it had been a mistake."

"That's what she said?" Garrus was surprised, his mother was always very private and not known to say personal things to someone like Shepard, who was basically a stranger.

"Not quite those words but it was clear what she meant. I think she feels that you were unhappy and... she wants you to be happy, that was obvious." Shepard gave him a crooked smile. "I may not be quite the expert on turians like you are on humans, but I'm pretty sure I know what she meant."

A warm feeling spread in his gizzard and he pressed his forehead against hers, spreading his scent on her. "She said that she likes you."

"She did?" Shepard pressed her forehead against him. "I'm so glad." Her hands went to the back of his head, softly walking her fingers under his fringe. When she found the hidden bundle of nerves, his lubentia, and rubbed it, a not so quiet moan left him.

"That's not fair," he mumbled, his subharmonics buzzing in need.

"I know, I'm sorry," she chuckled, "but I love the sounds you make when I do that."

His hands went to her sides, stroking down to her waist. He knew that the waist was not the same erogenous zone for humans as it was for turians, but Shepard was soft all over and loved his stroking everywhere. To touch her waist like that had more of an effect on him for it's sexual implications than it had on her but she still threw her head back and breathed in with a sigh when he touched her.

"The files never mentioned the waist as a special zone for humans," he whispered in her ear.

"It may not be for other humans but I know what you mean," she whispered back, "and that's what makes it hot."

Garrus was simultaneously cursing and thanking his armor as it was successfully hiding his arousal now, his plates loosening up rapidly. He began looking around the room, knowing that he could not have sex with her in a hospital room but still secretly entertaining the idea. She pressed her face against his neck, kissing and nibbling the softer skin she could reach. A growl rose from his sub-vocals, his hands roaming her back.

Some sensible part of his brain reminded him that the fantasy of bending her over the bed and taking her now was not the wisest plan in their current situation. His hands clenched around her waist as he nibbled along her throat. He fluttered his mandibles against her skin and found her lips, loving how she willingly opened them for him, tilting her head back in a turian sign of submission. He wondered if she knew what she did to him with that gesture. A growl was shuddering through him, heat rising up his spine.

The doors opened and in stormed some human, all energy, constantly talking, laughing and throwing two long arms around them in a crushing embrace. Garrus felt disoriented, his lips still pressed
against Shepard's and receiving kisses on his mandible from this stranger while Shepard giggled against his mouth.

The blond man was constantly talking. "I'm so glad you are alright, baby, and you, her wonderful hero are here with her and aren't you just fabulous, she told me so much about you, I'm sure you have no idea how crazy she is about you, I'm so happy to see you both, oh baby, are you okay? What happened, they wouldn't tell me anything, but you woke up and it looks like you were about to get it on right here, so I guess that's a good sign, ah, maybe I should leave..."

Shepard laughed out against Garrus's lip plates and released them. "Hello Svend, good to see you, no, you don't have to leave. This is not exactly the time and place..."

"We got a bit carried away, I guess," Garrus mumbled. He turned his head which brought him in kissing distance with the blond man, his skin even paler than Shepard's, and his eyes of an almost electric blue. He was grinning at him and made no move to change his position.

"Hm, I never kissed a turian before..." the human purred suggestively.

Shepard pushed him back with her hand on his chest, a friendly smile on her face but her eyes firm. "Yeah, you're not starting with this turian, girly."

"Of course not, baby, I would never..." He rose and stepped back.

Shepard leaned back against her bed. "Garrus, this is Svend, we've known each other for a long time. He was on Elysium and fought with me against the batarians there."

Garrus remembered the face from the news-vids now, framed by blond hair but he looked different. There was some kind of paint around his eyes that made his blue eyes look more dramatic.

The human smiled widely and held out his hand for Garrus to take. Garrus stood up and took the offered hand. His grip was firm and he shook Garrus's hand enthusiastically. "Svend Lee, very nice to finally meet you. Sorry for interrupting... whatever you were trying to start here."

"Garrus Vakarian and it was probably a good thing that you interrupted us." He stepped to the side to give him some space to talk to Shepard but the door opened again and Kaidan Alenko walked in.

"Oh, I didn't know that you had so many visitors." Alenko said, stopping at the door. "I'll come back later." He turned around and left again.

Svend kept staring after the Lieutenant even after the door had closed behind him again. "Baby, who was that hot piece of booty?"

Shepard grinned widely. "Oh girly, that biotic booty is Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko."

"Biotic booty?" Svend's eyes got so wide that Garrus was afraid that they would pop out of his head. "I'll see you later, baby," he said absentmindedly and ran to the door.

"Go get him, girly!" Shepard called after him and then fell back against the bed laughing. "Poor Kaidan has no idea what's happening to him."

"Why do you call him girly?" Garrus asked.

"Oh, Svend doesn't believe in gender. When I met him first, he called himself Svenja and dressed like a girl, frilly dresses and the brightest colors possible. Drove the Alliance nuts because he refused to give himself a gender. About a year ago he decided to be Svend again but I've always called him
"And he calls you baby..." Garrus was pretty sure that that expression was an endearment among lovers, if he remembered his lessons correctly.

"Yes, he always does but don't worry about it, I'm not his type, never was. He's into guys, men like Kaidan," she said, taking his hands into hers again.

Garrus sat down again. "And Kaidan?"

"Kaidan is pretty open minded, as far as I know. Not that I know much about his sex life but I have seen him leave a bar with men or women before, and with an asari as well." Her fingers were stroking the skin between his fingers again. "He keeps these things very much separated, just like a good Alliance soldier should." She looked up to him. "Kaidan and I kissed once, we were very drunk but it never went further than that. You don't have to worry about him, there is nothing going on between us."

Garrus let out a breath he had not realized that he had been holding. How she knew that he had worried about her and Kaidan, he did not know. He had not even been aware of it himself. He didn't understand what was going on with him, he had never been jealous before.

Shepard kept stroking and rubbing the skin between his fingers, her eyes following the movement. He watched her four digits, almost disturbingly slim and small compared to his two long fingers. "There is only you, Garrus, I hope you know that. I was never a shy girl but I'm not fucking around."

"I know," Garrus said. his voice strangely rough. "I mean, I'm still glad to hear it but... yeah, I... I mean... it's the same for me." He leaned down and caught her lips with his own. She leaned her head back and he let a talon softly scrape down her throat. Her tongue mapped the inside of his mouth, tangling with his own tongue and they both moaned.

With a sigh they broke apart, only their foreheads touching. Shepard said out loud what he thought himself. "This will have to wait."

"Yes, I know." Garrus said.

"When Chakwas let's me go, I want to speak to Nihlus if possible. Do you know how he is?"

"Dr. Chakwas said that he woke up a few hours ago and he knew who he was and what had happened," Garrus said with a happy trill in his subharmonics. Only the worry and the relief about Shepard's situation had distracted him from the fear he had felt for his friend. Dr. Chakwas had been genuinely happy when she had told him about Nihlus’s recovery, he did see it in her face.

Shepard's feet were twitching and Garrus found it very amusing how her whole body was radiating impatience. "Gawd, I hope the doc let's me go soon, I can't sit around here anymore, I need to do something. I need to talk to Nihlus, and the Council, and the Alliance. I hope I don't have to talk to the press..."

"That might actually not as bad as you think because Frank is the main reporter for this case."

"Frank? Your Frank?"

"Yes, he talked Anderson into letting him be the official reporter for the Alliance," Garrus said. "Or is it ANIS? It's confusing..."
Shepard smiled at him. "Believe me, you're not the only one. I'm never quite sure who I am reporting to."

"The boss and director Schaefer asked about you, Dr. Chakwas had to send them hourly reports about your status." He watched her head fall back against the pillow and brushed her hair back from her face.

Shepard raked one hand through her hair, letting the short strands slip through her fingers. "Did my hair grow already? I think the doc had to turn off my implant."

Garrus tried to remember if the strands had been shorter but he could not say. He wondered what it would feel like if her hair was longer, how the bundles would slip through his talons.

The door opened and Kaidan entered with Frank in tow. Kaidan looked absent minded and Garrus heard Shepard quietly giggle. "Hey, Lieutenant, attention!" She called out in her Commander voice. Kaidan automatically snapped to attention and then looked slightly embarrassed. Shepard laughed out, "Oh boy, you've met Svend, haven't you? Your hair is all puffy."

Kaidan tugged his fingers through his hair and his olive skin turned a shade red. "Yes, he's... very energetic."

"Oh yes, he is," Shepard said. "But he's a good guy." She waved him over and gave him a light punch on his arm. "You better be nice to him."

Kaidan let his head hang and his face turned even redder. He coughed. "Captain Anderson wants to see you as soon as Dr. Chakwas sets you free. The doc will be with you soon, how are you feeling?"

"I feel fine, Kaidan."

"Headaches?"

"No, no headaches, and I also slept quite nicely." Shepard had placed a hand on Kaidan's arm and it occurred to Garrus that she was saying these things for his benefit. He remembered that Kaidan had blamed himself for her situation.

Kaidan looked relieved and turned to leave. He nodded to Frank and Garrus and gave Shepard a friendly salute. Shepard's smile fell from her face as the door closed behind him. She murmured, "I'm sure that wasn't the last time I heard about that." She seemed lost in thought but then focused on Frank and smiled at him. "Reporter Frank! Where is your hat and the notebook and pencil?"

Frank grinned at her and placed himself on the footend of her bed. "Well, Commander, I had asked about that myself but they just threw a bunch of programs on my tool and kicked me out into the Citadel streets."

"But the hat, Frank, I'm sure you could totally work the hat!" She moved her hands to her head as if she was placing something on top of it and pulled something down in front. Garrus was completely lost but Frank obviously knew what she meant, making the same kind of movement over his head. They both giggled like kids and he had to admit that he felt left out. There was so much he did not know about her and her human history.

She took his hand and turned his attention to her. "I have to show you what kind of hat we mean, it looks cool." She turned back to Frank, her hand still holding his. "Well, Mr. Reporter, you want to ask me some questions?"

Garrus wondered if he should leave but she kept holding his hand as she answered Frank's questions.
Her fingers were still too slim and small in his hand. And still just right.

"What aren't you telling me, Nihlus?" Shepard's eyes were thin slits, barely controlled anger radiating from her. She had been cleared by the doctor to get up and start working again and the first thing they did was visit Nihlus. After a few friendly questions, Shepard had run straight into the core of the problem, asking Nihlus about his strange behavior. He clearly did not want to talk about it.

"Please, Shepard..." Nihlus sighed. Dr. Chakwas had cleared him for visitors but it was obvious that he was still not well. Half his face was covered in bandages and his whole left side was covered with an orange glowing omni-brace. "I can't tell you."

"Can't tell me what?" Shepard growled out. "You knew, didn't you? You knew he was there!" She began pacing back and forth in the small room. With an angry glare she pointed a finger at Nihlus. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't and I can't tell you," Nihlus answered with his subharmonics sounding out anger. "Unlike humans, turians tend to follow orders!"

Shepard stopped her pacing and stared at Nihlus. The hurt on her face was obvious and Nihlus already sounded out a quiet apology. But her expression was quickly replaced by the neutral look that Garrus had come to call her Commander-look. Her face turned hard and unreadable, polite interest covering up any emotion.

Her voice was cold when she spoke. "Of course. Then I guess that is all, Spectre Kryik. I have to make my report to the Alliance now." She turned around and left the room.

Nihlus let his head fall back on the pillowroll. "Futuo. Now I pissed off the best friend I have ever had." The sounds from his subvocals spoke of the pain he was in, caused by his injuries as much as by the fight with his friend.

Garrus thought about the position he was in, unsure where he stood in this game. He decided to get to the bottom of this mess. He trilled at Nihlus to get his attention and to tell him that he was there for him. "The Council ordered you to keep the information secret?" he asked with his best investigator voice.

Nihlus head snapped around. "What would you know about that?"

Garrus let a smug grin play in his subharmonics. "We know that Sparatus protects Saren out of some obligation to his brother Desolas. So he probably ordered you to keep all information to yourself."

Nihlus growled in annoyance. "Damna stercus. So I pissed her off for nothing, great."

"Shepard understands orders."

Nihlus sighed. "Yes, but she wouldn't have followed them to the letter. She would at least have given me a hint in her place." His hand went up to the bandage, feeling around the wound. Two spines of his fringe had been shot off and he felt around the stumps with a sad hum. "Maybe if I had told her about Saren's strange message, I wouldn't look like a crooked garlef now."

"He sent you a message?" Garrus leaned forward and automatically set his omni-tool to record.
"It was the weirdest message ever," Nihlus said, "and let me tell you, Saren is not exactly known for his flowery letters. It was a vid-file and he looked so strange. He has even more ports and amps on him, he looks half-machine by now. He told me to stay away from Eden Prime at first, and then suddenly he spoke of something entirely different and ended the vid mid sentence." There was a hum in Nihlus's subharmonics that spoke of his worry for his friend.

Despite what Nihlus had said about Saren before, calling him an ass and other things, his subvocals told of friendship and admiration for the older Spectre. Garrus wondered how close Saren had let Nihlus come, how much friendship he had allowed himself.

"When you saw him on Eden Prime..." Garrus let the question hang, an old investigator trick to get someone talking.

"I knew he was there, I knew it as soon as I saw that strange ship on the transmission. When he showed up on the platform, I wasn't even surprised. He told me some stercus about the Council ordering him there but I knew it was a lie. I always know when he lies." Nihlus hummed quietly in sadness. "You should have heard him, he spoke so sure and calm but his subharmonics - they were drifting."

Garrus tried to imagine the famous Spectre sounding out confusion like that and failed. In some way Saren Arterius was still the hero from his childhood, ruthless, strong and unfailable.

Nihlus’s voices had become very quiet by now. "I knew something was wrong but I never thought... I was his student, maybe even his friend... I never would have thought..." He keened in sadness. "I turned my back to him, I trusted him! I heard him move his arm and I guess I took a step to the side... maybe... Saren would normally not miss a shot like that..."

"That's what Shepard said too. We wondered if maybe he hesitated?"

"I wondered about that too, believe me, but I thought that maybe that's just wishful thinking." He turned his head to look at Garrus, his green eyes full of sadness. "He shot me. He shot me when my back was turned, me, a friend. I just can't..." He looked away again and his subharmonics sang out in pain.

Garrus stayed with Nihlus in silence, just quietly humming for him until he fell asleep. Shepard had sent him a message that she had debriefed Captain Anderson and had a meeting with the Council next. Her next message contained some explicit curse about the Council and where they could shove their fringes, tentacles and horns, and to meet him at the ANIS office.

At the office he found Shepard at his desk, her feet on the table and her head leaning on the back of a human chair. Her eyes were closed and she was gently snoring. He let himself slide into the turian chair next to her and watched her. She looked relaxed, calmer than she had looked all day. There was a new scratch on her cheek that had already closed and begun to heal. He wondered what other injuries she had on her body, her soft skin so malleable to cuts and scratches, but healing so fast.

He lightly brushed over her cheek with the back of his finger, enjoying the silky smoothness. Her eyelids began to flutter and she woke up with a sharp intake of air. For a second she looked disoriented but then her eyes settled on him and filled with so much joy that it almost hurt to look at her.

"There you are," she whispered, her hand raising to cup his mandible. She let her feet fall to the floor and leaned forward, closer to him. Her thumb was stroking over his lip plates and she smiled at him. Spirits, how he loved her smile.
He pulled himself back into reality. "So, the meeting with the Council did not go well?"

Shepard pulled her face into a grimace. "You could say that. They didn't believe anything besides the geth being on Eden Prime. Saren was there too, via vid-conference, and that smug bastard acted like I shot Nihlus and somehow fucked this all up." Her hands were clenching in her lap and a deep scowl had formed on her forehead.

"Did he say why he was there?" Garrus asked.

"No, and they didn't even ask him about that. He was acting all superior, dismissing the witness and everything I said. If we don't find some evidence, they will just let this case drop."

Garrus brushed over the frown on her forehead with the tip of his finger but it didn't go away. "Did you tell them about the prothean beacon?"

Shepard sighed. "I did tell them that it touched me and that I fell unconscious but I didn't tell them about the vision. I didn't want to give them more that would make them label me as crazy."

"But it might be important."

"We'll see, I'll tell them when it comes up again. I didn't want to give out too much information while Saren was there, there was something about him and the projection..." she began fiddling with her omni-tool and Garrus got impatient.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Wait, here, I recorded it, look at him and listen, isn't his voice strange? I think I have a pretty good ear when it comes to turian voices and something is wrong there." She held out her arm and played the recording. The vid was at a strange angle because she had left her arm hanging and the sound was a bit tinny but he could still understand everything that had been said.

"The Council doesn't allow any recordings, you know," he mumbled.

"Yeah, the Council can kiss my shiny ass after all this," she snarled back.

Garrus chuckled and kept listening. "You're right there is something... his subharmonics, they aren't transmitting correctly. There's only part of them and they are drifting."

"Drifting?"

"Yes, we call it drifting if the subvocals and the mainvocals don't match, if they say different things. It is usually a sign of insecurity or lying. In severe cases it is a symptom for a mental illness. Nihlus had said it too, when he spoke to Saren, his subharmonics were drifting."

Shepard looked pained and Garrus took her hand in his. "Nihlus is sorry by the way, he never meant to hurt you. He was ordered to secrecy by the Council."

"We both know who gave that order. It pisses me off but I can't really blame him for that," Shepard said quietly. "I'll talk to him later." She leaned back and folded her hands behind her neck. "What now, Garrus? We have nothing."

"Not nothing."

"Not something either," she said, "we have geth on Eden Prime and geth traces on this ship of yours, we have zombies on both..."
"Husks," Garrus interrupted, trilling a grin at her.

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Fine, fucking husks then. We saw how they were 'made' on Eden Prime," she shuddered, "did you find these silver spires on the ship?"

Garrus shook his head.

"So they've brought the husks with them. We don't know how those two things are connected but something about it makes me think they are." She scratched her neck, leaving reddish marks on her skin. "What about the quarian with the geth memory files? How does she fit in?"

Garrus sighed. "I'm not sure. But from what I read about geth, they are all connected, they have one shared mind. So the data Tali had downloaded from the geth core could contain information about the attack on Eden Prime. There was a map that looked very much like the excavation site where the prothean beacon was found. And she played a sound file that was severely corrupted but I'm sure it was a turian speaking, I could hear subharmonics, he was content and sure of himself."

"You sure it was a male?" She asked. "Could it have been Saren?"

"It could be. We would need to clean it up some more to get a voice match."

"Pauly could probably fix it so that it sounds like an opera singer sang it, she can do magic like that."

Garrus sighed again. "We still need the file for that and so far we could not find the quarian who hopefully still has it."

"Do you think she would sell it?" Shepard asked with wide eyes.

"Why not? I'm sure she could use the credits and the Shadow Broker would probably pay quite well for a file directly from a geth memory core," he said, grumbling in his subharmonics.

Shepard looked thoughtful. "Dealing with the Shadow Broker could be dangerous and we don't know if Saren doesn't have any agents on the Citadel. If that's him on that voice file, he will do everything to get his hands on it, to make the evidence disappear."

Garrus nodded. "And he would not hesitate to make a quarian disappear as well, if necessary."

"Shit."

"Yes."

"We have to find her, Angel." Shepard cupped his mandible again and looked at him seriously.

Garrus leaned forward and softly placed his forehead against hers, onlookers be damned. "I know, Sunshine." He hummed quietly. "Did I tell you already how glad I am to have you back?"

Shepard chuckled. "No, I don't think you have." He could feel her smile.

"Well, then I'll have to do that sometime." He grinned and turned to the terminal. He heard her laugh out and she punched him on his shoulder, which he did not really feel through his armor. But he felt the weight of her leaning her head against him as he began searching for traces of the quarian in C-Sec reports.
Chapter End Notes

Yeah, it's a bit shorter, I'm trying to get the next chapter out quickly for you. Things will get moving now.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Hello, dear readers!

I'm trying to speed up the story a little but I'm also replaying Mass Effect 1 and holy hell is there a lot of stuff going on! I think I just have to skip a few things, it would turn into a terrible mess otherwise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She leaned against him, working on her omni-tool, while he was engaged on his own terminal. As he looked through reports, he found that Berdin and Katrina had already thoroughly scanned through everything that looked like it could be in any way connected to someone who was on the run.

A message ping on his omni-tool interrupted their work. Garrus did not recognize the sender and was still confused after he had opened the message. Some doctor from a small clinic had contacted him about a quarian that she had treated. He showed the message to Shepard who jumped up and dragged him towards the wards as soon as she had looked at it.

As they approached the clinic, they could hear the voice of a man, clearly threatening a woman who cried in distress. He looked over to Shepard, who was already armed and completely focused on the situation. She made some sign with her hands that indicated that he was to take the left side and Shepard would go for the right.

With quick steps they entered, both aiming their weapons at a man who held a pistol to the head of a small human woman. She was crying and struggling to get away but she was not strong enough. Nothing happened for a few seconds and Garrus noticed that Shepard looked at him expectantly. He had no idea what she expected of him. Finally she stepped forward, her pistol loosely in her hand.

"Who are you and what do you want from the doctor?" She asked, her voice firm.

"None of your business!" the man yelled out, partially hidden behind the hostage.

Shepard played with the pistol in her hand. "Well, I'm here and your head is still attached to your neck. That might change any second." Her pistol was still just loosely in her hand but somehow she looked even more threatening, relaxed like that. "How about you let her go and we talk a little?"

The man looked over to his two partners, who had taken cover behind a table and a storage box. He seemed insecure about his situation but felt in control with the hostage. Garrus had used his short distraction to take up a good position and took aim with his rifle. He could see the panic in the face of the man and how his finger twitched on the trigger. If he got any more nervous, he might even shoot the woman by accident.

Shepard called out to the man again to let the woman go but he pressed his gun even harder against her head. Garrus slowly drew in air, waiting for an opportunity to shoot the hostage-taker. He waited for that one moment where you had no choice but to pull the trigger to prevent worse. Shepard took
a few steps toward the man hiding behind his human shield, drawing his gaze to her and Garrus took the shot.

The man's head exploded in a red mist, and at the same time Shepard dove into cover and took out one of the remaining two men with two shots. The last man was hiding behind a large container, shooting blindly in their direction. Shepard pointed towards the farside of the room, where a long counter stretched along the whole side of the room. She rolled over and scooted along the floor behind the low cover to get closer to the remaining thug while Garrus kept his attention by shooting at him.

The familiar rich bang of Shepard's pistol rang out and the last attacker stopped shooting. Shepard walked back to the human woman, asking her if she was well and helping her to sit down on a hospital bed. When the woman was taken care of, she turned sharply to Garrus and he suddenly knew that he was in trouble.

Shepard pulled him aside. "Damnit, Garrus, that was reckless! Reckless and dangerous!"

"I had a clear shot and his finger was twitching on the trigger," Garrus growled back defensively.

"You had a clear shot? Apart from the information one of them could have given us, you endangered the hostage." She stepped up closer and the coppery smell of human blood hit his nose. "And your partner in the field." Her eyes were hard as she stared at him. "This will not work, Garrus, if you act reckless like this. We don't risk lives like this."

How dare she? How could she criticise him like that? Shouldn't she be on his side? He was a cop, she was a soldier, of the two of them he should be the one to know how to handle a situation like this. He knew how a hostage situation was handled, he had been trained for that! He had been trained to... never risk the life of a hostage like that. He had been trained to negotiate, to diffuse a situation, to minimize the risk. How could he have forgotten all that?

He suddenly noticed a thin trail of blood that dripped from Shepard's shoulder. A shot must have scraped her and he realized that it very well could have been his own shot that had hurt her. He took a shaky breath. Outside of their personal relationship, he had to accept criticism from her to be able to learn and that turned out to be the hardest part for him to swallow.

"I'm sorry, Shepard, I think I misjudged the situation," he managed to say.

Her face turned softer and she let her hand rest on his for a second. "Maybe it was the right decision to take the shot but we have to communicate about that. Didn't you see my sign?"

"What sign?"

"I made the sign for you to talk to the hostage taker and that I would try to get behind them."

"That was all in your hand movement?" Garrus wondered.

Shepard looked genuinely confused for a second. "I guess that's one for the file, we have to get those down between us later on." She turned to the woman. "Are you alright?"

Garrus stepped up to her. "Are you hurt, doctor?"

She looked at him with a wide smile and said, "I'm fine, thank you Officer Vakarian, thank you very much. I'm also glad to see you well again." She took his hand and shook it. He finally recognized her as Dr. Michelle from the hospital, who had treated him and his colleagues after the explosion at the warehouse.
Shepard went over to the other dead bodies and searched them, he saw her look over and raise an eyebrow at him. He wasn't sure what she meant but she looked mildly amused so he felt safe for now.

"Dr. Michelle, what do you know about these men?" he asked the tiny woman, who looked shaken but seemed to calm down.

"They asked me about a quarian I had treated yesterday," the doctor answered, wringing her hands. "She had been injured and had an infection, and her suit needed to be repaired. I had to keep her in a sterile field for a day until she was well again. I urged her to go to Huerta Hospital, they have sterile rooms especially equipped for cases like that but she was very afraid."

"Why didn't you report her to C-Sec?" Garrus asked, he would have heard about the quarian a day earlier if she had.

The tiny woman raised herself to her full height. "That's not what I do here. People come here because they can't or don't want to go to one of the main hospitals. I don't report them unless I feel that someone's life is in danger. That is why I contacted you, Officer Vakarian, and then these men showed up..." She took his arm and leaned slightly against him, as if she needed his support to not fall down.

Garrus held her arm and helped her to one on the hospital beds to sit her down. She held onto his arm, even when she was already sitting. Garrus wondered what was wrong with her and Shepard's smirk told him that he was missing something. He turned back to the doctor, who looked at him with a smile on her face.

"She said that she had something," the doctor continued, "something that some people want, and she wanted to sell it to the Shadow Broker. She said that someone named Fist would get her in contact with him."

"Fist?" Garrus did a quick search on C-Sec files. "He is not listed as a Shadow Broker agent. It could still mean that he is one but I've met Fist, I think he's just a smaller light among the shady businessmen on the Citadel." He looked over the most recent entries. "He owns Chora's Den, that's probably where we're going to find him."

Shepard had come back to his side and asked Dr. Michelle, "These guys, did they say anything? Mention who they work for?"

Dr. Michelle thought for a little while. "They talked about 'the boss' and one of them said 'the turian'. But they never mentioned a name."

Shepard threw him a meaningful look before she asked the doctor, "How long ago did she leave to find Fist?"

"About three hours ago."

Shepard turned around with a short nod to the doctor and ran to the exit. Garrus ran behind her and heard her mumble to herself. "I think I owe Chakwas some flowers for forcing me to wear armor." She initiated a call on her omni-tool. "Kaidan? Meet me in the lower markets, armed and armored."

She ended the call and turned to Garrus. "You know, I was sceptical first but now I'm convinced. All geth are connected, right? If Saren works with geth, and Eden Prime certainly looked like it, then that geth could have known something. Whatever the quarian girl has downloaded from the geth memory core, it has something to do with Saren."
Garrus nodded. "We have to hurry. We have to get that file." He looked at her and noticed the trail of blood again. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine, it's just a scratch." Shepard smiled at him and he took her arm to stop her. He had to talk to her, just for a second.

"Shepard, I'm sorry." He knew that he should say more, that he would accept her criticism, that he would adapt to her way of doing things because it felt right. But Shepard stopped him with a finger to his lips.

"Shh. It's okay, we will work this out. We're good." She made a little kissing motion with her lips, a promise for a later time. They jogged over to the door that led to the market and towards the stairs to the lower markets. A reporter stopped her for a short conversation and a strange fan tried to approach her, calling her the hero of Eden Prime, but Shepard dismissed him with an embarrassed smile and ran even faster down the stairs.

"That reporter's name was Emily Wong, ever heard of her?" she asked him over her shoulder.

Garrus thought the name over. "I think Frank mentioned working for her."

"I normally don't trust reporters but she seemed like a good person," Shepard said. "She asked me to give her info on this Fist guy if I found anything. Looks like he is more interesting than we thought."

She looked at a map on her omni-tool, apparently waiting for a marker to appear that showed Lieutenant Alenko's arrival. She broke the silence with a smirk on her face. "So..." she spoke down towards her arm, "are we going to meet anymore of your girls?"

Garrus had turned to his own omni-tool, as it was his and everybody’s habit as soon as free time presented itself. He froze in his movement, his hand hovering over his tool arm. "What?" His mandibles fell open. "What girls?"

Shepard looked up to him with a bright smile. "Oh, that doctor was completely smitten with you," she laughed out. "Didn't you notice? How do you know her?"

"She treated us, me and my colleagues after that explosion in the warehouse caught us." He stretched his throat in embarrassment. "I spoke to her maybe twice? I'm not sure how..."

Shepard stepped closer to him and her hand brushed lightly over his mandible. "Well, you see," she whispered, "your sexiness is irresistible for women."

Garrus leaned into her touch and mumbled, "I take no responsibility for that, I'm just glad it worked on you."

Shepard bit her lip and whispered, "Oh boy, did it ever." She looked at him from under the hairs she had on her eyelids which made her look like a predator, ready to attack. He wanted to pull her closer to him, closer until not a single molecule of air would dare to stay between them.

Heavy footsteps approaching them let them step apart and Kaidan Alenko walked in front of Shepard with a salute, and a little smile playing on his lips. "Ma'am?" he said and held her gaze.

"Don't you 'Ma'am' me, Alenko," Shepard grunted at him, "you know how I hate that!"

"Yes, Commander." Alenko's face was blank.

"Really? You can't call me Shepard anymore?" She shook her head at him.
Lieutenant Alenko relaxed his shoulders and the little smile was back on his face. "No, I can't. We are Alliance, this is an Alliance investigation and you have a higher rank than me. On a mission, it would be inappropriate to call you by your name without your rank." Garrus did not miss the meaningful look that Kaidan gave him over that statement.

Shepard scratched the back of her neck. "Damn," she murmured, "I'm still not used to that." She straightened her back. "Fine, on a mission, it's Commander but outside of a mission I would prefer Shepard."

Alenko nodded and threw another look to Garrus. He flexed his mandibles back, he knew very well what Alenko talked about and it would not be a problem for him. He had worked with Shepard before and calling her Commander on a mission she commanded, was natural for him. He was a turian, after all.

They fell into a light jog towards the bar, while Shepard briefed Kaidan on who they were trying to find, and that the file the quarian had could be a link to Saren. On their way through the shady market, Shepard stopped so suddenly that Kaidan bumped into her and Garrus had to jump to the side, to avoid tumbling them both over.

She stood still, staring at a huge krogan in red armor and then walked over to him with fast steps. "Wrex?" she called out, as soon as she was close enough for him to hear her over the chatter in the hall. The krogan turned and Garrus recognized him by the three scarred slashes on his crest.

"Shepard!" The massive krogan spread his arms and pulled his huge mouth into a terrifying grin. Shepard was unfazed by that and hugged the krogan, almost disappearing in his massive body.

"Wrex, what are you doing here?" Shepard asked, pulling out of the embrace.

"Sniffing the air, looking for some backup," Wrex rumbled. "I have a contract on some local flatface and... well, you know."

Shepard pulled the krogan to the side, out of earshot of Kaidan. Garrus could still understand what they said. "Flatface? That a new word for human?" she said quietly. Wrex nodded, showing his grin once again. Shepard's eyes narrowed. "Assassination, Wrex, really?"

"A krogan has got to make a living, Shepard."

Shepard sighed and scratched her neck in that familiar quirk of hers. "That flatface, who is that?"

Wrex turned his head to each side, taking in almost the whole room with his wide-set eyes. "His name is Fist, he runs a bar down here..."

"You don't say," Shepard interrupted. She grabbed his arm and pulled him over to Kaidan and Garrus. "You are coming with us. We need to talk to this Fist, we need some information from him. I can't let you shoot him before we have that information."

Wrex' red eyes turned to slits, staring her down. Shepard remained standing before him, her arms crossed and her hip cocked out to the side, completely unimpressed. After a few seconds of intense silence, he nodded and stepped to the side to take a place to her right and slightly behind her. Garrus placed himself on her six, guarding her back, leaving Kaidan her left hand side.

With a nod from Shepard, they walked out of the market hall, over the construct that bridged the breathtaking chasm and skycar path in front of the bar. As soon as a human guard at the door had spotted them, shots greeted them from the inside, forcing them to dive for cover next to the entrance.
Shepard's voice was an angry hiss over the comm. "Now, why the fuck are they expecting us? How do they know?" She leaned forward on her knees and peeked around the corner, Kaidan shooting over her, Wrex and Garrus on the other side. "I see three humans and two krogan, right side."

Garrus noticed that Wrex had built up a barrier that allowed him to take a step next to him and aim with his rifle. He activated his comm. "I'm counting four humans and two krogan." On his right side, Wrex's shotgun bellowed out. "Make that three humans, no, two..." He held his breath and pulled the trigger on the krogan who had placed his head right into his aim, "and one krogan."

"Fucking alien showoffs." Shepard grumbled, her voice making the grin audible that he could not see. "Come on, Kaidan, humanity has to keep up." A blue glow grabbed one of the humans and threw him against the wall, the sound of his bones cracking drowned out by the sound of Shepard's heavy pistol taking out two other attackers.

"Moving!" Shepard called out, sprinting across the room and onto the counter. Garrus took out the last human on his side and followed her with Wrex, while Kaidan took a position behind a small wall, catching and throwing the remaining humans in biotic fields. Shepard had her eyes on the last remaining krogan, a huge fighter, his armor and helmet scratched and patched. He looked like not even a clawhammer could take him down.

Garrus had to fight the urge to call Shepard back, to stop her from attacking this battlemachine. That was not his place, so he did the best he could do and shot the remaining mercs and the krogan as much as possible. The krogan moved with surprising grace, sliding in and out of his aim and he was a good shot himself. Garrus had to roll behind an overturned table, to give his shields a chance to recharge and he felt the floor shake from the heavy krogan running towards him. A biotic warp from Wrex slammed into the krogan, momentarily stopping him and Shepard took her chance and jumped on his back, her hidden knife extended from her gauntlet. She rammed the knife into a gap between the helmet and the armor, ripping it out, and then with her other hand, slammed a smaller object into the gap.

The krogan roared, his arms desperately trying to grab the small figure on his back, but Shepard had already pushed herself away from him, flipping over backwards and was on her feet and dashing away before the krogan had realized that she was gone. "Pyjack!" he yelled after her, his massive frame sluggishly turning and in slow motion he tipped forward and crashed to the floor.

It was suddenly very quiet. Most of the guests had fled, the other mercs were dead and the remaining guests and waiters stared at the krogan, lying on his stomach, with their mouths open. Shepard sauntered back, a satisfied grin on her face. She checked on the krogan. "That should keep him asleep for about ten, fifteen minutes. Do you know him, Wrex?"

"You think I know every stinking krogan?" Wrex growled back.

"I was just asking, he looked like an experienced fighter, maybe you've met him. Probably better if we're not around when he wakes up again." She turned to the girl behind the bar and asked in her friendliest voice, casually wiping krogan blood from her face. "We are looking for Fist, where can we find him?"

The girl stared at her and just pointed over Shepard's shoulder to a small hallway. Shepard smiled and thanked her. With a circular wave of her hand, she called her team together. They all took their old positions behind Shepard and walked into the hallway.

Two guards, without armor and their ancient guns trembling in their hands, stepped in front of them. Shepard looked from one to the other, slowly. She let her pistol hang loosely in her hand and it had once again the effect of making her look more scary because she seemed so relaxed. With a sarcastic
grin she looked at the taller one and said, "Really?"

The guards exchanged a look, dropped their guns and hurried past them into the bar. Shepard chuckled and stepped around a corner towards a door. She raised her hand and tipped her head to the side. Garrus found that oddly endearing, she looked like a turian baby, trying to hear where its mother was. He couldn't stop his mandibles from forming a grin.

Shepard raised an eyebrow in question at him and asked, "Do you hear anything?" Garrus concentrated but the room behind the door sounded quiet. He shook his head and Shepard palmed the opener and stepped to the side. Not a second too soon, because two turrets started shooting straight at them, peppering the walls to the left and right of the door.

Kaidan leaned out and placed a Throw over one turret, crashing it against the wall. Wrex stepped out at the same time, a blue barrier wavering around him and shot the turret with his massive shotgun. When it stopped shooting to recalibrate it's angle, Garrus aimed and ripped it apart with a shot from his rifle.

With the noise of the turrets gone, it was easy to zero in on the desk, where a human man was hiding. Shepard and Garrus aimed at him while Wrex just stood there, fixing the human with his red eyes. The man pointed a pistol at them but let it drop as soon as he realized that he was outnumbered. Holding his hands above his head, he crawled out from under the desk.

"Take everything I have," the man whined, "I have credits, I have drugs, you want something special? I can get you whatever you want!"

Shepard tipped her pistol up to indicate that the man should get up and he pulled himself up on the desk, nervously looking over his shoulders. Wrex moved closer to him with a low growl but took a step back when Shepard gave him a look. Garrus almost held his breath, expecting to receive this look of doom himself but it seemed that he was safe.

She looked over to Kaidan. "Alenko, guard the door and the hallway, I don't want any surprises." Kaidan looked like he wanted to protest but he nodded and left the room.

Shepard turned her attention back to Fist. "We want some information from you," she said. "A quarian has contacted you and we want to know where she is now."

Fist's eyes kept flitting around the room. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Shepard took a step closer and punched the man in his face. Red blood gushed from his nose. He screamed like a beaten pyjack and Garrus trilled out his disgust at him. Shepard pressed her pistol under the man's chin. "Don't bullshit me."

Fist tried to get his cries under control. Shepard's eyes fixed him with a cold stare. "Do you work for the Shadow Broker? Where did you send the quarian?"

"I'm not... I don't work for the Shadow Broker anymore," he muttered, bending his head back to move away from Shepard's pistol pressing into his chin.

Wrex chuckled loudly, an alarming sound, coming from a krogan. "That's why I'm here, the Shadow Broker has simple rules when it comes to quitting."

Fist tried to look at the krogan but Shepard forced his attention back to her with a snap of her fingers. He was sweating and the knuckles on his hands were white as he held onto the desk. "But the quarian didn't know that, so I set up a contact and she thinks she will meet the Shadow Broker."
Wrex snorted. "No one meets the Shadow Broker, nobody has ever seen him. Even I was contracted through an agent." His shotgun steadied in his hands, aiming at Fist.

Shepard studied Fist's face with a scientific calmness, but Garrus also noticed how she looked at Wrex. Garrus was getting worried about the krogan too, he had an assassination contract with the Shadow Broker, he would want to fulfill this contract.

"So, where is she trying to meet this contact?" she asked, her voice cold and calm.

"I won't tell you, you have to promise that you won't kill me," Fist cried out. "I only tell you if you promise..."

"I won't kill you, I promise..." Shepard said. Garus snatched a quick look of her face to see if she was really serious about letting this coward go.

"You are Alliance, you have rules, you can't kill me!" Fist screamed at her.

Shepard sighed. "As I said, I will not kill you if you tell me where the quarian is," she said and there was that smile that made the room colder on her face again. Garrus aimed his assault rifle anew, he had a feeling that things were going to get bad soon.

She took a step back, leveling her pistol at his chest but leaving him some room to move.

The man rubbed his jaw and glared angrily at her. "There is an alley next to the transport hub by the markets," Fist said. "She is there now, waiting for the contact. My new boss will send some men to welcome her." A sickening grin spread on his face and Garrus itched to shoot his head off. But Shepard had promised him his life. He would not have done that but this was her mission, not his.

Shepard took a breath to ask another question but Fist's head exploded in red mist. Wrex had shot him.

"What the fuck, Wrex?" Shepard yelled out, wiping blood and brain matter from her face and armor.

Wrex snorted. "He gave the information and I had a contract to fulfill."

"Maybe I wasn't done yet? We don't know who he works for now!" Shepard shouted back.

There was a glimpse of remorse on Wrex face before he stared back at Shepard. "You said you wouldn't kill him."

"Well, I didn't, did I?" Shepard said. "I never said he would leave this room alive." She stepped in front of the krogan and jammed her finger on his breastplate. "When you work with me, you don't kill captives without my explicit permission, is that clear? Don't ever pull a stunt like that again!"

There was a short silence, where the huge krogan and the slim human were sizing each other up. It looked ridiculous but there was a strength radiating from her that made her appear more impressive. Garrus had never felt more proud of her than in that moment, when Wrex nodded and called her "Commander" for the first time.

Shepard turned away from Wrex, and Garrus saw a tiny smile play on her lips. But he also noticed the narrow frown that had settled on her forehead, and decided to ask her about it later. "We have to hurry, but let's do a quick search." She searched through the desk and Garrus looked through the lockers on the wall. Wrex smashed some boxes and returned with a few weapon mods. Garrus found nothing useful, but Shepard found a datapad and an OSD in a drawer.
"Maybe we'll find out who Fist worked for from these files." She shoved the things into her pack and jogged towards the door. "Let's go, we have a quarian to save."

She fell into the familiar jog and Garrus fell in step with her. Behind him he could hear Wrex’s heavy steps following them. Kaidan had set up a position at the entrance of the hallway, overlooking the inside of Chora's Den.

Apparently a new batch of mercs had arrived and awaited them in the bar. The shootout was over quickly, their position was covered and they had developed an efficient routine in dealing with the attackers. As soon as the last merc had fallen, Shepard broke into a fast run out of the door and over the bridge.

Kaidan ran up to her. "What about Fist?"

"He's dead but he told us that the quarian thinks she will be meeting the Shadow Broker in an alley over there," Shepard said. "Since Saren is probably his new employer, that will not go well for her."

Kaidan looked at her questioningly but did not say anything. They had arrived at a narrow door, and Shepard made a hand movement that left Garrus confused again. But then he saw that Kaidan and Wrex settled back into their fighting position to the left and right of her so it probably meant that they should form up. He moved to her six and aimed his rifle over her shoulder.

Shepard opened the door and stepped in with slow, quiet steps, watching the quarian talking to a turian. Garrus recognized her purple suit, she was indeed Tali'Zorah, the girl they had found on the husk-ghostship. A sigh hissed through his mandibles, if she had just stayed with C-Sec, this would have all been much easier.

Another turian and a few salarians in armor were mingling about, trying to look inconspicuous and failing. The quarian became quickly aware of her situation. Just as the the mercs closed in on her, an explosion took out two salarians, and she dove behind a container for cover. Shepard opened fire and Garrus took out the turian that had spoken with the girl, and the rest of them dropped just as fast.

Shepard stepped forward, ignoring the corpses on the ground and spoke to the quarian. "Are you hurt? Is your suit alright?"

The girl shook her head. "I can take care of myself. Not that I don't appreciate the help." She tilted her head to the side. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

Shepard gave her a small nod. "I'm Commander Shepard of the Alliance Navy. We were looking for you, that file you took from the geth could be essential for our case against the Spectre Saren."

Tali'Zorah dipped her head. "Then I can at least repay you for saving my life." She raised her arm and typed on her omni-tool. "If this evidence is worth killing me for..."

Garrus worked on his own omni-tool, scanning the area. It looked quiet but you never knew around these parts. "This area won't remain safe for long." He said to Shepard. "We should take her to the boss, or Anderson."

Shepard nodded. "Let's get the file to Pauly first, see what she can do with it. Afterwards, we show it to whoever wants to hear it. I'll announce it over the Citadel comm, if I have to." She turned around with a grin and walked towards the door that led to the transport hub.

A Keeper was quietly working in a corner, not acknowledging their existence like all Keepers. When they walked past him, Shepard suddenly slumped as if she had been hit, her hands pressing against her temples. Garrus rushed to her side, beating Kaidan to catch her before she fell forward. He
pressed her against him, terrified by her stillness. Her body was rigid, curled up, her face was pale and he wasn't sure if she was even breathing.

"What happened?" Kaidan asked, kneeling beside him and feeling for her pulse on her throat. Garrus remembered that Kaidan was a field medic, and he was grateful for his presence.

"I don't know," Garrus said, "the doctor had cleared her but who knows what that beacon on Eden Prime did to her."

Kaidan looked up with a frown. "She has a pulse, it's very fast. I remember that it was very fast after the beacon had dropped her too."

"Maybe it's the Keeper?" Tali'Zorah asked from the side, her omni-tool bright in scanning over the Keeper. "I'm not getting any readings from it but..."

"Let's get her away from it," Garrus decided and picked her up. With three long steps, he distanced them from the Keeper and immediately felt Shepard relax in his arms. She breathed in like a drowning person, her eyes wide open but unseeing. After a minute of Garrus's heart not beating, her eyes focused on him and a tiny smile crept on her lips. The relief rolling down his spine was tangible like an ice cube sliding down his plates.

"Hey, Angel, what happened?" she asked, taking in the position she was in.

Garrus nuzzled her forehead, not caring that Tali'Zorah or Kaidan saw it. "You held your head as if you were in pain, and then went rigid and fell forward." He pointed over to the Keeper. "It happened right over there, next to the Keeper."

"I have never had a reaction to a Keeper." Shepard mumbled. "They don't emit anything, I have scanned them before."

Kaidan chuckled a little while he scanned her vitals with his omni-tool. "I thought you were not supposed to do that?"

"Like I care."

Kaidan gave another chuckle. "They do feel strange though, I can feel when one is close." He shut down his omni-tool, apparently satisfied with the readings.

Shepard raised herself up and came to a stand, holding on to Garrus arm for support but visibly getting better by the second. "You feel them?"

"Yes?" Kaidan raised his eyebrows in confusion. "You don't? I thought everybody did, I heard others say it too."

"Maybe you have to be a biotic for that, I don't have any eezo nodules in my body," she said. "Do other biotics feel them?"

Kaidan raked through his hair. "I'm not sure, I can ask around."

"Discreetly, Kaidan," Shepard said, "the Citadel people are very protective of the Keepers, I always wondered why. It's like they don't even want to know what they do and how they work."

Garrus had to grin, of course the endlessly curious humans would want to know what the Keepers are and how they worked. On the Citadel it was against the law to disturb the Keepers, and nobody did any research about them. They had kept the Citadel intact for thousands of years, and the people
of the Citadel trusted them to keep doing that.

Shepard straightened herself up and the skin of her face returned to it's normal color. She eyed the Keeper with a frown and kept herself at a distance. "Alright, people, time to go and get this evidence into the right hands."

She stepped over to the quarian, placing a hand on her back. She peered into the helmet and smiled at her. "You are safe now," she threw a look back towards the Keeper, "at least as long as those creepy-crawlers leave me alone. But even then," she swept her arm around to include Kaidan and Garrus, "those guys will protect you too. You are safe."

The quarian girl tilted her head and her body language showed her confusion. She probably was not used to being treated in such a friendly way, knowing the normal hostility towards quarians. Maybe she even wondered if it was just an act on Shepard's part but Garrus knew that it wasn't.

It was never an act with Shepard.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, I actually like how I wrote that fight scene! That's a new one.

Those creepy keepers... I don't trust them.
They took a transport car to quickly travel to the ANIS offices, and Garrus and Shepard both kept scanning the surroundings for pursuers. Kaidan had taken the front seat with Tali, while Garrus and Shepard sat in the back. Wrex wanted to meet his contact for the assassination contract against Fist first and had taken another transport.

Tali had really warmed up to Kaidan and they were amiably chatting and comparing omni-tool programs. Garrus moved closer to Shepard, their armor scraping against each other.

"I was surprised that you let Wrex shoot Fist," he said quietly so that only she could hear. He had no doubt that she would have prevented the shot if she had not wanted him to do it but, she had only been angry about him shooting Fist too early.

Shepard leaned her head back. "Yeah, not my favorite turn of events I must say." She stretched her neck in a strangely turian way and Garrus wondered if she mirrored some of his movements. "The thing is," she said, "he is a bounty hunter and a krogan. It would have been dishonourable for him to break the contract. I may not like it but it was not the place for me to question his way, I think." She looked over to the forward bench where Kaidan was sitting. "I'm pretty sure that Kaidan would not agree with me on this, that's why I had him wait outside."

Garrus understood her reasoning but he could not understand why she insisted in taking the krogan with her. "Wrex is a bounty hunter, a thug, a merc for hire. Is that really the kind of person you want to take along?"

Shepard turned, her brows drawn tight together. "He is much more than that. He is wise, he has experience of over 300 years fighting in this galaxy, and he is smart." She put her head back against the seat. "I know what you've learned, what stereotypes you have. Believe me, I know how hard it is to overcome them."

She took his hand in hers, squeezing it lightly through their gloves. "You know, I collected children books of all kinds for a while, had my omni-tool translate them. It's really interesting what you see there. Asari books are all about wisdom and kindness towards the other races, but there is always
some kind of undertone that they are young and uneducated and need a helping hand in their
development. It's quite condescending." She looked at him. "Turian books are about being strong
and watchful because the galaxy is full of dangerous savages like the krogan and thieves like the
quarian."

Garrus shook his head. "I'm sure not all of them are like that."

"No of course, not all of them. But think about what you know of other species, what prejudices you
have." Shepard's eyes stayed on him. "Keep an open mind, question your presumptions."

He had to take a breath, there were things he just knew, knew to be true. It felt wrong to let go of
that.

"What do krogan children books say?"

"There are no krogan books for children. The krogan don't have children anymore." Shepard's eyes
were like glowing daggers, piercing him.

Something clenched his gizzard.

He remembered his teachings well. The krogan were out of control, the genophage was the only way
of controlling them. It was either that, or the krogan would have crashed the moon Menae into
Palaven in their attempt to crush the turian spirit during the rebellion. It was the right thing to do, the
krogan were out of control, they were irrepressible. Only the genophage kept them at bay.

But how much of that was actually true, how much did he just accept and never question? His work
at C-Sec and dealing with drunk, angry krogan had certainly not helped to form a better opinion on
them. But he had also never tried to get to know a krogan better, no one was friends with a krogan.

Except for Shepard.

She was still watching him, probably seeing the doubts and questions wander over his face. She
looked down at her hands. "You know how humans are portrayed in those books for turian children?
Humans are wild and unpredictable, and they have no sense of honor." She turned her head to look
at him, a smile playing on her lips. "But still, here you are."

"Yes." His voice was hoarse and he could not think of anything else to say. And he had to grin a bit
at how cunningly she had planted that speck of doubt in him.

They arrived at the ANIS offices and rushed inside. Keggs saw them and without a word rose up
and stepped with them into the elevator down to Pauline's laboratory. Shepard introduced Kaidan
Alenko to him and Tali'Zorah mumbled a quiet apology for running away from C-Sec. Keggs told
her not to worry about it and Garrus had the feeling that he had made sure that those two C-Sec
officers had reasons to regret their behaviour by now.

The laboratory was vibrating with loud music and Pauline Schumann stood with her back to the door
in a lacy-leathery-something black outfit that did not fit any fashion trend Garrus had ever seen on
the Citadel. She turned and after a tab on her omni-tool, the music shut off. Chains on her outfit
jingled as she spread her arms wide. "Hello! What wonderful things do you have for me?"

Tali'Zorah stepped forward with her omni-tool brightly lit, and Pauline held hers against it with a
wide smile. Even though it was impossible to see behind the tinted glass of the mask, Tali'Zorah
seemed to smile too and her shoulders relaxed. Pauline turned back to her terminal and started a
whole suit of programs to clean up the files.
"I already tried to improve the quality," Tali'Zorah said quietly. Pauline whipped around to her and gave her another wide smile.

"I know, I can see that!" Pauline said, "I can tell that you have some excellent programs on your omni-tool. I would like to see them, actually!" She turned back to her terminal. "But this baby here is a monster compared to our little omni-tools, I can tap into the Citadel mainframe if I want to." She gave a little sideways look to her boss. "Not that I would ever do that, that would be illegal."

Keggs clicked his mandibles. "Just let us hear the soundfile, Pauly."

"Of course!" Pauline turned back to the terminal and let the soundfile play. It sounded a bit better but it was still not clear enough to understand.

Shepard stepped up to her side. "Can you lower the high frequencies? Maybe it will be better without the hissing."

Pauline rolled her eyes at her. "Yeah, I was just about to do that, Miss soldier-engineer!"

Shepard grinned. "Sorry."

Pauline smiled back at her and then looked over to Tali'Zorah. "Let the professionals do their jobs, right Tali?"

Tali flinched at being suddenly addressed like that but nodded.

It took another few minutes of programs crunching over the file until finally, Pauline let it play over the speakers with a dramatic flair of her arms.

The first voice was male, definitely turian like Garrus had said before. The second voice was female and not turian. Pauline typed a few more commands into her terminal, while the voicefile played.

"Eden Prime was a major victory, the beacon has brought us one step closer to the conduit," said the male voice. "And one step closer to the return of the Reapers," said the female voice.

Pauline exclaimed a triumphant "Hah!" and pointed to the screen. "I have a 98% voice match for the male voice as Saren Arterius. And..." A beep from the terminal made her turn back to the screen, "a 97% voice match for the female voice as one Matriarch Benezia of the Asari Republics."

They all turned to their boss, whose face showed his mandibles clamped tight in anger. "That is the proof we needed, Saren went rogue. Let's take this to the Council, I'll get the higher ups onto that."

He marched out and turned in the door, "Vakarian, Shepard - good job. Tali'Zorah, thank you very much for your help and I would hope that you stay with us, for your own safety."

Tali'Zorah dipped her head. "Yes, I think that would probably be wise."

Keggs nodded towards Shepard and left. Shepard put her hand on Tali'Zorah's arm. "Do you need a sterile room to clean up? I'm sure we can find one for you."

Tali'Zorah's bright eyes blinked behind her mask. "Yes, I would like to check and clean my suit actually, the last few days have been a bit hectic." She was involuntarily scratching her sides and grabbed her own hands when she realized it.

Pauline turned from some rapid typing and pointed to the screen. "The best room would probably be the one at the Huerta Memorial hospital," Pauline said. "There is also one down in the Zakera Ward,
Shepard nodded. "Yeah, I wouldn't want you to go anywhere else, honestly. I'll contact them." She stepped aside and initiated a call on her omni-tool. The exchange was short and when she stepped back to them, she held her thumb up. Garrus had seen humans do that at C-Sec before but Tali'Zorah had obviously no idea what that gesture meant.

Shepard turned to the quarian girl. "They agreed to let you use the room, they have no need for it right now. They are doing another cleaning cycle and exchanging the air right now, so by the time we are done with the Council, the room will be ready for you."

"You want me to go with you to the Council?" Tali'Zorah whispered, her eyes blinding white orbs.

Shepard peered into the mask. "Yes, of course. Not only are you our resident expert on the geth, you extracted that file, you should present it." She turned and held out her arm to Pauline. "Please copy the cleaned file and the voice match prints to my and Tali'Zorah's omni-tool."

"Of course, Shep." Pauline waved her hand over her terminal and both omni-tools flared up upon receiving the data.

Shepard turned around to leave the lab and waved to Pauline. "Thanks!"

"No problem, Shep, come back anytime."

As they all filed back into the elevator, Kaidan spoke up. "The Council can't ignore this, they have to see now that Saren is a traitor. He works with the geth, he is responsible for attacking colonies and ships in council space."

Shepard held up a finger. "For that last part we actually don't have evidence, but it's an easy assumption." She turned around completely to look at all of them. "Can anybody tell me what those Reapers are, that the Matriarch spoke about?"

Tali started to speak but was interrupted by the door opening, revealing Wrex staring down Lorenzo Jorno while Dania Va'sida stood a bit to the side, her fists faintly glowing in biotic blue.

Lorenzo snarled at Wrex. "Do you want me to arrest you?"

Wrex leaned in even closer. "I would like to see you try, human"

Before things could escalate further, a door opened on the upper gallery and Keggs stomped down the stairs. "Stand down, everybody."

The krogan and the human slowly leaned back and Dania let her biotics die down. She still looked quite dangerous. Keggs strode around the corner and only threw a cursory glance at the krogan, before he looked to Shepard. "Is this your friend, Wrex?"

"Yes." She nodded and shrugged her shoulders towards Lorenzo. The human straightened his jacket and slowly walked back to his desk, only talking to the krogan over his shoulder.

"You could have said something."

"Where is the fun in that?" Wrex grumbled, a grin pulling his face even wider.
Keggs had gathered things from his desk and walked towards the exit. "Lorenzo, Dania, Terlin, I want you to find out what you can about this Matriarch Benezia. Everybody else, come with me, we are presenting the evidence to the human ambassador and he will get us a meeting with the Council."

"Why can't we go to the Council directly?" Shepard asked, a deep frown on her face and Garrus wondered how her subharmonics would hiss if she were a turian.

Keggs answered with just that kind of annoyed hiss. "Don't ask me about the whys and hows of politics." He walked with long strides and the humans and Tali'Zorah had trouble keeping up with him.

The human ambassador turned out to be a really unpleasant person and Garrus understood why Shepard had been so annoyed in having to meet him. Donnel Udina was curt, impatient and did not let anybody finish when they spoke. He ignored Tali'Zorah's explanation of the Reapers being gods for the geth and anything that Shepard said about the vision from the beacon. The whole meeting almost turned into disaster until Anderson put a stop to the yelling.

"Regardless of what we think of Shepard's vision or Reapers and the geth," the Captain's voice boomed over the noise, "we have to present this proof to the council to get Saren's Spectre status revoked. We want Saren caught and brought to justice for the attack on Eden Prime and we need a Council order for that."

The human ambassador swallowed at that and turned to his desk. "I will arrange a meeting."

They waited around as the ambassador made his calls, when Wrex suddenly pointed to Tali'Zorah. "What about the quarian? Are we dragging her along now?"

The quarian girl whipped around and the bright orbs behind her faceplate turned to slits. "I have a name! My name is Tali'Zorah nar Rayya!" She turned to Shepard. "If this evidence was worth trying to kill me for, then I want to be part of this. You saw what I can do, I can help!"

Shepard shot a glare at Wrex that promised a serious conversation for later and then turned to Tali'Zorah. "I can't promise how involved I will be in further investigating Saren, so far, all we were supposed to do was find evidence against him." She threw a look toward Anderson, who dipped his head subtly. "But if they let me continue searching for him, then I promise that you will be part of my team."

Udina returned from his desk, announcing that the Council would see them right away and how rare it was to get an appointment this quickly. He was mumbling something under his breath when he realized that Shepard insisted on taking everyone with her to the meeting. She even sent a message to Nihlus to meet them at the Citadel tower.

The Ambassador and Captain Anderson and Keggs went ahead, while Shepard and Garrus waited with Wrex, Kaidan and Tali'Zorah for Nihlus to arrive. Shepard had taken Wrex to the side and even though he could not hear what she said to him, Garrus was pretty sure he knew what kind of dressing down he received. It probably had the same kind of basic message that he got from her all the time, about respecting and understanding other species, just not delivered quite as friendly.

The elevator doors opened and Nihlus slowly stepped out, limping and leaning heavily on a cane. Shepard stopped her angry gnarling of Wrex and broke into a full on run towards Nihlus. Before she could crush against him, she skidded to a stop and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. For a long moment they just stared at each other until Nihlus dipped his head to the side and pulled her into an embrace.
A deep purr rose up from Nihlus. "I'm sorry Shepard, I'm sorry I didn't talk to you."

Shepard sighed loudly. "I'm just glad you're okay. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have acted like..."

Nihlus stopped her with a loud trill and pulled her back into the embrace, her face against his neck. Garrus felt a tiny speck of jealousy at how easily he showed his affection for her in public. The way he held her head against his neck was almost scandalous. He would not dare to do that.

Nihlus broke the embrace and his hand on her back gently led her back to him, as Garrus didn’t fail to notice. Wrex made a chuckle that made Tali'Zorah flinch. Kaidan looked confused from one to the other. When Shepard leaned against Garrus for a second, a worried smile spread on his face.

Anderson called them over from inside the big hall full of blossoming trees. At the far end of the room, the platform rose up to the council pedestal. Udina waited at the bottom of the stairs, his face drawn in the familiar annoyance that he displayed all the time. Garrus whispered to Shepard at his side. "You know, for a diplomat, Udina is kind of lacking in the diplomacy department, don't you think?."

"Yeah, I think so too," Shepard whispered back, as they walked with Anderson towards the human ambassador. "Especially because the one before him, Anita Goyle, was very impressive. I don't know what strings he pulled to get this job. I don't trust him."

"That was kind of obvious," Garrus chuckled.

"Oh, C-Sec's expert on humans caught me again!" Shepard whispered and nudged him with her elbow, which only made a loud noise as their armor clanged together. The frown on the ambassador's forehead got even deeper as he watched them. Garrus noticed that their boss gave them an amused look.

Udina greeted Anderson with a nod and then let his gaze sweep over the group behind Shepard and Garrus. "Do all these... people have to come with us? This is a council meeting, not an interspecies dinner party."

Shepard stepped forward. "Officer Vakarian and me have been leading this investigation under ANIS authority. Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko was with me on Eden Prime and can give a first-hand account of the events surrounding the prothean beacon. Tali'Zorah nar Rayya has extracted the file that we want to present from a geth memory core and is pretty much the only expert on geth that we have. Spectre Kyrik has also been on Eden Prime, had contact with Saren and is also here in his position as advisor from the turian Hierarchy." She stood proud, her arms crossed in front, her eyes daring the other human to say something against her reasoning.

"What about the krogan?" Udina sneered.

For a second, the conviction fell from her face, she obviously had no idea how to justify his presence. She opened her mouth but before she could say anything, Wrex raised his hand to stop her and stepped to the side. "If you don't mind," he said to Shepard, "I'd rather hang back and keep an eye out. Get's a bit crowded here, you know? And you never know who could turn up around here."

The nasal voice of Udina called out. "This is the Citadel Tower, the Council hall. This is the safest place on the Citadel."

Wrex shrugged. "We've already met some of Saren's agents today, you better not underestimate him." He gave Shepard a nod and purposefully ignoring everybody else, slowly walked over to the side, his wide set eyes rapidly moving to take in his surroundings.
Udina looked positively relieved and ushered the rest of the group up the stairs to the platform opposite of the council's balcony. Garrus noticed that Keggs stayed behind, and was curious as to why. Shepard had noticed it too and whispered to him, "I think him and the turian councillor had some run in before, they hate each other."

Garrus wanted to ask her about that but they had arrived at the platform. He took in the scenery as he stood on the platform for the first time in his life, and the symbolism of the position of the Council raised above them did not escape him. They were petitioners, asking, almost begging, not demanding something from the Council.

The human ambassador addressed the Council with a polite greeting and then let Tali play the file, amplified to speakers right next to the Council. Garrus watched them closely for reactions. The turian councillor Sparatus snapped his mandibles tight in anger, annoyed and probably embarrassed by the betrayal of the Spectre. The salarian councillor looked slightly amused but seemed to wait for the other councillors before he formed an opinion.

The asari councillor Tevos was guarding her expressions carefully. Her face remained almost unmoving, only a tiny look to the side showed how uncomfortable she was. She asked Tali'Zorah to explain what she knew about the Reapers and what they had to do with the geth.

Tali'Zorah's voice was very quiet at first but she became louder and more confident as she spoke. "The Reapers were mentioned in prothean artifacts that have been found on many planets around the galaxy. They may have wiped out all civilization 50,000 years ago. It is possible that the geth are worshipping the Reapers as gods and want to bring them back. Since the geth on Eden Prime seemed to have worked for Saren, it looks like they work with him to bring back the Reapers."

Garrus had to keep his subharmonics under control to not sound out his surprise at her excellent summary. Shepard smiled at her encouragingly. The asari Councillor asked Nihlus and Kaidan for a short report and then turned to Shepard and asked her about her experience with the beacon. Shepard finally told the council of her visions, clenching her hands at her sides.

"The vision shows me death, destruction, devastation. The death of thousands, the fall of a whole civilization, maybe, it is not clear. It could be a warning. If we assume that Saren has seen it too..." She hesitated. "I don't know how he can see that as a desirable outcome." She straightened her back and raised her head high. She spoke loud and strong but her body language seemed to clash with her speech. Garrus could not quite point out why but it looked wrong somehow.

Nihlus noticed it too and leaned over and whispered something at her while the council members discussed the information. Shepard looked at him confused but she lowered her head and looked at the Council from under her eyelashes. Garrus flared his mandibles in admiration, now it looked right. She looked strong now, like a wild predator, controlled power in her stance.

The turian councillor Sparatus noticed it too, a subtle shift in his position acknowledging her strength. The asari councillor looked slightly nervous, having been around turians for a long time, she was probably well versed in turian body language.

Shepard had their complete attention and laid her case for the arrest and prosecution of Saren Arterius. Only when the human ambassador stepped in and shrieked about having to send the fleet after him, the spell broke. Sparatus refused to acknowledge the threat of the Reapers, he was downright dismissive towards anything Shepard said. The muscles on the back of her neck were thick in tension but she remained calm. The salarian councillor also called the Reapers an obvious myth but they both agreed that Saren Arterius had to be stripped of his Spectre status and needed to be caught.
But the council would never send a fleet after the rogue Spectre, Garrus was sure of that. They did not like to meddle so directly, they avoided getting openly involved in such things. Usually they send a Spectre out to solve problems like that as discreetly as possible and he wondered who they would send. Nihlus was the obvious choice but he was still not fully recovered.

In a surprise motion that made Garrus wonder how much political power play had been going on in the background, the council made Shepard a Spectre. The first human Spectre!

Ambassador Udina was unable to control his self-congratulatory grin while Anderson had a proud smile on his face, his eyes on Shepard. She had lost almost all color in her face and looked at Kaidan apologetically. The Lieutenant was hiding his disappointment well and gave her a friendly nod. Her hands clenched behind her back and Garrus stepped up closer to her to brush his hand against hers for a second. She let out a harsh breath and gave him a tiny smile before looking back to the Council.

The ceremony was not different from the one Nihlus had had, the same speech about Spectres not being trained but chosen, elevated above rank and file. Shepard received the praise with a stoic face and expressed her gratitude in a short statement. She turned and Anderson received her glare with a grin, knowing that she blamed him for getting the Spectre status she never really wanted.

They left the pedestal and finally they could congratulate Shepard to her new rank. Her face changed from pale white to bright pink under all that attention. Wrex looked almost prouder than Anderson upon hearing the news and pulled Shepard into a tight hug. After she had managed to free herself from his arms, she walked over to Kaidan, who stood a bit to the side, his shoulders hunched forward.

She draped an arm around his shoulders and Garrus could hear her talking quietly to him. "You know this wasn't my choice, Kaidan and I'm sorry that you were not picked for this. I think you would have been the better candidate."

A small smile appeared on Kaidan's face. "Don't be ridiculous, Shepard. You are the hero of Elysium, you saved countless lives and you do get the job done, whatever it is." He straightened and pulled his shoulders back. "You have earned this, and one day I will earn it too. As long as you don't mess up humanity's reputation on this," he said with a grin.

"Yeah, thanks man, no pressure!" Shepard mumbled.

Anderson stepped up to her. "Shepard, I will contact you, we have things to organize before you can go on the hunt for Saren."

"Yes, Sir."

Anderson turned with a nod to the rest of the group and followed Udina to the elevator. The ambassador had not spoken to Shepard or anybody else of the group. Keggs stepped out of the shadows, his mandibles spread in a rare smile. He walked over to Shepard and quietly said a few words to her and gave her a salute before he walked away.

Shepard turned back to the group, her skin bright pink and a sheepish smile on her face. "Well, that was... unexpected," she said, "and I don't even know what my next step is supposed to be, I need a ship. I need a technical crew, I want you all to come along, we need to find out where Saren is now, and..."

Kaidan raised his hand. "How about if we take a short break. You find out what kind of ship you get and then we'll see what we have to do. Just send us a ping when you know something."
"Alright, Kaidan," Shepard said with a relieved smile. "Could you take Tali'Zorah to the hospital so that she can use the clean room there?"

Kaidan nodded. "Of course." He turned to the quarian. "Ma'am?" he asked, indicating to her to take a place at his side.

Tali'Zorah giggled, the light on her speaker blinking rapidly. She tilted her head and said, "Please don't call me Ma'am, just call me Tali."

They turned to leave but a loud trill by Nihlus stopped them. When he had everyone's attention, he turned to Shepard. "You know that I had been tasked with evaluating you for the Spectres and even though this has happened a lot faster than I had planned, have no doubts about my confidence in you not only as a soldier, but as a leader." He flared his mandibles in a smile and shook Shepard's hand.

After dip of his head, he let her hand go and looked over to Garrus. "Now, I had been assigned as the official liaison for the turian hierarchy on the Normandy." He looked down on his cane. "But with this," he angrily shook the cane, "I'm hardly the right person for that, so it looks like Garrus is going to get that role." He grinned at the shock that showed on Garrus's face.

"Me? I'm not even part of the turian military!" Garrus called out. He had actually liked his service in the military. He had only left because his father had gotten him the job at C-Sec, as a favor to his wife. Garrus's mother had wanted her children safely away from the military. That had been the end of a promising sniper career for Garrus and also the end of his dream to become a Spectre one day.

Nihlus trilled out in amusement. "Oh, I'm aware of that but the turian hierarchy is eager to reinstate you if you pass the aptitude tests. Appointments for those should reach you soon." He fixed him with a hard stare and his subharmonics wavered on the lowest, almost inaudible spectrum. "Unless you refuse."

This was a dream come true! An unbelievable chance! Garrus realized after a few seconds that Nihlus actually expected an answer and he reeled his tumbling thoughts back in and spat out something that sounded like, "No! Yes! Not refuse! Yes, liaison!"

Shepard snorted loudly and Nihlus began chuckling, his mandibles twitching until he broke down in laughter. Wrex's booming laughter almost drowned out the rest of the giggling and snorting. Tears were streaming down Shepard's face as she held on to Garrus's arm. Garrus stretched his throat in embarrassment but joined their laughter.

He looked at the faces of the people around him and as much as he could guess from Tali's body language. It felt like they were becoming a whole, a complete group, strangers from all corners of the galaxy, working together as friends. He caught a look from Shepard and could see it in her face too. As alarming as their coming mission was, it felt like anything was possible with this group working on it.

Shepard opened her eyes and woke up with a gasp. Garrus sat beside her on the couch, watching her until his eyes had fallen shut as well. They had taken off their armor, leaving it in piles on the floor and Shepard had sat down and been asleep in seconds. Garrus reminded himself that she had still been in the hospital this morning. She had every right to be tired. He had only dozed in a state of half sleep that let his brain run at high speed through the days events. Shepard’s sudden movement pulled
him out of it and he watched her eyes dart around.

From previous painful experiences he knew that it was not advisable to touch her in these first few seconds of waking up, so he just called her by her nickname. "Hey, Sunshine..."

Her head snapped around and recognition dawned on her face. "Hey, Angel!" She smiled her brilliant smile and moved over him to straddle his lap. Urgently she planted kisses on his face and Garrus was slightly overwhelmed by the sudden affections. She leaned back and gave him a sheepish smile. "Sorry, that was probably a bit freaky, and I think I have a stinkmouth."

Garrus hurriedly interrupted her. "That's not the problem, I was just surprised, you are normally not so..."

"I know, but I had you close to me all day and could not touch you and kiss you like I wanted," she said, "I had to make up for it now." She arranged her legs over his hip-spurs, crossing them behind his back and settled her head against his cowl. "Is this comfortable for you?"

"Very." Garrus answered with a chuckle. He bent down and nuzzled the top of her head.

"I have a few things going around in my head," Shepard mumbled, "mind if I dump them on you and you tell me what you think?"

"No, go ahead." Garrus felt quite content with her in his arms. Having her back with him gave him a feeling of peace.

"Okay, here's the first thing that bothered me." She looked out ahead, her hand moving around as she spoke. "We tell the Council this, admittedly, crazy story of the Reapers. I'm not even sure what to make of it myself. So Councillor Valern calls it an obvious myth, Councillor Sparatus dismisses it too but the asari Councillor, Tevos, was noticeably quiet don't you think?"

Garrus recalled the reaction of the asari, she had kept her expressions under close guard. "She looked nervous, but not like she doubted you," he said.

"Isn't that strange?" She craned her head to look at him. "And I don't understand why she didn't mind-melt with me. I mean, I may not like it much but it would have made her see the visions as well." Her hands went to her head, massaging the temples. "Maybe she would have been able to make sense of it."

She got up and began walking in small steps in front of the window, her hands moving over her head and arms. "And she didn't even react when we showed her that this Matriarch Benezia was involved. If she was so highly important, wouldn't the Councillor know about her and that she is with Saren?" Shepard turned to Garrus. "To me it looks like she knew all along, but she is trying to cover up her involvement."

"We have no proof of that," Garrus said.

"I know but still, there is something going on, something we don't know yet. And the asari are somehow involved. I just..." She scratched her neck, "I have to be careful that I don't let my prejudices overshadow this investigation." She turned to him. "You have to watch me. You have to remind me when I... lose my way."

She walked back to him and pulled him into an awkward hug, halfway on the floor and halfway leaning over him. Garrus pulled her closer. "You don't need me for that," he whispered into her hair, "but I will remind you if necessary."
She pulled back and opened her mouth to say something but instead just crashed her mouth against his lip-plates, sucking, eagerly kissing him. Garrus kissed her back, his hunger for her burning inside of him. The softness of her lips, the taste of her so foreign and familiar.

With a gasp for air she pulled back, her bright smile making her face shine. Garrus wanted to pull her back but she stopped him with her hands on his chest.

"Wait, I have another question!"

Garrus let his head fall back in frustration, "Really, woman? You have another question and it needs answering right now?" His desire for her had already loosened up his plates and his head was swimming from her sweet scent.

She smiled wide. "Yes, just a minute." She settled her weight back on his knees, moving away from his groin. "Don't worry, we are getting to this." She grinned at him and then turned serious.

"When I spoke to the Council, Nihlus told me to lower my head, what was that about? Was that to show abjection?" The look on her face was slightly disgusted on that word.

Garrus tried to make the connection between the predatory look of her lowered head and abjection and failed. "What? How do you mean?"

She sighed. "I had my head raised high..."

"Yes, you presented your throat to them."

Shepard wrinkled her nose in confusion. "I presented my throat?"

Garrus realized that she had no idea how she had looked to a turian. "Jane, you had your head tilted back and showed your throat. To a turian and to many other species, that is a submissive gesture, you were complying to..."

"Submissive?" She yelled, jumping up from his legs. Her arms were flailing, pointing to him and elsewhere. "You mean I was submissive to this giant fucking turian asshole of an asswiping..." She continued with a cascade of slurs and swear words that his translator just gave up on, yelling and pacing in front of him. He couldn't help but laugh, desperately trying to hide the flapping of his mandibles.

Shepard turned sharply to him. "Oh, don't you laugh. Damnit!" She finally stopped pacing and settled on one spot, her hip cocked out. "So let me get this straight. We humans have this expression of 'raising your head up high', which means to not take anybody's shit. But to you that looks like I'm being all humble and groveling?"

Garrus finally couldn't stop the laugh bursting out of him, she looked so annoyed by the revelation, it was just adorable. "Yes, yes it does!" he gasped.

Her eyes narrowed and he knew that he would get in trouble for laughing at her but he couldn't help himself.

"And this lowering of my head..." She slowly bowed her head down.

"And keeping eye contact, like you are about to headbutt a krogan..." Garrus rumbled, getting aroused by the predatory look of her.

"That is a dominant gesture?" she asked, one eyebrow rising. She kept her eyes on him through her
lashes, icy and piercing.

His voice was getting hoarse and his subharmonics shamelessly rumbled his desire at her. "Yes, dominating and also very sexy when you do it." He slowly tilted his head back, presenting his throat. It was almost instinctual, submitting to the dominant female with her enticing predator look at him. It was also a game, a game that he wanted to play.

She came closer to him, still looking at him like a predator. "And you are presenting your throat, so you are submitting to me right now?" Her eyes were hungry and she sucked on her lower lip.

"Yes, I am." He stretched out more, tilting his head even further back, his eyes turning away from her in the ultimate form of submission.

She stepped between his legs, towering over him. Tiny beads of sweat sat on her forehead and she looked at him like he was a tasty piece of cake. Her voice was deeper than ever when she spoke. "So you if I tell you to undress and lie down on the bed, you would do it?"

"Yes."

She leaned down to his ear, her breath whispering over his throat. "Well, then hurry." She stepped back with a grin and Garrus never ran so fast to his bedroom, dropping his undersuit on the way. He let himself fall back on his bed, pushing the pillowroll under his neck, eagerly waiting for her. She sauntered in, slipping out of her undersuit. She was swinging her hips as she walked slowly towards him. He felt desire prickle up his spine like ice.

She still had her socks on and he smiled at that. She noticed his look and giggled, bending down to take them off. Throwing them away in a dramatic gesture, she laughed out. "Hah! I'm so sexy!"

Garrus laughed with her. This was one of his favorite things, that they could always laugh, no matter what they were doing. Her laugh turned to a grin and her predatory look returned, icy eyes under dark lashes, which quickly became another favorite of his.

She stopped in front of the bed and regarded him sternly. He stretched his head back again, eagerly submitting. Excitement made his plates thrum and he stretched backwards but he kept his eyes on her. He could not look away, she looked so wild, beautiful, like barely contained energy.

Jane was still standing and Garrus grew impatient. "Touch yourself," she ordered, before he could complain.

"I want to touch you," he said, hunger for her burning through him.

"In a minute, don't worry." She grinned at him, her hands slowly traveling down her sides and over her stomach. He could imagine how soft her skin felt, how flexible it moved against her hands and it was enough to make him rumble in deep trills.

"Oh yes, keep making that purr," she breathed out.

"I'm not purring."

"Yes you are. And I love it." She lowered her head more and gave him a sexy cold stare. "Now touch yourself!"

He could not refuse. Slowly, he let his hands stroke down over his cowl, down to his waist. It felt rougher than her hands of course, and it brought back memories of sex with turians. It felt familiar. Warm roughness as opposed to the cool softness of human hands. Slow strokes over his waist
loosened up his groin plates and he felt his penis emerging. She still looked at him, her eyes growing wide, her teeth biting into her lip.

Her hands were moving over her sides and he noticed that she seemed to mirror his movements. To test it, he stroked over his stomach towards his groin, placing his hand left and right of his glistening erection. She followed his movements, her hand traveling along the same path and her fingers to the sides of her labia. A breathy moan left her and the heady scent of her arousal hit his nose.

Garrus took a deep breath and moved his hands back to his waist, kneading it, and she did as well. He put his hands on his cowl, stroking along the inside and Jane softly brushed along the undersides of her breasts. His own touch and watching her, made him thum with need. Her thumb made little circles around her nipple that turned hard under the attention. She was panting now and Garrus's subharmonics were rumbling shamelessly at her.

His hands traveled down, his aching penis demanding some care. She moved down along with him and when he touched his hard erection, giving it some relieving strokes, her fingers rubbed her clitoris equally urgent. Her face was flushed pink now and her eyes were fixed on his hands, stroking and rubbing himself.

Suddenly she dropped her hands, breathing hard. She gave him her intense stare again and slowly let herself fall on her knees on the bed and crawled up over him. His hands stilled. She held herself above him and he still did not dare to touch her. Her eyes were eating him up and he wanted nothing more than to bury himself in her and become one with her.

The moment fell apart when her omni-tool beeped with a call. Shepard sighed and sat back on her legs, answering the call with a tip under her ear. "Yes?" She listened for a second and then said with a blush, "Sir? I would rather not." She got even redder and ended the call with, "Understood, I'll be there."

She sighed and Garrus groaned in frustration. "So you have to go now?"

Jane brushed through her hair. "Well, I was at first but when I refused to turn on vid, Anderson gave me another 20 minutes."

"You mean he knows what we are doing?" Garrus asked, a subharmonic trill of embarrassment under his voice.

"Well... he is not stupid!" Jane said with a smile. Then her look turned wild again. "So we better not waste any time!" With a rush she was over him, between his legs, her teeth scratching his throat and the feeling zapped through him like static. She stretched out long and he spread his legs wider.

Leaning back, she put her hands under his knees, right in the curve of his spurs and pushed his legs upwards until his knees almost pressed against the mattress. Garrus was trapped, he could not move. Her thighs pressed against his ass and she rubbed her wet folds over his shaft. She briefly took one hand off his leg to guide his penis inside her and then she held him down with her hands on his thighs and sank down on him. She took him in completely, grinding against him, rising up again, letting him almost slip out and then driving herself down on him again.

It was amazing. To be taken by her, under her control, was liberating in a way.

The only thing he could move were his hands and he stretched his arms to reach her, stroking her breasts with one hand and holding her waist with the other. Her eyes were wide open, staring at him, an expression of disbelief and pure desire in her face. She moved faster, taking him deep into her and whenever she hit his groin with her pubis, she made a circling motion that made her eyelids flutter,
and he’d quiver in joy.

He moaned loudly, his second voice rumbling out his lust. The way she held him and fucked him, it was beyond arousing.

She was making little whining gasps now, pushing harder, her eyes wide open, her nails digging into the skin of his legs and he felt her pulse rushing inside. Her walls contracted and she came with a scream, shuddering but still moving, riding him on her wave, pushing, pumping until the ripples of tension in her vagina made him reach his peak too, spilling into her with a yell.

With a sigh she lost all tension in her body, unceremoniously letting his penis slip out of her to fall on her side like a drunken hanar. She was still panting hard just like him, a happy, satisfied smile on her face. It touched his gizzard like an electrical charge.

_I love you. Please, let me love you._

Garrus slowly stretched his legs out, muscles protesting about the unusual position they had been held in. Jane appeared at his side, moving herself up to him by pulling at the blanket, hand over hand. With a sigh, as if the movement had tired her out, she flopped down beside him, her face nuzzling his neck.

He felt her lips move against his skin when she spoke. "We have to get going."

"I know." Garrus managed to say through the tiredness that tried to pull him down.

"I don't think I can move," she mumbled against his throat.

"Just call Anderson," Garrus said, "and tell him you'll be late."

"Yeah, right," Shepard snorted, "I'd like to be able to look him in the eyes in future. He is not stupid, I told you. And don't think you get to lounge around here, you're coming with me." She slowly raised herself up and turned to sit.

Garrus groaned. "Not fair. I'm just a lowly C-Sec officer, my shift is long over." Her naked back was irresistible and he softly let his claws scratch down. She arched her back, a breath hissing through her teeth.

"But you have the privilege of fucking a Spectre now," Shepard said with a grin, "there has to be a drawback."

Garrus raised himself up to lick her neck, enjoying the shudder that went through her. "Actually, it felt more like I was _getting fucked_ by a Spectre."

She was suddenly very still and her voice just a whisper. "And did you like that?"

He flicked her earlobe with his tongue before whispering, "Very much, Lady Spectre."

She turned around and flung her arms around his neck and kissed him, hard and soft. They would have to hurry but there was no way he would ever cut a kiss like that from her short.
Now, wasn't that nice? About time too.

A little lesson in interspecies body language problems.

The term "falling down like a drunken hanar" was termed by the mighty nerdymum!

Next chapter we hopefully, finally get to fly away in the Normandy. The Normandy, my baby!
I had this done and it sucked, so I had to redo the second half, that took a while.

"The Normandy is yours, Shepard."

"But... Sir!" Shepard's face was frozen in shock. "This is wrong!"
They stood outside at the dock, right next to the Normandy. Shuttles and cruisers passed over them, making the mass effect field waver in blue ripples.

Anderson shook his head. There was a sadness in his posture, warring with the love and pride in his eyes. Garrus remembered that Anderson almost had been the first Spectre, and despite being proud for Shepard, in some way his own dream had been shattered along the way.

"No, this is right," Anderson said, "you are the first human Spectre and you need the best ship the Alliance has to offer to represent humanity and catch Saren. Take the Normandy, Shepard, and show the galaxy what we are made of. I know you will make us proud."

Shepard snapped to attention and saluted, her voice rough when she finally spoke. "Thank you, sir, you won't regret this."

Udina cut in. "We better not! This is humanity's big chance to finally prove ourselves to the Council. Do this right and we might even get a seat on the Council soon." He nodded curtly and walked away.

Anderson shook his head. "I think he's getting a bit ahead of himself there." He stepped up to Shepard, who slowly let her hand fall from the salute. He placed his hand on her shoulder, looking at her with a soft smile. The gesture looked just like a turian father would, sending his child out into the world and it made Garrus hum in empathy. "You will do this, you will catch Saren and find out what is going on with the Reapers. I know you will."

Anderson let his gaze rest on the sleek curve of the ship for a second, then turned back to Shepard. "This is a good ship, with a good crew. Take care of her, Commander."

"I will sir, thank you," Shepard said, her voice stronger.

Anderson typed a few things on his omni-tool and Shepard's tool flared up in response. "I have transferred the command codes to you. The Council has assigned a personal assistant to you who has already conferred with my staff about the things you need and what the Council will provide. She will send you a list of things that you will need to do and you should let her know of the crew roster and who else you will take with you." He shut down his omni-tool and a small smile played on his lips. "Also, it looks like being a Spectre means that the Council expects you to do the little odd jobs for them here and there. Your council assistant will forward those assignments to you. And the Alliance and ANIS are also very happy to have a Spectre at their hands to give the jobs to that others can't do."

Shepard groaned and rolled her eyes. "So every shitty job will be thrown my way, I get it. I just hope I'll still have time to catch the rogue Spectre while I'm at it."

Anderson left with a nod and Garrus and Shepard stood alone on the dock, the sounds of the passing ships and shuttles around them. Garrus looked at her, how small and how great she was. Her Spirit glowed so bright, he almost had to close his eyes.

Her hand found his, squeezing and holding on for dear life. "I never would have thought..." She whispered, "I had hoped that maybe Nihlus would have given me his ship for a while, it's a nice little thing, nothing special but this... this is the flagship! This is the best ship the Alliance has and they are giving her to me!"

"And it was the right decision," he said, a deep hum in his subharmonics to express how proud he was and how happy he was for her and how much he trusted her. "You will use this ship and catch Saren and the whole galaxy will see what you are capable of."
She looked up to him and for a second she looked like a scared little girl. "How can you be so sure? What if I fail?"

Garrus took a deep breath and swallowed a whole load of embarrassing love statements. "I just know. You will rise to this task and I will have your back."

"Together," she said and with her smile, her old confidence seemed to return. 

"Yes, together." _Forever._

"Well... then I better get going with this monumental task list." She opened several interfaces on her omni-tool and smiled. "Looks like my assistant has already done half the work, she seems quite capable. The crew roster is basically done, provisions are taken care of, there is even dextro stuff for you." She let her gaze go out to the light of the nebula in the distance. "We might need something special for Tali'Zorah, I'll inform her and I have to talk to Dr. Chakwas about medical equipment we need for a quarian. I wonder where she is."

As if on cue, the Normandy's airlock opened, and the human doctor stepped out. "Ah, Commander Shepard, I was looking for you. As our new commanding officer, I have a few things to organize with you."

Shepard smiled warmly. "Let's leave out the Commander bit, Dr. Chakwas, just Shepard for you. I was also just saying that I need to talk to you about medical equipment that we will need for the different species on board."

Dr. Chakwas nodded and had her omni-tool open. "Yes, we are perfectly equipped for humans and turians, no surprise there as the ship was constructed by humans and turians. We will need a few things for the krogan, although I don't expect to see him much, apart from refilling the medi-gel compartments in his armor."

"Yeah, Wrex is not exactly a fan of doctors anyway." Shepard dipped her head to the side, to indicate to them to follow her to the elevator. She threw another look to the far side of the dock, where a Keeper was working at an access point. Garrus wondered if she had sensed him the whole time.

Dr. Chakwas continued. "I would like to speak to an expert on quarians at Huerta Memorial Hospital about the supplies and medical equipment we will need. I have heard that it is recommended to have a clean room with a special air-filter system to make long space flights more accommodating for quarians."

"The markets should be a good start for us." Shepard kept staring at her omni-tool. "Then we head to the hospital and I also want to go the Spectre Requisitions office. And I got a few people asking me for investigations already." She ruffled through her hair and Garrus recognized the gesture as a sign of her being overwhelmed. He stepped closer to her and let a reassuring hum sound out, just loud enough so that she could hear it. She took a breath and closed her eyes for a second and when she opened them again, she looked much more relaxed.

The elevator had brought them to the hub at the C-Sec Academy and they took a transport to the markets. This section was unusually busy, and they had to shoulder through a thick crowd of people to the large window to find a quieter area. In the centre of the crowd, a group of asari and salarian dancers held a performance. It was a fascinating dance, bringing out the elegance in the wry bodies of the asari as well as the salarians. When they had finished, the crowd applauded enthusiastically.

Garrus wanted to see what Shepard thought of the performance but she had gotten distracted by a
human male, who was talking agitatedly to her. He had two supporters with him but he still seemed to
not make a good impression on Shepard. She said something to them and turned briskly away.
Shaking her head, she came back to Garrus, looking angry.

"Damn Terra Firma," she grumbled.

"Who?"

"Human patriotic party, they think that humans are better than aliens," Shepard said, "he thought the
first human Spectre would be just the person he could get to agree with him." She snorted. "I gave
him a piece of my mind." She walked over to Dr. Chakwas, who was engaged in a friendly
conversation with a krogan. Garrus had to shake his head, human women were unbelievable,
obody was quite as relaxed with krogan as they were.

An elder turian, tastefully dressed in an expensive tunic that indicated his high position in the tiers of
the turian Hierarchy, walked towards him. Garrus almost did not recognize him but when he trilled
his greeting towards him, he saw that it was General Septimus Oraka. Garrus acknowledged him
with a respectful trill of his own, noticing with relief that the General looked much better than the last
time Shepard and him had seen him.

The General stopped in front of him and trilled another greeting. "I have heard that you will
accompany the human Spectre in her hunt for Saren."

Garrus wondered how he already knew about that, so far his assignment to the Normandy still hung
on his reenlistment in the turian military. "It is not official yet but, yes, that is the plan."

"Good, very good." The general nodded and looked over to Shepard with a thoughtful trill. "Saren is
the best Spectre we ever had, he will not be easy to find. But with a human to help you," he trilled
with approval, "you might even have a chance of stopping him."

Garrus could not make sense of what he was saying. "Sir?"

Septimus made an amused chuckle. "Ah, you thought I would tell you that a human is no match for a
turian? Like they have told you how we almost had the weak humans beaten on Shanxi but the
Council stopped us?" His eyes had narrowed and there was a low rumble to his subharmonics,
speaking of experience and anger. "That's a lie, son. We all would have died. Humans, turians, no
one would have made it out alive. We would have killed each other down to the last man because
turians never retreat and humans just don't know how to give up."

He kept looking over to the two human women, casually conversing with the krogan, apparently
making some purchases off him. He spoke quietly, and his subharmonics rumbled in appreciation,
"They just keep going, they don't stop. They run, with all their heavy gear and they take half as
many breaks as our troops. They can't even see in the dark but they keep going. They climb like
pyjacks if they have to, they swim through water, they just don't stop."

He pulled Garrus towards the window. "Let this old man tell you this one war story. 'Let this old man tell you this one war story.' He looked out
the window, unseeing, his mind supplying him with the pictures. "We had to cross a swamp field,
holding our weapons up over our heads to protect them from the mud. A miserable day, cold and wet
and we had been searching for this small group of soldiers for a whole day already. We were
halfway through the swamp, when suddenly the humans rose from the mud behind us like dirty
lizards and started shooting at us. With their stupid guns, no eezo core, just plain metal tumbling out
out at high speeds, obviously more sturdy than ours, and they still worked after that mud bath. We
were twice as many as them but they had us cornered. We surrendered. I know they tell you that
turians never surrender but that's a lie too."
Garrus stared at him, trilling out bewilderment. He had never heard a story like that.

The general turned back to Garrus and smiled. "You need a stubborn human to stop a turian. And if she is the best of them..."

"She is," Garrus said, looking over to her. "She will stop him and bring him to justice."

Shepard had noticed the General and came back to them with Dr. Chakwas. But she got stopped on the way by the reporter Emily Wong and handed her the OSD that she had taken from Fist's office. Wong kept holding her in a conversation and Dr. Chakwas came over to them on her own.

General Oraka looked the human woman over with an appreciative trill and turned to Garrus, speaking just loud enough for the Doctor to hear what he said. "Now, Garrus, why do you always have the most beautiful women around you? Please introduce me to this fascinating lady."

Garrus grinned and made the introductions. "This is Dr. Karin Chakwas. Dr. Chakwas, this is General Septimus Oraka."

The General took the hand of the doctor and did something strange. He bowed down and pressed his mouthplates softly to the back of her hand. Garrus had never seen a gesture like that, but the way the Doctor was blushing, it must have had a good meaning.

Oraka straightened and said, "The day has considerably brightened since you entered this part of the Wards, Madam."

"Well, General, I'm sure you tell that to every woman you meet," Dr. Chakwas said with a smile.

"I assure you, I don't!" Oraka said with a trill of mock indignation. "Only if they are as fascinating as you are. And please, call me Septimus."

The human woman giggled lightly and blushed again. Shepard had returned and hearing the last remark, raised an eyebrow in an amused question. "Now, General Oraka, I'm glad to see that you are well. Are you planning to steal my doctor?"

Oraka was about to answer, when Shepard received a call and her omni-tool flared up from many incoming messages. "I'm sorry," she said, "it looks like everyone wants a piece of me. We still need to buy the supplies for the medbay and go to the hospital for the quarian equipment and..." She turned to answer the call and turned back to them after a short time, typing notes into her tool.

Septimus made a loud sound to get her attention. "Commander, allow me to help you. I can take Dr. Chakwas around, I will help her and protect her. Here, you can track my omni-tool, so that you always know where we are."

"Only if the doctor agrees," she said, looking at Dr. Chakwas with her eyebrows raised.

Dr. Chakwas gave bright smile and interlocked her arm with the General's. "I think that would be a much more efficient way of handling all the things we have to do and I will gladly allow this man to help me."

The general bowed his head in a more human than turian gesture and Garrus wondered how much the turian knew about human customs. "I will also take Garrus with me," Septimus said, "because I happen to know that he is expected to appear at the gun range for his aptitude test in a moment." He turned to Dr. Chakwas, leaving Garrus confused. "That will only take a few minutes, my lady, after that we will take care of all your business."
Garrus opened his mouth to ask the General what he was talking about, when his omni-tool lit up with a message from turian command, ordering him to the gun range for his aptitude test. How had the general known about that before him? He relayed the message to Shepard, who looked just as confused as him.

The General grinned and trilled in amusement. "We'll be on our way then." He saluted to Shepard. "Commander."

Shepard smiled and saluted. "General, I trust you to take good care of my friends."

"Of course." Septimus turned and walked with Dr. Chakwas on his arm towards the transport hub. Garrus turned to Shepard, making a quiet little hum towards her. She pursed her lips for a second and made a discreet wave with her hand. He wanted to hug her and kiss her and he hated that they had to act so reserved in public.

"Vakarian?" General Oraka called over to him and Garrus hurried to enter the skycar with him and Dr. Chakwas.

At the gun range, the General led Dr. Chakwas to a seating area and said, "This will only take a moment, my lady. Let me call someone over to get you something to drink and I'll be back with you shortly."

Garrus sent his identification to the front desk and the salarian manager called up the information on his terminal. "Ah, yes, Garrus Vakarian, here for his aptitude test for reenlistment. You were part of the sniper squad in basic? Let's see how you do today. You will be tested by the esteemed General Oraka himself."

The General appeared at his side with an amused trill and indicated to Garrus to follow him. He handed him a Mantis sniper rifle, an excellent weapon, well taken care of and calibrated. It was a joy to shoot with it and Garrus hit every mark. The General remained silent at his side, until the session was over.

When no new targets appeared, Garrus turned to see the General looking at him thoughtfully. "I was told that it might do me good to let you fail today," he said quietly.

"By my father?" Garrus felt familiar anger well up in him.

But Oraka just laughed. "Son, this is so far up the tiers, your father can't even see it." He typed a few commands in his omni-tool and Garrus's tool received the certificate of having passed the aptitude test.

He put the gun back into the locker and turned to the General. "So why did you let me pass?"

Septimus grinned. "First of all, you are an excellent sniper and passed the test because you shot well. And secondly... I didn't get to where I am now by listening to stercus." He typed a few more commands into his omni-tool. "You are now re-enlisted in the turian military in the rank of Optione. Your next command is as the turian relations officer on the Alliance vessel Normandy under the equivalent rank of Lieutenant to support the Spectre Commander Shepard in the hunt for Saren."

He typed a few more commands and Garrus's tool buzzed with all the documents it received. With a salute, the General dismissed him and turned his attention back to Dr. Chakwas. She got up and interlocked her arm with his again, ignoring the shocked stare of the manager. Garrus heard her quietly giggle as they left, they paid him no attention.

Garrus also left the gun range, and sat down on a nearby bench to compose a short message to his
mother. He knew that she had never wanted him to go back to the military but he wanted her to know that he was happy with this decision. He could stay with Shepard, support her and learn from her. He had never felt happier before. He finally knew what he wanted to do with his life.

The Presidium was bustling with even more people than usual, most of them human. There seemed to be a spontaneous party going on; the human population of the Citadel was celebrating the first human Spectre. Shepard worked her way through the crowd, shaking hands everywhere, smiling for pictures, speaking to children and Garrus could see that her smile got more strained by the minute. He called up a skycar and waved her over. She finally managed to free herself from the crowd and jumped into the skycar.

"Hit it," she said and the exhaustion cut grooves into her face.

"Where to?" he asked, directing the car into the flow of traffic, his fingers hovering over the console to program a destination.

"Eventually the Normandy," Shepard said, "but we need to get our stuff first. We will be leaving in an hour, can you believe it?"

"So soon?" Garrus asked in surprise.

"Yes, after playing errand-girl for half of the Citadel, I finally got some info from the Council about Matriarch Benezia. They want me to pick up her daughter in the Artemis Tau Cluster. They hope that she knows what her mother is doing or that she maybe will have some influence on her."

Garrus growled in disbelief. "Not all asari daughters stay in close contact with their mothers. And that's a big system to search through for one asari."

"It's all we have for now. She is an archaeologist, an expert on protheans. Anderson recommended to look for prothean ruins." She gave him a short look. "Maybe she could even help me with this prothean vision in my head."

It was the first time that she really acknowledged that something had been implanted in her brain by the beacon on Eden Prime. It was a chilling thought.

"Other than that," she said, her tone light again, "I only have some odd jobs here and there that apparently need my Spectre authority to get solved. Anyway, the assistant from the Council is incredible, she has gotten everything ready in record time." She turned to him with a grin. "You'll never guess who it is."

"The assistant? I know her?"

"Yes, it's Jinala, you remember? The asari bondmate of Sapita, the woman your father had arranged the convi-something with."

"The praecipit convenire, I remember." He looked over to Shepard and trilled out his love. "It seems like a lifetime ago."

"Yes it does," Shepard said, smiling at him with the light of a thousand suns.
They needed only a few minutes to pack up their things and a short time later they arrived at the Normandy. The outer airlock stood open waiting for them to enter. Shepard hesitated and her hand searched for his. He pressed her hand shortly, just enough for reassurance but then he let go. She was the Commander of the Normandy and her first steps onto her ship would not be with him holding her hand. She smiled at him and nodded. They stepped in and after the decontamination cycle had ended, he let Shepard step on board first.

The VI announced her presence to the crew and everyone snapped to attention. The XO, a human named Pressly informed her that the crew was complete, including the aliens, he added with a slight sneer. Shepard did not react but Garrus knew that she had made note of his behaviour. Pressly would soon find himself in a serious conversation with Shepard.

Garrus followed her into the cockpit, where a rather small man was sitting in the pilot seat, grinning widely at them as they entered. "I knew you'd join me here, Commander!" He called out, only half watching his hands flying over the orange glowing controls. "Ready, whenever you say." He looked at Garrus, a slight look of unease flitting over his face before he grinned at him. Shepard stepped to the side to make room for him.

"This is Optione Garrus Vakarian, here on behalf of the turian Hierarchy as the turian relations officer and also," she hesitated and gave him a smile, "my best friend."

The pilot looked between the two of them and a grin spread on his face. "Friend, sure." He laughed and nodded towards Garrus. "Nice to meet you, Optione Vakarian. I'm Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau, everybody calls me Joker. I would give you my hand but I'm a bit fragile and don't want to get it crushed by yours." He turned back to the controls. "Kinda need my hands, you know?"

That was a rather strange remark, even slightly offensive. Garrus made a confused trill and Shepard turned to him with a smile. "I'll explain later. Joker may be an ass but he did not mean to insult you... this time." She turned towards the window, the mass effect fields casting blue patterns on her skin. "Take us out, Joker, and set a course for the Artemis Tau Cluster."

"You got it, Commander," the pilot answered, his hands flying over the omni-display in front of him. The docking clamps released the ship with a metallic clunk and the Normandy glided through the mass effect fields of the Citadel into open space.

The Relay grew larger in the viewport, spinning it's inner rings, pure energy discharges jumping around the core. The ship crept closer to the core, Joker keeping it clear of the spinning rings put close enough for the energy to enclose the ship. For a few seconds, the light of the core was almost blindingly bright, cradling the ship right next to the relay. In the next moment, the familiar but still unnerving gravitational pull of the mass effect field catapulted the ship away from the relay into the stream. The blinding light disappeared and left the viewport dark until the eyes adjusted again and faint stars became visible in the background.

"I love this," Shepard whispered beside him. "I love watching the ship pass through the relay." She smiled with wide eyes and to Garrus she almost looked like a child, her face full of wonder.
Garrus had not seen much of Shepard for the first few days on the Normandy. She kept herself busy with tours of the ship from top to bottom and spoke to everyone. He had never seen a commander of a ship being so familiar with her crew. She learned everybody's name, asked them about their jobs, had them explain everything to her and took notes of what they needed. She spent a lot of time in engineering and Garrus saw her disappear in the ductworks with Tali, checking out Spirits-know-what in the intestines of the ship.

The travel to the Artemis Tau cluster went through four relays and it took eight galactic days to get there. Once in the system, the Normandy jumped from one weirdly named system to the next, scanning everything. They found mineral and gas enclosures to survey but no prothean ruins.

Whenever she passed him or saw him in a room on her way to somewhere else, she gave him an apologetic smile, promising to come to him eventually too. He tried to be calm and patient but it got harder every hour. All he wanted was to hold her in his arms and talk to her.

To distract himself, he had turned to the Mako, an agile tank, loosely based on the design of turian ground combat vehicles with some changes and improvements by human engineering. The Mako was secured at port in the cargo bay, opposite the weapons workshop. Garrus found the open workshop quite strange, as on a turian ship, a whole room was dedicated to the armory and the weapons workshop.

At least the weapons bench was close to the lockers so that he could easily find a place to clean his rifle at. Unfortunately though, the human marine Ashley Williams worked at the bench most of the time. Garrus had greeted her and had tried to engage her in a friendly chat but she answered in the most short and cold way possible. Her face practically radiated distrust and anger. He was pretty sure that he had done nothing to warrant such behaviour but he knew these kind of expressions from his time at C-Sec. It was the typical expression of a xenophobic human, spewing hateful remarks about the First Contact War.

At least she didn't look at him like she looked at Wrex. The krogan mercenary had thrown down his pack on the other side of the lockers and Williams had to walk past him whenever she wanted to get to her workbench. Garrus did not need to recall his training on human expressions to know what she was thinking. This could turn into a problem. On Shepard's ship, she had better get used to aliens. He was not looking for friendship with her but she had to be able to work with him and the other aliens on board.

Scratching his fringe, he turned back to the Mako and called up the data sheet on his omni-tool. It looked fairly familiar, but there were a few controls added to accommodate for human customs. They had even added a steering wheel, which was apparently preferred by humans but the turian control sticks were also installed in hidden compartments. The guns looked familiar enough and Garrus let a few simulations run to see if he could improve anything on the software.
The sound of the elevator doors pulled him out of his concentration. Shepard stepped out and gave him a short smile before turning to the requisitions officer. After speaking to him, she exchanged a few words with Wrex and Ashley and then, finally, she came over to him. Garrus locked the terminal and turned around to greet her respectfully, only to find her right in front of him, stretched on her tip-toes. Feather-light, she placed a kiss on his mandible.

Garrus wasn't sure how to react but his head followed hers as she went down on her heels again. It was so good to smell her again and to feel her soft lips, he just didn't want to lose that contact. He only moved his head back a bit to get a good view of her wide smile.

*Finally. I missed this smile so much.*

"Hey," he mumbled, his hand lightly stroking over her arm, "what... I mean, public display of affection? Won't that be a problem?" He vaguely pointed towards the requisitions officer, who was unashamedly staring at them, and Ashley Williams, who turned a bit too fast back to the gun on her workbench.

"Can we sit down? Maybe inside of this baby?" She pointed to the Mako. Garrus nodded and opened the door for her. The inside compartment was not exactly luxury seating but it had a bench on the side where they both could sit. Garrus left the door open, so that the light of the cargo bay illuminated the inside. As soon as he had sat down, Shepard stretched out beside him on the bench and placed her head on his thigh. A happy sigh left her upon stretching her legs, letting them hang down from the bench.

"I feel like I have been running around this ship for a week." She grabbed his hand and placed it on her stomach, interweaving her own fingers with his. Garrus quickly removed his gloves to really feel her skin. He let his other hand stroke through her hair, lightly scratching the skin with his talons. She closed her eyes and made a deep, rasping sound in the back of her throat.

"Are you purring?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Maybe?" She grinned. "I'm a spacecat, just like you."

"I thought we turians remind you humans of birds. Frank always calls me Birdy."

Shepard giggled. "I think they got it all wrong, you are definitely a purring spacecat."

Garrus let out the kind of deep hum that she loved so much.

"There it is, the purr." She gave him her bright smile as she looked up to him. It warmed his gizzard and his subharmonics sang.

Her hand reached up to his mandible, the tip of her finger tracing its outline. "As for the public display of affection... us having a relationship is not against any rules. Besides the fact that I'm a Spectre on an Alliance ship, the Alliance actually has no problem with established relationships, they just get panicky if something happens between an officer and a subordinate while they are on tour. But even that is not exactly forbidden." Her finger moved down his throat, softly stroking. "There is just this unwritten rule that we don't flaunt it, you know? No smooching during combat, no kisses on the bridge."

"The bridge?"

"Command deck. Sorry, we still use a lot of nautical terms on spaceships. I guess, for us humans, sailing the ocean is not so long ago compared to turian history of spaceflight. So, no kisses on the command deck."
"Damn, and here I thought about bending you over the CIC," Garrus murmured with a deep purr from his chest. Her eyes widened and a little sound of surprise escaped her lips.

"Oh, I like the way you think, Garrus Vakarian." She pulled his hand up to her mouth and kissed his fingers, still looking at him. "I was thinking of christening the Mako soon."

Garrus let out a surprised trill and she laughed out loud. "Not now! You horny turian, we may not have to hide but I'm not putting on a show for Ashley there."

"That might scare her off the ship, the way she's looking at me." Garrus said with a look over to Williams' side of the cargo bay.

"Let me guess, suspicious, paranoid?"

"She looks at me like she is expecting me to attack any minute."

Shepard stretched and folded her hands behind her neck. "Ashley is careful, that's for sure, not quick with the trusting. The thing is, she's a Williams, born to be a soldier but unappreciated. So she only got the shitty jobs on Earth or some backwater colonies. This is probably the first time she has ever seen aliens up close. I saw her fight on Eden Prime, she should have been a squad leader by now."

Garrus felt that he was missing something. "Why isn't she?"

"Right, the name Williams doesn't mean anything to you." Shepard sat up and settled down next to him. "During the First Contact War, on Shanxi, General Williams surrendered to the turians to avoid further civilian casualties."

"Oh, he was leading the guerilla fight? His name is actually known in turian annals and you should ask General Oraka about that sometimes. I think he has something to say about it."

"Really? That would be interesting, I wonder what the turians thought of the surrender, knowing now, that the Second Fleet was already on its way. I think it was a wise decision, he was cut off from reinforcements and had to protect the colonists. He had to play for time. But in the Alliance Navy it has put a kind of taint on the name Williams. So Ashley still has to make up for her grandfather or something like that. It's ridiculous."

She had taken his hand and played with his fingers, letting her many digits slip between his. Garrus felt his mandibles quiver in a smile.

He recalled something that he had learned in training. "You know, before the Relay-314 incident, turians did not really have a concept of unarmed civilians."

"No?"

"Every turian goes to basic training at age 15 and even if he or she does not stay in the military, they still have regular training in weapons and self-defence," he said, recalling his mother grumbling about having to go to another training session, while his father was giddy about it like a little boy. "Asari have their biotics, salarians all have some kind of defense suite on their omni-tools and krogan... krogan are krogan. If batarians leave their home-world, they are either mercenaries or business men and there is no batarian business man without a gun. So the idea that the new aliens could settle on a planet with people who had no military training, protected by just a small unit of soldiers, never came to anyone’s mind."

"I see," Shepard said, "that kind of explains why the attack was so... overblown, from a human perspective. For us, it looked like the turians were trying to wipe a peaceful colony of unarmed
farmers off the planet, while you guys thought you had to stop a military installment taking place."

Garrus shook his head. "If the Council had not intervened..."

"Yeah, that would have ended badly. It was bad enough..." She let her voice trail off.

"Turians don't retreat," he said, thinking back to the conversation he had had with the General, "and humans don't know how to give up. That's what Oraka told me."

Shepard raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Huh, I think I really want to have a little conversation about the First Contact War with him. That could be very interesting."

She looked back over to the weapons bench, where Ashley Williams stood with her back turned to them, taking a rifle apart. "Anyway, this is the first fleet posting Chief Williams has ever had and it is the first time that she is working with aliens. Part of her reticence is that she feels that we should keep the Normandy and it's capabilities a secret. She thinks that humanity has to look out for themselves and I know that a lot of people think that way." She grinned at him. "I disagree, I'm a fan of interspecies collaboration but... who knows, maybe she is right and that openness will bite us in the ass one day."

She shrugged her shoulders and settled her head against his armored shoulder. "I'm planning to take her along on our next scouting mission, take this baby for a ride," she slapped her hand against the side of the Mako, "and have her work with you on shields and guns."

"We still don't know where Liara T'soni is?" Garrus wondered.

"No, it's such a joke! She is working as an official archaeologist for the asari government, she has a whole team with her and nobody knows where they are! Or," she raised her finger, "or this is another try of the asari councillor to make my job harder than necessary."

Garrus trilled out in disbelief. "Why would she do that?"

Shepard threw her arms up. "Shit on my head if I know! But it is all so weird, Sparatus and his connection to the Arterius brothers, Councilor Tevos' refusal to mind-meld with me, this sudden Spectre status. People usually get trained to become Spectres but I just get thrown out there, 'Ho! Go and play Spectre!' And now we are drifting around out here without proper intel, looking for the daughter of an asari Matriarch, who, surprise, has been in contact with Saren for a while but nobody felt it necessary to tell us until we came up with proof on our own."

"So, actually I'm convinced they are setting me up to fail. I just don't understand why."

"Neither do I," Garrus admitted, "but you are right, none of this is making sense."

They sat in silence, thinking. Garrus tried to come up with a reason for the things Shepard had mentioned but he couldn't. The behaviour of the asari Councilor was irrational.

Their thoughtful silence was interrupted by the voice of the pilot coming over the shipwide comm system. "Commander? We are currently in the Sparta system and we have received an Alliance distress signal from Edolus."

Shepard tabbed the comm under her ear to speak directly with Joker. "Standard orbit, Joker, we will drop with the Mako and investigate." She turned to Garrus, excitement twinkling in her eyes. "Get ready, Vakarian, we are going for a ride!" She jumped out of the Mako and skipped over the the lockers. "Chief Williams, suit up, we drop in ten and you're coming with us!"
Williams almost jumped in surprise but managed to produce a salute and hurried over to the lockers to suit up. Garrus walked over as well to take out his weapons. He noticed how she looked suspiciously at him from the corner of her eyes, displaying signs of worry and distrust. He checked over his equipment, noticing his sniper rifle collapsing with a very quiet snap, unlike the day before. He turned to the woman, "Chief Williams? Did you change something about the mechanism?" The rifle's collapsing mechanism had given him trouble for weeks but to fix it he would have had to take it apart which would have meant a long session of calibrating the weapon again. He never had the time to do all that.

The human's head snapped around, guilt clearly visible on her face. "It was just wedged, I could realign it with some grease and by levering..." The shock must have been visible on his face because her eyes widened and she balled her fists at her side. "I calibrated and tested it, it shoots just as before!"

Garrus was about to hiss out an angry reply about her screwing up his careful calibrations, when a slight knock on his armored arm stopped him. Shepard looked at him, a serious scowl on her face but he could see a smile fighting it's way through by the twitching of her lips.

"I'm sure you can find something to shoot at on Edolus, so why don't you test your baby there? Now get ready." Shepard gave both of them her under-her-lashes stare that still let a shiver run down his spine.

The effect disappeared as she transformed into Commander Shepard in front of his eyes. She suddenly seemed to be taller and her face looked hard. Her normal, wide arm movements became short and precise. It was fascinating how every movement, every look seemed to be deliberate, not a single motion without purpose.

She settled down behind the strange steering wheel of the Mako and waited for Garrus and Ashley Williams to sit down in the aft section. A few commands on the interface later, an automatic announcement by the ship’s VI rang through the cargo hold.

"Attention, flight deck in operation, stay clear of the containment fields on the cargo deck. Attention, flight deck in operation." Around the Mako, blue mass effect fields appeared, separating the vehicle from the rest of the cargo deck and forming a ring around the opening hatch. Shepard started the motor, letting it quietly hum. "Stand by for drop," the VI announced. "Drop in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1."

In front of the Mako, the field disappeared and tightened around the vehicle and pushed it out of the hatch. With breathtaking speed the Mako dropped to the ground in free fall, reminding everyone on board that is was not made for flying. Shepard used the thrusters to steer the vehicle, laughing madly as she floated above her seat in the loss of gravity.

"Yeah, go baby!" she yelled out. Garrus wondered if she had lost her mind, they fell like a rock, the ground hurtling towards them, promising a painful death on impact. Williams stared at him, fear in her eyes that he could very well relate to. Her hands gripped the handlebar so hard that it creaked. Garrus did the same, holding on as he stared at his crazy girlfriend cackling madly.

A mere breath above the ground, Shepard hit the thrusters with full power and the Mako set down on the ground with a thud, bouncing a few times before coming to a stop. She turned around in her seat, a triumphant grin all over her face. "Wasn't that awesome?"

"Have to respectfully disagree there, Skipper," Williams said, taking a deep breath and slowly letting go of the handlebar. "Never been so sure of dying before."

"I second that," Garrus mumbled. Williams looked at him in surprise and for the first time she
actually smiled at him.

Shepard snorted loudly. "Pfft, you guys are such partypoopers. That was fun. Fun, fun, fun." She fiddled with the controls and started driving, slowly at first. "Reminds me a bit of skiing. Dashing down the hill at full speed, oh, so awesome." They began to leave the flat landing surface behind. Around them, jagged hills closed the valley off like walls.

Garrus slowly relaxed, feeling the muscles in his neck soften and his hand releasing the handlebar from his painful grip. "What is skiing?" He wondered, asking no one in particular.

"Do you have snow on Palaven?" Shepard asked.

"Up in the north, there is permanent snow. But turians don't like the cold, so nobody goes there."

"What a shame." Shepard laughed. "We don't like cold all that much either but we put on warm clothes, tie two long pieces of wood under our feet and then ride downhill on them as fast as we can."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Garrus shook his head.

"A little... I mean, you shouldn't ram any trees and stuff that could kill you."

"And you do that why?"

Shepard grinned her mad grin again. "Because it is fun!"

Garrus stared at her in disbelief. "For fun? You humans..." The floor crashed against his face, impeding his speech. He failed to orient himself in space, tumbling over the floor, seeing the side hatch of the Mako over his head.

From up front he heard a cascade of swear words as Shepard tried to get the vehicle under control again. They had hit a rock on the side of the cliff, not even a very big one, but it was big enough to send the Mako spinning and almost ending up on her roof. The vehicle swung around as Shepard turned sharply, narrowly avoiding another rock and climbing up the cliff face at full speed. Garrus and Williams flew backwards against the rear end, Garrus managed to grab hold on something to avoid crashing onto the human.

When the Mako's front tipped over the cliffs edge, Shepard brought the thing to a hard stop, sending them both tumbling forward and crashing against the half-wall separating the cockpit from the rear. Shepard fell back against her seat and snapped her hands away from the steering wheel as if it was on fire.

"What the blazing fuck was that?" she yelled out. Garrus muttered some oldfashioned curses under his breath as he unscrambled himself from the bench he had slid under, and held out a hand to Williams who sat on the floor, looking slightly dazed. She took his hands without hesitation and he wondered if she had suffered head trauma. But she seemed to come around again, carefully stretching her neck. Garrus assessed his own bumps, the tip of one fringe felt a bit sensitive but other than that, he seemed uninjured.

He twitched his mandibles into a sly grin to Shepard's angry face. "I had no idea that I was supposed to wear a helmet inside the Mako."

Her features relaxed, the anger melting away from her frown. "I'm sorry guys, I swear I'm a good driver, I steered combat cars before."
"Didn't feel like it, Skipper," Williams said, rubbing her elbow. "I'm about to rethink my posting on
the Normandy."

Shepard gave her a scowl that sat somewhere between anger and amusement. She turned back to the
steering wheel and very slowly steered the Mako along the cliff edge until they had reached an
almost horizontal plateau. She turned to Garrus, who had held on to the divider behind her seat a bit
harder than necessary. "Garrus, the Mako is based on a turian design, right? Why does it control so
bad?" She waved over the steering wheel, "If I so much as breathe against that, it goes off!"

"Well, turians don't use steering wheels. Maybe it wasn't set up right." Garrus had to hold on to his
subharmonics to keep the amusement out of his voices, Shepard sounded like she was personally
offended by the car.

Shepard strained her neck to stare up at him. "What do you guys use then?"

Garrus leaned over and swiped a few controls on the interface. The steering wheel collapsed and
disappeared behind a flap while the familiar control sticks locked in place on the sides. Shepard
hesitantly laid her hands on the control sticks, adjusting her five fingers to the three indents on the
grip.

He put his head next to her, looking over her shoulder, breathing in her scent. "You steer the wheels
with the left stick, the right stick turns the upper section to point the big gun. Keep your movements
small," he said, as she slowly drove the Mako along the ridge of the cliff.

"This is much better, it actually works," she said with a smile. She enlarged the map and drove down
the cliffside towards the marker for the emergency beacon. "On the Citadel, Admiral Kahoku has
asked me to look for a group of marines that have been lost in this cluster on a mission. I hope that is
their emergency beacon." She attacked another steep cliff, making Garrus and Williams hold on to
one of the many handles that the engineers had thankfully installed in the car.

"Skipper?" Williams asked through her teeth. "Do you have to take the steepest route?"

"Look around, Chief, it's steep everywhere." The Mako tipped over the top edge and tumbled more
than rolled down the even steeper other side of the cliff. Just as they were about to crash into the
ground, nose-first, Shepard hit the thrusters and managed to set the Mako down on all six wheels.
Beside him, Garrus heard Williams mumble something that sounded like a prayer.

They had reached a large, sandy area, surrounded by the jagged cliffs they had just tumbled over.
Shepard stopped the tank and scanned the area in front of them. The terrain was flat and stretched out
wide towards the horizon, delimited by more jagged mountains. Garrus adjusted his visor, he could
make out the shape of a vehicle in the centre of the field and a few dark spots.

Shepard enlarged the picture on the omni-screen. "That's an M29 Grizzly and there is the emergency
beacon," she zoomed in on the picture to the dark spots on the ground. Her mouth pulled into a thin
line when she recognized the shapes. "Those are bodies and I receive no life-signs. It looks like we're
too late. Damn." She punched the cockpits surface, earning her an angry beep from the translucent
interface.

Williams crawled into the other seat, studying the enlarged picture. "Why did they even go out? The
Grizzly is a fine tank, they could have waited shit out inside."

Shepard nodded. "We have to find out who or what killed them. Follow protocol." She settled her
hands on the control sticks again and slowly drove towards the M29 Grizzly. The bodies on the
ground were now recognizable to the naked eye, but the blue of their Alliance armor was visible
under a layer of dust and sand. Shepard steered the Mako in a circle around the site, scanning the ground. She was obviously expecting a trap and Garrus had to agree, the whole situation made his plates itch.

Something was definitely not right.

She stopped the Mako and scanned the area once more. "I don't see any explosives, trip fields. All I get is the distress signal from the beacon."

"Ma'am..."

"Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams, you did not just Ma'am me, did you?" Shepard turned towards her, one eyebrow raised high and a grin twitching on her lips.

Williams face turned pink and for the first time on this trip, she looked actually nervous. "Yes.. no! I'm sorry Ma-Skipper!" She raised her arm and projected a reading from her omni-tool. "Something is wrong with that distress signal. It seems to be Alliance but the encoding is outdated. And it has been running for a long time, it's not from these marines." Shepard leaned over, those expressive eyebrows of her pulled tight together in a frown.

"So this signal lured them here and then someone..."

The ground exploded.

Mere twenty meters away from the Mako, a giant thresher maw erupted from the ground, long tentacles twitching and stretching towards the vehicle. Williams and Garrus stared at the creature, paralysed. The giant mouth opened wide and green acid erupted from it, flying towards them. The Mako jumped violently as Shepard reacted in a split-second and skidded out of the trajectory at full speed.

"Thresher maw!" Shepard yelled out, forcing the Mako in a tight turn at full speed. "Williams - shields and cannon, Garrus - machineguns! And someone tell me how we kill it!"

Garrus slid into the gunners seat, belts buckling him in and connected to the interface. "That acid will eat through our plating in seconds." He aimed for the head and fired.

Shepard hit the thrusters to jump over a blob of acid, as the thresher maw appeared right in front of them. She jerked the Mako around so hard that the control stick creaked, driving in the opposite direction to get away from the thresher maw's head hammering on the ground. The creature disappeared underground again and Shepard drove towards the rocky cliff face at top speed.

"I know that, heard enough about Akuze." The thresher maw erupted in front of them and Shepard turned the Mako again, making them strain against their seat belts. "Killing, how?"

"Throat, below the head. Main nerve centre. Hit it here..."

Shepard didn't wait for him to finish, she pivoted the cockpit towards the creature, Williams aimed the gun and fired. The thresher maw twitched and shrieked as it went underground again. Garrus peppered it with shots from the machine gun until it was completely underground.

They drove another circle around the Grizzly, now the hunter and not the prey. Shepard's eyes roamed over the plain. "Ready, Chief?"

"Always, Skipper." The dark haired woman had murder in her eyes.
"Do we have grenades on the cannon?" Shepard asked, taking another turn.

"Yes, armed and ready!" the other woman answered.

The maw erupted right next to them, dousing the Mako in acid before they could get away. Garrus fired until the thing went underground again.

"Shields at 53%," Ashley called out.

"Fucking fuckshit," Shepard grumbled. "Next time that thing comes up, I want a grenade right into its mouth, let's see how it swallows that pill."

"Aye, Skipper."

Garrus noticed movement on his side. "On the right!" He aimed the guns and fired in short bursts. The guns tended to overheat from continuous fire and they could not afford anything like that right now.

"Williams?" Shepard called out as she turned the cockpit to the right.

The Gunnery Chief aimed, waiting for the moment when the thing opened its mouth. The tentacles twitched, the mouth opened to spit out another blob of acid and she fired the grenade. It flew in a slight arc and tumbled into the blue glowing maw. For a second the monster threw its head around, trying to dislodge the object from its throat. With a blinding flash, the grenade exploded. Acid and bits of flesh sprayed around and the giant thresher maw tipped over and crashed to the ground.

Shepard slowed down, carefully circling the heap of the monster. Garrus used the Mako's scanner on the thing.

"It's dead."

"Is it the only one?" Shepard asked, still driving, keeping the Mako moving. "Akuze had a whole nest."

Williams and Garrus kept scanning for movement and thermal images underground.

Garrus looked over to Williams, trilling in question. She looked confused and Garrus remembered that she had not worked with aliens before, so she probably knew next to nothing about turian subharmonics. "Anything?" he asked aloud.

Williams shook her head. "No, it looks all quiet underground."

Shepard slowed down, lifting her fingers off the handles one by one to stretch them. "Alright, I'm going to stop at the Grizzly. Williams, eyes on the scanner and the main gun, Garrus, cover me but stay in the Mako. I'm going out."

Garrus opened his mouth to object and quickly shut it as he realized that this was Commander Shepard and it was not his place to argue with her. He clamped down his worry trill and unfolded his sniper rifle and waited until Shepard stood beside him with a backpack, her assault rifle ready. A short nod by her gave indication to open the side door. She jumped out, carefully checking her surroundings. Garrus let his visor enhance heat signatures but the only red outline he could see was by her.

Shepard put her gun away and walked to every dead marine, pulling each away from the Grizzly by the feet and laid them next to each other. She searched around the upper armor of each soldier before
moving to the next one. As she passed the beacon, she turned it off and placed a small pack from her backpack on it. At last, she crawled under the M29 Grizzly and came out without the backpack.

Garrus trilled questioningly and was surprised when Ashley Williams answered from the cockpit. Apparently she had learned what this specific subharmonic meant.

"Standard Alliance protocol. Collect the tags of any dead soldier, and destroy all Alliance equipment that can not be taken away," she said, her eyes never leaving the scanner display.

"What are tags?"

Williams looked up from her display. She stretched her underarmor at the throat and pulled out a silvery chain with two metal plates dangling on it. "Every Alliance soldier has these. It has the name and the identification number punched in and it contains a memory chip with personal information and..." she turned back to the scanner and her voice got very quiet, "...personal things like pictures and letters to the family."

"Ah, like a signaculum." Garrus was about to show her his signaculum but he didn't want to keep his concentration off Shepard for too long. She was trotting back to them now, the tags in her hand. When she had reached the Mako, she turned around and pressed a button on her omni-tool. The Grizzly jumped up as the pack exploded underneath it, dust and sand billowing out from underneath it and settling over the bodies of the dead marines. The beacon disintegrated as well and a second later, another explosion sounded out and a bright flash signaled the violent destruction of the Grizzly's eezo fusion cells.

Williams mumbled something under her breath and moved her hands in a pattern in front of her chest. Garrus wondered what that meant. Shepard turned back to the Mako and Garrus held out a hand to help her up. He pulled her into the Mako, maybe a bit closer to himself than necessary. For a glorious second he could smell her hair and enjoy having her safe in his arms. He knew it was ridiculous but he had worried about her, out there in the thresher maw’s field, more than he liked to admit.

Shepard stepped out of his embrace, her skin a bit pinker than normal. She cleared her throat before she spoke. "What's a signaculum?"

Garrus realized that he had forgotten that the team comm was always open; he had gotten used to the C-Sec standard of keeping the comm off unless explicitly stated otherwise. He opened the little compartment in his armor that contained the omni-chip with his personal information and showed it to the human women. "That code here is also etched into my plates, on the side." He pointed to the left side under his cowl.

Shepard stared at him with wide eyes. "Why have I never noticed that?"

Ashley Williams suddenly looked like her head was about to explode, the color of her face rivaled the pink joints on her armor. She turned abruptly and looked straight ahead. Shepard grinned and sat down in the drivers seat next to her.

"Well, Chief, I'm pretty sure you already knew about Garrus and me. And the grapevine was probably busy too."

The face of the other woman turned even more pinker. "Well, yes, but scuttlebutt actually has the LT pinned as having a crush on you, so I wasn't sure..."

"Alenko?" Shepard laughed out, shaking her head. "No, they got that wrong. This turian here is..."
She said something else but it was drowned out by the rushing of his own blood in his ears. The one?

Shepard called the Normandy for pickup and they stopped to wait. "Now, Williams, I know that working with aliens is new for you and I don't expect you to fall in love with one but I do expect you to work with them. This is a multilateral mission."

"Yes, Commander, I understand. I was mainly concerned about Wrex and Tali, since they both are not military. Giving them access to the technology of the most advanced ship the Alliance has..." Williams sat up a bit straighter in her seat. "But it won't be a problem. You tell me to jump, I ask how high, you tell me to kiss a turian, I'll ask which cheek."

Shepard grinned. "You're gonna have to find your own turian for that, I'm kissing this one." She smiled at him, making him feel warm under his cowl.

Williams looked between them, a strange expression on her face. She seemed appalled and curious at the same time. "I'm very glad to be on the Normandy, Commander, I'm not going to ruin it."

"Glad to hear it, Chief."

The Normandy swooped over them. The rear hatch opened and the cables extended, glowing blue from the mass effect fields. Shepard drove backwards towards them and hit the thrusters to give the Mako the necessary lift so that the cables could grab it and pull it in. The upwards jerk was even more unsettling than the drop before and only stopped when the mass effect field enclosed them again and positioned the Mako at its parking spot in the hangar.

They all let out a sigh of relief and unbuckled the seat belts. Williams climbed back into the main hold and collected her equipment. Garrus gave her his friendliest smile, mandibles wide but his mouth closed so that his teeth were hidden.

"That was some good shooting down there, Williams," he said, nodding his head.

She looked startled for a second but then she bowed her head as well, a faint smile on her lips. "Likewise, Vakarian."

"Please call me Garrus, I'll think you're talking to my father otherwise."

The smile on Williams face grew wider. "Yes - Garrus - and please call me Ashley. Same reason, actually. Funny that."

He was about to jump out of the Mako, when he suddenly was pulled back by someone grabbing his armor at his backplate. Shepard made him turn around and pulled his head down to her, placing a fierce kiss on his mouthplates. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her as close as it was possible with their armor scratching against each other. Her tongue licked his mouthplates and he caught hers by wrapping his longer tongue around hers. She tasted of salt and heat, and her hand under his fringe pulled him hard against her mouth. He lost himself in the feeling of pulling, kissing, pressing, hunger, love. Only the lack of breath made them break apart, and they stared at each other for an endless second.

At last, Shepard turned around and jumped out of the Mako, a pleased smile on her face. Garrus followed her, an equally happy smile on his face. She put her hand on Garrus' arm and murmured, "I want to report to Admiral Kahoku right away, I'll find you later, okay?" She walked towards the elevator. Halfway there, she turned around and looked at him and Chief Williams, giving a salute.
"Good job, guys."

Garrus and Ashley both saluted and then looked at each other, realizing that they both wore the same kind of proud grin on their faces. Even Ashley seemed to recognize it.

Garrus had to chuckle, Shepard may be his girlfriend but a compliment by your commanding officer was still something special.

Chapter End Notes

WTF? There isn't even sex? I'm sorry, it just didn't happen.

Edited by Credete
The satisfaction of the kiss lasted Garrus for about thirty minutes. He checked the Mako for damages and ordered a few replacement parts for the shock absorbers. But he couldn't concentrate on anything else. Her scent was all around him and it had been so long since he had touched her.

He felt like a horny teenager. Whenever he closed his eyes, he saw her, her eyes sparkling, her mouth open in a moan. His armor had gotten extremely uncomfortable in the last few minutes. He shook his head at his own ridiculousness. It wasn't like this was the first time that he had to wait for sex. It shouldn't affect him like it did.

His mind kept supplying him with memories of previous sex but also with pictures of a future he imagined. The rational part of his mind was telling him that it was silly and much too early in their relationship to make plans for the future. But another part of him was painting pictures of a life together with children running around them and adventures under the stars.

_Get a hold of yourself!_

He decided to get himself a snack to take his mind off those silly ideas and stepped into the elevator. Just as the doors closed, the pilot's voice came over the speakers.

"Optione Vakarian, the Commander orders you to report to the comm room immediately."

"Thank you Lieutenant." He tapped his comm to make a connection to the Flight Lieutenant. "Lieutenant Moreau? You don't need to use the rank when you're addressing me."

"Listen, you cut it with the Lieutenant and call me Joker and I call you Fluffy The Princess if that's what you like," said the pilot.

Garrus chuckled. "Garrus would be fine."

"Got it, Garrus. Now better hurry to the comm room before the lady gets angry."

"Yes, thanks, Lieu- Joker," Garrus said and hurried up the stairs to the command deck. He turned around the corner rather quickly and almost knocked over the XO, Pressley, who gave him a look as if he had swallowed something nasty.

The comm room's doors closed behind him with an audible noise of seals sucking shut. Garrus wondered exactly what this heavy door was supposed to withstand. Shepard stood on the far end of the room, a translucent projection of two very familiar turians in front of her. One was Keggs,
leaning on a desk, looking at a display off to the side, the other was Nihlus, his feet on the desk and laughing about something. He noticed Garrus approaching.

"Ah, there he is! Garrus, the brave! I heard you became friends with a Thresher Maw today!" Nihlus called out.

"I also experienced some new deathly fears from Shepard's driving." Garrus hummed his subharmonics in humor at Shepard and grinned.

"Oh, come on!" Shepard yelled and punched him on his armored arm. "It's not my fault that the thing handles like a cat on ice with the steering wheel. It got much better with the turian control sticks." She gave him an angry look from under her frowned eyebrows and it was so damn sexy that Garrus felt his groin plates open. This was getting more ridiculous by the minute.

Keggs turned back to the camera and pushed Nihlus' feet off the desk, making the other turian stumble to not hit his mandibles on the table. They exchanged some grunts and angry tones but with a friendly undertone in their subharmonics. It looked like they had developed a friendship in the last few days that Nihlus had been working with ANIS.

"We have some information on Matriarch Benezia," Keggs said and transferred a collection of files over to the Normandy. It took a while to load them and he explained what they knew while they waited. "Matriarch Benezia is a well respected, high ranking teacher and spiritual leader on Thessia. She is known for her unique teachings and her somewhat extreme views on the legacy of the goddess Athame."

"How extreme?" Shepard asked with a frown.

Nihlus leaned forward. "The asari today mostly follow the teachings of the siari religion, believing in the unity of everything in the universe. But in the old days, they had many different religions and the biggest group worshipped the goddess Athame. Few asari actually follow Athame's teachings today, but she is still prevalent in their everyday praying or when they say 'By the goddess!'. It is said that she taught the asari science and math and prepared them to be leaders of the galaxy."

"Now Matriarch Benezia takes that a little further," Keggs chimed in, "stating in her teachings and her manifestos that the galaxy needs the asari to lead or better force the other species on the right path."

Garrus was taken aback. "That doesn't sound like the asari teachings you hear on the Citadel," he said, recalling what he had learned from the acquaintances he had made over the years. "In the schools and chapels on the Citadel they speak about the unity of all beings, of the connections between the spiritual energy of all species."

"So Matriarch Benezia is a radical?" Shepard asked.

Nihlus trilled a negative tone. "They rather call her conservative or old-fashioned."

Shepard pinched her nose with two fingers, a strange gesture that she did when she was thinking hard. "Does she have political influence?"

Nihlus made a vague hand movement. "Asari politics are kind of undefined if you look at them from the outside. Matriarch Benezia doesn't hold an official office but she has a lot of influence. Asari don't really have elected rulers, they hold open debates over the communication system but tend to defer decisions to wise Matriarchs."

"And that's where the influence comes in," Shepard said.
Keggs trilled a short tone in agreement. "But she simply left. She was asked for advice on a current
debate on Thessia and made an initial statement but never gave her answer. She also didn't notify the
temple school, just one day didn't show up to the class she is teaching. We contacted people that
know her and worked with her, they say she never worked with a turian before, as a matter of fact,"
he gave Shepard a meaningful glance, "she tends to avoid other species. And she never before left
her position in the temple without informing her congregation."

"Do you think she got kidnapped?" Garrus asked.

"The disappearing act sounds a bit like a kidnapping," Keggs said with a worried undertone in his
second voice. "But on the message from the geth core she sounded more like an accomplice."

Nihlus laughed out. "I can't imagine someone trying to kidnap a powerful Matriarch like Benezia.
She would rip you apart if you tried."

"So," Shepard mumbled, staring at the information on her omni-tool, "let's assume she follows Saren
out of her own will. Why? She might be interested in prothean technology, but what does she need
Saren for?"

"Or the other way around," Garrus said, "what does he need her for?"

"How do they even know each other?" Shepard wondered.

Keggs projected a picture of a file to their omni-tools. "They're both investors at Binary Helix, they
met at a shareholder meeting at least once."

Nihlus leaned into the picture again, the cuts and patches on his fringe painfully visible. He still
occasionally touched his shortened fringetips carefully, but other than that his disfigurement didn't
seem to bother him. "Nobody really saw them together though, she isn't known to have worked with
him before."

Keggs hummed in agreement at that. "Everybody Lorenzo and Terlin spoke to emphasized that her
behaviour was highly unusual."

"So where can we find her?" Shepard asked, tapping her foot.

"She hasn't contacted anyone," Keggs said, "but she may be on Noveria. Matriarch Benezia is an
executive of some kind for Binary Helix. Binary Helix rented a laboratory on Noveria and recently
there have been... problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"The kind that leads to disconnecting the labs from the main systems," Nihlus said with a grin, "and
waiting for the stercus-freezing cold to kill whatever has gotten loose in there."

Keggs marked a few files on their omni-tools to look at. "Noveria port authority is not very
forthcoming with information but they have mentioned an asari business woman arriving a few days
ago, causing quite a stir apparently."

Nihlus pointed at Shepard. "You will investigate the situation on Noveria, that is your official
mission by the Council. It's not quite Spectre level work, but no one will question that."

Shepard smirked. "But in reality, we're trying to catch Benezia."

Both turians nodded.
"I still want to pick up her daughter first, we should find her soon," Shepard said.

Nihlus nodded. "Yes, she might have an influence on her mother."

"I doubt that," Keggs said, "as far as we know, they have not been in contact for well over a decade." He gave a meaningful trill to Nihlus. "Some people don't stay in contact with their parents."

"True," Nihlus said with a bit of forced cheerfulness in his subharmonics. "If my mother was trying to interfere with one of my missions, I would just shoot her to shut her up for good."

Shepard raised an eyebrow at that remark but didn't say anything. They ended the connection soon afterwards and Garrus and Shepard were finally alone.

For a second they just stared at each other. Then, with a gasp that sounded like a whimper, Shepard flew into his arms. Their armor crashed together with a loud clang and continued scraping as she more or less climbed up on him and hungrily kissed him. With one hand she held onto his neck, with her other hand she was stroking his mandible. He wrapped his arms around her form, her body unusually hard and unyielding in her armor, but it was at least something.

Her lips, her strange soft lips pressed against his unyielding mouthplates, nibbling and suckling. It shouldn't work, it should not be so arousing but it was. He forgot to breathe as he lost himself in her taste and the softness of her lips and tongue. Her hand on his neck did something magical on the sensitive part under his fringe and it made him rumble out a deep moan.

She giggled. "Hey, my spacecat is back." She kissed him again. "I missed you."

"I wasn't gone."

"I know," she pulled him even tighter, "but that was business," she mumbled as her lips nibbled along his mandible, "I couldn't feel you."

She began searching for the clips and fasteners for his groin armor. Surprisingly fast it clattered to the ground. His aroused penis strained against the fabric of his underarmor.

"What are you doing, Jane?" he asked, his subharmonics rumbling in desire.

Her lips moved over his mandible to his ear and she whispered, "I want you, isn't that obvious? I want you right now."

"Here?"

"Why not?" Shepard looked around. "This room is soundproof, protected against surveillance and -" she turned to the control panel and typed a command, "the door is locked. Who knows when we'll have time again for each other." She rubbed her still armored groin against his hardened member, sending sparks up his spine.

"Spirits Shepard, it's not that I don't want you, far from it but..." He turned his head away, trying to come up with the words.

"But what?" she asked, uncertainty making her voice hoarse.

"It's been so long..."

"It hasn't been that long..." she moved like she wanted to slide down but he held her up.

"I know," he said and quickly dragged his tongue along her jawline, "and honestly, I don't
understand it myself, how crazy you make me but I'm afraid I might lose control."

Her shoulders visibly relaxed. "You know I don't mind that," she said, taking the tip of his mandible between her lips and sucking on it. Another rush of sparks ran up and down his spine.

"That is really unfair, Sunshine." His subharmonics had dropped to another register.

"But you love it."

"I love everything you do."

She let her fingers run through the grooves of his fringe, lightly scratching him with her nails. It made him shudder. "So what are you worried about? You know I kind of like it if you get wild."

"But I don't!" Garrus blurted out. Shepard looked at him in surprise but she seemed to wait for him to continue. "I mean, yes I liked it and it's wonderful that you enjoyed it too but it's not really something turians do. We don't lose control like that, not even turians with turians. We are not savages."

"Oh no! I would never think that!" Shepard called out.

"I know you don't," Garrus said, laying a calming tone into his subharmonics. "But I don't want to hurt you and..."

With unexpected speed she jumped off him, unlatched her groin cup and the lower back part of her armor and let it drop to the ground. Catching his eye, she slowly opened a slit in her underarmor, grinning at the lusty groan he made at that.

"You know I trust you, I know you will not hurt me." She let her fingers trail down along the slit in her underarmor. "So do you want me?"

"Spirits, yes!"

She stepped closer to him just so that she could touch his underarmor and let her fingertips lightly play on his bulging erection. He hissed through his mouthplates and grabbed the rail on the side of the control panel. "Shepard!"

Her oh so flexible fingers kept playing on the fabric that felt like it was about to burst from the pressure building up. "We don't have much time, Angel, and I'm still wearing most of my armor so I don't think you can hurt me much and..."

He didn't let her finish. By the time his brain processed what she had said, his body had already moved to her and slammed her against the rail. He ripped off the frontal part of his armor and threw it to the side. The rest had to stay on, he needed her now. He pressed his nose into the part of her neck that wasn't covered by her armor, breathing in her scent. She giggled and he felt relief untensing his shoulders. As long as she was laughing and giggling, she didn't feel threatened by his urgent behaviour.

"Come here, big guy," she whispered, "come to me." She stepped on his spurs to raise herself up and unceremoniously pulled his penis out from his underarmor to line it up with her opening.

"Commander?" The pilot's voice from the comm system made them freeze. "We are ready to leave the Sparta system and head to the Knossos system, unless you have anything left to do for us here."

Shepard switched her voice to her 'Commander-voice', giving no indication that she was hovering on the spurs of her turian advisor-boyfriend with his throbbing penis in her hand. "I think we are done
here, Joker, go ahead to Knossos."

"Aye, Commander, going to FTL, enroute to Knossos, ETA four hours. Joker out."

Shepard grinned at Garrus but didn't move until she heard the tiny click of the comm turning off. She smirked at him. "Now where was I? Oh right..." Without further warning she lined herself up with him and sank down on his penis in one quick move. They both gasped out and she laughed again.

Her thigh covers rubbed along his waist as she adjusted her position. "How does that feel for you?" she whispered.

Garrus tried to form words but his mind was filled with just her and his desire for her. "I... I..." he pulled her tighter, making their armor creak, "I need you, I need..."

"I know," she rolled her hips, "come on." She held on to his shoulder guards and pushed against him, taking all of his length with a loud moan.

His hands sought purchase on her armor, scratching over the surface. He bent to lick under her ear, letting his tongue travel over to her mouth where she caught it with her lips, sucking on it. He let his hips snap forward, careful at first but when she sucked harder on his tongue he pushed harder. The sounds she made told him that she loved what he did and it felt right.

Oh, he had missed this so much, this connection they had. Her eyes were wide open and never left his. He pressed her against the rail and pushed into her, harder and faster, feeling her clench around him.

"Yes, keep going, yes, yes!" she mumbled, throwing her head back.

He kept on pumping, ignoring the noise of armor pieces clanging against each other. She felt hard in his arms, strangely changed but still familiar. He could feel her strength, how tight she held herself to him, pressing her thighs into his waist, only her hips moving. Her outer shell was a stark difference to the softness of her vagina squeezing him. She felt tighter now, and he hoped that she was close because he was not going to last much longer.

"Spirits, Jane, I'm almost..."

"Wait!" she hissed out, "wait!"

"I can't, you feel so good, so..."

She locked her legs around him and stilled, forcing him to stop moving. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to calm his breathing, slowly pushing the rising wave back. When he opened his eyes again, she looked at him and moved one hand between them. She rubbed herself, her eyes piercing him, eating him up. He could feel her vagina contracting, forming a tight sheath and he had to bite his tongue to stop himself from moving.

The tightness became almost unbearable. "Jane, please, you are so tight, so..."

She pulled the hand out and began pumping her hips in hard thrusts. "Yes, now, come with me," she panted and he almost lost his mind in bliss. It was their own dance, their own perfect rhythm, pushing and holding. He felt her come before she even made the first strained sound, felt her pulse and milk him. He pushed harder, growling in his subharmonics as she growled back, louder and faster until they both held their lips tightly shut to muffle their screams.

She kept on moving, still pulsing, giving him tingly aftershocks until she whimpered one last time
and went limp. He nuzzled her throat under her ear, licking the skin until she giggled.

She kissed along his throat and sighed. "Now what are we going to do with this mess?" She pointed to their groins where his penis was so far keeping all of his liquid inside her.

"We didn't think this through," he murmured, slightly embarrassed.

Shepard laughed out. "No, we really didn't." She spread her legs and moved her butt onto the rail, letting him slip out. He set his feet apart and watched the result of their frantic love making drip to the floor.

She shook her head. "I'm going to sneak back in here with a rag and some cleaner stuff, I don't want the cleaning crew to sniff on that."

"Oh futuo!" Garrus called out, "Wrex is going to smell that, no matter how much cleaner you pour on that."

"Aw shit, you're right," Shepard said, her face turning slightly pink. "He's going to joke about that every time we sit in this room." She pinched her nose but then looked up to him with the big smile that he loved so much. "Totally worth it though," she mumbled and kissed him.

A soft kiss this time, almost hesitant, slowly moving her tongue over his, her lips caressing his mouthplates.

Yes, it was totally worth it.

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Chapter End Notes

Yes, it's short but I'm hopeful that I got my writing mojo back now.

Thanks to Credete for high-speed editing.

I started this story in August 2012 and it was the first thing I have ever written. To be here, at 32 chapters and still writing is the most incredible thing that has happened to me recently. Thank you all for being here, for reading, for commenting, for making me feel like I'm a writer.

Love, peace and happiness!
"Incoming!" Garrus yelled out as the strangely curved ship flew over them. It wasn't shooting at the Mako but it dropped big packets ahead of them. They were limited in their maneuverability, Therum turned out to be a lava filled hell hole of a planet, as Shepard had called it. The path that the mining company had leveled was flanked by streams of lava most of the time.

"Normandy," Shepard shouted over the noise of shots fired at them, "patch me through to Tali'Zorah." The projectiles glowed of blue plasma and traveled relatively slow at this distance. Shepard easily dodged them by having the Mako jump up with the thrusters when they reached them.

"Yes, Commander?" came Tali's voice over the comm.

"Tali'Zorah, is that insect thing a geth ship?" Shepard asked, the tension in her jaw making her face look hard.

"I'm not sure what an insect looks like but that is a geth ship, yes. The geth used early quarian design for their ships and have not changed it."

By now they could see the dropped 'packets' on the Mako's display. They looked like four-legged geth, powerful guns with artificial intelligence.

*Just what this planet of flaming lava needs.*

Shepard thanked Tali and called the Normandy again. "Joker, is this the only ship?"

"No other ships on scanner, Commander."

"Drop stealth and shoot that thing out of the sky," she snarled.

"Aye, Commander."

The Normandy swooped over them, lining up behind the geth ship and fired. But only the GARDIAN lasers fired, neither the powerful cannon nor the Javelin torpedoes fired a shot.

"Joker, this isn't a game! Fire the cannon!" Shepard yelled into the comm.

"Sorry, Commander, the cannon doesn't work." Joker sounded embarrassed.

Shepard hissed through her teeth, "Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

"I'm getting a system warning about the cannon not being calibrated right and Adams says he can't fix it quickly." Joker sounded equally angry.

The geth ship turned and was now chasing the Normandy away from their viewport. Shepard looked
Shepard cursed under her breath and accelerated the Mako so fast that it jumped forward. She had to make a hasty turn, narrowly avoiding a river of lava to swerve away from another plasma projectile.

"Fucking untested prototype... they give me a ship to chase geth and the guns don't work. Fucking fuckshit," she grumbled.

Her anger translated right into her driving and she was barreling towards the walking geth cannons at high speed. Garrus fired at them as much as he could with the Mako's machinegun, slowly destroying their shields. When they reached the first armature, both Garrus and Wrex shouted out a warning but she didn't slow down and drove right over it. Garrus swallowed all comments he wanted to make, turned the gun around and shot the thing to pieces while it lay flattened on the ground. The second armature was dealt with in much the same way and he was sure he heard some manic cackling from the front seat when they drove over the machine.

When the last geth cannon was down, she stopped the Mako and Ashley and Shepard slapped their right hands against each other and Shepard yelled, "This is how we do it!"

"Damn right, Skipper!" Ashley called out and turned back to the shield controls. "Shields at 80%, building up."

Kaidan looked rather annoyed but didn't comment. He checked the scanners. "No activity around us but there is interference, we can't see far."

"Alright, I'm starting the repair protocol," Shepard said with a few tabs on the controls and the Mako's engines powered down for 10 seconds while the microbots fixed the shield grid. "Check your guns and armor, helmets on, I have a feeling we got invited to a nice little geth party here," Shepard said with a dangerous glint in her eyes. The three marines, whose names Garrus didn't know, Kaidan Alenko, Ashley Williams and Garrus himself answered with a short "Yes, Commander!" while Wrex just gave a grunt and lovingly stroked his shotgun.

The Mako's engine powered up again and Shepard drove forward, quite carefully this time. The road curved around mountains and most of the time they had streams of lava on at least one side of their path.

The rapid fire from massive turrets reached them before they could see them hidden behind a curve in the road. The turrets protected a walled-off outpost that blocked the path. Garrus turned the cannon but a rise in the path blocked his shot. Shepard stopped behind the rise and turned around to look at him. Her eyebrows were raised in what Garrus had learned was her way of posing a question without saying anything.

Garrus swallowed the hint of nervousness that wanted to come up and went through the options they had in his mind. "A frontal approach would be suicide," he said, "those are military grade turrets, installed to protect the outpost from raiders and pirates. The geth must have hacked them to turn against us. We need to work down their shields before we can hope to shoot them down."

Shepard nodded and turned her raised eyebrow to Kaidan. He checked the scanners once more and then nodded. "There might be another entrance off to the other side of this cliff but I'm still getting too much interference on the scanner to say for sure. The path forks 30 meters ahead."
Shepard nodded. "Let's check that path first, I want to know all options. And I really want to know more about the inside of that compound. Keep scanning, Kaidan, try to filter out the interference, I don't like heading in there blind."

"Aye, Commander."

Shepard crept forward until the turret spotted them and sped forward to the fork when the shots lit up the front of the turret. The Mako was hidden behind the cliff when the projectiles hit the ground. Shepard slowed down again and slowly drove the tank around the cliff.

The inside of the Mako was eerily quiet except for the Commander's voice calling out sharply. "Kaidan?"

"Scanners still distorted," Kaidan answered and it sounded like he was about to apologize. There was nervous grumbling from the other marines in the back of the Mako but they fell silent like someone had turned off the sound by a look from the Commander. She drove forward again, edging around the corner of the rocky rise only to hastily back up again as the first blue glowing projectile rushed past the Mako's viewport.

"I have one turret on the scanner now," said Kaidan.

"Well, by now I can wave at it," Shepard grumbled. "I'm gonna coax one more shot out of it and then I'm gonna drive directly towards it. Garrus - cannon, Oman - machine gun. Everybody else, we disembark as soon as the turret is down, expect more geth resistance. Lock and load!"

To Garrus' surprise, the Alliance marines yelled out "Oohrah!", which seemed to be a kind of battlecry. Even Kaidan Alenko joined in. He didn't get a translation from his tool and looked at Wrex, to see if he knew anything about this. But Wrex just showed his teeth in a big grin and yelled out a battlecry of his own that shook the Mako. Ashley Williams had murder in her eyes as she stared at the krogan but he just dipped his head to her and raised the nozzle of his shotgun to her. He held it there until she awkwardly clinked the nozzle of her assault rifle against his shotgun. Apparently satisfied with the ritual, Wrex leaned back against his seat.

Shepard had already let the Mako peek out from cover and another projectile whizzed past them. As soon as the viewport had cleared, the Mako hurtled out of cover and rushed at top speed toward the turret. The tank was bumping and flying over the uneven path but Shepard had it under control, swerving out of the way of projectiles. It just made it harder for Garrus to aim the cannon. The marine Oman worked down the shields with the machine guns and when Garrus finally fired the main gun, the turret exploded in a fiery rain.

The Mako skidded to a halt next to some rocks that provided cover for them and the marines jumped out, rifles ready. Oman stayed on the machine guns and Garrus unfolded his sniper rifle and set up through an exit on top of the Mako. Not a moment too soon because now the big gate in front of them opened and geth ran towards them, clicking in their characteristic way and firing.

Garrus began shooting. He quickly learned that a headshot was not the preferred kill-shot for geth, after a headless geth kept shooting at Ashley Williams until he shot it into its chest area. He adjusted his aim after that.

The marines made quick work of the geth. As the last one fell with a mechanical screech, a strange quiet fell over them. If the environment had been less harsh, they might have heard birds sing.

The marines went through the buildings of the outpost and returned with a few packs of ammunition and guns.
"Nothing, Commander, not even a dead body," said one of the marines.

Only now became Garrus aware of the fact that they had not found anybody, not even corpses. Shepard nodded at the marine and checked the map on her omni-tool. "It looks like they fled from the geth, maybe there is a bunker or something at the end of this path."

They continued on the road, meeting nests of geth along the way but they still did not find any people. It was quite unnerving.

He noticed that Shepard made them leave the Mako and fight the geth on foot but she herself held back. She was watching how everyone performed, how they worked together. In between fights, while she let a young marine drive the Mako, she quietly spoke to people, giving advice, making suggestions. Every fight worked better after that and the team began to really work together.

They developed a routine of Wrex and Ashley taking the frontal approach, with Wrex and his almost impenetrable biotic barrier acting like a walking cover for Ashley's deadly aim. Behind them Kaidan fought with his impressive biotics, protected by Oman and Shepard covering his flanks. Garrus stayed on Shepard's six, watching over the group while the other marine covered their backs and one stayed in the Mako to drive after them. They worked together like a well oiled machine.

Shepard had ordered one of the marines, a rather small, wry kid with light-brown skin named Madhav to drive the Mako. Garrus had the suspicion that she was ordering Madhav to stay in the Mako because she wanted to protect him. He was the youngest of the marines and had a youthful face that looked like he smiled a lot. He wondered if he reminded her of Jenkins, the young soldier that had died on Eden Prime.

It had taken Madhav a while but he managed well with the control sticks now and maneuvered the tank securely around and over geth armatures and boulders. He drove a bit slower than Shepard probably would have but Garrus was kind of glad about that.

Shepard was talking to Ashley when the voice of the pilot came from the Mako's control panel. "Normandy to Commander Shepard."

"Joker, good to hear you," Shepard called out. "What happened to the geth ship?"

"It was quite clingy, really wanted to hurt my baby." The pilot sounded offended. "But we shot it out of the sky per your orders, Commander."

"So the cannon works now?"

"No, it only worked once. The situation got a bit desperate. Adams and Tali jury rigged the system somehow and he practically kicked out the Javelin torpedo with his own foot. Luckily that was enough to blow the ship but the cannon is definitely done for now." Joker paused and they could hear another voice in the background. "Adams apologizes for breaking the cannon."

"Well, it wasn't of much use before," Shepard said, "and if you had lost the Normandy I would have hunted you down!"

"Would have loved to see that." He chuckled a little before his voice turned professional again. "Commander, the area where the miners found the prothean ruins is up on a hill ahead of you. I'm getting some strange readings from there, like off the charts."

"Can you contact the miners or archaeologists? We haven't found anybody down here."

"Sorry, Commander, but whatever is down there, it's jamming our communications and scanners, I
can't even get readings in the infrared."

"Fucking fuckshit," Shepard quietly mumbled to herself. "Shepard out."

They all slumped forward as the Mako came to a sudden stop. Madhav turned around and grinned sheepishly. "Sorry about that but the road ends here."

Shepard strained her neck to look outside the front viewport. "Come on, kiddo, I have taken this baby up steeper cliffs before."

"Commander, there is lava on this side and a narrow canyon on the other. We have no room to maneuver."

Shepard sighed and grabbed her helmet. "Fine. Madhav, Carlsson, stay with the Mako, we might need it for a hasty retreat. Everybody else, disembark."

As soon as they had slipped through the narrow opening in the steep wall blocking their path, they got attacked by geth. These geth reacted differently, more vicious and careful than the ones they had met before. They used cover better and specifically targeted the back part of the team, ignoring Wrex in front.

When Oman got hit in the shoulder guard, Shepard ordered them to hunker down behind cover and let Garrus and herself snipe down their numbers before proceeding.

"Is is just me or did they get smarter?" Shepard asked over the comm between breaths and shots.

Garrus let his breath flow out, pulled the trigger and watched the 'chest' of a geth explode. "Agreed, Commander, they seem to have adapted to our fighting style."

Another shot from Shepard's rifle took the head off a geth. "They must be networked," a breath, a shot, and then her voice came back over the comm, "so the ones we fought before basically taught these guys how to fight us." A loud boom made Garrus' head snap around to see Shepard rolling away from a fiery rain. "They also have rockets now. I'm beginning to get annoyed," she grumbled.

Garrus shot another geth that had dared to step out of cover and changed his position. "I advise shots to the chest, Commander, it seems to do more damage than headshots." He looked over his shoulder towards her and even though her helmet shielded her face he could tell from her posture that she gave him her raised eyebrow.

She changed ammunition and adjusted her position. Her shot made the 'chest' of a geth explode in fire, taking it out without any chance to react. "Incendiary ammunition seems to work quite nicely," she said, her smile audible in her voice.

Garrus grinned and switched ammunition but he could not find a target. "They're hiding," he stated.

"Yep." Shepard checked her scanner and readied her pistol. "Kaidan, can you pull them out?"

"On it, Commander."

"Covering fire!" the other marines called out and gave Kaidan the chance to get up and perform the mnemonic that let blue biotic light shoot from his hands. A geth flew up from behind a rock, caught in the stream from Kaidan's hands and helplessly flailing its arms and screeching. A few pistol shots later, the mechanical noise stopped.

An annoyed growl came from Wrex. "Are we done hiding now?"
Shepard laughed out. Kaidan pulled out another geth and it fell in seconds. "I'm impressed, Wrex, I thought you would start complaining earlier," Shepard said.

Ashley chuckled and said, "He was way more patient than I thought him capable."

"I should have bet you on it!"

"Lucky for me that you didn't, Skipper."

Wrex roared out and hit his shotgun impatiently. Shepard laughed and made one of the Alliance hand signals that she had made Wrex and Garrus learn.

As one, the group began to move. Wrex charging out in a blue glow, happily roaring as he disintegrated geth with shotgun blasts, Ashley running behind him, shooting fire with incendiary ammo. Kaidan wrapped in blue glow, pulling out geth from cover for Oman and Shepard to shoot. She was rolling and skidding around the field, almost untraceable, her movement only stopping for quick shots or a brutal close knife kill that took off the whole head of a geth. Garrus stayed in the back, shooting strays that crept towards them from the side and kept his eyes on the entrance of the canyon. So far, no new geth had appeared from there.

With one last roar from Wrex and the mechanical screech of a geth crushed by the weight of a krogan, the fight ended and the only sound left was the rushing of the lava stream in the back.

Shepard raised her hand and made them move up the path. She stepped up to Oman and checked the damage to her shoulder guard. "How are you doing?" she asked.

Oman straightened her back and readied her rifle. "Nothing to worry about, Commander. I've had worse on my last shore leave."

"Sounds like my kind of shore leave," Shepard said, a grin audible in her voice. "We move in three, you watch our backs, I don't want any surprises on our asses."

"Aye aye."

After a steep climb and a few geth in their way, they finally came upon the main mining site, where the prothean ruins had been found. They were greeted by two huge armatures and strange geth that could climb on walls. This fight was the most difficult so far, Shepard almost got taken out by one of the wall crawlers before Garrus could hit it. The armatures made movement impossible, forcing them to hide behind cover without any clear way to shoot. Even Wrex didn't dare to confront the armatures directly.

"We need to take down its shields," Shepard shouted over the comm. "Kaidan, Garrus, I want to combine your overloads. The one on the right, in three, two, one!"

Their omni-tools cracked, Shepard's blast joining the powerful blasts from Garrus and Kaidan. The armature shuddered and reeled backwards. Wrex and Ashley hit it square in the 'chest' and the machine crumbled. They had to hide behind cover again as the other armature targeted them with blasts that made the containers they were hiding behind scrape over the ground.

"Moving!" Shepard yelled as she rolled out of cover and leaped behind a container on the far left, drawing the fire of the armature. Kaidan and Garrus didn't need an order to blast their overloads against the armature and it fell in a heap of molten metal from everybody's shots. The remaining geth now fell quickly, no longer protected by the fire from the armatures.

After assessing the damage and recharging their shields, they finally entered the tunnel that would
lead them to the underground dig site. The tunnel opened to a large cave with mining equipment scattered around. They had to take an elevator down to the ground level but it sputtered half-way down and stopped.

Oman scanned the motor. "It looks like it got sabotaged, Commander."

"I would have done that too," Ashley said. "Maybe they managed to fight them off in here."

A strange noise made them raise their rifles. Flying drones rose from the ground and attacked them. They were dangerously exposed up here in the scaffolding with no cover. The first two drones fell in a hail of shots from their guns, one crashing on the bridge that Ashley was standing on. She skidded down the sudden incline until Shepard could grab her armor and pulled her towards herself.

The last drone kept escaping their shots, swerving between the beams of the scaffolding. With their shields already dangerously low, they could not engage in an open fight. Wrex, glowing in a blue barrier, finally got fed up with it all and jumped onto the drone, crashing it to the ground with his weight. The drone died on impact on the ground, parts flying away like shrapnel and Wrex lay motionless in between all of it.

"Wrex?" Shepard called out, hastily climbing down the scaffolding.

The krogan finally moved and groaned. "I'm fine, Shepard, nothing a little krogan healing can't fix."

He got up and rolled his shoulders. Shepard arrived at his side, looking him over critically and giving him a punch on his arm. She looked like she could have yelled at him for a long time but didn't.

The rest of the team slowly climbed down. "Commander," Kaidan called out, gesturing towards the ground. "We found the people."

They were all dead. Piled on the floor like discarded fight dummies or laying in their own blood where they dropped from the shots fired at them. Garrus was glad for the filters in his helmet protecting him from the smell of the corpses. He looked over to Shepard, her face hidden under her helmet. Her shoulders were hunched forward and she clenched her fists at her sides. This was not how she had wanted this mission to work out.

"Any asari among the dead?" she asked. Garrus walked further into the cave, checking behind natural stone formations and constructions for activity or corpses. He found two dead asari and many dead humans and three destroyed geth. At least they seemed to have fought back.

He called Shepard over to examine the dead asari and they compared them to a picture of Liara T'Soni.

"It's not her," Shepard said, "they have different markings. They must have been part of her team."

She turned around and raised her pistol to continue her search through the cave. The cave had been hollowed out lengthwise. They passed a big mining laser that was quietly humming. He was about to ask if he should turn it off when he heard a female voice from the left side.

"Hello? Is anybody there?"

Shepard stepped forward, her pistol raised. At the end of the cave, a blue forcefield wavered in front of a differently looking cavity. It appeared to be older, the walls of the cavity unnaturally even and dark. In the middle, an asari was floating with her arms spread wide inside of a blue bubble. Garrus had never seen anything like it.

"I'm Commander Shepard of the Alliance Navy. Are you Dr. T'Soni, daughter of Matriarch Benezia?" Shepard asked.
"Yes, I'm Liara T'Soni," the asari said, relief in her voice. "I'm not sure what my mother has to with this but I would be very grateful if you could free me from this force field."

"How did you end up in there?" Shepard had holstered her pistol and climbed up a ladder to get closer to the force field in front of the cavity. She scanned it and frowned at the readout. She looked at Garrus and shook her head, indicating that she could not see a way to get through the force field.

"The geth attacked and the miners and my team took refuge in this cave," Dr. T'Soni said. "Eventually they came in here too and -" she took a shaky breath as she looked around, "- they didn't stand a chance. The geth were too many, too quick, too... ruthless." A tear ran down her face that she couldn't wipe away because she could not move her hands. "I ran into this room that we had just discovered, a prothean room and I must have triggered a security system. It has protected me from the geth but..."

"And how long would the air in this room last?" Shepard asked.

"I'm not sure, I didn't exactly plan this."

"Wow, I don't even know..." Shepard obviously fought to keep from laughing. "You got yourself in quite a situation there but I'm glad we found you. Give me some time to find a way into there."

She climbed back down, a grin dancing on her face that warmed Garrus's gizzard. "We need to get inside that room, there has to be a release mechanism somewhere," she said. Her eyes went straight to the mining laser, a dangerous glint in them. "Let's see what this baby can do."

Dr. T'Soni strained her neck to see what Shepard attempted to do. "Commander Shepard? The head miner was reluctant to use the laser any further because he detected seismographic activity. This volcano might become active if the laser puts more strain on the geological formation of..."

"This is a volcano?" Ashley called out.

"Yes, it appears so," Dr. T'Soni said with a surprised look, apparently noticing for the first time that more people were in the rescue group.

"Nice," Shepard grumbled sarcastically, her hand hovering over the interface of the mining laser.

Wrex laughed out loud. "Never been inside an erupting volcano before. This is going to be interesting, Shepard, angering the fires in the depth. Not many can say that of themselves."

"Well, I'm very sorry to anger the gods of the underground but we don't have many options. Watch your feet, Dr. T'Soni." Shepard squinted along the line of sight of the laser and adjusted the angle. She winked at Garrus. "I'm an engineer, I know what I'm doing," she said and activated the laser with a tab on the interface. A bright beam shot out and evaporated the rock under the prothean cave. Shepard turned the laser off and for a second they couldn't see anything until their eyes had adjusted to the normal level of darkness again.

Shepard climbed up into the prothean cave first and Garrus followed her, while Ashley stayed below the prothean cave. She had her rifle ready and looked at the trapped asari critically. Garrus had his rifle ready too, who knew how much they could trust the daughter of a matriarch who worked with the traitor Saren.

After a few scans, Shepard found the release mechanism and Dr. T'Soni fell to the floor as the bubble around her disappeared. She was thanking them profoundly when suddenly the whole cave seemed to shudder. Dust and small rocks fell from the ceiling and walls and the scaffolding began to shake and creek. With a deafening crack the back part of the cave collapsed, cutting off their escape.
"It seems the laser has made the whole volcano unstable," Dr. T'Soni shouted.

"Yeah, no kidding," Shepard grumbled. She grabbed the Doctor by her arm and pulled her along the bridge to the main structure leading upwards. "To the elevator!" she yelled and only Garrus heard her quietly mumble, "Let's hope it still works."

They all crammed into the open cage and Garrus sent a prayer of thanks to the Spirits when the motor began pulling them up. His prayer was cut short when they arrived at the top and looked straight into the guns of four geth and a krogan. They stumbled out on the platform as the mountain shook again and steam was rushing out of the elevator shaft.

The tremor pushed Shepard right in front of the krogan and without hesitation she yelled at him, "This whole structure will break down, the volcano is about to erupt. You will die alongside us if you stay here!"

"Exhilarating, isn't it?" the krogan said with a smile, leaving Shepard staring at him in disbelief. He drew his head back and Garrus expected him to slam his head against hers, probably breaking her helmet or worse. But Wrex appeared out of nowhere, ramming into the krogan and slamming him to the ground. The krogan began to glow blue like Wrex and the battlemasters fought in a blur of biotics, too close to each other to use their guns.

The rest of them didn't have much time to watch the fight as the geth attacked them and made them scramble into cover. Dr. T'Soni screamed and hid behind the control panel in the middle of the platform. Shepard crawled over to her and shielded her with her body. She was yelling into the comm, "Normandy, requesting pick-up from the top of the mountain, the volcano is about to erupt. Madhav, Carlsson, take the Mako and get as far away as you can, we'll pick you up."

She was momentarily distracted and Garrus noticed the geth that had crept up on them too late. Before he could warn Shepard, Dr. T'Soni rose up, glowing biotic blue and formed a powerful singularity that immobilized the geth and sucked it into a dark vortex. Garrus shot it dead.

Ashley shot the last geth just as Wrex ripped off the headcrest of the krogan and shot him in the head. Garrus and Oman had finished off the others and they finally could run out as the structure around them collapsed. The bridge leading out was shaking and Garrus saw Shepard and Oman fall behind as Oman stumbled and Shepard helped her up. They ran as fast as they could, the bridge crumbling behind them, pieces of it falling down into the lava.

Over them, the Normandy swept around, covering them in shadow. Up front he saw Wrex unceremoniously grabbing Ashley and Dr. T'Soni and throwing them on his back. He took two long strides and jumped up to grab one of the cables that usually pulled in the Mako. Garrus followed his example, grabbing Oman and sat her on his hip. Shepard ran along on his side. The Mako hovered in front of them, the second cable extended and glowing blue with a mass effect field.

He grabbed the cable, feeling the strange sensation of the mass effect field pulling like magnetism on his hand. As the cable pulled him up, he felt Shepard holding on to his armored spur. The cable pulled them into the open port of the Normandy as the fire of the volcano licked at Shepard's feet. Wrex grabbed them and threw them up in the cargo hold. Shepard was the last, bringing the heat of fire with her into the hold before the mass effect field could shield them. She sank down and sat on the ground, throwing her helmet away to heave in air.

The Normandy sped away from the fiery rain. Garrus sat down on the ground to catch his breath. Shepard pulled off her smoking boots, laughing while she sang, "Boots on fire!" Ashley joined in,
"Boots on fire, ohoho!" and they both sang, more loud than pretty, until they lay on the floor next to each other, laughing uncontrollably. Liara T'Soni looked at them as if she wondered if they had gone insane.

Joker's voice came over the comm. "Nice to know you are well Commander and you should clear the cargo area now so that I can pull in the Mako. And just for future reference: That was too close Commander, 10 more seconds and we would have been swimming in molten sulfur. The Normandy isn’t equipped to land in exploding volcanoes. They tend to fry our sensors and melt our hull."

Dr. T'Soni looked at Shepard in disbelief. "We almost died and your pilot is making jokes?"

Shepard stood up, still giggling, and cleared the parking space for the Mako. "As long as he pulls us out of exploding volcanoes, he can make as many jokes as he likes."

Dr. T'Soni made a breathless "oh!" and looked helplessly around. Ashley came up to her and gently maneuvered her out of the Mako area. The asari shook her head. "Must be a human thing."

"You don't go out much, Doc, do you?" Ashley asked her.

Liara smiled weakly. "No, I'm afraid not, I'm usually not the centre of the conversations at parties. Most people find archeology not very interesting."

"I know how you feel," Ashley said as she led the asari to the elevator. "Whenever I start to talk about poetry, I see people's eyes glaze over." She threw a meaningful look to Shepard who turned slightly pink.

"Sorry, Ashley, but poetry... I just can't," Shepard said with a shrug.

Liara T'Soni turned her bright eyes towards Ashley again. "I would love to hear about human poetry." She smiled shyly and Garrus wondered how young she really was. She had a child-like naivety about her.

Ashley stared at the asari, expressions of curiosity and suspicion flashing over her face. But as the doors of the elevator closed, she showed a genuine smile and they could hear her breathe out, "Ok..."

Shepard grinned widely. "Bet you your favourite drink that these two will be best friends in three days."

"Bet you that it will be only two days."

"You're on, Vakarian!" Shepard called out before she raised herself on her tiptoes and placed a kiss on his mandible.
And mission done. I'm trying to keep the mission chapters tight and short but there is so much to do and I love the dynamic between the characters and I could introduce so many OC's, I actually have to stop myself. So much fun.

I'd like to apologize for probably getting marine language and fighting wrong, I research that as best as I can but it's truly not my area of expertise. I'm an engineer, not a marine.

Did you catch the calibration joke? Snicker...

The broken gun of the Normandy is my way of solving that problem I have with many of the missions. Why didn't the Normandy shot things from orbit? I know it is done that way, so that you as the player have stuff to do but it doesn't really make sense on a story mechanics level.

Credete had to stay up way too late for editing this once again, so give him a hand!
In case any of you fear that this story will now turn into a boring retelling, let me assure you, that is definitely not the plan. The missions will be different and fewer, concentrating on the characters that we know and love and new ones and characters that we don't know enough of. I hope you will stay with this story.

And now to the ever important question: Why does Liara have eyebrows painted on her face?

Thanks to Credete for editing.

Garrus’s grip on the wrench slipped and his elbow hit hard against the underside of the Mako. Lucky for him, he still wore his armor. He was trying to replace some of the electrical connections, before they got damaged too much. Parts of the underside of the vehicle looked like it had been roasted in an open fire, no wonder Joker had gotten so angry.

"Hey, Angel."

Garrus rolled out from under the Mako, next to the strong legs of his girlfriend. She wore no armor and the Alliance clothes hugged her tightly. She leaned against the Mako, her arms crossed over her chest and looked down towards him with a smile. He didn't get up right away, he liked the view.

"Yes, M'am?"

"Don't you M'am me, turian. I’ll have you thrown into the brig." She gave him her best Commander look through her lashes and it did things to his insides that should be illegal. No one should feel like a horny teenager all the time.

He rolled out completely and leaned his side against the Mako so that he could see her face. She looked like she had something on her mind and Garrus waited for her to talk, singing a soft tone.

"I did something bad," she said with a lopsided smile.

"Bad?"

"I hung up on the Council."

"The Citadel Council?"

"Yes."

"Spirits, do you need a political scandal on your back?" Garrus imagined how the Councillors
reacted to that and he had to chuckle. "I wish I could have seen Councillor Sparatus's face."

"Oh, he was pissed!" Shepard said and she looked quite proud of that. "It was just so..." she threw her arms up, "we fought our asses off, barely got out. My feet were literally on fire for fucks sake! We even saved Benezia's daughter and all they worried about was that the prothean ruins got destroyed. Well, I'm so fucking sorry that your precious protheans built their shit inside of a volcano!"

"So, do you think anything will come from that?" Garrus asked, taking off his gloves to let his finger trail along her cheek.

"Oh, it already has." She leaned her cheek into his touch, her eyes half closing. "It only took thirty seconds for Anderson to call me and berate me on my behaviour and just two minutes for a fucking admiral to give me a firm talking to."

"An admiral, impressive."

Her eyes sprang open. "Yes, definitely impressive. Admiral Hackett. Never met him but I was standing to attention from his voice alone." She straightened her posture, as if she heard the admiral scolding her right now.

Garrus looked her over, while she looked stressed, she did not appear overly worried. "Are you ok?"

Shepard waved the question off. "Oh sure, that wasn't the first firm talking to I have gotten, my 'Yes, Sir!' face is impenetrable."

Garrus internally congratulated himself on his correct assessment of her mood. His expertise in human expressions still worked, even on his girlfriend.

She came closer to him, leaning against the shell of his armor. He wondered if it hurt her.

A loud rumbling came from her stomach and for a second he thought that she had developed subharmonics. But then he remembered that stomach noises were a sign of hunger in humans. She held a hand on her stomach as if she hoped to quiet it down that way.

She grinned sheepishly at him. "Are you done here? Want to join me in the mess?"

Garrus realized that he was hungry too. "Actually, yes. I can always finish this later."

"I saw Ashley and Liara sitting there before I came down, maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

"Well, Liara T'Soni and I didn't exactly get off on a good start. She did this melding thing with me, the councillors wanted to know if she could make sense of the vision. You know how I hate that." She shuddered on the memory. "But I let her do it, let her in. It felt so weird. And afterwards..."

Garrus waited for her to continue as they walked over to the elevator. He chirped a short question with his subharmonics when she stayed quiet.

"Well," Shepard sighed. "I think I told you how I had that experience once before and how that asari looked at me afterwards like she was scared of me."

Garrus nodded.

Shepard pulled her shoulders up and her voice got very quiet. "Same thing with Liara. I don't know
what she saw but she looked at me like I'm a monster. And it was not because of the vision, she
couldn't make any more sense of that than me. Fucking useless, the whole process." Her eyebrows
narrowed angrily. "The councillors were not happy either and then they complained about the
fucking ruins..."

"I see why you hung up on them."

"Yeah... by the way," she stopped and faced him with an angry scowl, "next time I have to talk to
the Council, you are there with me, Mister Advisor of the Turian Hierarchy! I'm not doing this alone
again."

"Futuo," he mumbled, adding an extra trill of annoyance to the swear word. "Yes, if Madam Spectre
insists."

She punched his arm with a loud laugh, only to wince as she hurt her hand on his armor. "This
Madam Spectre might make wearing armor on board against the law."

"I don't think Spectres have legislative authority."

"Damn, useless Spectre status." She turned back towards the elevator. "You know what? Let's ask
the rest of our ragtag team to come too. I know Jinala got some nice food for us on the Citadel,
there's no reason to let that spoil." She leaned past him to look at Wrex, who looked at something on
his omni-tool. "Wrex, we are having dinner in the mess, do you want to join us?"

Wrex looked up with a start, he seemed to have been totally engrossed with what ever he had looked
at on his omni-tool. "I'll come later, Shepard."

Shepard nodded and stepped into the elevator with Garrus. She initiated a vid-call on her omni-tool
and the shiny faceplate of Tali's helmet appeared in miniature on her arm.

"Yes, Shepard?"

"We are having a team dinner in the mess hall and I know that I have some nice dextro shakes for
you in the pantry, want to join us?"

"Oh, yes, but I have to..."

"The drive core is not going to explode just because you spend some time away from it."

Another face appeared on the translucent display on Shepard's arm, Engineer Adams leaned in front
of the camera to say: "I wouldn't be so sure about that, Commander, ever since Tali has gotten hold
of the drive core's interface, it's been purring like a cat and runs more efficient. It might get offended
if she leaves it alone."

He disappeared from the display and Tali looked after him, her voice sounding insecure. "Sir, it's not
possible for the drive core to feel -"

"That was a joke, Tali," Shepard interrupted with a grin, "Engineer Adams is quite aware of the lack
of emotions in the drive core."

"Oh!" Tali tilted her head in what must be quarian body language for embarrassment.

"So are you coming?" Shepard asked, giving her a bright smile.

"Yes, Commander, I will be there in a little while."
"Ok." By the end of the call, the elevator finally released them on the deck. They saw Liara T'Soni and Ashley Williams sitting opposite each other at the table as they came around the corner. Ashley was looking at pictures on a datapad and waved them over when she noticed Shepard and Garrus approaching the table.

"Skipper, this looks just like a part of that beacon on Eden Prime."

Shepard leaned over and enlarged a part of the picture. "You are right, these marks look the same."

"You saw the letters on the beacon?" Liara asked with a gasp.

"I was quite close to it, you know." Shepard said with a slightly forced smile.

"Of course, Commander."

"Call me Shepard, Dr. T'Soni."

"Only if you call me Liara."

Shepard smiled at her. "Of course, Liara, would you like something to eat? I thought we could all have dinner together, I also invited Wrex and Tali and let me just call Kaidan over."

The voice of the pilot came over the speakers. "Don't mind me, Commander, I'm not hungry."

"Didn't I tell you not to spy, Joker?" Shepard asked with a stern voice. "And I would have asked you to come but I happen to know that you can't leave your shift right now."

"Slave driver."

"No more spying, Joker."

"Alright, Commander." The pilot sounded quite disappointed.

Garrus got himself a blue coded dextro meal from the pantry and placed it into the heater. Liara took one with the characteristic purple lid that indicated an asari meal and Ashley took one with a red color and placed them both in the heater too. Garrus also saw many big containers with an orange coding for krogan food and bottles with blue and pink stripes that had a special nozzle that could be connected to a quarian induction port. All in all, he had never seen such a well stocked pantry before.

Shepard spoke to Kaidan, who worked on a terminal next to the door to the captains quarters. Shepard had told Garrus that she still called it that, even though they were now her quarters. She left Kaidan at his station and picked a box out of the pantry as well.

"Kaidan wants to finish whatever he's doing there first." She put another red coded meal on top of the others and turned on the heating unit. A soft hum indicated that it worked.

Garrus looked over to Kaidan, who peered at the screen with a frown. "Do you think I should offer to help him?" Garrus asked Shepard.

Shepard shook her head and spoke quietly. "It's not about the console. It's about him controlling his surroundings, don't take that away from him. Control... is very important for him."

"Why?" Ashley asked.

"I suggest you talk to him yourself, Chief. Maybe he'll tell you." Shepard said.
The heating unit made a short beep and she handed out the food containers to everyone. Liara and Ashley sat down on their seats again, Garrus picked the chair next to Ashley after a short hesitation and was surprised by the friendly look she gave him. Shepard sat down opposite to him, next to Liara. They ate in silence for a little while but Garrus could tell that Shepard was working on something to say.

Finally she broke the silence. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, Liara."

"I understand, Comm... Shepard. It was very tiring for me too. The vision from the beacon is very powerful." Liara hesitated, her face showing something like fear but Garrus wasn't sure if she feared the vision or Shepard. "You... you must be incredibly strong willed, Commander Shepard. A weaker mind would have been unable to hold the vision without going mad. You were touched by real prothean technology and survived."

"It was.. it is..." Shepard's hands clenched around her fork. "It still feels like there is something in my head, something foreign."

Liara nodded in understanding. "The vision, the message, was constructed for a prothean mind. It can not be understood by a human mind, not without some kind of translation system. Not even I understood it."

Ashley and Shepard both looked at her with one eyebrow raised. Liara's face turned slightly purple, it made Garrus realize that he had never seen an asari blush before. "No, I didn't mean to make it sound like asari are superior!" she stammered. "Our geneticists assume that asari share genetic traits with protheans. So an asari brain might be more compatible..."

Shepard laughed out. "It's okay, Liara, we get it."

Tali came around the corner and stopped at the table, fidgeting. Shepard got up and led her to the pantry on the side.

"You don't have to ask permission to get food and sit with us, Tali'Zorah," Shepard said.

"Oh, yes, I guess it's kind of a habit." She picked a bottle with the blue and pink stripes from the pantry and took the seat beside Garrus. "Quarians are not exactly loved across the galaxy and we are taught to be humble."

"After releasing the geth on the galaxy," Garrus said, "the quarians have quite the reason to apologize to the rest of the galaxy for creating them."

A silence fell across the table as everyone stopped eating. Tali straightened her back and the bright spots of her eyes behind her tinted mask turned to slits. "We lost our homeworld!" she shouted, louder than he had ever heard her speak. "We are fugitives with nowhere to go, fighting to keep the geth contained in the Terminus and you still think we should apologize? We have apologized for hundreds of years!"

Garrus did not fail to notice the intense stare and raised eyebrow his commanding officer and girlfriend projected at him. Even Ashley looked at him in shock and slightly shook her head. He replayed what he had said in his mind and stretched his neck in embarrassment. "I'm sorry." He added an extra hum of humility to his subharmonics. "I guess that was an old prejudice surfacing. I don't... That's not what I want to think."

Shepard let out an audible breath. "Well, since we are already working on embarrassing our fellow alien friends, let me continue with that trend." She turned to Liara, whose eyes widened in shock at
being the center of attention. "Liara, why do you have eyebrows?"

Liara's skin turned dark purple. She raised one of her hands to her face, tracing the contour of the thin black line above her eye. Shepard's look followed her movement.

"I know it is painted on," Shepard said, "it's a kind of permanent paint but it can get changed. I've seen asari with complicated, graphical markings and others with patterns that look random, is there some kind of fashion with it?"

"We get our markings at a young age," Liara said. "In a human it would be the teenage years I think it is called. In some families the markings are designed by the elders of the Sirlina, the clan. Others use a ritual called Lirningion. It is a coming of age ritual, a festive occasion. The highlight is the mixing of two colorful substances in the silver bowl of Athame that are phobic to each other. They don't mix and the pattern that is formed in the end is then painted on the younglings face by one of the matriarchs. In less traditional families, the younglings decide and design their markings themselves."

"And who designed your markings?" Ashley asked.

Liara sighed. "I did."

Both Ashley and Shepard chuckled a little and waited for Liara to continue.

"It was..." Liara hesitated but when she saw the eager looks on Ashley's and Shepard's faces, she continued, "my mother is not a strict follower of the goddess Athame, she followed some rituals, others were silly in her opinion. The Lirningion was one of those she had decided as not worthy to follow. She told me one day to decide on a pattern and have them painted on. I was disappointed to not have the ritual, I had looked forward to the festivities."

Shepard raised her hand and almost touched the painted eyebrow before putting her hand back on the table. "So you had to make a pattern, I get that, but why eyebrows?"

Liara sighed again. "I guess it was a rebellious phase."

Both human women at the table snorted out and laughed heartily. Ashley managed to say between laughs: "Good to know that even asari are just like human teenagers during puberty."

Liara smiled shyly. "Back then, the humans had just appeared, fighting the turians on Shanxi. There was a lot of talk about these new aliens, their looks and how they managed to stand up to the turians." She lowered her head as she continued, "My mother thought they were abhorrent creatures, arrogant and presumptuous." She looked up at Ashley. "I'm sorry."

Shepard put her hand on her arm. "No need to be sorry. You are not responsible for the opinions or actions of your parents or ancestors." A look passed between Ashley and Shepard and before the hardened soldier looked down on her hands, Garrus caught a glint of tears in Ashley's eyes.

"I wanted to annoy my mother," Liara continued, "I thought by making myself look like the humans, she would get angry, yell at me, demand to take on the markings of our family, I guess..." she looked down on her hands opening and closing around each other, "I guess I just wanted a reaction, anything from her to show that she cared." She sighed again and she looked very young. "She didn't react like that at all. She just laughed and said something about me being strange. I left shortly after that to study history and archaeology."

"Why did you never change them?" Shepard asked.
"I never cared much about how I looked. I may have gotten the markings for a silly reason originally but after a while I actually kind of liked them. By now, I consider them part of me. Maybe I will add something to them one day but I think I will keep the lines." Liara's hands stopped fidgeting and she looked at Ashley.

Ashley took a few breaths as if she wanted to say something but stopped herself three times before she finally blurted out: "I think you... they... the markings are very pretty."

"Thank you, Ashley."

The soldier's face turned even darker than usually, a deep crimson glowing on her cheeks. Shepard smiled but didn't comment and turned to face Tali instead.

The quarian had said nothing so far after her outburst after Garrus's insensitive remarks. But she had been watching the exchange and it was unfortunate that no one could tell what she was thinking about it all, hidden behind her mask. Shepard peered into the glass, apparently thinking along the same lines.

"Let's continue with embarrassing questions." Shepard pointed at Tali's faceplate. "Why is that not transparent?"

Tali tilted her head slightly and rested her hand on the side on the table. Garrus wondered how much of her body language was actually deliberate, a code to make up for the lack of facial expressions. Her speaker began to blink, a millisecond before her voice could be heard. "We are very sensitive towards light. Long exposure to unfiltered light makes our eyes hurt and burns our skin."

"That explains it. So that clean room we installed on deck three, where you can take off your suit, you would keep that dark?"

"Almost entirely, yes."

Shepard nodded. "I have another question, about the geth. Don't worry, I'm not making you apologize for them," she said with a smile and a wink towards him and Garrus cringed at thinking about his stupid remark.

She turned her gaze back to Tali. "What are the geth fighting for?"

Tali shifted her position again, a slightly different tilt of her head, a quick movement with her hands. "What? How should I know?"

"Don't you wonder? Do they attack the flotilla?"

Tali hesitated before answering. "The flotilla is very well hidden but, no, unless we get close to Rannoch, the geth don't attack us. They sometimes descend on other planets to get resources but they have most of what they need on Rannoch. We, I mean the quarians back then, built them with the resources at hand."

"So they defend the planet?" Shepard asked.

"Yes, we lost Rannoch to the geth, that's basically our history," Tali said quickly.

"But why?" Shepard's hands began to move, encompassing the world. "I mean they are robots, they don't need air, light, flowers, water... they could live on spaceships, they could float in space with propulsion jets on their feet. Why do they stay on a planet? Why do they fight for a planet they don't really need?"
Tali suddenly got very still. Only now it became obvious how much she usually moved in little ways. "I never thought about that."

Garrus chuckled. "That's Shepard for you, she wonders about things like that."

Shepard raised one finger, "'Know your enemy better than your friend', we humans say." She grinned at him and then turned back towards Tali. "So I was wondering if it was some kind of base programming, some kind of home defence protocol."

Tali's eye-lights suddenly looked brighter. "That could be it, all geth had a base program that they had to protect their owners and their home."

"So now they defend the home-planet by fighting their former owners?" Garrus wondered. "That should cause a programming conflict."

Tali turned to him and he could almost make out her face behind the mask from this close. "Yes, it should. We don't know how they separated themselves from that kind of base programming."

"What exactly were the geth constructed for, originally?" Shepard asked.

"The were servants, some were integrated in construction- or farming machinery, others were helpers around the house, watching over the children."

Ashley looked past Garrus to speak to Tali. "What turns a robot-nanny into a killing machine?"

"That part of our history has been lost, we don't really know what made them turn against us."

"Quarians don't care much about history," Liara said quietly. "Asari historians probably know more about quarian history than the quarians themselves and even we have hardly any records that go back more than a few hundred years."

"A few hundred years is still something." Ashley said.

"Not for an asari," Liara said to Ashley, "a few hundred years is not much for an asari. By human years, I'm only 106 years old, barely older than a child."

"Damn, I wish I look this fresh at a hundred years!" Ashley blurted out, only to turn dark crimson again.

"Smooth, Ashley," Shepard said. Ashley hid her face in her arms on the table and avoided looking at Liara, who had also turned slightly purple.

Shepard shook her head. "Back to the topic. Why do all geth now fight? Not all of them could have had the programming for that."

Tali seemed to think on that question for a while before answering. "What made the geth truly advanced AI was that they were networked, so that they could learn from each other."

"So the geth learned to defend their life and home with weapons and they learned it through the networking. Your ancestors truly fucked that one up." Shepard said. "But now we see them fighting for Saren, they've never done that before, right?" Shepard leaned forward on the table, looking like a wild predator seizing up an enemy. She was getting to the core of her questioning, working like a seasoned investigator. Garrus's breath hitched at the grim purposefulness she had hidden under her calm and friendly demeanor.
"No, I don't think so." Tali tilted her head back, thinking before she continued. "They never fought for someone else since they separated themselves from the quarians."

"So how did he make them do that? Did he reprogram them? Saren is clever but I don't think geth programming is in his repertoire."

"And it's not easy." Tali was vigorously shaking her head. "Very few people know how to do that."

"What if he had a quarian to work for him?"

Tali's eyes flashed angrily. "As I said, it's very difficult, just having a quarian is not enough. Not every quarian knows how to program a geth, we all have different interests and abilities."

Shepard hung her head in true shame. "I'm sorry Tali, here I go again with the fucking stereotypes. Sorry."

Tali's voice was softer now. "It's okay, Shepard, I know you don't mean it this way."

"But I should know better," she said. "So we need to find out how he managed to influence the geth in fighting for whatever cause Saren has in mind. That's another thing I need to figure out, what Saren is getting out of all this."

"You weren't joking with this 'know your enemy'," Tali said.

Shepard straightened her shoulders. "No, I wasn't."

The voice of the pilot came from the ceiling speakers. "Commander, you have a call from the Citadel."

"Route it to the captain quarters, Joker." She turned to the group at the table, "sorry, duty calls, I'll be back in a little while." She gave Garrus an extra smile and hurried towards the captain's quarters doors, nodding at Kaidan on the way.

Ashley spoke up. "I had my doubts about the Commander but now I think she can really bring Saren down."

"Why were you doubting her?" Garrus asked.

Ashley looked him straight in the eyes. "I know she was always held as the rising star of the Alliance, Anderson's protege and a hero of many missions. But I always had my doubts, she doesn't exactly follow the rules, blatantly disregards them a lot of times, as you know." She kept looking at him, probably cataloging his reaction. "I know she still does a good job but I was just raised differently than that. She gets the job done no matter what, no doubt about that but it's always primarily her way, not the Alliance way." She threw a quick look towards Liara before continuing. "I have no problem with her - eh - xenophile... tendencies, you know, I'm just not used to it."

Garrus decided to ignore that last remark. "And now you don't doubt her anymore?"

"Maybe I have just gotten used to her leadership, it's very unusual, in case you don't know, she almost seems too nice. I never had a Commander invite me to dinner in the mess and talk like she does. I thought she would be different, more removed," Ashley said and began cleaning up the food containers. Tali finished her drink and handed the bottle to Ashley who threw everything into the recycling chute.

"Thank you, Chief Williams," she said.
"It's Ashley, I know we may have gotten off on the wrong foot but I hope we can be friends."

"There is a wrong and a right foot?" Tali asked, her head tilted slightly different.

"No. Yes. I mean, we started on a bad note..." Ashley was searching for words when Liara saved her.

"Humans have many expressions in their language that the translators have trouble with."

Garrus chimed in. "I think Ashley wants to say that she wants to start over without any bad feelings from before."

Tali perked up. "Of course, I'd like that Chief, I mean Ashley."

"Good," Ashley said with an audible sigh, "it's been fun ladies and gent but I have to get back to my station."

"Me too," Tali said, "I want to learn more about the stealth drive and see if I can extend the time we can stay in stealth." She made a wave, her two fingers pressed close together and turned away. Garus made a mental note on reading up on quarian body language the next time they had access to an Extranet buoy.

Liara walked up to Ashley. "Can I join you?"

"At the weapons bench?"

"Yes, I would like to see what you do and I have not seen much of the ship so far."

"Oh." Ashley stared at the asari for a few seconds before she collected herself and smiled. "I can give you a quick tour first, if you'd like."

Liara smiled back and Garrus realized that she was quite beautiful.

The two women, or rather the monogendered asari and the human woman left the mess and Garrus looked over to Kaidan, who had stopped working at the console and was looking at something on his omni-tool. A happy smile played on his lips and Garrus decided not to disturb him.

He had a nagging thought in his mind that he needed to ponder. It was about something Ashley had said, about Shepard getting the job done no matter what. They were already on the hunt for a Spectre who was known for getting the job done at any cost. How dangerous was a Spectre with that kind of ethic? They had already seen one go rogue. Were they fighting fire with fire?

Garrus decided that he disliked Noveria even more than the shadiest district of the lower parts of the Citadel. And not because of the cold on this ice planet, the habitat where Port Hanshan was located was kept at a comfortable temperature. But the administration and authorities were even more corrupt and ominous than on the Citadel. They did not even try to hide it.

The Noveria habitat was owned and run by the Noveria Development Corporation and the whole place was just a business venture for them. The corporation made the laws and only worried about the revenue. Morals were not in high demand on Noveria. A hanar merchant had openly asked Shepard, an official Council Spectre, to smuggle something for her. The audacity was almost
impressive.

Even though Noveria had an agreement with the Council to allow Spectres access to Noveria, despite not being part of Citadel space, they almost didn't allow the Normandy to dock or Shepard and her team to enter the port. The private security force only stopped harassing them after they got ordered to stand down over the comm system. Garrus was already fed up with this place and it had not even been five minutes since they entered Port Hanshan.

After having spoken to the administrator about the laboratory Benezia and Saren had rented on Noveria, Shepard was clearly at that point as well. The administrator, an arrogant salarian, straight out refused to give them access to the transport system that would take them to the laboratories. He was ready to punch him in the face and Shepard did not look much calmer.

As they stepped out of the office, Shepard fuming with anger, stomping loudly across the plaza, a voice he hadn't heard in a while called him. "Vakarian, hey, Birdy!"

Every single turian in the plaza snapped around, angrily searching for the human who dared to call a turian with such a cussword.

Garrus knew only one person who would call him like that. "Frank Johnson, you dirty monkeyman!" He turned around and saw Frank leaning against the wall by the door, grinning at him. His brown hair had gotten a little longer and he had a faint stubble on his face but other than that, he looked exactly the same. He pushed himself off the wall and walked the few steps over to him and pulled Garrus into a tight hug. He wore armor, just like him, so they more or less clanked and scratched against each other like two vehicles but the gesture still meant a lot.

Shepard came up to them and put a hand on Frank's shoulder when they stepped apart. "Frank, it's good to see you." She looked his armor over and smiled appreciative. "Nice armor, Frank. Is that necessary for a reporter nowadays?"

"Good to see you too, Shepard. And if you spent some time here or any other non Council place, you'll see that armor is very much necessary. I feel like my life has gotten much more dangerous since I left C-Sec."

"What brings you here on this damn ice-planet?" Garrus asked.

"You already hate it here, don't you, Birdy?"

"Spirits, yes, like a crack in the cowl."

Shepard laughed out. "It's not my favorite place either," she said, "but Saren has been here and Benezia might still be here." Shepard had taken Frank's hand and shook it with a warm smile. Frank smiled back at her, a short nod passing like a story between them.

"Oh, and let me guess," Frank said, "you have met Administrator Bel Anoleis and he doesn't want to help you."

"Is that his name? He didn't even tell us that much."

"I might know someone who could help you."

"I'm all ears," Shepard said. That expression formed a very strange picture in Garrus mind.

"The administrator has a secretary, her name is Gianna Parasini, she... she is my contact here."
"What exactly are you doing here?" Garrus wondered.

Frank ruffled his hair and then gestured them to follow him as he took them across the plaza towards the noise of a busy bar. "After I had worked with Emily Wong on a huge story about corruption on the Citadel, we decided to broaden our scope. Emily is going to come in a few days, I'm sort of putting out the feelers around here." He led them to a table in the bar and they ordered drinks from the waiter. "Worlds like this, entirely corporational, are truly the worst of the evil. They barely adhere to the most basic laws, they have slavery and hardly any safety regulations. You almost can't call the system corrupt because that would imply that there is a lawful system in place to corrupt in the first place."

He opened his omni-tool and showed them the people in the bar, discreetly zooming in on the faces.

"Over there, that's Gianna Parasini, she... I'm pretty sure she has some kind of secret agenda but so far she is helping me by feeding me valuable information." He aimed the camera at another woman, blonde with a harsh look on her face. "There we have Kaira Stirling, head of security."

"Oh we met her," Shepard interrupted, "she was almost eager to shoot us when we arrived."

Frank nodded. "She's a cowboy."

Garrus searched his memory for that word because his translator made absolutely no sense, hinting at cattle and a boy. Then he remembered that Frank had explained to him one day that someone who is trigger-happy was called a cowboy. He made an addendum to the translation entry and sent it as a suggestion to the company that made the software.

The camera focused on a salarian now. "Over there we have Jillik Rark, a merchant who doesn't like to speak about his merchandise. There is a hanar at the port who works with him." Frank turned the camera to a turian, who sat alone at a small table, wearing the most expensive and elegant clothes Garrus had ever seen. "There we have Lorik Quinn, business man. Actually one of the few people here on Noveria who I would classify as mostly good guy. If you can get on his good side, things can work better around here."

He pointed out a few other people, shady people of all species. Garrus hated this place more by the minute. He could see that Shepard felt the same way but she also adapted to this place. Her charisma was like adaptive camouflage, making her look like she fit right into this cesspool of evil, despite wearing Alliance armor. When she got up to speak to Gianna Parasini, she walked like she owned the place, drawing hungry looks from almost everyone she passed.

Gianna Parasini had indeed an idea how they could get access to the transport system, they had to help Lorik Quinn with a problem and he would get them a garage pass. Shepard growled angrily at that, saying that she had kind of important things to do but Parasini convinced her that this was the fastest way to get access. Even on a corporate world like this, you could not cheat the bureaucracy.

Lorik Quinn was a suave man, well versed in his behaviour towards all species. He took Shepard's hand like Septimus Oraka had done with Dr. Chakwas and kind of blew over it? Garrus made a mental note once again to really look that up. Under all the elegance, he seemed to be a genuinely good person and Garrus wondered how someone like him ended up in a place like this.

The turian wanted them to break into his own office to get files on corruption in the administrative board. Frank's eyes lit up when he heard that and after agreeing to do the job for a garage pass, they left Frank with Quinn to talk about the information he had.

Before they could leave the bar, Frank called Garrus back. "I may have something on Saleon."
Garrus leaned close to him to keep his voice down. "Is he here?"

"No he was, but he left before I got here. But I'll find him again, he leaves traces wherever he goes."

"Keep me updated."

"Sure thing." Frank nodded and turned back to Lorik Quinn.

Shepard and Garrus left the bar. Outside in the plaza, in a quiet area, Shepard sat down on a bench, her face scrunched up in thought. "After we have the garage pass, we are going up to those locked laboratories at Peak 15. We can assume that Benezia is still there."

"Nobody has seen her leave and the laboratories have no spaceport. She must still be there."

"I was thinking of taking Liara with us, what do you think?"

"Have the mother face the daughter?" Garrus thought that scenario over. "It might have an influence but we can't be sure."

Shepard nodded. "I know but it's worth a shot, I think."

She pressed her finger under her ear to open the comm. "Normandy? ... Joker, tell Kaidan to suit up, I want him to come to my position. Just him, it's only a small job. ... patch me through to Chief Williams now, please." She waited until she heard Ashley answer. "Ash, I want you to give Liara a quick training session. You will eventually do this more thoroughly and with Tali too but for now we don't have much time. Teach her about positions, about formation, what words and hand signals mean, the basics. I want to take her with me in a few hours when we go to Benezia and I don't want her to get her head shot off because she stepped into my line of sight." She was about to end the call, when an idea practically lit up her face. "Oh, and do that training in the cargo hold so that Wrex sees it. He should know all that too but he would get pissy if I ordered him to get training. Just let him watch."

She ended the call and grinned. "Wrex will know that I made Ashley do that in front of him on purpose." She giggled. "Oh, he is going to be so pissed!"

She took his hand in hers, even though they both wore armored gloves, it still felt almost too intimate for a place like this. Garrus hid their hands between them to keep them the secret between them.

Garrus slid behind a half sized wall and prepared another Overload blast as a spray of bullets flew over his head. He was glad that Shepard had ordered Kaidan to join them, the simple little break in had turned into a full on close quarters fire fight that left the office mostly in ruins. He wondered if Lorik would regret his decision, once he saw the bulletholes and destroyed furniture.

They were fighting the local security force, which Garrus found kind of ironic. The same woman, who had threatened to shoot them as soon as they had entered the port, was indeed now shooting them.

"Garrus, three ticks left!" The shout from Shepard was enough for him to know where to aim his Overload blast. Without looking, he pointed in the general direction, a bit to the left of his position. The overload cracked on the targets armor and with a scream the woman fell in a rain of shots from
Kaidan's and Shepard's pistols.

When he looked to Shepard's last position, she was nowhere to be seen. Garrus hesitated to call for her, the harsh blonde head of security was still hiding under the roof somewhere and her aim was not bad.

*Better not draw attention to her.*

In the next moment, a gurgling cry came from the top of the gallery under the roof.

*There she is.*

The blonde woman fell over the golden rail of the gallery and crashed lifeless onto the floor, bleeding from her neck. Shepard's head appeared over the rail, the blue streak in her hair shining in the cold light that came through the glass ceiling, the light framing her.

*The Spirit of death.* She was as frightening as she was wonderful.

Shepard climbed down like a pyjack, swinging over the rail and jumping from the gallery down the next level. She went into a room with a private terminal and shortly afterwards, she was back at his side.

"I got Lorik's data. Let's get our damn transport access," she said. "I don't like being the hired gun for questionable people."

They met Parasini in the bar again and Shepard got involved in a longer exchange between her and Lorik until they finally shook hands. Frank had not left their side and had taken notes on his omni-tool. He stayed at the table, and when Shepard came back to where Kaidan and Garrus waited for her she slumped down on a chair.

"Looks like things will change around here," she said, "guess what, Parasini works for Internal Affairs and was sent here to investigate the Administrator. Now it looks like Lorik Quinn could become the new Administrator of Port Hanshan." She pointed to Frank, who had set up a camera floating next to him and was interviewing Quinn. The turian looked delighted.

"What's our plan now?" Kaidan asked.

"We should prepare for deep frost temperatures before we approach the laboratories at Peak 15."

Shepard checked her omni-tool. "Ash is not quite done with Liara yet, so we will use the time to relax and prepare. We approach the laboratory in five hours. Kaidan, prepare deep frost equipment for the squad, I sent you the list." She closed the omni-tool. "Garrus and I will check the transport system and how well the pass works."

Kaidan saluted and walked away, as Shepard walked with Garrus over to the garage.

"Frank wants to meet us later on, he said that he had something to talk about," Shepard said, pulling Garrus into the garage. This area was noticeably colder than the plaza and Garrus turned up the heating unit in his armor to stay comfortable.

The pass had opened the door to the garage without problems but Shepard also wanted to test it on one of the trains. It took a few tries but they finally managed to get into one. It was still powered down but the mechanic had promised them that it would be ready in five hours.

As they stepped out, Shepard suddenly knelt down and checked something on the floor. "Look at this, what is that?" She scanned a puddle of greyish fluids. "It's synthetic."
Garrus looked at the substance. "I have seen that before, on the turian vessel that came through the Widow relay. That's geth fluid."

Shepard had her pistol ready before he had even finished the sentence. She motioned him to follow and Garrus readied his gun too. He looked at the two of them, how they mirrored each other's movement. He imagined how they must look to an outsider, like a creature with two bodies and one mind. How he wished he could see it, they way they worked so perfectly with each other.

They found a few more puddles of geth fluid, leading them towards a large door at the end of the garage. They closed their helmets before Shepard opened the doors so that the icy wind could not hurt them.

The extreme cold still felt like an icy grip on his armor, making every surface creak in contraction. Shepard held her head low against the wind, letting it blow snow over her back. He followed the blue lights on her back, staying as close as possible to not lose her in the snow drift.

After twenty steps, the door behind them had disappeared, hidden by the snowstorm. In front of them was only white, like a wall moving in front of them just an arm's length away. The cold began to creep into the joints of his armor and he turned up the heating once more.

"Did I ever tell you that turians don't like the cold?" he grated through his teeth.

"You may have mentioned it," Shepard answered over the comm. "I wonder what the geth wanted out here, I don't get any readings, there is just..."

Around them, a ring of fire rose from the ground, hot and bright against the ice. He thought that it looked beautiful before he registered the sound of the explosion and that the ground was gone.

They fell into the whiteness below for endless seconds until they crashed hard on the ground in some kind of cavity under the icy surface. Garrus rolled to the side before he could get buried by the snow falling down through a hole above them. His hands found the hardness of Shepard's armor and he desperately felt around for life signs from her.

The snow stopped sliding down and he became aware of the eerie quiet. Not even his armor made any sound and he realized with a very real chill that the heating unit in his armor did not work anymore. He already felt his plates painfully contract from the cold.

Shepard finally moved, groaning as she sat up. Garrus sat up beside her and curled up as much as he could to keep from losing all his core heat. Shepard on the other hand seemed to be almost unaffected by the cold.

"At least we're protected from the wind down here." She checked her omnitool. "It's only 18 degrees under freezing point, not exactly tropical but not too bad." They had fallen into some kind of snowtunnel, maybe an underground passageway. It looked like it had not been in use for a while, the walls were crumbling.

Garrus was losing feeling in his legs and he couldn't stop shivering. "Not bad? I thought humans don't like the cold either."

"Yeah, we don't like it much but this won't kill us." She turned to Garrus and he could see worry fall on her face behind her helmet's faceplate. "What's the matter, Angel, it's not that cold."

Garrus could almost not move his mouth anymore, the muscles all over his body tensing. "I guess, turians don't deal with the cold like humans. I'm cooling down too fast."
"Already?" In a wave of snow she slid on her knees to his side.

"My heating unit broke," Garrus hissed out through his clenched teeth, now shaking all over.

Shepard ripped off her frontplate and removed his as well and pulled him tight to her body. Her body, usually so much colder than his, felt like a scorching fire on his cowl and he could even take a much needed breath without painful cramps. Her helmet scratched against his, her voice, tight like an overdrawn spring, still came from the comm. "What happens if you get colder?"

"Asphyxia." His face felt like stone and he couldn't stop his subharmonics screaming.

"How long till that happens?"

Garrus tried to absorb as much heat as he could from her, pulling her tighter. She gasped, probably getting hurt by his keel bone. He tried to tell her that he was sorry, tried to sing it to her, but his voice was gone.

She took off her helmet and looked at him. "How long?" she almost shouted.

Garrus looked at her, the edge of his vision turning dark. "Maybe two hours..." he pressed out, the cold burning in his mouth.

"Garrus, no! This can't be..."

Her voice faded, drowned out by the rushing of his blood in his ears as his heart tried to keep up with the temperature loss in his body. He knew that he should worry, worry about the tiredness in his bones, how he couldn't remember how he got here and why this Spirit was talking to him. But he had forgotten how.

Numbness made his world smaller, the edges of his vision sinking into grey fog. He fell back, the shivering had stopped and he didn't feel anymore. He wanted to sleep, to wait for something but a strange sound pulled him along the edge of consciousness. He turned his head to see where that sound came from. His vision turned darker, contracting until all he could see was that bright face, surrounded by white ice.

*My Spirit of death.*
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Since I got a comment about that, I'd like to clarify something. Garrus speaks of asphyxia as the end game but I wrote him as suffering from hypothermia. My idea is that turians react so severely to hypothermia that their blood stops circulating and they eventually die of oxygen deprivation while suffering from hypothermia. So he doesn't mention hypothermia as the cause of death for turians that get too cold because that is a given. I wrote him as having hypothermia (research!) but my headcanon is that the effects are much more severe and quicker than they are for humans.

Icky humans and their weirdness coming up in this chapter. ;-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Light can be painful. It bites through eyelids that want to stay closed forever.

The calm, cold quiet was replaced with noise, a hum and a voice forcing themselves into his mind. He knew that the voice was important, that he should listen but he was so very tired. He wanted to go back, back into the darkness.

Garrus knew that he was waking up but he was fighting it. His body felt too heavy, his skin too painful, his plates too cold. He turned back into the nothingness.

After an endless time of blissful darkness, the noise pulled him back up. Someone was calling his name. He knew that voice, it was vital.

"Garrus, wake up. Can you hear me, Garrus?"

The biting light glared into his eye as he opened it a little. There was a face in front of him, blinding white with dark spots for eyes. He knew that face, it was a good face. It was important.

"You are on the Normandy, in the med-bay, you got a bit too cold," said the voice, "you will be fine, just don't rip anything out, ok?"

He tried to nod but the muscles in his neck felt like they had not been used in years.

"You can sleep now, everything will be fine. I'll be back here when you wake up."

A wave of relief washed through him and he drifted back into the void.

A moment later, that actually lasted for several hours, he woke up again. The skin under his plates hurt. A sensation of a thousand needles running up and down his back made him turn to the side.
Only now became he aware of his surroundings.

The light, that previously had hurt his eyes so much, was actually dimmed and held at an orange color like the color of the sunset on Palaven. Next to him, a machine was quietly humming and two tubes, filled with his blue blood, were running in and out of it. The tubes ended in one needle on his arm and one on his neck. He was itching to take them out but he figured that they were probably keeping him alive. On his other arm, another tube with a clear fluid was attached to a needle.

He realized that the bed was more like a survival pod, molded around his body with foam, encasing him in warmth. He even had a warm pad laid over his head, covering his fringe. There was a strange sensation of his plates contracting or expanding all over his body. It felt good and uncomfortable at the same time.

The sound of the door opening made him slowly turn his head to the side. Dr. Chakwas strode over to his bed, omni-tool in scanning mode. She gave him an encouraging smile.

"Good to see you awake, Optione Vakarian. You had us worried." She issued a few commands and began to remove the tubes that had drawn his blood into the humming machine from his arm. "We had to warm up your blood. You had severe hypothermia when Shepard brought you in."

"Shepard?" His voice sounded foreign to him, a croak of someone who had not spoken in years.

"She'll be right here." The doctor administered something into the clear tube on his other arm and looked at the readout on her omni-tool.

The door opened and Shepard stormed in, dressed in just a shirt and socks. She was by his side in seconds, her hands hovering over his face but not touching him. Her eyes had dark shades underneath and a deep, bloody gash across her cheek had the familiar shine of medi-gel sealing it.

"How do you feel? Are you in pain?" She looked him over but still didn't touch him.

He coughed to clear his voice. "My skin..." Speaking was difficult.

Dr. Chakwas spoke up, "You had some frostbite under your plates but nothing serious. There may be some pain and sensitivity but it will be fine in a few days."

"Can I touch you?" Shepard asked with her voice like a whisper.

He nodded, wondering why she was so hesitant. She took his face in her hands and very lightly pressed her forehead against his. He felt her draw in a shaky sigh and a salty tear fell on his mouthplates. His skin prickled but the relief of feeling her close was overpowering everything else.

He raised his hand to touch the gash on her cheek. It took all his strength, his muscles spasming from the effort.

"How?" he managed to croak out, stroking over the gash once before his arm fell back down.

Shepard looked down. "You were freezing, you were in pain. You were barely conscious, you didn't know where you were and what happened. You didn't recognize me." Her finger was lightly stroking over his cheek, and her eyes followed the movement, avoiding his eyes. "I touched your face and..."

Garrus wanted to yell out but his voice didn't work.

But she saw the reaction and looked him in the eyes. "You lashed out. Your skin must have been
painful and when I touched you, you struggled and... you scratched me."

_I did that?_

It wasn't just a scratch, it was deep cut from his talon, a whole section of her skin scraped off. The guilt constricted his throat.

He tried to turn his head away but she didn't let him, holding him with her hands. "Don't blame yourself for that," she said. "You weren't all there, you didn't even recognize me, you called me 'Spirit of Death'. Which is totally going to be the name of my band one day."

He didn't quite understand that reference but he could see that she was trying to make light of the situation. She looked tired and he wondered how long she had worried about him.

"What... how...?" he rasped.

"Let me tell you the whole story," she said and sat down on a chair and took his hand in hers. There were sections of raw skin on his hands but she avoided touching those areas.

"You basically shut down, it was scary, we fell into that snow tunnel and right away you were freezing cold and disoriented. I had no idea turians reacted so severely to cold, you fell unconscious after just a few minutes. I had to get you to a warmer place, quickly. My scan showed some kind of underground building a few hundred meters away, so I put a rope around you and pulled you behind me, sliding over the snow on your back. It was the only way, I couldn't carry you, you were curled up like a ball."

She grinned at him. "At least I was warm that way, lugging you behind me like a horse. Anyway, that building was some kind of storage shed, back from the time when that tunnel was carved. I made a fire with some stuff that was lying around. I remembered that we learned not to warm someone up too quickly, a human would die of a heart attack if the blood vessels opened up too quickly. I didn't know how that was for turians but I figured I would just treat you the same way."

Dr. Chakwas nodded at that. "That was the right idea, my dear, his reaction to warming up too fast would have been the same as if he was human."

Shepard looked thoughtful for a minute. "I put you next to the fire and covered you with a piece of tarp I found. Kept the armor on you, I figured, even if the heating unit was broke, it still protected you. After a while you woke up a bit, I tried to talk to you but you were still disoriented." She absentmindedly touched the gash on her cheek, that was probably the moment when he had hurt her.

"I couldn't reach the Normandy or Alenko but we needed help. So I made an emergency call on open channel, even though the geth would probably hear that just like everybody else. The shed wasn't exactly a fortress but at least it was only open to one side. I built cover out of the storage boxes and waited. Kept the fire going."

She hesitated, her mouth opening and closing and her fingers trailed along the plates on his arm, so lightly that he almost didn't feel it.

Dr. Chakwas looked down on her, a sad smile playing on her lips. "I'll leave you alone now, please let him rest soon."

"Yes, Doc, thank you."

Dr. Chakwas turned off her omni-tool and left. The light was still turned down low and orange tinted shadows played on Shepard's face. A dark look passed over her face but it got wiped away by a
smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Anyway, guess who was our saviour? Lorik Quinn! He heard a few rumors about some people not being so happy about us being here and when we didn't come back from the trains, he took a few people with him on a search. They found the hole in the ground where we fell in and followed our tracks. I almost shot him when he came around the corner." She shook her head. "He was so proud for finding us. Kept boasting about it to Frank. We got you on a transport and on the Normandy. You were... in bad shape. Dr. Chakwas modified one of the life pods to warm you up and she had your blood circulate through a heater. It... you were lucky."

She stopped talking and her head and shoulders fell forward.

Garrus used all his strength to raise his arm to put his hand under her chin. His voice seemed to work a little better now and he croaked out, "Jane, tell me everything."

"I did."

"No."

She curled up even more, and the grip on his hand got almost painful. When she finally spoke, her voice was so quiet that he almost didn't hear her.

"I was so afraid. I thought I lost you." She looked up and he could see tears in her eyes. "One minute we were joking around and the next you regressed and almost died. I..." a quiet sob shook her, "I thought I lost you."

His finger went to the cut on her cheek, carefully tracing it. She took his hand and lowered it onto his chest. "Don't worry about the cut, it's nothing. I would have... anything..." She wiped away a tear. "It's nothing."

Garrus wanted to say something, chase the despair off her face. But tiredness began to pull him down.

"Sleep my Angel, everything is going to be fine," she said, her fingers ghosting over his face. "Sleep, I'll be back soon."

Sleep welcomed him like an old friend.

He woke up from the noise of someone running past his bed into the room on the side of the med-bay. He opened his eyes and saw Liara disappear into the room. He heard a sob before the door closed. A short time later, Ashley Williams came into the med-bay. She nodded shortly towards him and went to knock on the door of Liara's room.

"Liara, it's Ash. Can I come in?" She waited at the door, her hand resting on it. After a few moments, it opened and Ashley stepped inside, taking Liara in her arms as the door closed behind her.

Garrus took stock of the pain around his body and decided that it was bearable. He raised himself up on his elbows and slowly raised himself to a sitting position. Dr. Chakwas appeared at his side.

"I see you feel better, Vakarian," she said, looking over the readout from her omni-tool. "I would like
to transfer you to a bed, let me just move you closer." She let the pod float on a mass effect field over to a normal bed. With an encouraging push on his back, she made him sit up and scoot over. The backrest was raised and he leaned against it with a sigh, already exhausted by the movement.

The doctor covered him with a heavy blanket and did another scan of him. "Your blood pressure is a bit high but not alarming. I'd like you to rest some more but I think you can leave the med-bay by tomorrow."

"Is everything alright with the rest of the team?" Garrus asked. "I just saw Liara run into her room."

"I only know that I had to treat some scrapes and a sprained ankle. There was also exposure to acid from..." she looked on her omni-tool, "Rachni? I must admit that was a first for me."

"Rachni?" Garrus felt a chill crawl up his spine, the rachni were supposed to be extinct. The rachni had pulled the galaxy in a devastating war, almost destroying everything. The salarians uplifted the krogan to fight the rachni on their home planet, without them, the galaxy would look very different today.

Shepard stormed in, hearing him call out the word. "Oh yes, rachni, nice isn't it?" She radiated anger like a wild Regar, even though she did look nothing like that wild predator from Palaven. "They have been breeding Rachni there and - surprise! - the population got out of control and killed everything that moved. That's why they locked up the labs at Peak 15. Binary Helix has some explaining to do." She kept pacing in front of Garrus's bed, a slight limp in her steps.

Dr. Chakwas saw it too and stepped in her way. "Commander, I need to look at your injuries."

"In a minute, doc, I'm fine, really. We have to talk to the Council first. The turian councillor has been bugging me constantly about his turian advisor not responding to messages."

Garrus groaned and looked for his omni-tool. Shepard went to a drawer on the side and took out the omni-tool ring and handed it to him.

"Here you go, check your messages, I set up the camera." She placed a camera drone floating at the foot of his bed and let it project a translucent screen in front. That way they would look directly at the camera while talking to the councillors.

Garrus slipped the ring over his hand, hissing as it scratched over tender skin. He ignored most of the messages that had piled up and only read the ones from the councillor. Most of them were just questions about his well being but one announced that he had forwarded a package from his family to him, hoping that it would arrive on Noveria before the Normandy left. He had no idea what that could possibly be.

Shepard tested the picture, looking that she was in frame next to him propped up on his bed. He trilled his embarrassment about being tucked in bed while talking to the councillors. Shepard smiled warmly at him, noticing his discomfort.

"I know it's not the most dignified position for you," she said, "but the councillors were getting anxious, so I rather have them see you like this than answering a million questions again."

The gash on her cheek looked less red by now but it still pained him to look at it. "Didn't they believe you?"

"I don't know what kind of problem the turian councillor Sparatus has with humans but I think he thought I tied you up in the cargo hold or thrown you out the airlock."
She typed a few commands on her omni-tool but Garrus stopped her with a hand on her arm. He looked towards the door to Liara's lab and hummed questioningly. "What happened down there? Liara just ran through here and was very upset."

"Oh god, yes. I should.. but I don't think she would want me to..." She raked through her hair and stared at the door like she expected it to open any minute.

"Ashley is with her," he said, humming reassuredly.

"Oh yes, good, that's good." She was almost shaking, hugging herself. She still had her armor on but no gloves. Garrus took her hand and let his thumb rub circles on the spot between her thumb and finger. Slowly, she calmed down and relaxed.

"Did you find Matriarch Benezia?"

"Yes, we found her, right at the Rachni queen," Shepard said and Garrus had to hold in a fearful keen. A Rachni queen!

"She was... out of her mind," she continued, staring ahead at nothing. "Something, someone had an influence on her, control. She fought it and managed to snap out of it for a short while. She spoke to Liara, and she told us that Saren's ship can influence everyone around, like brainwashing them." Shepard shook her head and her shoulders fell forward on the memory. "Then she fell back into the influence, began to fight us along with asari commandos. I tried to talk to her, Liara was crying, screaming, trying to get through to her but she was gone. I... I had to shoot her right in front of her daughter." She shook her head in disbelief, "There was nothing I could do, she would have killed us all."

"Liara knows that," Garrus said, "she will understand."

"Still, how horrible is that? I'm her friend and I shot her mother in the heart, right in front of her, the blood hit her! I... what kind of monster..."

Garrus turned to the side, wincing at the pain and pulled her into an embrace, ignoring her dirty armor. A breath like a sob left her as she hugged him back.

"You are not a monster, Jane, you know that." He took her face in his hands and pressed his forehead to hers. "You did what you had to do."

She took a deep breath and stood up straight, shaking the sadness off. "Yeah, I know. Still, not a good day." She looked around, they were alone in the med-bay, Dr. Chakwas had quietly left without any of them noticing.

"What happened to the rachni queen?" he asked, trying to steer the conversation to something else.

"She sang to me."

"Sang."

"Yes, through an asari she possessed, that's how they communicate. She told me that her children could not hear her song, that's why they went crazy and attacked everyone." She pointed to a few marks on her armor, where acid had eaten away the top layer of her armor. "She was in a cage with a tank of acid over her. I could have killed her. But I let her go on her promise to disappear."

Garrus froze. "You let her go? A rachni queen? Do you have any idea what the rachni did? Spirits save us." He fell back against the backrest, recalling the history lessons from his childhood. The
galaxy had almost fallen back then.

Shepard gave him a sad smile. "I knew you wouldn't agree with that. Wrex was also quite vocal about that."

"But why, Shepard? You must have heard about the rachni wars, even if your kind was not spacefaring back then." He just could not understand how she could risk everything like that.

Her eyes turned to small slits. "Yes, our kind, we are just the babies of this galaxy, we know nothing, I get it. Someone should have gotten rid of the babies once and for all when they stumbled into space! How lucky that no one sent the krogan after us." She had gotten louder and the fire in her eyes was almost burning him. She took a breath and calmed down. "She is the last of her kind, killing her would have been genocide."

She looked at him with pleading eyes. "Can't you understand, Garrus? Who am I to decide over the fate of a whole species?"

Garrus fought the fears of the old stories down, he may have decided differently but he could understand her. Despite being such a killer on the field, Shepard had respect for life. "Ok, I understand. I just hope we won't have to fight an army of rachni anytime soon."

"Yeah, I can only hope that won't come back to bite us in the ass one day," she said with a sigh. "But I felt... I felt I could trust her. I can't explain but I believed her promise."

"I hope you're right. The councillors are not going to be happy about this." Garrus squeezed her hand once more and then let her call the council. He looked over her dirty armor. "Don't you want to change?"

"No, let them see that we actually do some work here." She straightened her back and raised her head, only to lower it again with a smile to him. She remembered what he told her about dominant and submissive gestures. He grinned at that memory.

The councillors were expectedly not happy about the rachni queen but they had to accept Shepard's decision. The rachni queen had long left the system and could not be traced.

Garrus listened to her report, he had missed a lot while he was unconscious in the med-bay. There had been a whole lot more fighting with rachni and employees of Binary Helix than he had known. The most interesting part was the information about the location of the Mu relay in the Terminus system. Saren wanted to find something called the Conduit and he had explicitly ordered Matriarch Benezia to get the information from the rachni queen.

The asari councillor looked thoughtful. "The Mu relay was a major hub, connecting hundreds of system before it was lost thousands of years ago. We need to know more about this Conduit so that we know where to look for it."

Sparatus, the turian councillor nodded at that. "Without knowing what exactly the Conduit is, you can only follow Saren's trail. We will forward any information we find." He was going to end the call when Shepard raised her hand.

"About that - your intel sucks!"

The turian councillor stood in shock, his mandibles drooping.

Shepard glared at him through her lashes. "We had no useful information when we got here, we almost got shot as soon as we set a foot in port. The lab was full of geth and rachni and we didn't
know anything about that. Saren has an army of geth and a huge ship and none of your sources
know where he is? Your intel sucks. If that is the kind of support you have for your Spectres it's no
wonder they have such a high mortality rate."

Sparatus pulled his mandibles tight and looked like he was about to explode. The salarian councillor
cleared his throat to defuse the situation. "I'm sure we can find a solution..."

"Yes," Shepard said with a firm voice. "I want a team from ANIS dedicated to investigating for us.
I'm sure Spectre Kyrik can make all the necessary arrangements."

The councillors reluctantly agreed and ended the call rather quickly. Garrus shook his head.

"You really like making Sparatus angry, do you?"

Her grin was downright wicked. "It does give me a certain joy, I must admit. I wonder if I can make
his fringe pop off if I keep at it."

Dr. Chakwas came back as she put the camera away. "Commander, please remove your armor now,
I need to examine your injuries."

Shepard sighed but didn't object. Piece by piece, her armor came off and into a transport box and her
underarmor as well. Save for her underwear, she was completely naked and waited for Dr. Chakwas
to scan her. The coppery smell of blood made Garrus look up. Apparently she had been hit by a
bullet at least two times, something had stabbed her upper arm and the rachni acid had eaten through
her armor on her hip. Dr. Chakwas began to apply medi-gel to all the injuries.

Garrus had to suppress an angry growl. "Didn't you say you were fine?"

"I am!" She looked down on her body. "Those scratches are not too bad."

The resilience of humans was legendary by now but he was certain that he smelled something else.
Something that made a shuddering wave rise up his spine. He scooted closer to her, reached for her
before he even realized that he did it.

He sniffed and a protective urge came from some instinctual part of his brain and made him growl.
Shepard looked at him with one eyebrow raised and he had to admit that he couldn't explain his
behaviour himself. "There is something else," he growled, "something new..." he took another breath
and to his own surprise he was getting aroused and the blanket did nothing to hide it.

An amused smile played on Dr. Chakwas lips and Shepard's eyes got wide when she followed her
eyes. The doctor did another scan and nodded. "Ah yes, I see. You have finally started your cycle,
Commander, it looks like you are ovulating."

"Damn, that means I'll be bleeding in a few days? I really don't need this right now, doc!"

"I know dear but I told you, after what happened on Eden Prime, I had to turn off your implant and it
was about time that you let your body have another cycle anyway. You have been postponing that
for far too long."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "I'm kind of busy, doc."

"You soldiers always are," the doctor said, "after you have started your period, I'll turn the implant
back on and you won't have to deal with this for another year."

Garrus fought through the fog of his arousal that wanted him to grab Shepard and carry her into
some dark corner to fuck her brains out and trilled. That got the women's attention and they both
turned to him with mild amusement on their faces.

"What is going on?" he asked, suppressing a loud song of desire.

"Commander Shepard has started her menstrual cycle, she will be fertile for the next few days," Dr
Chakwas calmly explained, "we usually don't consciously notice the accompanying pheromones but
they seem to have an- ahem - unexpected effect on you." She went to her terminal and did a quick
search. "There is not much information about the effect of human pheromones on turians, this will be
very interesting."

All the tiredness had fallen from his bones and was replaced by feral power, power that made him
strong enough to carry her away. He had to protect her, hide her. She was his, his alone and he
would take her as his mate and make her forget anybody else!

He reached for her arm, a wild growl rising in him from deep behind his cowl until he gasped in
sudden pain. It reminded him that his foggy mind was lying to him.

Shepard came to him on her own accord and he breathed in her divine scent. She kissed him. The
world fell away, her lips and her tongue injecting him with life. His arms wrapped around her, faintly
he felt the pain as the newly healed skin under his plates was irritated. But he didn't care.

She breathed in just as deeply as him, pressing her forehead to his and his marking scent released in
abundance. With a sigh, she pulled away. He immediately missed her presence as a tangible pain in
his gizzard.

"Well, it seems like it's a good thing that you are on sick-leave for a few days," she said with a sad
smile, "judging by the tent you're making there, you might get a bit distracted on the field." She
giggled as she looked towards his erection under the blanket.

He sighed, willing his penis to calm down to end this embarrassing display of his arousal. Thankfully
Dr. Chakwas had decided to read something on her terminal, probably more for his benefit than for
hers.

She got up as Shepard put her underarmor back on and gathered the box with her armor to leave.

"Commander, I expect you to allow those cuts to heal for at least five hours before you start any
strenuous activity." Dr. Chakwas took another look at her omni-tool display. "Other than that, you
are cleared for duty but I would like to take another look at your arm before you get into armor
again."

"Understood, doc." She turned and made a kiss into the air towards him. "I'll see you later, my
Angel, get some rest."

Garrus raised his hand up, placed his longer finger on his forehead and then turned the inside of his
finger towards her. This was an old sign, indicating the marking scent between lovers. She probably
didn't know what it meant but he needed to do it to show his love.

As she left, taking her pheromones with her, he felt his mind clear. He let his head fall back, finally
succumbing to the tiredness of his body.

Dr. Chakwas came over to his bed, arranged the blanket around him and dimmed the lights over his
bed.

"I want you to rest some more, try to sleep."
"Doctor, could you give me a rundown on this menstrual cycle that Shepard has?"

The doctor smiled and sat down on the chair. "Well, most humans regulate their hormonal systems with an implant. That implant affects hair growth, reproduction cycles and in some cases it can be tuned to correct imbalances that could cause depressions or mood swings."

Garrus nodded at that. "Turians use implants in the same way, suppressing ovulation is also quite common, especially in the military."

"I see," Dr. Chakwas' face lit up with the joy of acquiring new knowledge. "Now, as you probably know, turian women are fertile about four times in a year. Human women ovulate about every 20 days."

His mandibles fell slack. "Every 20 days? You mean a human woman could get pregnant every month?"

"She stops ovulating once she has gotten pregnant but yes, every month." Dr. Chakwas let out an amused laugh. "I had a conversation about this with a turian colleague, he said that this explains the mystery of how the weak humans managed to overpopulate their planet. It's all in the numbers."

"Spirits, that actually makes sense. And those pheromones..."

"Ah yes, I had not heard about that yet, probably because relationships between humans and turians are still not very common." The doctor looked excited like a kid with a new toy. "There is no research about this but I will investigate it more, discreetly of course."

"What about that bleeding?" he asked, fighting the horrifying pictures in his mind.

"During ovulation, a lining is built up in the uterus to prepare for a pregnancy. That lining has to be shed if no pregnancy occurs." Dr. Chakwas typed something on her omni-tool as she got up. "I'm sure that is also the case for turians."

"Yes, the effund. The expression is not about bleeding but about ejecting something." He found it very strange to call it bleeding.

Garrus felt the exhaustion creep into his body and closed his eyes. Dr. Chakwas excused herself and went back to her desk. He let his thoughts lazily run through all this new information. The rachni queen, the death of Liara's mother, the Mu relay, Shepard standing up to the Council to get ANIS involved and last but not least, the powerful pheromones from his strange human girlfriend.

Without the implants regulation, Shepard would emit those pheromones every month. The craze this caused in his body would probably kill him in the long run. He fell asleep with a new appreciation for that implant.
The things I make the poor guy learn...

Thanks to Credete for quick editing.
Garrus' recovery took a lot longer than he had expected. Doctor Chakwas' estimate of him being able to leave the med-bay the next day had been correct so far in that he made it all the way to the mess hall and had to sit there for half an hour to gain the strength to even make it back.

As he lay back down on the med-bay bed, tucked in and scanned by a non-commenting Doctor Chakwas he decided to, for once, use the privilege his rank gave him and ordered one of the crew to get him some food from the mess. He also asked the engineers to set him up a terminal so that he could at least get some work done while he was under observation by the doctor.

The knowing smile Doctor Chakwas told him that she had wanted him to experience this weakness. He would have argued with her to release him before but now he was quite aware of how frail his body was. She connected an IV to his arm again and after about half an hour the trembling in his muscles stopped.

When he finally felt strong again, he scheduled a call to ANIS and waited for them to acknowledge it. He scanned the news for a while until his call was returned. The omni-screen expanded and showed the faces of Keggs and Nihlus, both trilling with worry.

Garrus answered with a calming tone before they even exchanged a greeting.

Nihlus leaned forward. "How are you feeling, Palaven boy?"

Garrus gave a hum to that little jab but before he could say anything, Keggs spoke up, his arms crossed in front of his cowl. "Didn't your mother tell you not to play in the snow?" Nihlus broke out in laughter at that and Keggs was chuckling quietly.

He decided to not bother with an answer and waited for the two older turians to stop giggling. Keggs was the first to get himself under control again and he sang a sharp tone at Nihlus to get him to quiet down. Nihlus shook himself and focused on Garrus again. "We were actually quite worried about you. Freezing to death was not supposed to be part of the job."

Keggs gave Nihlus a slap on his fringe, which made Nihlus laugh again. Nihlus got up and disappeared, in his place Terlin Mirhale sat down. After a nod from Keggs and a slightly bewildered look over his shoulder to Nihlus, the salarian turned to a datapad in his hand.

"We have tried to find a lead as to where our rogue Spectre is now," Terlin said. "Saren Arterius has completely disappeared from the grid, he has not contacted anybody. We then turned to the next
obvious thing to follow his movements - credits."

"And?" Garrus asked when Terlin didn't continue.

"Nothing. He's not touched any of his funds." Terlin shook his head. "I don't understand this, a ship that huge needs a crew to run, we should see a trail of money for that."

"Unless he runs the whole ship with geth," Garrus said.

Terlin stared at him for a second. "Is that possible?"

"Why not? The geth have spaceships of their own, we have seen them. Although, there have been asari troops too..."

"Ah yes," Terlin interrupted, "we can actually trace credits for those from Matriarch Benezia, but that trail has dried up now."

"Saren could be working exclusively with geth now, it seems." Garrus flipped through the information on geth that Tali had put together. "The geth run on a versatile fusion core that can convert energy virtually out of anything. They could run on the exhaust of that strange spaceship Saren is using or on scrap material they pick up planetside."

Keggs nodded at that. "His own nourishment could easily be provided by the things he finds along the way. I'm sure there was a fridge to raid on Noveria."

The thought of the frightening turian Spectre, rummaging through a fridge in one of the laboratories on Noveria, gave Garrus an unexpected chuckle. "He could also have funds available that we are not aware of."

"Possible, but not likely," Terlin said, "we've been very thorough. As it is, we are monitoring for geth activity now and we've found a few things. There is a human colony on Feros, run by the ExoGeni Cooperation, that has reported attacks by geth."

"I heard about Feros before, an information broker on the Citadel told us that some colonists are leaving."

Terlin nodded. "Yes, some of the colonists don't like how ExoGeni runs the colony, they felt mistreated."

Garrus thought about Noveria and how such a corporate run colony worked. He couldn't blame anybody who would want to leave such a place. "Why is ExoGeni colonizing the planet?"

"Feros is covered with prothean ruins. They want to establish a settlement to explore the ruins from there."

Garrus made a note of that. "Prothean ruins would certainly interest Saren. Has he been seen there?"

Nihlus leaned over Terlin's shoulder. "Not officially but the colony is not very large, most of the planet is undeveloped and covered with ancient debris. He could have dropped anywhere without getting noticed."

Garrus' omni-tool buzzed with the receipt of data files. Terlin had forwarded all the information they had on Feros and the prothean ruins on the planet. "I'll inform Shepard that we should head to Feros next to investigate there. Saren might not be there anymore by the time we get there but we need to know what he knows. If he found anything about the threat that Shepard sees in her vision."
"Where is Shepard now?" Nihlus asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"The Alliance asked her for a few investigations." Garrus looked through the mission log of the ship with his omni-tool access. "She is planetside right now, a former Alliance laboratory that has gone dark."

"Tell her my greetings," Nihlus said, "and tell her that she should take better care of you."

Garrus sang a note of amusement before ending the call. He read through the information Terlin had send him until his eyes fell closed.

"Stand by, Normandy."

Garrus had the shore party communication running on his console and listened to it while he cleaned his armor and guns. He wanted to go with them but Doctor Chakwas had not given clearance for him. He had been annoyed but if he was honest with himself, he had to admit that he really was not fit for duty yet. The physical therapy this morning had left him wheezing for breath and almost collapsing on the floor.

But Shepard had given him access to the comm channels and the external recordings that she took with her omni-tool to add to her mission reports. That way, he could at least hear what went on down in the human colony of Zhu's Hope on Feros.

The shore party got attacked by geth as soon as they had stepped off the walkway. Shepard was now talking to the leader of the colony, a strange man called Fai Dan. He was way too calm about the geth attacks.

"Shepard to Normandy."

"Normandy here," Joker answered.

"Something is not right here, the people of this colony act like they are drugged. There's only a handful of people here and this colony used to have over a thousand people. Nothing works, they have no water, no power, no food."

"Want me to send the engineers out?" Joker asked.

"Yes, but I want them in full protective gear, including breathing masks, and I want three marines protecting them, also in full gear. Samples of the air, the water, everything and I want Doctor Chakwas to analyze it for sedatives, drugs or anything similar. We're heading out into the ruins to sweep out the geth."

"Understood, Normandy standing by."

For the next half hour, Garrus listened to the sounds of heavy boots on hard floor, shootings, and the characteristic screeching of dying geth. Shepard gave short and calm commands to Kaidan, Ashley, Wrex and Tali, showing no sign of distress in her voice. Garrus heard the remarks of the squadmates too and only Tali sometimes seemed to be overwhelmed. But after a while, she also found her rhythm in fighting. Her and Wrex exchanged jokes, the krogan apparently having a lot of fun in winding up the young quarian but she got wise to his antics and snapped back just the same.
Garrus relaxed a little, so far the mission seemed to go smoothly. It was quite embarrassing how much he worried about Shepard when he could not be with her. Probably the deadliest woman alive and he wondered if she could manage without him.

A terrifying scream pulled him out of his thoughts. He realized after a second that it had not been one of the squad but one of the colonists who had screamed. The man sounded strange, as if he was not fully in control of his own mind. He tried to tell Shepard something about who controlled him and the other colonists, but he broke down in an agonizing scream before he could finish his sentence.

"Shepard to Normandy."

"Go ahead, Commander."

"Call back our teams and have the samples analyzed. I want guards at the airlock and constant surveillance for any sign of external influence on the crew." Shepard sighed. "Something is very, very wrong here. We found the reason for the water problems, the valves were closed, and had been for a while apparently. We spoke to a colonist who was in pain from fighting some kind of influence. This has been going on for a while it seems," anger was making her voice sound hard, "I really want to hear what ExoGeni have to say about that."

"Commander," Joker said, "according to the maps, you are not far away from the ExoGeni headquarters. They haven't evacuated, not officially at least so you should find someone there who can answer you. But," a negative beep came from one of the consoles next to him, "something is blocking our scans of the area."

"We deactivated a geth transmitter outside of Zhu's Hope, that should have improved scanning."

"It has, but only for the area around Zhu's Hope and," Joker took a deep breath, "we still get very strange readings, we can't even clearly differentiate the colonists from the base. It's all one big blob."

"Have one of the engineers check the scanners. First the guns don't work, now the scanners. Maybe we should send the ship back," Shepard hissed out between her teeth.

Joker said something about not giving up his baby but Shepard cut him off and announced that they were going to drive over a prothean skyway to a building that ExoGeni had repurposed as their headquarters.

"It's a Mako!" Shepard announced with a happy laugh. Garrus was sure that he heard a groan coming from the rest of the squad.

"Commander!" Joker called out, "incoming geth ship!"

"Acknowledged. They're dropping armatures."

Tali spoke up, "Shepard, I'm getting comm chatter but I can't fix the location."

Shots from the Mako's cannon boomed between the rattling and screeching of geth. "Keep scanning, Tali, I would like to find some survivors," Shepard said between shots. The rumbling of the Mako told Garrus that she was most likely driving over geth and armatures, just how she liked it.

Finally the noises died down and the squad found an outpost with some employees of the ExoGeni laboratories. One very cynical supervisor was trying to tell Shepard that the ExoGeni headquarters were private property and housed company secrets. Garrus could easily imagine the angry tension in her jaw when she told him that she wasn't interested in company secrets. That supervisor was lucky not to receive a punch in the gut.
The team took off over another skyway and Garrus listened to the conversation over the comm. In the middle of a conversation about the ExoGeni cooperation and what they wanted with this colony, the connection dropped. Garrus sat stunned, listening to the silence.

Now he began to worry. It was one thing to sit by and just listen, it was quite another to wait and not know at all what was going on. He tried to distract himself with some complicated programming, installing a code subset that would make a normal combat scanner effective against geth shields. But after a few minutes he had to admit that he wasn't concentrating and that his hands were shaking.

He finally got up and went up to the cockpit, unable to sit still in his cabin any longer. As he approached the cockpit, he could already hear Joker trying to raise the shore party.

"Normandy to Commander Shepard, please respond, Normandy to Commander Shepard."

He looked over his shoulder as he heard Garrus approaching, his footsteps loud on the metal walkway. Unlike a turian ship, the Normandy was not equipped with much soundproofing and to Garrus she actually was much louder than a turian ship. A big turian in bulky, heavy armor could not get around quietly on this ship.

Joker pointed to the co-pilot seat with his head, offering it to Garrus. He kept scanning and calling for the shore party without receiving an answer.

One of the marines guarding the airlock looked up from his omni-tool scanner. "XO Pressly, we are getting movement outside, the people in the colony are coming to the Normandy."

Pressly stepped into the cockpit and Joker switched one display to an outside view. They watched a group of humans slowly walking towards them.

"Is it just me, or do those people look like a bunch of zombies?" Joker wondered.

"I was thinking the same thing, Lieutenant," Pressly said. Joker turned around and raised his eyebrows in surprise. Pressly had a faint smile playing on his lips, a rare sight.

"Keep the doors closed, watch for weapons," the XO ordered and turned back. He nodded shortly towards Garrus as he left. Not the warmest greeting but better than before. Pressly clearly had already received his talk from Shepard about welcoming the aliens on board.

Joker looked at the screen, his nose wrinkled. "Someone should tell them that we're all out of zombie food."

They flinched when the colonists started to bang on the hull and called to them, their voices eerily calm. Joker looked at Garrus wide eyed and shook his head. "Never a boring moment on this ship," the pilot said and turned back to his controls.

Excruciatingly long minutes passed until Shepard finally answered Joker's hails. Garrus felt the tension drop from his shoulders like a coat.

"Commander," Joker said, his voice pitched high in relief. He had been just as worried, apparently. "Good to hear from you. The colonists have gone crazy, they're banging on the door and throwing things at the hull."

"Don't let them in, don't interact. We have some new information about this place," Shepard said over the comm. "There's a plant under the substructure of Zhu's Hope, called the Thorian. It has some kind of influence on the colonists, controlling them. And get this, ExoGeni knew about this and willingly used the colonists as test subjects!"
Shepard let out a growl, sounding like an angry turian. Garrus had to grin, it seemed she had taken on some vocal habits from him.

"Corporate run colonies are looking better and better," she said with a sharp edge in her voice. "Forward this information to ANIS, this might be grounds for investigations. We are making our way back to Zhu's Hope now but we're going to stop at the ExoGeni outpost and drop someone off. And I'm itching to talk to that supervisor," she snarled. "Shepard out."

They kept the connection open, listening to more fights with geth, a conversation about geth that seemed to have built a temple, and Kaidan and Wrex holding a contest who could throw geth further with his biotics.

The meeting with the ExoGeni employees at the outpost turned into a standoff, as the supervisor wanted the whole colony purged and was waving a gun around. The sound of a hit, someone falling and Wrex's chuckle told them that Shepard had just run all out of patience.

By now, the colonists were out of control, swarming the Normandy and even the people at the outpost seemed to be affected. Shepard needed a solution to get through the colonists without having to kill them and someone handed her grenades with a sedating nerve gas.

"Shepard to Normandy."

"Go ahead, Commander."

"I don't have enough nerve gas to sedate every colonist. Have Doctor Chakwas prepare tranquilizer darts from my stash and I need someone to shoot those darts into the neck of the crazy people."

"I'll do it," Garrus said, already on his way to the armory, typing a message to Doctor Chakwas as he walked.

Shepard switched to a private channel with him. "Are you well enough? You need to shoot very precise and..."

"I'm fine Shepard, I can do this. I'm a sniper, you want me to do this."

"Of course I do, but I also want you to be healthy. You'll have to climb on top of the Normandy through a roof hatch, are you up for this?"

"Yes," Garrus said, sounding a tad more convinced than he felt. But he needed to feel useful, he was going crazy, sitting around doing nothing. He looked through the rifles on the gun rack, picking a small and light one. Someone handed him a pack of tranq darts, and he began loading them into the magazine.

"Okay," Shepard said and he heard a smile in her voice, "go ahead then. Modify the rifle for low impact, we don't want you shooting the darts through their necks."

"Already at it, Shepard," Garrus said.

"Of course," she said, laughing a little, "happy shooting. going back to open comm."

The comm filled with squad chatter again and a warning from Joker about geth activity. The squad kept coming closer to the base, meeting resistance by geth, colonists and something that Tali called green creepers. Garrus decided to take a second gun with normal ammunition with him, in case those creepers would turn up at the Normandy too.
One of the marines, Omar, wordlessly came up to him, loaded up on ammunition and hefted a grenade launcher on her back. Apparently she had been ordered to be his backup, as it was standard procedure. When he had to climb out of the roof hatch, Garrus was actually glad that he had her with him, so that they could help each other with their guns.

It was even more creepy to hear and see the colonists from the roof. They shouted words in no real language and they cried and whimpered at the same time. When they saw Garrus and Omar, some tried to climb up on the Normandy, almost falling down into the dockingbay. Garrus hurried to stun them before they would fall into the pit.

After he had tranqed the first ten colonists, Garrus had to refill the magazine. Omar had her gaze set to the far side where the shore party had gotten attacked by the geth when they arrived. So far, no geth or green creepers had shown up. Garrus raised his rifle again and aimed at another colonist. He was starting to feel the strain in his arms but he forced himself with calm breathing to keep his aim steady.

Through the comm channel he could hear Shepard's team fighting their way towards the base. He froze for a second when he heard the leader of the camp shooting himself to escape the control. How could a plant have such a terrible influence on a person? No wonder Saren was interested in that thorian, such control would be useful for him. And Saren was the kind of person who had no qualms in using such methods.

"Shepard to Normandy. We found the entrance to the lower levels, going down now."

The colonists at the Normandy suddenly turned as one and ran back towards the base. Omar took the grenade launcher from her back and calmly placed two shots on the ceiling at the end of the walkway. The ceiling collapsed and blocked the escape path for the colonists, trapping them. Garrus nodded appreciatively towards her and she grinned.

"We don't want them guys coming up in the Commanders back," she said.

Garrus nodded in agreement. He sat down, trying to cover up how much the shooting had tired him out. Over the comm, he heard the squad go silent and he wondered why. After a second, Shepard spoke up.

"That does not look like any plant I've ever seen. This may be - problematic."

Garrus wondered what she saw when his omni-tool indicated that he had received files. It was a series of pictures of a massive object the size of a shuttle, with tentacles and something that looked like a mouth. It took him a while to realise that he was looking at the plant, the thorian.

Omar looked over his shoulder and gasped, "That's a plant? Really?"

Another picture appeared, an angry looking asari with green tinted skin on it. Over the comm he could hear the asari speaking for the plant, demanding of them to be in awe. Garrus shook his head, that was definitely the wrong thing to say to a human and especially to Shepard. When Shepard refused to leave the colonists under the plants control, the thorian attacked.

The next few minutes were very confusing to listen to. Tali complained about more of those green creepers, Shepard and Kaidan fought with asari clones that the thorian seemed to give birth to and Wrex and Ashley were cutting and shooting down the tentacles that held the plant in place. Garrus began to worry when Tali fell down and Kaidan let out a scream when he pulled the creepers away from her. Wrex announced the last node as almost cut when Ashley called out "Commander!" with choked fear in her voice.
The rifle began to creak under Garrus's grip until he heard her voice, croaking out a "I'm fine." Then an inhuman scream echoed through the building as the thorian fell down inside the tower.

The team was patching each other up in silence. Kaidan had been scratched by a creeper and Shepard had hurt her arm. Tali's suit was not punctured, she was just a bit rattled. As they were taking inventory, a wet sound could be heard. Garrus heard guns getting readied and a new voice came over the comm.

"I am free! Please don't kill me!"

"I just fought ten of you," Shepard snarled, "I need some convincing."

"My name is Shiala, I served Matriarch Benezia. She saw the danger and wanted to guide Saren on a gentler path."

"Didn't work out so well, did it?"

"Saren is compelling, Matriarch Benezia lost her way, she, all of us, came to believe in his cause, his goals. The strength of his influence is troubling," the asari sounded close to tears.

Tali gave a snort. "She tried to manipulate Saren but in the end, her plan backfired."

"Indeed," Shepard said. "How does he do it?"

"He has an enormous warship called Sovereign," Shiala answered, "and it can dominate minds, indoctrinate them. The influence is subtle, it can take days or weeks but it will happen. I was a willing slave when Saren brought me here. He needed my biotics to communicate with the thorian, to learn it's secrets."

"Saren is a biotic himself, why did he need you?" Shepard asked.

"I was offered as trade, to secure an alliance. But Saren betrayed the thorian, he ordered the geth to destroy all evidence of it's existence."

"No wonder it was so angry," Ashley said.

Shiala continued, "The thorian was here, long before the protheans built this city. The thorian's knowledge of the protheans is the essence of the protheans, it can not be taught, it has to be transferred. But you need the cipher to understand them. Saren knows that you search for the conduit, he attacked the thorian so that you could not gain the cipher."

Garrus perked up, finally some new information. They had already suspected that there was something going on with Saren's ship. But they had not heard of a cipher so far. Shiala explained that the cipher would make Shepard understand the vision from the beacon on Eden Prime. With the cipher she could think like a prothean, she would understand their culture and history. The asari would have to transfer the cipher into Shepard's head with a mind meld. Garrus just knew that Shepard would not like that at all.

But she sighed and agreed to have Shiala implant the cipher in her head. The asari fell into a long speech, Garrus was pretty sure that Shepard rolled her eyes at that.

"Every action sends ripples across the galaxy, every idea must touch another mind to live, each emotion must mark anothers spirit. We are all connected, every living being united in a single glorious existence. Open yourself to the universe, Commander. Embrace eternity!"
There was no sound until Ashley and Kaidan both called out "Commander!" and there was a commotion that made Garrus almost lose his mind in worry. Finally, after what seemed like hours, he heard Shepard cough and say that she was fine. He was beginning to hate that expression.

"My head hurts," Shepard said, "and I still don't understand what I'm supposed to be seeing."

The asari spoke up. "You have been given a great gift, the experience of an entire people, it will take time to process this information. I'm sorry if you suffered but you needed the cipher, in time it will help you understand the vision from the beacon."

Garrus stopped listening, and climbed down the hatch. He needed to see her, to know that she was okay. He waited next to the air-lock until she finally came back. She was holding her arm in front of her and gave him a tired smile. The mission briefing was cut short because she had to go to the med-bay.

Before she left, she pulled him closer and whispered, "Meet me in the Captain's cabin in forty minutes."

He sighed, he could hardly wait.

As soon as Garrus had entered the cabin, he got pulled on the couch and Shepard snuggled up to his side. She placed a kiss on his mandible and pressed her face against his.

"I missed you so much," she whispered. "Sorry that I had so little time for you in the last few days. You were stuck in the med-bay and the Alliance was sending me around on stupid errands."

"I could not have helped you anyway," he mumbled, leaning back against the couch and thinking about how tired he had been even after short activity. "Even tranquilizing the colonists today pretty much took all my strength."

She softly punched him on the arm. "Hey! You said you were okay!"

"Well, I couldn't leave such delicate shooting to someone else, could I?"

"Oh, you cocky bastard, we have capable marines on this ship, you know. Somebody else could have done that." She looked at him sternly from under her eyelashes and it filled him with a rush of hot anticipation. Hopefully they would have time for some intimacy later tonight.

"But not as pretty," he said, grinning widely at her.

"Oh, come on!" She gave him another punch in good humour but winced and rubbed her arm.

"How's the arm?" Garrus asked.

"Nothing serious, that Shiala clone slammed a Warp or something like that against me, and that gave me a hair fissure in my arm. Doctor Chakwas had to do some bone mending but it's fine now." She sighed and leaned her face on that arm. "Damn, I'm so tired. All those stupid jobs Alliance command is throwing at me. You'd think we had more important things to do."

She sat up, an angry scowl on her forehead. "Honestly, the mission from Alliance command before we went to Feros was really testing my patience. They lost some drone on Eletania and I had to pick
up the fucking data-module. A data-module! On a planet that is a health hazard even in full combat gear. I think Tali fared better than me down there."

"Was that the first time you took Tali with you?"

"Yeah, I wanted to see what she had learned in her training with Ash and I didn't expect much fighting. I had Ash with me, she is worth two soldiers if you ask me. Hell of a shot. We actually ran into some geth but we had them down in seconds."

"Why the hurry in picking up that data module?"

"They were afraid the geth would find it out there in the Attican Traverse. But still, the top ship of the Alliance and Hierarchy, also kind of busy with chasing a very dangerous rogue Spectre and they send me down to run after pyjacks to search for a data module? Ridiculous."

"You searched pyjacks?" Garrus asked in disbelief.

"Apparently one had picked up the thing and ran away with it. So I had to chase every single one. There were at least a hundred there and I was really careful but the terrain was not easy and I accidently drove one over. Tali was so upset with me, she gave me such a vicious look."

Garrus chuckled and nuzzled the soft hair at her temple. "How can you tell, you can't see it through her helmet?"

Shepard laughed out. "Oh, but I knew! She has the cold-shoulder-and-scowl body language down to an artform! You should see her when Wrex is teasing her, she shuts him up with that!"

Garrus tried to imagine the huge, battle-scarred krogan to back away from the small quarian and failed. He had to see that to believe it. He pulled Shepard closer to him, enjoying the softness of her body. He had missed this, this closeness, holding each other.

Shepard was not quite ready to settle down though. She straightened and bounced on the couch in excitement. "Guess what else I found down there."

"Oh Spirits, the possibilities..." It could be anything from baby Thresher Maws to dancing geth.

"Come on, guess!"

"You found a long lost colony of botanist krogan."

"No, I - oh wow, that would have been awesome!" Her eyes lit up. "Krogan cultivating poisonous plants, how cool is that! But the place is so toxic, I might even be bad for krogan. No, there was a prothean artifact that looked like a floating silver ball. I touched it..."

"You don't learn, do you?" Garrus sighed.

"I had to! I had to see if it does something to the vision from Eden Prime."

"Is it still so cryptic?"

Shepard made a face. "It's gotten better with the cipher but it's still all chaos and devastation in hectic pictures. Whatever the protheans are trying to tell me, it's not going to be pretty. Anyway, the silver floaty ball gave me a brand new vision," she threw her hands up with a sarcastic grin, "hurray!"

Garrus saw the worry that she tried to overplay with her humour and took her hands to soothe her. "Are you collecting them now?" he said, trying to keep the mood light.
"Yeah, Liara is already looking at me like I'm some kind of prodigy that she wants to put into a museum." Shepard scooted lower and laid her head on his legs. "That vision was actually quite clear for a fucking change. It was from a hunter and it seemed like the protheans were watching him, how he lived, like anthropologists. It ended..." she raked through her hair and Garrus caught her hand and held it. She sighed and continued, "there were objects in the sky, silver and dark and then there were giant red beams and then it ended."

"You think he got killed by the beams?"

"It sure looked like it. I don't think I ever saw something like that before but, somehow, I know..." She began raking through her hair again, a nervous gesture that many humans shared.

Garrus stroked over her cheek with the back of his finger and felt her relax from his touch.

She took a deep breath and some of the tension left her. "Somehow, it felt familiar. I'm convinced that those beams came from a Reaper, although I can't really know that."

Garrus kept on stroking her cheek while he thought about that. "Maybe it's the vision from Eden Prime. You might not understand it all but subconsciously you know now what the Reapers can do."

"Yeah, that could be true." She raised her hand and stroked over his mandible in a mirror of his own movements. "How do you feel, Angel?"

He traced her lovely lips with his talon. "A bit tired. Dr. Chakwas wants me to do some more physio training before letting me go but she said that I could return to duty in about three days."

"Good, I need you by my side again. It's not the same without you." She sat up and climbed on his lap, taking his face in both her hands. "No more playing in the snow for you."

He leaned into her touch. "That would be fine by me."

Shepard hid a yawn behind her hand. "Wanna go to bed? I can't promise much action but I would really love to have you sleep by my side."

"I would love that."

She got up and undressed and disappeared into the bathroom for a few minutes. When she got out, she wore a simple shirt and some thin pants. She looked at him sheepishly. "Not exactly sexy this look, I know."

Garrus got up and nuzzled her hair. She smelled of soap and the sharp sting of her toothpaste. "You look sexy no matter what you wear."

Her cheeks turned a little pink and she gave him one of her blinding smiles that always hit him like a physical force. She took his hand and led him into the bathroom. With a smile she pointed at the turian teeth cleaner nozzle. "I had one of those installed for you in here too, so that you can sleep here if you want. And..." she pointed to a hook on the wall, "there's a sleeping tunic for you. I hope you like it."

The sleeping tunic was white with blue lines and the fabric looked very soft. Garrus felt his gizzard warm up, she really wanted him here, not just occasionally.

He took her face in his hands and licked over her lips. "Thank you, my Sunshine."

"You're welcome, my Angel." She walked out and slipped into the bed. "You better hurry or I'm fast
asleep when you get here." She snuggled up under the blanket and Garrus noticed with a smile that there was a second blanket for him on the bed.

He rushed through cleaning his teeth and put on the sleeping tunic. Shepard looked like she was already asleep when he crawled into the bed but she opened her eyes and turned to him.

They looked at each other, fingers tracing over faces and necks. There was an unusual seriousness on Shepard's face for a second before it was replaced with her smile.

"You know what we missed out on?" she asked. "Because of your hypothermia, we didn't even get to act out the story of 'trapped with an alien in the cold and surviving by sharing body heat'. That always sounds so hot and sexy when you're not actually trapped in the cold for real."

"What are you talking about?" Garrus asked and trilled out his confusion.

"Don't you guys have that trope?" She scooted closer to him and wrapped her arms around him. "We have lots of stories or movies with this. There is a scene where two people, who don't know each other or are even enemies, are forced to share a sleeping bag to survive. Of course, things get hot and sexy then."

"Yes, I think I saw a vid like that. That sounds interesting."

"It does, doesn't it?"

She grinned at him and sat up, the blanket wrapped tightly around herself. She looked at him with her eyes wide, acting as if she was scared of him. But there was grin on her lips that she couldn't quite hide.

"Turian, I know we are enemies but if we don't work together now, we will both die." She pulled the blanket tighter around herself, pretending to be cold. She even made her teeth shatter.

Garrus bared his teeth and flared his mandibles. Together with his subharmonic growl, he acted every bit like a threatening turian towards an enemy. "Human. How can I trust you? How can I be sure that you won't jam a knife into my side as soon as we lie down?"

Shepard's eyes lit up before she fell back into her role. She opened the blanket and lifted her shirt to show that she had no weapons. Garrus swallowed once before he nodded and also opened the blanket and lifted his tunic. She licked her lips as she looked him over.

"Besides," she scooted down on the bed, holding her blanket open to invite him to crawl under it, "a dead turian would not be very warm, right?"

Garrus pretended to hesitate for a short time and then slid under the blanket next to her and wrapped his arms around Shepard. She curled up against his chest, her leg over his hip. Her closeness, the soft coolness of her pliant body and her scent were enough to loosen his plates. He pressed his hips against hers and felt that familiar shiver from her.

Shepard chuckled. "Of course, there are more ways to keep warm on such a cold, cold night."

Garrus acted like he was frozen in shock, holding absolutely still. "But that would be wrong."

She ground her hips against his and whispered, "So very, very wrong."

He let his hand stroke up and down her back. "Sleeping with the enemy..."
She pressed herself closer to him and sucked on the tip of his mandible. "...a capital offense."

"Maybe I can say that you had me under mind control," Garrus growled.

"You think humans have mind control capabilities?" Shepard laughed out and the vibrations travelled most pleasantly through both of them.

"Anything is possible with you humans." He flared his mandibles. "We heard that your kisses are poisonous and that you control us that way."

Shepard grinned before acting serious again. She scooted up until her face was level with his. "How about if we test that theory?" She softly licked along his mouthplates and pressed her lips against them. He let his mouth fall open and she eagerly pressed forward, her tongue stroking over is. She alternated between stroking and sucking on his mouthplates. He let himself fall into the sensations with a sigh. It had been so long that they had time for a slow and sensual kiss.

She pulled back to take a breath and licked her lips. "So, how does that mind work now?"

Garrus grinned and faked a panicky trill. "Oh no, the human has me under control! My mind is convinced that I need to bury myself inside of her. Only then can we keep warm enough to survive this cold, cold night."

"You must be mistaken," Shepard huffed, her hips grinding against him, "because clearly it's you, implanting this desire in my mind. Making me wish to feel you inside of me and fuck me."

Garrus could only answer with a growl, his desire now very real. She struggled against his tight hug and it took him a moment to realize that she wiggled out of her pants. As soon as she had freed one leg she ground back against him, only to stop once more. To Garrus's confusion she turned away from him and searched through the drawer in her nightstand. With a triumphant smile she returned, holding the tube with the plate-softening lotion in her hand. She lathered some on his thighs and around his plates, his emerging penis spreading his groinplates apart. She grinned and tossed the tube to the side and aligned her hip to his, throwing her leg back over and her soft wet folds rubbed against his penis.

Garrus licked along that wonderful curve where her neck met her shoulder and she gasped. He pressed his teeth against her clavicle, just softly, so that he didn't nick the skin. "So soft," he murmured, "so enticing." He took another lick along that curve up to her earlobe and she moaned. Garrus grinned and whispered into her ear, "So sensual. Are you made for pleasure, human?"

Shepard gave a slight grin and ground her clit harder against him, making herself whimper. "Right now, all I want is to feel you, enemy mine. Our troops may be fighting but here, right now, there is only us. And we are not so different." She arched her back with a moan, thoroughly enjoying grinding against him.

Garrus shifted and aligned the tip of his penis with her soft, warm opening, almost getting overwhelmed by the sensations. He held his position, just touching her opening and he practically trembled in anticipation.

"Human," he said, his voice underlayed with deep hums from his subharmonics, "this is your last chance to say no."

In answer, she ground herself down on him, taking him in as far as she could in this sideways position. "Come here, enemy mine," she purred. "Let's see if you aliens live up to your reputation."

"We have a reputation?"
Her laugh turned into a gasp as she pressed herself against him, her fingernails digging into his carapace. She spoke with little breathless gasps between the words. "Yes, that you are sexual beasts, wild and untamed. Taking your women by force, holding them down with your teeth... big hit in the romance novels scene and.. ohhh" a loud moan made it impossible for her to continue speaking.

Garrus slowly pumped his hips forward, his movements somewhat hindered by lying on their sides but Shepard adjusted to his rhythm and pushed forward when he pushed forward. They both gasped as his penis went deeper into her warm sheath. It wasn't the urgent pumping of their usual sexual encounters, always driven by burning lust and the lack of time. This was slow, just rocking against each other in delicious friction.

"Sorry to disappoint," he said between gasps, "not much of a fan of the sex by force thing." He felt her her tunnel pulsing and getting tighter, telling him that she was close to her orgasm.

"Neither am I... oh gods... oh yes, yes, like this, Garrus!"

She pressed herself against him, her breath coming in hot puffs over his neck, her hips snapping to his. Her movements became faster and more urgent. She was mumbling his name between moans, her eyes pressed closed, her whole body drawn like a tight spring until she went rigid with a pressed scream only to push even more, harder, faster, taking him, holding him, pumping him from inside until he exploded in white bliss, pressing his teeth into her neck, her name all he could mumble like a prayer.

They kept holding each other like they were drowning, slowly coming down from that high. Her leg over his hip held him tight to her, not allowing him to slip out. Her hand moved from the back of his neck to the side of his face, softly stroking over his mandible.

"I'm so glad that you're here with me," she said, "I'm so lucky to have you, my Angel."

Garrus's voice came out hoarse, "I'm the lucky one, Sunshine, I..."

She shut him up by kissing him, the shift in position causing him to slip out. "Let's get cleaned up and then sleep."

He nodded and they both padded to the bathroom to take care of the necessities. A few minutes later they were back in the bed, her wrapped in his arms, her back pressed to his front.

A deep calm fell over him, sleep quickly claiming him.

This was where he belonged. As long as he had her in his arms at the end of the day, his life was right and whole.
All credit for the botanist krogan, cultivating poisonous defense plants goes to Joey, the sexy krogan.

Some lines are taken from the game, credit for them goes to Bioware.

And of course, thanks to Credete for editing this long chapter.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

One quote verbatim from the game because perfection. Also, some cameos, I didn't plan it that way, I swear, they just turned up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One thing nobody tells you before you sign up on a fancy new ship with or without aliens is -- how boring spaceflight is.

After the mission on Feros they had yet another frustrating talk with the Council. Garrus could not understand why the councillors were so reluctant to accept that Saren became increasingly dangerous. Shepard held her face tight and neutral but she finally hung up when the turian councillor accused her of only saving Feros because it was a human colony.

Now, without new information as to Sarens location, they had nothing else to do.

Garrus had put all his weapons and his armor through complete maintenance cycles and modded and calibrated his guns in any way possible. Ashley had let him use her workbench for that. At first she eyed him critically but she relaxed after a while and they even had some nice conversations. Mostly about guns of course but she also told him interesting things about life on Earth, about her family and the rituals they had. She told him about holidays she celebrated with her sisters and he got a glimpse of her religion. As with everything, human religions were diverse and confusing to an outsider.

Shepard joined them on the second day of sauntering through space, having finished all her reports. She also worked on her guns and armor but she didn't participate in the chat about turian and human religion. Garrus made a mental note of asking her about that later.

The Alliance threw them a few jobs here and there and Shepard had the scientists scan every system they entered for resources. But it was all busy work, it did not bring them any closer to catching Saren. Shepard spoke to one of the ANIS crew daily but they still could not find any trace of him.

Tension began to run high, as it was to be expected if you stuff a bunch of highly trained soldiers into a metal box with nowhere to spend their energy. Shepard took big teams of five or six down on every mission, even though most did not require such a big effort. But it was all she could do to keep the crew busy and distracted. As soon as there was a lull in activity, someone started a fight with someone.

Garrus had to break up an argument between Ashley and Wrex at one point. When he entered the cargo bay, they were standing almost nose to nose, grumbling and yelling at each other. Garrus quickly stepped between them, not even asking what was going on. He was not here to pick sides, he just wanted to prevent them from injuring each other. Wrex may have been stronger than her but he had seen Ashley fight, he would not bet on Wrex getting out of a fight with her unharmed.
They calmed down enough to talk reasonably to each other and when Garrus looked back to them from the Mako, they were tentatively shaking hands. He sighed, he would have to report this incident to Shepard.

Wrex had settled down on his mat, a frown on his forehead as he studied something on his omni-tool. He wondered what the old mercenary was working on. Apart from the trust between him and Shepard, Garrus wasn't sure why the krogan had actually joined them and why he was sticking around. He had the feeling that Wrex was along for more than just shooting husks.

Ashley had taken the elevator up and Garrus followed, he needed something to eat. He looked one more time towards Wrex as he stepped into the elevator but decided not to disturb him. As much as Wrex had accepted him and was sometimes even friendly with him, he was still a turian. There are limits to krogan tolerance towards turians.

Garrus stepped out of the elevator only to hear loud voices coming from the mess hall. He sighed, it sounded like another fight was going on. This time, Shepard seemed to be involved. Garrus stopped behind the corner and listened.

Shepard spoke in biting calmness, "So, you're calling me a racist?"

Kaidan answered her, sounding unusually defensive. "No, I just want you to be aware of what you base your judgement on. Your boyfriend may be a turian, but you avoid asari like the plague, can you be truly objective?"

Garrus flinched. Talking to your superior officer like that? Highly unlikely to ever happen on a military ship and very much out of character for Kaidan.

"Aren't you the one with the problem? That turian instructor at your brain camp doesn't shape your opinion of turians?" Shepard snapped.

Ashley spoke up, "Low blow, Skipper."

Garrus heard Shepard sigh and her voice turned softer. "I'm sorry, Kaidan, that was wrong."

There was a pause before Kaidan spoke again, his voice almost back to his normal soft tone. "I'm just asking you to question your motives. We are all formed by our experiences and you are in an intimate relationship with a turian while we are chasing a turian. You know people will wonder."

Garrus decided to walk around the corner and join the conversation. The humans were sitting around the table in the mess hall. Shepard smiled at him but turned back to Kaidan and Ashley. He sat down next to her.

"He's right Skipper," Ashley said. "I mean, I love being here on the Normandy but I was a bit taken aback by the human-turian loveboat vibe going on at first."

Shepard laughed out. "There seems to be an asari-human vibe going on too, I think."

"Touché," Ashley said and her cheeks turned red.

Kaidan leaned back and seemed to relax. "Our experiences influence us whether we like it or not." He looked at Garrus. "I had a bad experience with a turian but I try to not let that color my reaction to every turian."

Garrus turned to him. "What bad experience was that?"
Kaidan sighed before he answered, looking down on his hands. "He was one of the instructors at the biotic camp the Alliance built back then. I was still a kid. He mistreated a friend of mine, broke her hand because she didn't use her biotics to pick up a glass of water. I attacked him... I didn't have my biotics under control... I killed him."

"Damn, Kaidan," Ashley mumbled, "that's some tough shit."

Kaidan raked through his hair. "I was really suspicious towards aliens for a while but I got over it."

He looked at Garrus again. "Sorry if I came over as cold in the beginning, sometimes I fall back into that."

"It's okay, Kaidan," Garrus said. "I didn't notice any hostility coming from you."

Shepard took a sip from a bottle and leaned forward. "So you think that I may not be entirely objective?"

"Well, think about it. You know there will be press on the Citadel when we get back and what do you think they will ask? Why does it take so long to catch Saren?" Kaidan hesitated a bit. "And also -- what about Liara? Her mother was possibly the leading figure in this plot and you don't even talk to her."

Shepard slumped forward. "You think I avoid her because I don't like asari?"

"Maybe? I think you might miss out on valuable intel. Her mother worked directly with Saren and she was an influential Matriarch," Kaidan said. "Liara could know something, even if it isn't directly related. You should talk to her."

Shepard looked pleadingly at Ashley but she shook her head. "No Skipper, I'm not doing that for you. I'm just a lowly grunt, it's your job to put everything together, I just wait till you tell me where to shoot."

"Fucking mutiny, damnit!" Shepard grumbled with a little smile playing on her lips. "Okay, I'll talk to her. She better not look into my head though."

She stretched her arms over her head and bent backwards in a way that started all kinds of inappropriate thoughts in Garrus' head. He must have made a growl or Ashley had learned to read turian expressions, because the marine looked at him with a smirk on her face.

Shepard got up and looked over to the med-bay with a sigh. She looked around as if she wished that someone would want something from her so that she would have a reason to not go to Liara. But for once, no other task rescued her.

Another couple of uneventful days passed. They hopped around the galaxy, doing jobs for the Alliance that Admiral Hackett kept on giving them. They also followed a trail of material that had been sent from Feros to another science station. They had to fight Thorian thralls in that station. There was a single pod from the Thorian attached to the wall and it had been enough to infect the whole station and turn everyone into mindless slaves. Since Garrus had not been with Shepard in that fight, he was thoroughly creeped out by the idea of a whole giant plant like that.

He must have broadcast his disgust quite openly because Shepard was softly bumping his shoulder
on the way back and hummed at him. It still endeared him endlessly how she tried to copy turian subharmonics for him. Although her tone was off and she sounded a bit like a little child, he knew she asked him if he was okay. He hummed back at her, giving her helmet a short bump with his own.

Spirits, he loved that woman.

On the tenth day, when Garrus had to really concentrate to not let his subharmonics creak like a bored child, he got a message from Frank. It was a short note with coordinates and a single name: 

Saleon. It was signed with 'Get him, Birdy! - FJ'

Garrus jumped up, sending a message to Shepard and ran towards the CIC. The coordinates Frank had sent pointed to the Herschel system in the Kepler Verge. The doctor was on a ship, the MSV Fedele. A small cruiser, no external weapons according to the ship-register. Shepard keyed in the coordinates. They still needed a few hours to get there but at least now they had something to look forward to. Shepard threw him a worried look but he just grinned at her.

Garrus reveled in the feeling of excitement. The hunt was back on.

He spent the rest of the time preparing his weapons, laying out his armor and imagining the many ways he would make Saleon suffer for his crimes. That monster of a doctor would not get away from him again, he would not look at that arrogant grin again as he slipped through his grasp. This wasn't a C-Sec operation, he was with a Spectre now! Saleon was going down.

He was so distracted by his violent thoughts that he was surprised to hear Joker announcing their arrival in the Herschel system.

_Time flies when you think about death._

A few minutes later, Shepard arrived in the cargo bay in her skintight underarmor to put on her armor. Garrus was already set and prepared, bursting with excitement. They made their way to the airlock in silence.

On normal days, Garrus probably would have noticed the strange mood Shepard was in, but at this moment, his usual perceptiveness had left him. All he could think of was how he would make Saleon suffer.

Joker turned to them as they arrived at the cockpit. "Hailed them, no answer. We are docked but they didn't reply to my friendly question of opening the fucking door." Shepard only nodded, not reacting to Joker's remark. Again, an unusual behaviour for her that Garrus should have noticed but didn't.

As they waited for the VI to open the airlock, Ashley Williams joined them wordlessly. She nodded at Shepard and hefted her Assault Rifle to the back of her armor. Garrus was slightly disappointed, he had expected to do this mission with Shepard alone but apparently she was treating it like a normal mission. She even ordered a second team to stand by over the comm.

When the outer airlock door had opened to the sealed walkway to the other ship, Shepard finally spoke. Her voice was calm and professional, not in the least bit as excited as Garrus felt. But Shepard hadn't seen the confident grin of this doctor as he flew away from the Citadel with his victims.
Maybe she wasn't quite as affected as he was but Garrus didn't care. He was angry enough for both of them.

"As far as we know, this is a hired ship, so there must be a crew and we may find patients of Dr. Saleon. Garrus, I want you to stand back, Ashley and I have tranq darts to take out patients and crew non lethally. Keep an eye out for the doctor, he might be not so easily taken. We are heading for the bridge first."

Garrus swallowed his impatience with difficulty, all he wanted was to find Saleon and make him pay. "You think these mercs will let you take over the ship without resistance?"

Shepard closed her helmet as she answered. "According to the files I found, this is not a merc ship. They are transporters, they may hire mercs for security sometimes but they seem to be honest and legal. We will not treat them like pirates just because we suspect Saleon to be on board. I want to talk to the captain first."

Garrus swallowed any complaint that wanted to rise in him, he may have done this differently but Shepard had the command. He was still turian enough to not question his commanding officer. He turned to the control panel and started a hacking program from his omni-tool. A few seconds later, the door opened with a hiss and they stepped into a corridor.

Their omni-tools declared the air as clean but they kept their helmets on. Shepard downloaded a map from one of the terminals and they made their way through the empty cargo bay towards the bow of the ship. According to the map they had to follow a long corridor with many rooms on each side to reach the bridge.

Garrus noticed that the ship was old but seemed to be in good shape. The tell tale signs of wear and repair were visible on the walls and floors but the repairs looked well done. The terminals and the interface systems looked a bit outdated but everything seemed to work.

The ship was eerily quiet. Every groan of the outer plating, every click of machinery sounded twice as loud in the silence. Garrus felt his plates rise on his back, he had the feeling that they were being watched. Shepard looked at him and then pointed upwards. There were old fashioned cameras on the ceiling that followed their movements. Someone was definitely watching them.

"So they know we are here," Shepard said, "and they haven't attacked us yet. That's a plus in my book." The corridor stretched out in front of them, at least six closed doors visible on either side.

Ashley let out a snort. "Don't count your blessings just yet, Skipper." She looked on her scanner. "I'm getting life signs from behind all of these doors but no movement."

Shepard nodded, looking at her own scanner display. "There's a field in front of the door to the bridge. As if they wanted to protect themselves from the rest of the ship." She frowned and pointed her pistol to the door at the end of the corridor. "I really want to talk to the bridge crew now."

Garrus stomped forward with quick strides. The bridge crew would know where Saleon was and he couldn't wait to get his hands on him. The mass effect field in front of the door wavered as he approached and he scanned for the emitter. He was about to shoot at it when Shepard put her hand on his arm, giving him a pointed look.

She accessed the terminal next to the door. "Garrus, can you get me a line onto the bridge so that the crew can hear me?"

He considered that a waste of time and almost said something. But he held back, snapping his
mandibles shut and hacked into the communications grid. It took him a few tries, his concentration flipping between the task at hand and the giddy excitement of finally getting his talons on this monster of a doctor.

Eventually he cracked the security and stepped back to let Shepard access the connection. "This is Commander Shepard of the Alliance Navy. We are looking for a salarian doctor called Saleon and would like to talk to you..."

The field disappeared with a fizzle and the door opened. Ashley had her Assault rifle up and Garrus also raised his pistol while Shepard stepped into the room, her pistol arm relaxed at her side. The bridge looked like a mechanics shed, a collection of various kinds of technology connected in ways that should not work at all. Some of it looked ancient, some of it looked like an insane person had built it from scratch.

Garrus quickly scanned the bridge and noticed that the crew tried to appear non threatening but was watching them carefully. They were mostly human, except for two asari and a batarian. One asari looked strikingly beautiful and was dressed in expensive clothes that looked very much out of place on this bridge. The other asari was smaller and so thin, she seemed to disappear. Her eyes followed every movement and she made Garrus slightly nervous. He kept his eyes on the batarian. The guy didn't have his gun raised but his hand was lying on it and his fingers were twitching. He kept looking at a human who sat on the left in a chair, as if he was asking for confirmation.

Shepard's eyes had quickly flown over the crew and if she had flinched at the sight of the batarian, Garrus had not seen it. She looked perfectly calm and stepped up to the human in the left chair. He looked so relaxed as if he had just invited some old friends to a party. The tall human woman next to him looked less relaxed and had the stance of a seasoned soldier.

"Welcome to the Fedele, Commander Shepard, I'm Captain Tony Martel," the man drawled, "I normally don't let you Alliance types just dance onto my ship but you seem to be looking for this doctor and I would very much like it if you took him away from my ship." He leaned back in his chair, one leg up on some part of the console that looked useless but probably held this collection of machinery together. His clothes were old and worn and hung loose off his frame, not telling if he wore armor underneath.

Shepard fell into a relaxed stance and signaled for Ashley and Garrus to stand down. "You have a problem with your doctor, Captain?" she said, an amused smile playing on her lips. The Fedele's captain grinned at her and after a nod towards his crew, they all relaxed and settled down. The batarian looked quite disappointed to have to put his weapon away.

Captain Martel stood up and punched some commands into the ancient looking interface, bringing up the ships layout. "He isn't my doctor, he just hired us on Noveria. A salarian, calls himself Dr. Heart. Came on board with a bunch of medical equipment and some twenty patients. He assured us that they were not contagious and our own good doctor confirmed that. I still had a bad feeling about it, should have listened to my gut."

The Captain nodded towards a slim, somehow noble looking human who looked decidedly out of place on this bridge and among this crew. He stepped forward now and introduced himself as the ships doctor. "The patients got progressively worse once they were on board, what he did with them was absolutely unethical. Half of them have died by now and the rest are on life support units in the side rooms back there."

He pointed back towards the corridor and Shepard raised her hand to her head to open the comm. "Dr. Chakwas? I want you and your team standing by for medical emergencies. We also need a lazarett ship to evac the patients, contact the Alliance for that." She turned towards Captain Martel.
"That doctor sounds like the guy we are looking for and I will take him off your hands. But you will have to wait for the lazaret ship to take the patients, the Normandy isn't equipped to handle so many emergencies."

A woman in a dirty overall and with a soft smile stepped forward and put her hand on Shepard's arm. "Please, just help these poor people, he did horrible things to them."

"Did you find anything in the air when you got on?" Captain Martel asked. "Because when he began to run out of patients we kind of feared that he would release some kind of anaesthesia to continue his experiments on us. That's why I sealed us in here and called some friends." He looked at Shepard with a wide grin. "I had no idea one of my friends knows the first human Spectre."

"Frank Johnson is a friend of Garrus Vakarian here. Him and Vakarian have some unfinished business with Saleon."

"I see. Tell Frank I said thanks," Martel said to Garrus, who dipped his head in answer. While he had no illusions that his business was not quite as legal as Shepard had made it sound, he seemed to be an honest guy who took care of his crew. People like that were rare out here in the fringes of Council space.

"We scanned the air when we came on, we didn't find anything." Shepard started another scan on her omni-tool and waited for the result. "Still clean, no anaesthetics."

"Our sensors are not sensitive enough to find stuff like that," Martel said and then pointed at a room on the projected map. "There he is. Aft section, behind the purifiers."

"Got it." Shepard turned and strode out into the corridor. She stopped and turned to Martel. "Stay put, don't do anything funny."

Martel sat down in his chair and put his feet up on the console. "Wouldn't dream of it, Madam Spectre Shepard."

Shepard rolled her eyes at that title. She contacted the Normandy through her comm and ordered Kaidan to come on board with his squad. They were to escort Dr. Chakwas and her team to the patients in the life support units. And also to keep a discreet eye on Captain Martel and his crew.

She kept walking back towards the cargo hold, her eyes on her scanner and it was all too slow for Garrus. He passed her and fell into a jog, his fingers twitching on his raised pistol. This time, Saleon would not get away.

He rushed through the cargobay, and almost ran into the aft door as it didn't open for him. He stared at it dumbfounded, searching for the sensor or the button that would open the door until Shepard appeared at his side.

She grinned at him. "This is an old, human ship, some doors are just mechanical." She turned the wheel in the center of the door and with a metallic sound, the bolts retracted from the frame. The door swung open and revealed a dark corridor, lit up by the light of Ashleys Assault rifle. Garrus wanted to storm forward but Shepard stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Formation?" She smiled but her eyes looked serious.

Garrus shook off a rush of anger, to stick to procedure felt quite unnecessary right now. But the good turian in the back of his mind made him pull himself together. He took his usual position at the back of the squad, his assault rifle ready. Ashley scowled at him and moved to the left side of Shepard. They made their way slowly forward to the door at the end of the dark corridor. The ship felt even
older here, the floor was creaking with their every step.

The door behind the maintenance area for the purifiers opened automatically and the room was empty except for one salarian with his back turned towards them. He was working on a console, quickly typing.

"Saleon, step away from the console and turn around!" Shepard's voice had that distinct tone of an order and it made even Garrus flinch even though he wasn't addressed. For a second it looked like the salarian wanted to resist but then he raised his hands and turned around. Garrus hissed out in content, he would recognize that sick smile anywhere.

"You must be mistaken, my name is Dr. Heart and I..."

Shepard turned to Garrus and ignored the salarian. "Is that him?"

"Yes." Garrus spread his mandibles in a smile and aimed for the salarians head.

"You positive?" Shepard looked at him pointedly and Garrus had to stop himself to not snap at her. Of course I'm sure!

"Yes, that's Saleon." His moved his finger towards the trigger, just waiting for Shepard to give her ok. He would finally bring this monster to justice. "You will not get away again."

The salarians eyes got wide. "No! Listen, my name is Dr. Heart! You must mistake me for someone else."

"No, I'm not mistaken." Shepard cut him off with a wave of her hand but the step closer she took towards him brought her in Garrus' line of fire. He was dumbfounded. Shepard did not make mistakes like that. Her spatial awareness was almost flawless and had probably saved her life countless times.

"You are under arrest for crimes on the Citadel and in Citadel space. Under my authority as a Spectre I arrest you and will transfer you to the authorities. Hand over your weapons." She held her pistol up but she was still in Garrus' line of fire.

For Garrus, the world stood still for several seconds. He couldn't believe what was happening. They finally had this slimy bastard in their grasps and she would not let him shoot him?

How can you do this, Shepard? How can you betray me like that?

"Shepard! You can't let him get away from this! What are you doing?"

Shepard turned her head so that she could look at him. "The right thing. We arrest him."

"But..."

"We don't even know what he has done, we need information to help the patients here on board. He won't get away, he will pay for his crimes."

Looking past Shepard he could see Saleon grin even wider and the slimy bastard raised his pistol, mumbling something. Garrus stepped to the side to have a clear shot but he was too slow. Saleon had his pistol up, aiming at Shepard's head, his finger moving on the trigger.

A shot rang out and Saleon fell, hit by an armor piercing round that not even the reinforced chest piece on salarian armor could withstand. Shepard put her pistol away and sighed.
"And now he dies anyway!" Garrus yelled out, glaring at Shepard.

_How could you take this away from me?_

She turned towards him and took her helmet off. In his rage he didn't even notice how sad and soft her eyes were. "You can’t predict how people will act, Garrus. But you can control how you’ll respond. In the end, that’s what really matters."

Garrus deflated, all air punched out of him. He tried to say something but only his subharmonics could convey his confusion and war with himself. "I ... just..."

"I know, Garrus, but..."

He knew she was right, he knew this was how it was done but by the thrice damned ancestors -- it didn't _feel_ right!

Ashley cleared her throat and walked back towards the door. "I'm just gonna check the area, Skipper."

When she had left, Shepard came over to him and carefully put her hand on his gun. "Garrus, please calm down."

"You almost let him get away! How could you?" He stared at her, rage making him blind to the expressions of her face. "He killed Sarah, have you forgotten that?" The holding mechanism of his armor made an angry beep as he jabbed his pistol against it.

"No," Shepard said quietly, "but it's the first time you mentioned it. Because this wasn't about Sarah or the other patients, this was about you and that he had gotten away from you." She took his hand and pressed it so hard that it almost hurt. "We are here for justice, Garrus, not revenge."

Garrus felt like the air had left the room. Awareness crept up on him mercilessly. He hadn't even thought about the innocent people involved or Sarah, he had just wanted to bring Saleon down because -- he wanted to kill him for getting away from him. Pure revenge.

"I'm..."

Shepard placed her hand on his helmet and he suddenly felt as if he was suffocating under it. He ripped it off and let it drop to the floor. The stale air of the ship felt cool on his fringe. Her hand moved to his mandible, softly stroking.

"I know, Angel. You lost your way there a little." She raised herself on her toes to bring her face closer to his. "I'm always on your side, Garrus. Even if you've forgotten what your side is."

Garrus pressed his forehead against hers, his love for her finally winning over his hurt ego. His subharmonics hummed for her, still in disharmony reflecting his internal fight but slowly the only song that counted won out. _Love._

He took a deep breath, and pulled her towards him, as close as it was possible with the hard shell of their armor between them. "I thought I was supposed to watch you so that you don't lose your way..."

She smiled as she whispered, "Looks like we're watching each other."

"I'm sorry, Shepard, I don't know what came over me."
Shepard pressed a kiss on his mandible. "We all have darkness inside of us," she whispered against his face, "all of us have that monster of anger and revenge that's just waiting for the right moment to come out. We have to control it."

"I'm not very good at controlling it, I think," Garrus had to admit. Thinking back on his time at C-Sec, there had been many cases where he had let his anger control him and not the other way around.

"You'll get there, we'll get there. Together," she said, pressing her forehead against his.

Garrus sang out in love, his marking scent releasing.

*Together* was all he wanted.

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Chapter End Notes

I was worried that Garrus came across like a whiny teenager but on the other hand, this is ME1, so he is still a bit raw, young and reckless. He has a long way to grow ahead of him.
They slowly broke apart, their hands reluctant to lose the contact to each other even through gloves and armor. Shepard sniffed the air and grinned.

"You scented me again."

"Sorry.." 

"No, don't be sorry, it's not like we are having a secret affair." She sniffed again. "I like that smell, it's so... you!" She gave him one last smile that made his breath get stuck under his cowl and turned around to check the room.

Garrus needed a little time to collect his thoughts. He stared at the dead body of Saleon on the floor, killed like he had deserved it but not by him. There was still some unsettled rage in him, a hurt ego that made his plates itch. The monster was still there.

Shepard calling him over to Saleon's terminal woke him from his thoughts. She asked him to copy all the data off it and he was grateful to do something to distract himself.

Ashley looked through the door. "Skipper?"

"Report, Williams," Shepard said, not looking over her shoulder as she hacked a wall safe.

"Dr. Chakwas has declared the situation as serious for six patients and as life threatening for four. She has assigned her medical team to care for them for the next two days until the lazarett ship can be here."

Shepard groaned loudly. "So we have to hang around for two days?" She threw her head back. "I'm going to go insane!"

"Actually," Ashley cackled quietly, "that's exactly what Dr. Chakwas said what you would say. That's why she has ordered her assistant to stay on the Normandy and she will stay here with the nurses to take care of the patients. That way you can, as she said, play fetch for Admiral Hackett."

Shepard grinned widely. "Oh, how smart is our doctor. Sounds like she has already planned everything." She shut down her omni-tool and looked at Ashley. "We need a squad here for security."

"I volunteer!" Ashley called out before Shepard had finished her sentence.

"Of course, Chief." Shepard grinned even more, looking like a proud mother at Ashley. "Pick three marines to stay here with you, you'll be in command."

"Yes, Skipper!" Ashley made a sharp salute and turned on her heel. There was an unmistakable spring in her steps as she left.
Garrus looked after her and he had to smile. "So it's not only me..."

"Not only you what?"

"Not only me you are trying to make better."

Shepard smiled. "I hope after all this, we all have become better people."

They left the Fedele after Shepard had arranged for the crew to get paid by the credits she found in the wallsafe. The rest of the riches Dr. Saleon had accumulated were going to be paid to the families of his victims. Shepard very happily made use of her Spectre privileges to arrange that, before any corporate lawyers of Everest Artifics could get their hands on it.

Shepard ordered Joker to take them to one of the odd jobs the Alliance or the Council had lined up for them and they made their way down to the lockers in the cargo hold. Originally, Shepard had her own locker on the same deck as the captains cabin but she had moved her stuff to the crew lockers next to Ashley's weapons bench. That way she could stay with the squad for the banter or yelling as they were coming down from the mission.

She had told Garrus that she knew that she robbed the marines of the opportunity to complain about the Commander to each other. But she was sure that they could find other ways of venting their frustrations, she preferred to deal with their honest reactions directly. Or, as she had put it: "They can find other places to bitch about me, I wanna hear what they think when they don't care about rank."

It also gave Garrus and her an opportunity to spend more time with each other and by the soft smile she had on her lips, he could see that she loved that about it too. They took their armor off and checked it over, side by side, occasionally smiling at each other.

Garrus cleaned the connectors of his armguard with a brush when he thought about something. "You know, when we talked about prejudices back in the mess hall it got me thinking of Tali."

Shepard had her omni-tool connected to the systems of her armor and ran an analysis. "What about her?"

"You never take her with you anymore. You even took Liara and she's hardly a trained fighter."

Shepard looked up. "God, Garrus, she's just a kid, I don't want her to get hurt!"

"She is not just a kid, the quarians don't let their children go on a pilgrimage without basic training in weapons and fighting and other things." He took the other armguard in his hand and cleaned the connectors as well. "She's not much younger than us and we saw her defend herself against Shadow Broker agents, you know she's capable."

"I'm just not sure...," she scratched her head as she searched for words, "she seems so fragile..."

"Ashley says she uses a shotgun."

Shepard stopped looking at her omni-tool and stared at him, her mouth hanging open before she found her words again, "Tali uses a shotgun?"

"That got your attention I see." Garrus trilled in amusement at the face she was making.
"Hell, yeah!" she laughed out and shook her head. "Damn, I did it again, I let stereotypes lead me on. I let my feelings get the better of me again."

"That's what makes you so special, don't change that," he said, underlying his words with rumbles of endearment.

"But.."

"No, I will remind you, someone else will remind you and that's enough." He took her hand in his and made her look into his eyes. "Don't change, Sunshine."

"Alright, my Angel." She smiled so warmly that Garrus just had to press his mandibles against her face for a second, humming his love at her.

Garrus's omni-tool signaled that he had received an important message as he held on as best as he could while Shepard made the Mako climb an impossibly steep mountain. He linked his arm through the rail and opened the message. Communications were spotty at best out here in the Kepler Verge so he preferred to make use of them whenever they worked. He had sent a letter to his sister a few days ago, making true on his promise to keep her more in his life.

But it wasn't one of Solana's funny vids that she sometimes recorded in the morning before she got up. It was a message from his father. Garrus sighed and opened the message, dreading its contents.

[Word of your re-enlistment, your posting on the Normandy and your close relationship with Commander Shepard has reached the Elders. The clan elders have officially asked me how much the notarius has to record of Commander Shepard. You know what that means. I'll be on the Citadel on clan business for the next few cycles. Please contact me as soon as you can.]

Garrus let out a shrill keen that made everyone in the Mako turn and look at him. He dipped his head in apology and closed the message.

Shepard stopped the Mako behind a protruding cliff and had Kaidan check out the base they had marked on their map through the cannons scope. Admiral Hackett had sent them here into the Newton System, on a planet called Ontarom. The planet was so green, it was almost painful to look at it in natural light. Its nitrogen rich atmosphere made its plant life grow to impressive heights and giving it a very diverse range of native species. It was also extremely hot, even for Garrus. If it weren't for the unbearable heat and the electrical storms, the planet would have been a paradise.

Hackett had briefed them that someone was killing scientists that had been part of a special operation on Akuze. On the mention of Akuze, Kaidan and Shepard had exchanged a worried look and Garrus was trying to remember where he had heard that name before. It was easy to find out the main story of the incident where a whole platoon of Alliance marines had gotten killed by Thresher Maws. He remembered hearing about it in the news and he recalled Frank mentioning something about Akuze and how a black-ops group named Cerberus was somehow connected to that planet. Frank had been angry that this former black-ops group went rogue and nobody was talking about it.

"I see at least two sniper perches and mobile cover around the base," Kaidan relayed from the cannon scope. "Human mercs, as far as I can tell. They are definitely prepared for a fight."

"Well, it's not floating or walking turrets for a change," Shepard said with a grin. "We're going in!"
She put the Mako into gear and drove towards the base at full speed, swerving to the sides to dodge shots. Garrus connected his omni-tool to the outside cameras to get a look at the shooter. He sat at a good sniping position but not safe from the Mako's cannon.

"Madhav, give them some warning," Shepard ordered and the young marine sprayed the covers around the base with shots from the submachine gun. The mercs shot back and a shot from the sniper hit the Mako squarely in the front. "Well, it looks like they are determined to get into fight with a Mako. Rather stupid." She shook her head. "Kaidan, take out those towers."

"Aye."

Two cannon shots later, the snipers didn't bother them anymore. Shepard stopped the Mako in front of the rather flimsy covers and the whole troop disembarked. The fight was short and deadly. Shepard had tried to talk to the mercs, to convince them to surrender but there was no getting through to them. Their movements were jerky and their eyes wide in a drug induced state of hyper awareness. They showed all the signs of being high on illegal battle drugs, they wouldn't even stop fighting if their limbs were shot off.

Shepard scanned the dead bodies. "Wouldn't have thought that people still use these. After the first soldiers developed severe anxiety attacks, these kind of drugs have quickly fallen out of favor." She looked over to the door of the base. "Strange to find this kind of merc out here."

She got up and motioned to them to follow her as she walked towards the entrance. Garrus could see beads of sweat on her face under her helmet. She stepped up to the terminal and began hacking the interface.

"I hope this place has air condition," she mumbled.

Garrus came up to her side. He was about to offer his help but one look convinced him that Shepard knew what she was doing on this interface. So he just settled behind her to give her a shade.

"Garrus?" came her voice over a private comm channel. He flicked his own comm to her channel.

"Yes?"

"What had you so... panicked back there when you read something on your omni-tool?"

"Oh, ehm," Garrus stretched his throat and almost bumped his head on the low ceiling. This base was built very much for human proportions. "It was a message from my father, he wants to meet me on the Citadel soon."

"We'll be going back there after we pick up Ash and her squad from the Fedele. The gun needs to get repaired and I feel like we are not making progress out here, we need more information. Maybe if we rattle the Council's door a little, they'll finally let us in on what they know." Shepard issued another command and the door indicator switched to green.

They all took out their guns and slowly walked into the first corridor.

"Anything specific he wants to talk about with you?" Shepard asked, still over the private channel.

Garrus felt heat rise up his neck, he wanted to avoid this conversation very much but he also knew that Shepard would not let him get away with some vague excuses.

"The clan elders have contacted him, wanting to know what I'm doing on the Normandy and how much the notarius should include about, well, you."
"And that means?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

"In turian terms, we would be considered courting and they basically want to know how, ehm, serious we are." Garrus felt fear rise up in him, they had avoided the conversation about their feelings for so long, it had become natural. Creeping into a merc base was not the best kind of situation to have such a talk now.

They entered the next room, jumping behind cover when the first shots got fired into their direction. Kaidan pulled out a sniper from behind cover that Garrus took out, while Shepard and Madhav laid out cover fire. When the sniper was done for, the rest of the drug crazy mercs fell quickly.

Shepard send the rest of the squad on a search through the room and came back to Garrus' side. "Who is this notarius?"

Garrus gladly answered that question, that was safe territory. He could talk about turian customs all day if it meant to avoid the final assessment of the seriousness of their feelings for each other. "The notarius records the clan history. He or she writes down everything about all members of the clan, what they do, what their connections are, how they stand in the tiers of the Hierarchy."

"Why would they want to write about me? I would assume they wouldn't really like me anyway?"

"That doesn't matter. If you are, ehm, connected to me, you will have to be included in the clan history."

They entered another corridor, slowly walking forward towards another door.

"So," came Shepard's voice into his ear piece again, "even, like that asari that your family didn't like, she is still included in the chronic?"

"Yes, she is part of the clan's history, so her accomplishments are getting recorded to this day."

As the door opened, another group of mercs attacked them, sending them scrambling for cover on separate sides of the room. They both didn't have a clear shot on all mercs and had to work them down slowly. When the last merc fell, they both sat in silence for a minute.

Finally, Shepard appeared at his side, taking off her helmet to look at him. "So am I right to think that they want to know if you plan to bond with me?" Her face was unreadable to him.

"Yes, that's probably what they want to know." He took his helmet off as well, a slight panic making him feel like he would suffocate.

She laid her head to the side and raised her eyebrows. "So just going day to day and see what happens is not the turian way?"

Garrus felt his gizzard constrict. "No, that's not how turians approach a courtship." He was disappointed by her reaction but not exactly surprised. During his studies of human expressions, he had spoken with human and asari psychiatrists. One surprising insight had been how often humans were not really aware of their emotions. It seemed like they didn't even know what they felt half the time. As if the lack of subharmonics made it harder for them to tell what their emotions were.

She shook her head. "Garrus, baby, if this is meant as a proposal, it's a real shitty one."

He had to smile at that. "I know and this is hardly the time and place..."

Kaidan's voice came over the public comm. "Commander, we have another locked room and from
"We're on our way," Shepard answered, putting on her helmet as they jogged towards Kaidan's position.

As they ran, Shepard switched to their private channel again. "I'm not saying I would say no, but the fact is that we don't really know each other all that well. I probably know more about that sniper rifle in your arms than your quirks and bad habits."

"Some would call that a perfect courtship for a turian," he said and grinned at her.

"Yeah, I bet they would."

They came around the corner and stopped when they saw Kaidan and Madhav waiting for them. Shepard gave a nod and Kaidan opened the door for them. She stepped in first, closely followed by Garrus and Madhav, Kaidan behind them.

The room looked like a laboratory and in the middle a man in combat gear held a gun to the head of a man in a lab coat. He was yelling at him, calling him a torturer. The man in the lab coat was whimpering and begging for his life.

Shepard put her pistol away and stepped into the line of vision of the hostage-taker. "I'm Commander Shepard, I would like to talk to you, soldier."

The man looked at her with wide eyes visible under his helmet. His armor hid most of his figure but his face looked malnourished and sick. The gun was slightly trembling in his hand.

"No!" he yelled, "I'm done talking, I don't want to talk, I just want this monster, this torturer brought to justice. He.."

"Toombs?" Kaidan stepped up to Shepard, staring at the hostage-taker. "Corporal Toombs?"

The man stared at Kaidan for several seconds until awareness showed on his face. "Alenko. Alenko the biotic. Who would have thought that Major Bindlagen's prejudice against biotics would save your life, huh?"

Shepard turned to Kaidan. "You were supposed to go to Akuze?"

"Yes, I was in the same platoon as Corporal Toombs but back then... I was one of the first biotics assigned to a platoon, an L2 at that... Major Bindlagen didn't want me in the squad. She claimed I was unstable and would be a risk to the mission so I was sent to Alchera for a checkup when the platoon went to Akuze."

He turned to Corporal Toombs, "There was only one survivor, you were assumed dead with the rest of the squad, what happened?"

"Oh we weren't all dead! They took us away, me and three others, they wanted test subjects!" His breath came in ragged gasps and a violent shudder made his pistol tremble more. But he still had the scientist under his control, using his body as a shield towards the squad.

"Who?" Shepard asked, her voice biting. "Who took you away as test subjects?"

"Cerberus! They wanted to see how we would react to Thresher Maw acid, how much acid burn we could survive, how we would react to have it injected... they used us like..." Another shudder wracked his body.
Shepard turned her ice-cold gaze towards the man in the labcoat. "You are with Cerberus?"

"Cerberus is a legitimate Alliance operation..."

"Was. Not anymore," Shepard interrupted.

The man began to whimper, "I was just following orders, we were told to..."

"Liar! He was the one giving the orders! He ordered the injections and watched Hansen and Chira
die!" Toombs wrapped his arm around the scientist's neck and started strangling him.

Kaidan looked at Shepard and when she nodded, he took a step forward. "Toombs, if we had known
that you were alive, we would have come to get you. We thought you were dead."

"No, I wasn't dead. I stayed alive, I held on just for this moment," Toombs hissed out as another
shudder made him tremble. "I held on just to bring this man to justice, to watch him die." He looked
at Shepard. "So are you going to stop me? Or are you going to let a dead man fulfill his promise to
his brothers in arms?"

Shepard took a deep breath and changed her posture in such a way that she looked less threatening.
Garrus wondered if she did that consciously or if it was just natural for her.

"I want this man brought to justice just like you, Corporal, but I want him in court, I want him to tell
us everything he knows about Cerberus."

"No!" Toombs pressed the pistol so hard against the scientists head that he cried out. "He will just
get away, Cerberus will get him out. You don't know who you are dealing with!"

"He will be prosecuted, I will make sure of it. I promise you, he will not get away."

"No, he has to die now, he will die for the things he has done!" His finger moved to the trigger and
with one quick move, Shepard had her pistol aimed at him.

"You know I can't let you do that," Shepard said calmly.

"Then there will be only one survivor of Akuze, just like it should be," Toombs said, his voice full of
defeat.

"I was at your funeral, Toombs," Kaidan said quietly. "I spoke to your mom and your sister. They
would be so happy to see you again."

"My mom? And Juliana?" Toombs visibly deflated, the hand with the pistol dropping.

The scientist jumped away from him and began to shriek, "This man is insane, he doesn't know what
he says, you have to protect me!"

"Oh, shut up!" Shepard grumbled and ordered Madhav to escort him to the Mako.

When the man had left the room, Toombs collapsed. Kaidan caught him and helped him to go
outside. The ride in the Mako back to pick-up was rather uncomfortable. The scientist kept whining
and shrieking until Shepard threatened to knock him out if he would not shut up. Toombs stayed
eerily quiet, eyeing the man with so much hatred, it made the air inside the Mako feel cold even on
this oven of a planet.

Back on the Normandy, they put the scientist into a locked cabin and left Toombs with Dr. Chakwas'
assistant. Kaidan stayed with him, talking and listening. Shepard stayed with them for a while.
Garrus went down into the cargo-bay to put his armor away and kept himself busy with taking care of the Mako. His improvement to the underside of the Mako had paid off, she took the jumps and drops Shepard put her through without any problems now. One of the panels was a little deformed, he decided to replace it.

Working on screws and bolts always calmed him, he could let his mind wander. He thought back to the conversation with Shepard. While she had not sworn an oath of love for him like some part of him had wished she would, she had not brushed him off either. In fact, what had she said?

'I'm not saying I would say no...' The wrench slipped and scratched over the plate he tried to fix.

*Wait, does that mean...? She would say yes if I asked her to bond with me?*

His trill of happiness made Wrex look up and grin on the other side of the cargo bay.

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Chapter End Notes

Oh Garrus, you loveable little dork you! Only these two would have a conversation like that during a gunfight.

Editing by Credete.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Today's theme is Jane Austen meets Dirty Harry in SPACE!! Or something like that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus' omni-tool chimed with a message.

[Suit up, low atmosphere environment, don't look up where we are, it's a surprise! - J]

Garrus shook his head and fought the temptation to log into the navigational interface of the ship to see where they were. He knew that they were originally on the way to the Citadel but made one more stop on the way. As he put on his armor, he was surprised to see Tali at the lockers, reinforcing her suit with armor. It looked like Shepard had taken his suggestion to take Tali on missions.

After having verified that his armor sealed perfectly, he sauntered over to the quarian. With the armor attachments to her suit, she didn't look quite as fragile anymore but Garrus could understand why Shepard had thought she was. The big shotgun next to her believed that assumption.

"Did Shepard tell you where we are going?" he asked her. Tali looked up and despite her mask hiding her face, he got the sense of her smirking at him.

"Yes, she did but I'm not supposed to tell you." Her speaker flickered as she chuckled.

Before he could ask further, the Pilot's voice came over the ships comm, "We are in orbit of super secret location, ready when you are, Commander."

Garrus had to hide an annoyed huff, it looked like everyone except him was in on this game. He was about to open the nav interface on his omni-tool when the elevator doors opened and Shepard ran over to them. She had a happy skip in her step and the way she grinned at him made him forget his burst of annoyance.

She skidded to a halt next to him and placed a small kiss on his mandible. With a little giggle at his surprised face, she took her collapsed helmet from her locker and attached it to the back of her armor. Then she almost ran towards the Mako, ushering them in, still with that excited grin on her face.

During the drop he strained his neck to look out of the front window but the view was utterly bland. Whatever planetary surface they were falling towards, it looked like it was just grey rocks and dust. Jagged edges of craters told of a non-existent or a very weak atmosphere. He wondered what exactly Shepard wanted to surprise him with on such a place.

The Mako touched ground and bounced a few times before Omar had it under control. She drove the tank around one of the old craters before she stopped. Shepard put on her helmet and gestured to him to do the same. They depressurized the cabin and jumped out onto the surface. Gravity was very low
and made him bounce around a little before he settled.

Shepard nudged his side and he could see her smile through her helmet's shield. "Now to the surprise," she said to him through the comm, "you said you wanted to see Earth one day and we don't really have time to stop there but --" she pointed upwards, "I can at least show you Earth." Her smile was practically burning through her helmet.

Garrus followed the direction her finger pointed to a planet above them. It was impossibly blue with green patches under white clouds. The color hue was completely different to what he would see if he would look up to Palaven. Shepard stood beside him, staring at the planet, a happy smile visible through her helmet.

"That is Earth?" he asked rather stupidly.

"Yes, we are standing on Luna, Earth's moon. Here, three humans left their own planet in a rocket and landed on an extraterrestrial object. That was the first time humanity went into space. It was about 214 years ago not far from where we stand now."

"Only 200 years ago?" Garrus stared up to the planet. Turians had been travelling space for almost 3000 years. No wonder his father considered humans childish upstarts.

She turned her head to look at him. "We are really just babies to you, aren't we?" she said, her voice free of malice.

"Yes, maybe a little," he said, giving his voice a friendly undertone. "It really shows that you humans don't do anything halfway. You start at something and then you go forward as fast as possible, no matter who or what tries to stop you." He turned turned to bump his helmet against hers. "And I have the perfect example for that right here." He trilled his subharmonics in love and wondered how much she understood of it. "Thank you for showing me Earth."

"It was the best I could do right now." She pressed back against his helmet and he wished their armor would not separate them.

They stepped apart with a sigh and Garrus looked at the planet over them again. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah." She sighed. "Yes, it really is beautiful."

"Any other reason why we are here?"

Shepard laughed a little. "You mean I can't use this super secret stealth prototype of human and turian engineering to show my boyfriend Earth?"

He hummed at her and they turned back to walk to the Mako. Shepard's tone changed to her usual command voice. "There is an Alliance training ground here. The local VI has malfunctioned, it seems to view everything as a threat and reacts according to its programming. We are asked to disable its power source because it doesn't answer to remote commands anymore. It has weapons under control and might use everything in the compound against us."

She had included Tali in the comm and the quarian spoke up. "This sounds like a bit too much ability for a VI."

Shepard pulled the quarian up into the cabin and sealed the door. She left her helmet on, they probably didn't have to drive far. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Are you sure they didn't research AI capabilities here?" Tali said.
Shepard looked at her thoughtfully. "That is a good question. For all his talk when he gave me the mission, Hackett didn't really mention what the purpose and capabilities of this VI was."

Shepard stayed very quiet for the rest of the mission and Garrus noticed that she took many recordings with her omni-tool. They didn't meet much resistance from the VI. The Mako's cannon made short work of the external turrets and the turrets inside fell easily to their combined tech assaults and Tali's shotgun. The VI fought them with poisoned gas next but their armor was still in low atmosphere mode and the gas didn't affect them.

Finally the last generator turned off and the lights flickered and died. In the darkness, only the terminals gave some lights and they all displayed a message at the same time before they too shut down. Shepard recorded the message with her omni-tool before the system died.

Back in the Mako, she displayed the message. It was a block of numbers:

01001000
01000101
01001100
01010000
01010000

Tali laid her head to the side. "I'm not sure what that is."

"I think I know," Shepard said, "this is binary and you can convert it to letters.... let me see..." she typed quickly on her omni-tool, "there."

She projected the omni-tool display up so that they all could see what it said: H E L P

Tali made a loud gasp. "The VI asked for help? What does that mean?"

"Fuck if I know," Shepard snarled, "and I bet nobody will tell me either."

Garrus nodded at that. He made a copy of the data from Shepard's omni-tool but he wasn't sure what he should do with it either. AI research was forbidden anyway and it was doubtful that anybody would want to talk about it.

They called the Normandy for pickup and left the dusty grey moon behind. As they left the Sol system, Joker took an extra slow turn around Earth before pointing the Normandy towards Pluto to the Charon Relay. Garrus noticed how quiet all the humans were when they saw Earth through the windows and on the screens. As adventurous and forward they were, they still missed their home planet.

After another day of travel, the Widow Relay delivered them to the Citadel. Shepard and Garrus had spent the whole day with the engineering crew, taking notes, complaints and suggestions for improvements for the maintenance crew in the dock. The Normandy was scheduled for a full day of repair for the cannon and they wanted to use the time to have anything else fixed that had come up during this unusual shakedown run.

Shepard had contacted Anderson to schedule a meeting with the Council but it was of course too
short of a notice for an official Council session. It took the interference of Nihlus to at least get the Councillors to agree to a vid-conference in Udina's office. Shepard and Garrus both cringed at the thought of meeting the dislikable human ambassador.

Before this meeting started, Garrus and Jane stopped at the ANIS offices. They found Dania and Terlin at their desks. Shepard greeted them with hugs while Garrus kept to a friendly nod that was half human and half turian. Which was kind of strange since he nodded towards an asari and a salarian.

"Where are the others?" Shepard asked, pointing to the empty desks.

"The boss and Lorenzo are in a meeting with the director and the head of Alliance intelligence," Dania said. "You probably want to know what we found out about Saren."

"Fuck yes, that would really be something."

Terlin stepped up to them, his omni-tool glowing. "That's easy because we found nothing."

Shepard turned to him, her eyebrows raised in disbelief. "Nothing at all?"

Dania flicked a tiny ball of blue light from her finger, the only open sign of her well hidden anger. "Not even a fleck of starshit," she hissed out. The ball of light smacked on the floor and left a small smoking hole in the carpet. Garrus noticed that there were several such black marks on the carpet around her desk. "He truly disappeared, not a single trace of him."

"And there is something else," Terlin said closing the omni-projection on his arm. "We keep running into walls. The salarian and the turians gave us some info but nothing we didn't find out on our own and the asari gave us nothing. Not even confirmation of the things we found out."

"And..." Dania hesitated for a moment but continued on a nod from Terlin, "there are some coincidences..." she took another breath and then turned on a projection on the main vid screen in the middle of the office.

Terlin scratched the spot between his horns, a nervous gesture that many salarians had. He kept fiddling with the projection.

Garrus tried to make sense of the screen. "What are we looking at here?"

Terlin sorted the display into four case files. "Our current cases. Attacks on small bases, outposts, research bases."

Garrus nodded, "Yes, that's the kind of stuff we got sent to sort out too."

"Yes, out there in the Traverse," Dania said and pointed at the screen, "but these are all in Council Space, long established settlements."

"Husk?" Shepard asked.

"Yes," Terlin said, "husks and geth. But not many and -- and here comes the strange part -- most people we find have been killed by biotics."

Shepard shrugged. "Why is that strange? This is basically asari space, most settlements are probably asari. Maybe that's what asari husks do."

"All the husks were human based," Terlin said.
Shepard sighed. "I really wish somebody would explain to me why that is so."

Dania turned to Shepard, fixing her dangerous eyes on her. "You probably know that biotics can feel biotics."

"Yes, Kaidan told me that a while back and Liara..." Shepard seemed to think for a while and Dania kept looking at her until she continued, "she said human biotics feel different than asari biotics. Something about the difference in biotic nodes in the body..."

Dania had started to lean forward when Shepard had mentioned that the biotics felt different and eagerly interrupted her, "Yes, yes, it feels different and also," she raised her finger, a faint blue light glimmering on top of it, "traces of trained combat biotics also feel different than normal asari biotics."

"Really?" Garrus and Shepard called out at the same time.

"It's subtle but it's there. And..." she hesitated, "the people we found dead were most probably killed by asari commandos. I could feel it."

Garrus and Shepard jumped forward at the same time and began talking. "So, wait... what...?"

The asari looked at them and the anger in her eyes looked even more dangerous than the blue glow on her fingers. "Yes, it means that asari commandos are going around and killing soldiers and civilians. We have no proof other than my feeling and that isn't good enough but..." She breathed out harshly and flicked another tiny ball of biotic energy to the floor. Another black spot sizzled in the carpet. "...but something is going on and by the Goddess I want to know what!"

Shepard let herself fall into a chair and drummed her fingernails on the desk. "Matriarch Benezia had asari commandos with her."

"Saren had some too, on Eden Prime," Garrus said.

Shepard hit her fist on the desk with anger flaring in her eyes. "The asari are hiding something."

Dania nodded. "I contacted some old friends, and the feeling I got, how do you humans say, between the meaning?"

"Between the lines."

"Yes, I like that expression." Dania nodded to herself, flicking through messages on her omni-tool. "They don't really say it but there are political shifts, Matriarchs working against each other, religious sects that suddenly gain more support, some old beliefs that everyone thought had been eradicated. Something is happening on Thessia."

Shepard had her forehead in thoughtful wrinkles. "I have many questions for the asari councillor but I'm pretty sure that she won't tell me anything."

She got up and they bade goodbye to Dania and Terlin, asking them to keep them up to date.

The vid-conference with the councillors was frustratingly fruitless. They didn't learn anything new and the promises of support from their respective intelligence felt empty. Even ambassador Udina
noticed it and waited till the connection was closed to fall into a vicious rant about the Council species and what their political leaders were doing. Despite the truth in some of what he said, the angry hate in his words made Garrus and Shepard uncomfortable. They excused themselves quickly.

Garrus hoped for a quiet lunch with her somewhere but of course the universe decided against that. His omni-tool chimed with a call from his father. Garrus trilled out his annoyance before he answered the call.

"Yes, father?"

His father made no effort to hide his annoyed subharmonics. "The Normandy has been in dock for over two hours by now, where are you? I messaged you, I needed to meet you as soon as possible."

Shepard raised an eyebrow in question at his tone but kept out of the camera frame. Garrus imagined giving him a taste of his anger but he kept his subharmonics under control. He was still a turian son. "We had things to do for our case, a rogue Spectre has to take precedence sometimes." A bit of anger seeped into his voice and by the change of trill from his father it was clear that he had noticed it.

"Don't take that tone with me, son. I expect you at these coordinates right away." He closed the connection before Garrus could even answer.

Shepard stared at him. "Wow, who stole his lunch?"

"Let me call him back and tell him that he has to wait." Garrus initiated the call-back but Shepard stopped him with her hand on his arm.

"No, why wait? This is about the notarius, isn't it?"

"Yes, most probably."

"You'll have to talk to him anyway, why not now. I'll come with you, if you want." She smiled a bit lopsided at him, clearly not all that happy at the prospect of having this conversation with his father. "I know it won't be fun but if you tell me to stand by your side, I will."

Garrus felt a flush of relief, this would have been much harder if Shepard would not be there with him. "If I'm to defend our relationship and have you included in the notarius' chronicle, I really need you there."

Shepard looked at him for a moment, her mouth hanging open. She swallowed hard before she asked, "You'll have to defend us?"

"Yes, most probably."

"Oh fuck, I'm not going to like this conversation," she said, raking her hand through her short hair. "I need something to eat first and maybe a whiskey."

Garrus flinched. "To appear before my father drunk..."

Shepard raised her hand. "Kidding on the whiskey." She pressed her hand against her stomach. "Not on the lunch though."

Gaurus breathed and let a his subharmonics hum out the confusion that made his head spin. Shepard took his hand and pressed it, looking up to him with a careful smile. Garrus knew exactly how she felt. This talk could only go well or be an absolute disaster, there was no inbetween.
They got some food in boxes to eat from and ate while they slowly walked towards the coordinates his father had sent him. They arrived at an office area, where his father always rented an office when he spend time on the Citadel.

Shepard had been very quiet while they walked and not just because she was inhaling her noodles. She threw the container in a trashcan and pulled on his arm to stop him before they entered the office building.

"What exactly is your fathers role in the clan? Is he the notarius?" she asked.

Garrus shook his head. "No, he is actually the official head and representative of the Vakarian clan."

Shepard's eyes widened. "You're shitting me."

Garrus tried to trill at her reassuringly. "The clan elders are the real leaders of the clan. My father has been named representative in reward for the high tier he achieved for his service at C-Sec. That was years ago, I was a small child back then. He manages the clan finances, internal disputes and communications and he can order the Notarius to alter the clan chronic."

"Now I get why this is so important for him," Shepard mumbled so quietly that he almost didn't hear her.

"What do you mean?" Garrus asked but Shepard brushed the question away with a wave of her hand.

"Let's just get this over with, we don't have much time."

Garrus looked at her and wondered if the light tricked him or if she looked even paler than usual. He had hardly seen her the last few nights and wasn't sure if she had even slept. He made a mental note to take better care of her and making sure that she actually slept regularly. There were dark shadows under her eyes that he had not seen before.

They entered the building and went up a few levels to the office. Garrus remembered having been in this building before, they provided temporary offices for business people that stayed on the Citadel for a short time only. After he had moved to Palaven, his father had always rented an office here when ever he had stayed on the Citadel.

Garrus' omni-tool signalled that he had arrived at his destination and the lock of the door in front of them turned green. The door slid to the side as they approached, obviously programmed for Garrus' omni-tool. Aethius Vakarian sat behind a desk that looked nothing like Garrus' desk used to look. His father always had an orderly desk, no matter how much work he actually had to do. His workspace area was clean, pads were stacked in straight piles and little storage boxes were lined up in a row on one side.

He looked up from his terminal as Garrus entered and trilled a short greeting at him. But his trill cracked in surprise when he saw Shepard enter at his side.

"This is an informal meeting, you didn't need to bring her," Aethius said, his subharmonics wavering in annoyance.

"Nice to see you too, Dome Vakarian," Shepard said with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

The older Vakarian dipped his head into the cowl of his armor and changed the tone of his subharmonics. "I apologize, Commander Shepard, it is nice to see you." He turned to Garrus and
greeted him with a trill that was friendly enough but did not make him feel exactly welcome.

Aethius didn't wait for his son to return the greeting and Garrus grew increasingly uneasy. This whole situation made the plates on his back itch.

The older Vakarian took a short breath and then indicated with a snarl that he was getting right to the point. "I wanted to talk with you about your situation with Commander Shepard. Your stationing on the Normandy has already been added to the chronicle but your further involvement may need clarifying."

Garrus opened his mouth to say something but Shepard's voice cut through the short silence.

"Situation?" Her voice might lack subharmonics but the angry undertones were unmistakable.

Aethius Vakarian puffed up his fringe and walked around his desk to face Shepard. He was towering over her, using his height to impress her. In any other situation, Garrus would have laughed about this; Shepard faced krogan without even blinking -- a puffed up turian was not going to impress her.

When she didn't move, Aethius turned to Garrus, ignoring her. "Maybe you could provide me with a better expression for your situation then."

If Shepard were a biotic, she probably would have shot warps from her eyes at this point. Garrus himself was angrily hissing out his anger and stepped up to his father. He was even taller than him by now, but he still felt a bit like a little boy as he looked at his father.

"Shepard and I are in a relationship."

"And what does that mean?" Aethius hissed at him. "Are you bonded? Promised to be bonded? How long term can this be, with a human?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Shepard called out.

Aethius turned his head to her, his subharmonics anything but friendly. "Humans are fickle, they change their minds. How long will this relationship last?"

Shepard folded her arms in front of her chest. "Nobody can predict that."

Aethius stepped over to her, bending down to bring his face right in front of hers. "Turians can. A turian will never break a bond."

Shepard held his gaze, staring right into his eyes. "What do you want to hear from me? As long as we can stand each other, I will not leave your son, that I can promise."

Garrus felt a trickle of happiness in his gizzard, remembering what she had said the day before when they had talked about bonding. He knew humans, he understood them and he knew that they were sometimes fickle when it came to love. But he knew that Shepard would never make a promise like that lightly. He wanted to kiss her so much in this moment and he almost missed the deprecated hum his father made.

"What does a promise like that from a human even mean?" Aethius hissed out.

For a second, nobody said anything. It was so quiet that they could even hear people in the office next door talking.

And then Shepard exploded. In retrospect it was probably the lack of sleep and the stressful mission
that made her lose her control.

"For fucks sake! I'm not listening to this! I have done nothing that would make me not trustworthy, so why don't you just admit that you hate humans and don't want your son fucking one!"

Aethius stepped back, his mandibles slack in shock. Garrus now realized that the child-like curiosity and wonderment that he loved so much about her came with another attitude. One that she usually had under control. But in this moment, the anger in her broke out, pure, child-like rage against unfairness and circumstances she could not change.

"Don't you fucking tell me about humans this or that, I don't speak for humanity, I speak for myself. So what is it about me that disgusts you so much?" Reddish patches had appeared on her skin and she was clenching her fists at her sides.

Aethius took a small step back, shaking his head and turned to Garrus. "This is just like with Lirni De'Lisa, she knows nothing about our traditions..."

Shepard realized that she was being ignored and jumped up to sit on the desk, sending a pile of pads clattering down. When Aethius whipped around, his subharmonics shrieking in anger, she showed her teeth in a menacing grin. "Let me guess, that's what this is about. The asari your relative brought into the clan, so blue and always touching him. And after he died, she still wanted to be part of the family. And you didn't even invite her, did you? But she still turned up, how embarrassing..."

It is a soldier's ability to always know where to aim for the killshot. This was the first time that Garrus had seen that ability used verbally.

Aethius trilled out in fury before he caught himself. He was a cop, he knew how to control his subharmonics. That he had even displayed this much reaction showed how accurate Shepard had read him.

Before he could say anything, Shepard jumped off the table and walked towards the door. She didn't look at him when she said, "Don't worry, I won't ruin your christmas dinner with my filthy presence." She walked out with determined steps and the door closed behind her.

Aethius whipped around and raised his finger to Garrus. "How does she know about this?"

The last time Garrus had seen his father this angry was at the infamous "Vakarian shouting match" during his time at C-Sec. Pallin had ordered them on different teams after that.

"I told her about Uncle Gelden and his asari bondmate once, and Shepard pays attention."

Aethius sang out his annoyance and Garrus hissed against him. His father stepped up so close to him, that their armored cowls scratched against each other. "This disrespect, is that her influence?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Garrus snarled out, "this is hardly the first time we're arguing." He turned away and leaned back to give himself some space. "Does mother know about this?"

"Your mother..." Aethius let out a soft trill, "she is not head of the clan."

"She never would have accepted this, the way you treated Shepard." Garrus felt eerily calm, detached even. This disaster could not get any worse and he knew what he had to do. He drew a breath, letting his cowl fill from within. He shook his head and turned around. "We are done here."

"You don't even see how she has you under her spell, like a fool!" his father yelled out.
Garrus stopped, puzzled by his own emotions. He should have felt upset, angry; but he was calm. His body was light, filled with air and love. He straightened his back and turned to his father.

Aethius mandibles snapped tight to his face, what ever he had wanted to say, he kept it to himself.

Garrus took another breath, tension falling off him like a heavy coat. "You made me choose, father. Not her, she never made me choose, you did. I'm choosing her." He turned and walked to the door. "May the Spirits guide you, father," he said quietly and let the door close behind him.

The hallway was empty, Garrus slowly made his way down through the building and walked out into the daylight of the Presidium. He found Shepard without even searching for her with his omni-tool. She stood on one of the bridges arching over the lake, looking over to him.

The way her shoulders were hunched forward made his chest hurt. She looked so small, so defeated. The need to protect her rose up in him and made his gizzard clench in anger at his father. How dare he make this strong woman feel that way.

When he had reached her, she turned her head away as if she was too hurt to look him in the eyes. Garrus stopped, momentarily too confused to know what to do. Shepbard was always so strong and so sure of herself, he didn't quite know how to deal with her like this. He put his gloved fingers under her chin and turned her face towards him. The hunted look in her eyes actually scared him and made his gizzard clench.

He softly hummed for her, watching her face relax. "Hey, Sunshine," he murmured to her.

She smiled sadly and leaned her cheek into the palm of his hand. "Hey," she whispered and she seemed to want to say something more but hesitated. Garrus gave her time and watched the emotions flicker across her face. Finally she leaned forward, resting her head against his armor cowl and sighed.

"I'm sorry my Angel."

Garrus wrapped his arms around her. "What are you sorry for?"

"For losing my cool. It was all just too much for me, this mission, the way everyone is stalling us and then your father with his prejudices..."

"It's okay. My father was unreasonable and it was just a matter of time until the clan would have started to ask questions," he said into her hair. "They won't bother us anymore."

He noticed people on the bridge giving them strange looks but he ignored them. This was his purpose, she was all he needed.

He realized in that moment that it didn't matter that she couldn't promise a bond like a turian would. It was not in her human nature to make a promise like that but he knew deep in his soul that they belonged together. A Spirit was binding them. She would stay with him, he trusted her and he trusted the love he saw in her eyes whenever she looked at him. That was enough.

She looked up and her eyes had a wet shimmer to them. "They won't bother us anymore?"

He held her gaze. "No. I had to make a choice."

"And you chose me." There was a tear glittering in the corner of her eye.

"Yes."
She wiped her eyes and smiled at him. "I know it's easy for me to say but I choose you too. I..." she swallowed the rest of the sentence and Garrus wondered what it was that she was so afraid of saying.

Shepard looked around and noticed that people were watching them. She stepped back and stroked through her hair, a light pink flush showing on her cheeks. "It seems we are putting on quite a show here." She gave him an apologetic smile that he answered with a trill of the same kind. "We'll talk later, I promise," she said quietly and turned to walk further over the bridge.

Garrus took his place beside her, they walked slowly with no certain destination. The light reflected from the lake and he remembered how it had made patterns on her shiny hair the last time they walked like that. Today, her hair looked dull and unkempt, even the blue streak looked faded. She had not taken care of herself recently and he hadn't even noticed.

"I don't know what to do, Garrus," she suddenly said. He waited for her to continue and she did. "We aren't getting anywhere. When the Normandy is ready tomorrow, I don't even know where to point her to. We have no new information about Saren and I'm sick and tired of playing errand girl for the Alliance and the Council."

Garrus nodded, his frustration sounding out subvocally. "There has to be something we're not seeing."

"I'd put my money on the asari," Shepard said, an angry bite in her voice. She suddenly stopped and a wicked smile appeared on her face. Garrus felt a giddy trill rise in him, there was a promise in that smile for something exciting to be happening.

"You know," she said with a wicked undertone, "since I'm so disgustingly human..."

"Shepard..."

"No, hear me out, we played by the rules, we work with ANIS, we ask the councillors nicely if they can help us, we even have a Spectre on our side!" She stopped and placed her hands on her hips. "And nothing. Maybe we should do this the human way for a change."

Garrus flared his mandibles in a grin. "I'm not sure what that means but I bet I'm going to like it."

"Councillor Tevos lives on the Citadel, right? Do you know where she is during the day?"

Garrus hesitated for a second, the councillors offices and apartments were kept a secret for security reasons. But he had been a cop, he knew at least where the councillor's offices were located. "I know where she has her office."

"Let's visit her." She winked at him. "I'm not going to shoot her."

"I didn't think you would, Sunshine." Even stressed and frustrated, he knew that she was not that crazy.

They took the elevator past the administrative offices of the Citadel to a high security level. This level only housed the asari, salarian and turian Council offices. Two turian guards stopped them as they exited the elevator but Shepard flashed her Spectre sigil towards them. They had to let them through but Garrus had no doubt that they were already calling for reinforcements.

The doors to the asari offices opened and an asari receptionists scowled at them from behind a desk. She got up and stepped in their way. While she looked older, she no doubt had combat training and did not look intimidated by the armored and armed human in front of her.
Neither did Shepard as she stared the receptionist in the face. "I have to speak to Councillor Tevos."

"You'll have to make an appointment," the asari sneered at her.

"I'm not waiting for appointments, I'll speak to her now." Shepard had her arms crossed in front of her chest. Her heavy pistol was quite visible on her hip.

"You will have to..."

Shepard let her arms drop and stepped up to the asari. "Listen. Spectre Shepard needs to speak to Councillor Tevos in an urgent matter and unless you want me to shoot up this place, you will lead us into her office right now."

The receptionist jumped back with a snort and her hands began to glow blue. Garrus heard the guards running up to the door in the hallway and Shepard and him pulled out their guns at the same time.

The guards stopped in the door, facing Garrus's pistol. Shepard aimed at the receptionist's head, a dangerous smile on her lips.

In the silence, the back doors opened and Councillor Tevos stared at the scene in front of her. She looked at Shepard, who still aimed at the receptionist but looked at the Councillor now.

"Really, Shepard? Is this how you want to make the first human Spectre known?"

Shepard holstered her gun and straightened. "I do what's necessary." She nodded towards Garrus and he holstered his gun as well.

"You may go," Councillor Tevos said to the guards and indicated to Shepard and Garrus to come into her office. The receptionist let the biotic glow on her hands disappear and sat back down at her desk as if nothing had happened. Garrus had to admire her stoic nature, he wondered how many times she faced Spectres demanding entry at gunpoint.

The doors closed behind them and Tevos turned around with an angry scowl. "What is this about then? I find this behaviour highly inappropriate, I hope you have a very good reason for this."

Shepard walked over to the asari. She tried to look unthreatening, as much as that was possible in full armor. "I need your help, Councillor. Saren is just part of the threat, there is a much bigger threat on the horizon and I need all the help I can get to save us."

Tevos shook her head, "Shepard, the Reapers are a myth..."

Shepard roughly grabbed the asari's hands and placed her on the sides of her head. "Look into my mind!" she yelled out, "See what I see. See what will happen if we don't stop this."

Tevos stared at her, trying to step away but Shepard held her hands to her head. "See it. Please, see it and then tell me what you know so that I can prevent it from happening." She leaned in even closer to the asari, her voice a pleading whisper, "Please, see it."

Her pleading voice cut like a knife into Garrus' chest. How desperate did she have to be to ask for a mind-meld, despite hating it so much.

Tevos looked at her silently and then nodded. Her eyes changed color and she whispered "Embrace eternity."
Shepard's head fell back and before her eyes closed, Garrus saw a green shine come over them. He hurried to stand behind her and caught her as she swayed. The councillor's face suddenly contorted as if she was in pain and she gasped. Shepard sagged down, only Garrus wrapping his arms around her from behind prevented her falling. The councillor gasped again and her hands were shaking.

Both women looked like they were in pain and Garrus desperately prayed to the Spirits that they would get out of this meld unharmed. Finally, with a choked cry, Councillor Tevos drew her hands away as if they got burned. Shepard opened her eyes, looking around disoriented.

She shook her head and let Garrus lead her to a couch. He sat down next to her and she leaned against him. He could hear her heart beat rapidly. Councillor Tevos staggered to a chair and sat down with a sigh. Shepard looked up to her, massaging her temples.

"Did you see it?"

"Yes," Tevos whispered.

They waited. Tevos typed something on her omni-tool and Shepard's and Garrus's lit up with the receipt of information. The councillor leaned back against the chair. "I had ordered a team of commandos to find Saren and infiltrate his group." She looked out of the window towards the light of the Widow nebula. "I have not heard from them since Eden Prime. I hoped that they were under a communications lockdown, that one of them would contact me again, but--"

"They fell under his spell," Garrus said.

"If you want to call it that..."

Shepard massaged her temples once more and then looked at the asari. "Matriarch Benezia said that his ship has power over them, that it has a voice in their minds."

"It influences the mind? Even the mind of a Matriarch? That is a frightening thought," Tevos said. She looked out the window again and Garrus wondered if she prayed to her goddess. After a few moments she looked at them and stood up. "The Council received a message from a salarian reconnaissance team on Virmire that contained information about Saren. The message was fragmented, we don't know whether he is there or has been there. It may be nothing but we can't be sure."

Shepard stood up, "Virmire it is then. We will head there as soon as the Normandy leaves the dock." She walked over the councillor, Garrus following her and extended her hand. "Thank you, Councillor Tevos. I hope the next time we meet, my entrance will not need to be quite so dramatic."

"I would appreciate it. I would also appreciate it if you wouldn't hang up on us when we contact the Normandy."

"Of course," Shepard said, keeping her face perfectly neutral.

The Councillor opened the doors to the receptionists room for them, where they faced a full squad of asari Commandos. The squad quickly stepped to the side to let them through. Garrus had to grin at the angry looks they got from the squad members as they left the rooms.

Outside in the hallway, Shepard's proud posture faltered and she grabbed Garrus' arm to keep herself from stumbling. Her hands were trembling violently. Garrus was shocked how tired she looked, the shadows under her eyes were even darker now.

"You need to rest, Sunshine."
She shook her head, "The Normandy, we have to get ready, we have to go to Virmire right away..."

"The Normandy won't be ready for hours and you are dead on your feet." Garrus supported her whole weight by now, the mind-meld seemed to have sucked the last bit of energy from her. He called for a skycar and when they exited the elevator it was already waiting for them. He programmed it to take them to his apartment and by the time the skycar had swerved into the main traffic, Shepard had fallen asleep. Her cheek rested on the cowl of his armor.

At his apartment building, he gathered her up in his arms and carried her all the way up to his place. The apartment smelled of stale air and dust, he hadn't been here in a while. Not that Shepard noticed any of it. He threw the dustcover off the bed and pulled the blankets back to lie her down. Taking off her armor had become easy for him, she hardly flinched when he took the pieces off her.

As soon as all the pieces of her armor were off, she rolled to the side and cuddled up in the blanket as it was her usual fair. Garrus chuckled to himself and took his own armor off. He allowed himself a luxuriously long shower before he crawled into the bed himself. Their positions were strangely reversed with her sleeping behind his back. He was just happy to hear her sleeping and slowly he drifted off himself.

Movement behind his back pulled him out of the soft drift that wanted to lead to sleep. Jane scooted closer to him, her breath ghosting over the skin under his fringe.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Almost."

"I want to say something and please just listen, don't say anything."

Garrus held his breath, waiting for her to continue.

"I know you wanted to hear something different from me today," she whispered. "But with this crazy mission and all that is going on... I'm not even sure if I will make it through to the end and I don't want you to be bound to me in case this thing goes bad."

Garrus trilled out and turned to look at her but she softly pushed his head back. "Shhh, please, just listen. I don't want to promise anything that I may not be able to keep. But I want you to know that... I'm not going to leave you. Please believe me. I'm staying with you as long as life lets me. I love you, Garrus."

Happiness warmed him up like the sun itself lived inside his cowl. He turned around, his whole body and soul yearning for her. He couldn't say anything but his subvocals were singing out in love for her. He pulled her close to his chest, he had to feel everything of her, touch her, hear her heart beat. He nipped along her neck and throat while his hand stroked over her waist. She gasped with the sweetest breathy moan and her lips found his mouthplates and he kissed her like he had never kissed before.

He carefully nibbled on her lips and she responded by sucking on his mouthplates. Their tongues met, softly stroking and tangling until it they both had to take a breath. After gasping in air, they kissed again, softer this time, lingering touches of soft lips against mouthplates.

Garrus noticed that Jane's eyelids were drooping and he let her lips go with a sigh. She cuddled against him up with her head resting on his arm and fell asleep in seconds.

He could not follow her on that path. His heart was beating too fast to fall asleep.
Chapter End Notes

The great moment! Miss Can't-Communicate-Her-Feelings-To-Save-Her-Life has finally said the words! Sorry that she was too tired for sex. Soon, fear not.

The story with the asari in the Vakarian clan is a reference to something Garrus told Jane in Chapter 14. Oh yes, foreshadowing, I can do it! Apparently Jane pays more attention to these things than me because I had to search forever to find the chapter where that had happened.

Thanks to Credete for editing!
And we are back! I wrote this in vacation. No internet but at least I could write on my netbook. Gotta love technology.

Awareness slowly shifted into place. Light, brighter than anything the depth of space could produce was shining on his face. He was in his old apartment and the windows had switched the shielding pattern to let more of the Citadel's light in. The programming still followed the Presidium's day and night cycle, like he had programmed it – by the Fates, it felt like years ago.

The air smelled faintly stale with a hint of turian and human soap. He turned on his bed to the rolled up bundle of blanket next to him. Jane's short hair peeked out on top and she smelled fresh and clean. She must have gotten up in the night and taken a shower.

Garrus let his talons softly play with her hair, it felt damp and smelled fruity. He wondered if she slept enough. He didn't know when she had gotten up to shower, he just hoped that it was recently so that she had had a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

The display on his bedside table showed the time as a late morning, still plenty of time to get ready, the Normandy was still in dock, as far as he knew. Shepard stirred, and made a little purr as she leaned into his touch. He scratched her scalp a little with his talons and earned an even louder purr for that.

"When did you get up to shower?" he asked, raking his talons over the skin on her head. She pressed against it and purred, acting like a happy raderefelis.

"Just a few minutes ago. You smelled so nice and I stank like I had the grime and sweat of weeks on me. Luckily, my shampoo is still here but I had to use your soap."

"I like it when you smell of my soap," he mumbled and moved to her shoulder to take in her scent. He was glad that she had showered. Sweating was one of the weirder things about humans. It wasn't exactly a turn off for him when she glistened with a soft sheen of sweat. Especially during sex, when her pheromones and the scent of her arousal drove him wild. But the sweat she produced after fighting or after working out, kind of stung in his nose. He would never turn away from her for that but he preferred it if she washed and smelled of his soap.

And somehow she knew that.

A question rose in him that he wanted to ask. He had lain by her side, watching her sleep after she had told him that she loved him, too happy and wound up to sleep himself. When he had finally fallen asleep, he didn't even dream, pure exhaustion taking over. Now he looked at her and somehow it didn't feel real. He didn't want to be such a pathetic turian who had to ask his mate if she really
meant it – but by the Spirits, he had to know.

"Shepard, I mean, Jane..." he stumbled over the words, feeling his gizzard clench. "Last night, what you said..."

She turned around and pressed her lips against his babbling mouthplates to shut him up. As she moved back, a soft hum left her before she spoke, "Do you think I didn't mean it?" She smiled at him but her voice sounded brittle, "I don't expect anything from you... you don't have to... but I had to... I..., god, this feels like I'm using an unknown vocabulary..."

Garrus felt like his cowl was about to explode. He pulled her close in a crushing embrace, scrambling to get to her in her rolled up blanket. He pressed his face against her, his mandible fluttering over her cheek. "Jane, I love you, I always have," he whispered, his voice rough and thrumming with subharmonics, "I just couldn't believe that you felt the same."

A burst of light laughter rose from her, tension leaving her body. "What, you think I fall over any turian like I fell all over you?"

"I don't know what to think," Garrus babbled on, "I look at you and my world just stops. I have no romantic abilities but I look at you and I want to sing to you about Trebia, the sun over Palaven, how Menae tries to find her, his love..."

Jane turned her head and kissed him again, her soft lips suckling on his mouthplates. He opened them, gladly accepting her tongue invading him and meeting her with his own. They stroked and tangled until they had to break apart for air. She looked at him, her cheeks rosy and said, "I always knew you were a romantic."

He snorted out to disagree but she put her hand on his face, her thumb stroking his mandible. "Oh yes, you are," she said, "but you are not Menae, forever searching for Trebia, never finding her. You are my Angel, always around me, always with me." She pulled him close and looked him in the eyes. "I love you, Garrus Vakarian."

He trilled out loud, the happiness in his chest breaking out in subharmonic songs. "I love you, Jane Shepard, my mate." With that word, he pressed his forehead against hers, his scent pouring over her.

They stayed like that for a long time, at least it felt that way. When she leaned back, she used one of her slim fingers to wipe over his forehead, taking the glistening oil on her fingertip. She smelled on it, her nostrils flaring wide. "My mate," she whispered. She used the glistening fingertip to draw a line on her cheek, down her throat to the curve of her neck. He had no idea what that meant but his heart almost stopped.

With a sudden urge, he kicked off his blanket and pulled on hers to free her of it. She giggled and helped him to shrug it off. He had to stop for a second to tell the spring behind his cowl to stop tightening because she was gloriously naked, smelling of his soap and her pheromones.

He went in to kiss her and she surged against him, her breath blowing over the skin of his cowl. Her whole body searched for contact with his, her hands and her disorienting fingers going all over his neck, his shoulders, his back and finally to his genital plates. As he kissed her, two of her fingers pressed his plates apart and his erection sprang free, so hard and fast that he felt light headed.

She pressed the junction of her legs against his waist, curling her body around him. The softness of her very center against his sensitive waist was too much, he almost came from that sensation alone. He pushed her over on her back, too roughly and he whispered "sorry, I have to, sorry..." against her skin as he trailed his mouth down her body. He had to feel her core on his tongue, her soft center, he
needed to hear her cries of joy.

She laughed out, gasping as he went further down her body. "It's okay, it's okay... god, I love this, I love the feel of your mouth on my skin, I..." a voiceless scream broke out of her when he reached his target and flicked his tongue into the soft wetness of her labia. Circling her clitoris with the tip of his tongue had her throwing her head back, her whole body tightening up. He kept on circling, avoiding the direct contact, licking her labia lips, fluttering his mandibles against the skin of her thighs until she was writhing in anticipation. Words had turned to gasps, her hands grabbing his and holding on so hard that it hurt. Her body was tightened and her back arched off the bed. He pulled back and took one long look at her wet, rosy-brown center, those soft lips that waited for his straining erection.

A whine came from her for the lack of contact and he took that as his cue to drive his tongue into her and up over her clitoris. Fast and firm he stroked over her and her scream was the greatest he had ever heard. Even more liquid poured from her and when he heard her sigh out in content, he crawled up as fast as he could. His penis was almost painfully erect by now and he drove into her with an embarrassing urgency. They both cried out as he entered her, almost sobbing in relief.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, surging against him, deepening their connection. Her hips pumped, taking him in and he knew he would not last. He felt her tightening with another orgasm and the pulsing grip, her vagina had on his penis pulled and threw him over the edge. He tumbled into his orgasm, into her, into his life with a force he had never known.

With the last aftershocks of her sheath, he slowly came back to his body, grasping at the threads of his mind that knew his and her name. He found himself lying on his side, her leg wrapped over him, the result of their union making the bed wet and sticky between them. He didn't care at all and neither did she. Her face was pressed into his cowl, her breath panting over his skin. A happy little laugh made her tremble in his arms.

"Holy shit...," she whispered between gasps for breath, "holy mother of... wow."

"Agreed," Garrus panted out, pulling her closer.

They lay like that for a long time, catching their breath. When they had calmed down, she smiled at him and his newly growing erection.

She wrapped herself around him again and took him in slowly. This time they took their time, enjoying their touches, tentatively and softly. He leaned back against the headboard of the bed and she rode him, undulating her hips in the rhythm of their panting. The light from the window poured over her, illuminating her curves, the long stretch of her neck, her soft waist, the quivering muscles on her stomach. She touched herself and he growled in appreciation and because she loved hearing him like that. Her orgasm pulled him along; he spilled into her as he growled out his love for her in the most intimate song he knew.

Shepard's omni-tool chimed with a message and reminded them that there was a life and a galaxy outside that wanted them to do things. The message told them that the Normandy was about to be released from the shipyard and they both hurried to shower and dressed to get to the dock on time.

They met with Jinala on the way to the dock, the coordinator for the joint species project that the Normandy had turned into. The tiny asari had a list of things she needed to coordinate with Shepard
and was completely unfazed that she had to fall into a run on Shepard's side to get this done.

As they ran around the corner to the dock, a woman stepped in their way. A camera bot floated over her left shoulder. "Khalisah al-Jilani, Westerlund News. Would you answer a few questions, Commander Shepard?"

"I'm really busy, Miss al-Jilani."

"I would assume so, Commander Shepard, as a matter of fact, I'm surprised you even found the time to spend a night on the Citadel."

"The Normandy needed a check-up and the crew deserved a break. They are all working hard," Shepard said with an annoyed undertone.

"Is the mixed alien crew not as resilient? Does the crew not work well?" The camera bot focused it's bright light onto Shepard's face, making her squint.

Shepard took a breath and her face took on the controlled 'Commander Shepard' mask that made it unreadable. "The crew is working well together, be they humans or non-humans."

The reporter scrunched her nose and bit out her next question, "The Alliance invested a lot in you and the Normandy and now you are working for the Council. How can humanity..."

"Miss al-Jilani," Shepard interrupted, "the Normandy is a joint project by turians and humans and shows what the two races are capable of when they work together. The Council has asked us for our support, which means that humanity is now working for the most important representation of the galaxy. I think that is something to be proud of."

The camera bot kept zipping around and Garrus saw the muscles on Shepard's neck tense. Miss al-Jilani looked on her notes and raised her eyes with a nasty sneer on her lips. She looked at Garrus when she asked her next question. "Our viewers ask themselves how much you actually represent humanity today. Your personal relationship with a turian..."

"... is personal, just as you said," Shepard interrupted.

"Our viewers wonder..."

"Miss al-Jilani, I'm chasing a rogue Spectre who may be involved in a plot that could threaten the whole galaxy. Your viewers will have to trust me that I will do my best, as always." She brushed the woman aside, Garrus shielded her back and knocked the camera bot away with his shoulder.

"Westerlund News will not be quiet, Commander Shepard!" Khalisah al-Jilani yelled after her.

"Oh, bite me," Shepard mumbled quietly to herself.

Jinala snickered a little and made a note on her omni pad. "I will have the press corps of the Alliance and the Council work on a way of diverting the reporters from you."

"Oh fuck, yes please, that would be great!" Shepard called out.

Jinala nodded and continued with her list of questions. By the time they reached the Normandy, Shepard was practically gnashing her teeth. When they were finally in the CIC, her shoulders untensed. She lovingly waved over the huge galaxy map, plotting a course for Virmire.

She looked up to the ceiling. "Joker, is all crew accounted for?"
The voice of the pilot came over the comm system, "Commander, we are missing Wrex, or maybe we don't, personal taste, you know, but he's the only one who hasn't shown up."

Shepard cursed and called the krogan over her omni-tool. He answered after a long time. Garrus stood next to Shepard and heard the familiar sounds of a bar fight in the background. "I'm a bit busy right now," Wrex yelled over the noise.

Shepard angrily furrowed her brows and hissed into the tool, "Get your shiny red ass to the Normandy right now, we are leaving."

"You don't have to wait for me, Shepard. I don't need a nanny to watch over me." The krogan sounded harsh but Garrus didn't buy his tough act. Wrex had been a valuable addition to the squad and he never showed a sign of being unhappy on the Normandy. He had even seen Ashley and Tali joking with him, like they were old friends.

Shepard looked at him and he could see that she was just as confused as him. She turned back to her tool and her voice turned from friend to Commander, "Urdnot Wrex, we have a contract and I expect you to adhere to that. Get to the Normandy, right now."

There was a pause and then Wrex sounded out a grunt that might have been a "Fine, Shepard" and ended the call. Shepard told Joker to take off as soon as the VI logged Wrex entering the Normandy. She walked over to Garrus and spoke quietly to him.

"Can you watch Wrex down there, discreetly, when you work on the Mako?" she asked, her voice still in Commander-mode.

"Yes, no problem. Anything specific you're thinking about, Commander?"

"Something is wrong with him, I'm not sure what."

"I'll report back whatever I notice." He gave her a respectful nod and left her to her duties. He knew he would find her later and then she would be his very own Jane again.

Only one day into the twelve day flight to Virmire, he had to send a message to Shepard. Wrex and Ashley stood in front of each other, yelling and screaming about something. As far as Garrus could tell, it started about some shotgun mod but had now turned into biting accusations about useless flatfaces and savage dinosaurs.

The slim human woman was no match to the towering mass of krogan on a physical level but that didn't bother her at all. Ashley Williams stood in a fighter pose and roared out her accusations while the angry krogan in front of her roared right back. Garrus was quite impressed.

The elevator opened and Commander Shepard stepped out with the air of a pissed off drill sergeant around her, yelling a single "The Fuck?". Ashley instantly shut up and straightened to attention. Wrex gave the woman before him a long look and then took a step back, his red eyes turning to Shepard. She stared him down until he turned and left the cargo bay, stomping into the elevator.

When he had left, Shepard turned her attention to Ashley, who still stood ramrod straight like a nuvico, a young recruit on his first day of inspection. Garrus had to smile a little how at familiar this scene was, despite involving humans and not shaking turian recruits.
"What was that about, Chief Williams?" Shepard barked out, making Garrus involuntarily flinch. That tone of voice worked even without subharmonics on anybody who ever served in the military.

Ashley straightened once more. "Nothing, Commander. It won't happen again."

Shepard ordered her back to her station and then indicated to Garrus to follow her. They went up to her cabin, silent, until the door closed behind them. Only then let Shepard her shoulders relax and the Commander persona fell off her.

"Something is definitely wrong with Wrex," she said with a sigh and fell into her chair. "This is actually the third time he started a fight with Ashley over some stupid shit and he even yelled at Tali once. And the last time we were in the comm room, he didn't even grin at me for the traces of our 'adventure' he can still smell there."

Garrus grinned at that and happily recalled the frantic sex they had in that room, desperate for each other. He took a seat in a second chair, hoping that it would hold his weight.

Shepard eyed him and gave him an apologetic smile. "I'll get a turian chair for you, sorry, I should have thought about that already."

"Don't worry about it," Garrus said. "This one works fine, it just looks a bit fragile."

"Oh, it will hold you, don't worry. Those chairs are indestructible. We used to build towers with them back in basic." A smile settled on her face as she seemed to relive those memories. It dropped off her face as she turned to the problem at hand. "I thought I knew Wrex, I thought I knew his game. But lately..." She shook her head as she let the sentence trail on. She typed a message on her omni-tool and turned to Garrus. "I asked Dr. Chakwas to join us for a few minutes. She is a well of information when it comes to aliens, and not just on the medical side of things."

Garrus hummed his agreement, they needed to all the help they could get to solve this problem fast. A krogan on the edge of whatever self-destructive course he was, was nobody you wanted at your back in a fight.

A soft chime announced someone at the door and Shepard opened it to let Dr. Chakwas step in. The doctor looked as composed and professional as always, every strain in her grey hair at its place, her calm features enhanced with subtle colors. She greeted both of them with a respectful nod.

Shepard came straight to the point. "Something is wrong with our resident krogan, he is unusually aggressive and testy."

Dr. Chakwas let out an amused snort. "Many people would say that that is quite the regular behavior for a krogan."

"Not for Wrex."

"No, I agree," Dr. Chakwas said. "Urdnot Wrex has not displayed any of the common traits of krogan, he is polite, thoughtful and can be quite charming, actually."

Shepard raised and eyebrow and Garrus looked at the slim doctor with new fascination. What is it with human women and krogan?

The doctor continued. "From a medical standpoint, I have nothing to report. Wrex has had no serious injuries in the time he's here on the Normandy, all his readings check out as him being a healthy krogan in the prime of his years."
"Maybe he needs to get laid? Not that there are many female krogan around," Shepard mumbled and Garrus had to swallow a surprised trill.

Dr. Chakwas showed a little smile but other than that stayed just as professional as before. "The Genophage has done nothing to suppress the sexual urges and desires in the krogan, which is actually quite cruel if you think about it. The females have separated themselves from the male population, the few that are still fertile need to be protected and the others don't feel safe among males that feel the basic urge to procreate but can't. The krogan had many decades to accommodate to this, sexual relationships are not limited to male-female. Male-male sexual relationships are quite common and are probably the majority of relations today."

Garrus' head was spinning. He had to admit to himself that he had never given a single thought to how krogan lived every day. Krogan were sentient, normal beings and of course they had sexual urges like everyone else. It had never occurred to him what kind of impact the Genophage had had on relationships between them.

"You think he's acting that way because he's sexually frustrated?" Garrus asked.

"Actually, I don't," Chakwas said. "If Wrex wanted to have sex, he would just say so. It would probably amuse him endlessly to see Liara fluster over that question."

"Oh yes," Shepard laughed out, "poor Liara, she would turn purple." She giggled some more but suddenly her face lit up with a thought. "There is something... I didn't give it much thought because Wrex and I talk about the future of his clan a lot..." She raked through her hair, trying to piece together what she had heard from Wrex. "He told me a while ago that he was actually supposed to take the throne of clan Urdnot after his father was dead. Interesting little tidbit about that: he killed his father himself."

"Killing him in an honorable fight would even have raised his standing in the clan," Garrus said. There were parts in krogan history that sounded very much like turian history, back when turian society was still clan based.

"So, he still has the rights to the throne, so to speak, but he left without taking them," Shepard continued. "A few days ago, he told me about his family armor being in the hands of a collector and that he wants to get it back. I kind of brushed it off, I mean, why the fuck would he give a shit about some ceremonial piece of bling?"

"But if he plans on going back to the clan to take the throne, he may need that armor." Garrus' subharmonics hummed out how surprised he was by Wrex' actions. The krogan had never voiced an interest of going anywhere near Tuchanka, the krogan homeworld.

"The turian collector is in the Argus Rho cluster, it would probably be only a few hours for us to stop there," Shepard said, checking the flight calculations on her tool. "He wants to take it from him, not buy it, of course." Shepard shook her head. "That is definitely not an Alliance or Council mission, I would be using the Normandy and its resources for a personal favor to a krogan mercenary. Can I even do that? Can I justify that?"

Dr. Chakwas cleared her throat. "I know I'm not involved in commanding..."

"Please speak freely, doctor, you know I value your opinion."

The doctor nodded. "The Normandy has turned into a multi-species project, whether it was intended that way or not. I think it is a good thing that almost all major species from the Citadel are represented here, on this mission. This could improve relations between the species for years to
Shepard pinched the skin on top of her nose as she thought. "I agree with you, Doc and getting all the
different species to work together is my favorite part about this. But we don't know how long
Saren will be on Virmire, if he is even still there. What if we turn up and we just missed him? What if
I waste a day for Wrex' family armor and in that time, Saren slips through my fingers?"

She looked out ahead, her eyes unfocused. Garrus knew that she didn't expect someone else to make
the decision for her. She just let them in on her thought process. This was her burden of command,
chasing after Saren, who may not even be on Virmire or helping a friend for a ritual with
questionable outcome.

Dr. Chakwas stood up. "I'll leave you to this, I'm sure you will make the right decision."

"Thank you, doctor," Shepard said. The doctor left and Shepard stared into nothing for a while
longer. She turned to Garrus and he recognized the moment when she had made her decision. "I feel... call it a hunch but I feel like we need Wrex strong at our side in this. So, I'm gonna get him his
armor."

Garrus just nodded. He wasn't sure if he would have made the same decision but having Wrex on
their side, owing them a favor, was definitely a good thing.

She ordered Joker to lay a course to the Argus Rho cluster and then turned back to Garrus, a wicked
grin playing on her lips. "It'll be just you and me, a personal favor, getting his armor with him. He's
going to be so pissed that he owes a favor to a turian after that!" She rubbed her hands together. "Oh,
I love it already."

Shepard flinched when Wrex's voice boomed up behind her. "This is a historic place."

She stood at the galaxy map and scanned the Argos Rho cluster. She apparently had not heard Wrex
approach and Garrus couldn't blame her. The krogan could be disturbingly quiet if he wanted. In
fact, he had not seen the krogan for days and wondered where he had been all this time. Garrus
watched from the side, checking reports on one of the terminals that were arranged around the
holographic display.

"What do you mean, Wrex?" Shepard asked, still looking over the enlarged view of Argos Rho.

He stepped up next to her to point at the Hydra system. "There, one of the planets is Canrum. That's
where Shiagur had her last stand during the krogan rebellions. She was a warlord, one of the few
fertile ones. Men were proud to join her and they fought for the right to lay with her." He threw a
look towards Garrus. "She was finally taken down by thousands of turian forces on Canrum in a
glorious battle. Most of the turian survivors later got killed by krogans who had sworn blood oaths to
avenge her."

Wrex stood still, staring at the star system shimmering in front of them. Shepard looked at him, and
then enlarged another section. "We've been here before, in Hydra, we scanned every planet," she
said. "Only Metgos has traces of civilisation and we cleaned that all up. We're going to Phoenix
first." She stepped back in front of the map, forcing Wrex to step back. He didn't hesitate and Garrus
noted with relief that he didn't question her authority, despite his strange behaviour recently.
"Fine with me," Wrex rumbled and turned to the door on the side. "I'm suiting up."

Shepard watched him leave, a deep frown on her forehead. "Yeah... this is going to be interesting," she mumbled to herself.

A few hours later, they had found the hidden base on Tuntau and were cowering behind boxes, while turian and human pirates shot at them. These pirates were good, they knew how to fight as a team and combined their strengths well. It made Garrus wonder why everyone made such a big deal out of the joint turian-human project on the Normandy. It seemed, at least in the shady parts of the galaxy, turians and humans were working with each other just fine.

But Shepard, Garrus and Wrex knew how to combine their strengths as well. Between Garrus' and Shepard's shooting and Wrex's biotics, the pirates stood no chance. It was the first time for Garrus to see what kind of biotic power Wrex was capable of and he was truly impressed. The krogan warlord was completely wrapped in a blue glow and ripped the pirates apart like a force of nature.

When the base fell quiet, they searched the adjacent rooms and found a safe. The encryption was good but not good enough and the door opened after a few seconds. Wrex shouldered his way to the safe and took out a pile of metal with connecting strips of leather.

"Yes, this is it. Hard to believe anybody ever wore such a piece of crap." Wrex let one of his fingers trail over a pattern on the piece that was probably a breast plate. Garrus tried to read his face but krogan were hard to read on any day and Wrex was not someone who wore his mind on his face. But he looked relieved, maybe even happy.

The krogan tugged the armor under his arm and turned to leave the room.

"So, Wrex, what gives?" Shepard asked, stepping in his way, blocking the exit.

Wrex' tilted his head so that one of his wideset, red eyes was looking at her. "Shepard?" he said in his characteristic way.

Shepard crossed her arms over her chest. "I've been travelling with you through many systems, we fought side by side against every imaginable scum of the galaxy and this is the first time you ever wanted something very krogan just for yourself. So, what gives?"

Wrex turned his head to look away and opened and closed his mouth a few times. This look of embarrassment and shyness seemed so out of place on this massive hunk of masculinity, that it was actually quite funny. Garrus scrambled to suppress his subharmonics but Wrex' head snapped around and he glared at Garrus.

"I heard that, you turian hatchling," he grumbled. Then he turned to Shepard. "This is all your fault."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "Is it now?"

"Yes, your fault. You kept pestering me about the krogan and how we have to change, leave the past behind and become more than we are and how I should be the one..." he let out a roar of frustration that made the walls vibrate. Shepard didn't even flinch. Wrex growled before he continued, "Looks like you got into my head with all that shit. I actually started to consider it. And then I see you, skinny little thing of a flatface, with your pretty turian boy there and you're actually making a difference." He let out a curse in a dialect that no translator had heard in more than 500 years.

Shepard kept looking at him, a tiny smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. "So, Garrus is a pretty boy but I'm just skinny?"
This time, Garrus could not hold back his snort.

"By the dust of Tuchanka, you are an annoying pyjack," Wrex grumbled out.

He held the family armor towards a light. Intricate patterns and reliefs reflected the light, showing symbols and scripture in an unknown language. Wrex stared at the pictures and words for a long time until he spoke again. "The krogan once had a culture, you know? We weren't always just someone’s fighting pyjacks. We had songs and stories, rituals and dances. All that has been forgotten because of the Genophage; the krogan today just live for the next fight."

He looked Shepard in the eyes, his massive finger tapping on the glimmering metal of the armor. "I'm going to change that. After we get Saren and finish him and whatever else he started, I'm going back to Tuchanka. I will unite the clans. Build a future for the krogan."

Shepard stretched out her hand, her face beaming with pride, her eyes glittering. "I'm so proud to know you, Urdnot Wrex." She shook his hand, her strong arm almost disappearing in his massive fist. "I will help you in any way I can to make that happen for you."

Garrus trilled out a quiet note. Spirits, he was so proud of her and what she did. When the rest of the galaxy wanted to forget the krogan, she worked on a future for them.

"I'm proud to know you too, Commander Shepard." Wrex shook her hand once more, it looked like he was about to rip her arm out of its socket. He let her go with a nod.

Shepard smiled at him and nodded her head once. She turned to walk out of the secret base. "So, you seem pretty sure that we'll get Saren and stop him?"

"You and your pretty boy working on that?" Wrex let out a snort. "The skullfaced bastard stands no chance!" He let out a roar and pulled Shepard on her shoulder towards him so that she almost lost her footing. Garrus couldn't help himself, he hummed out a warning to the other male.

Wrex turned to him and laughed loudly. "Don't you worry, turian, I'm not getting between you and your female." He sniffed the air. "I can smell you both having the hots for each other right this minute. I'm not getting in on that, no thanks." His mouth pulled into a wide grin. "Maybe you should stop at the comm room for a few minutes when we get back."

His laughter shook the base until he had left the building.

A raderefelis is a turian cat by the way. And of course, I just made that name up, I just combined the words scratchy and cat in latin.
Holy fuck this is chapter forty! I had planned to at least be out of Virmire by now. But there are so many things that deserve a closer look, even though many of them won't get important until the ME2 storyline starts. I hope it doesn't feel like I'm dragging things out too long.

Wrex just needed more screentime, he is my favorite character after Garrus. I find the whole krogan storyline deeply touching and fascinating. If you wonder what your fic needs -- it needs more krogan! Trust me on this. Because krogan are awesome!
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Yes, I know, a long time has passed since last we saw each other. I'm sorry. This chapter was fighting me and I had to step back for a while. But I think it works now. I'm also writing a book, that eats into my time a lot too.

Sovereign and Saren mostly speak the lines from the game and of course Ash's most iconic line is included. All those are copyright by Bioware. I feel kind of bad about using them and if you know your Sovereign and Saren to the bones, you could skip some stuff I guess. Those lines are just so important to the whole Reaper/Saren construct that I had to include them, even though they are not my own writing.

This chapter is over 12,500 words long, I'm so sorry. You might want to schedule some breaks in between. I tried to cut stuff or make it two chapters but the longer I looked at it, the longer it got. And I didn't even get to the fluffy sex scene in the end! So, this chapter is all action and Reapers and the cozy sexiness has to wait for -- I don't even know.

Virmire was almost too beautiful. The vibrant blue of the water, the giggling waterfalls, the lush greenery, the picturesque rock formations in warm sunlight. It looked like someone had designed it in breathtaking detail as the perfect vacation spot. But there was lightning flashing on the horizon, like a warning of impending doom.

Garrus never would have thought that the doom was going to be an angry krogan pointing a gun at the love of his life.

The mission had started normally enough, drop the Mako, shoot geth, hold on for dear life as Shepard swerved around the spectacular landscape. Banter covered up the tension. They finally had a chance to catch Saren.

After a long fight with geth armatures, they found the salarian camp with the remaining troops. The Normandy landed and dropped off the rest of the team and the marines. Unfortunately, the ship could not take off again without getting shot out of the sky by powerful AA guns. Joker had tried to destroy them with the cannons but apparently the day in the dock had not been enough to actually fix them. The error message from the Normandy's VI was so severe, that he did not dare to charge the cannons again. Shepard's mood dropped considerably at the news.

The salarian team was led by a Major Kirrahe, who was disappointed that the Council didn't send an army to Virmire. Garrus swallowed a remark about how Shepard's team was the best army he could ever ask for and let the Commander do the talking.

The good news was that Saren was still here. He was holed up in a fortress, hidden among the breathtakingly beautiful rock formations. The complex was protected against outside intruders by automatic guns, shields, geth troops and krogans. According to the salarians, Saren had converted
one area of his fortress to a krogan breeding facility. An army of krogan at the hands of a rogue Spectre was the bad news. They had to kill the krogan, blow up the breeding facility and destroy the cure for the genophage.

And that was why at this moment, Wrex was pointing a gun at Shepard's head.

It had happened so fast, Garrus only realized it when he heard Ashley's gun extend with a whirr behind him. He hurried to bring up his rifle and peered through the scope, to see what was happening.

Behind him he heard Liara gasp. "Ash! What are you doing?"

Ashley's voice was perfectly calm. "Protecting my Commander."

"You're pointing a gun at Wrex, our friend!" Liara yelled out, her voice tipping over. "Is that so easy for you? He's just a krogan, just an alien for you and you would shoot off his head without hesitation?"

"A merc of questionable ethics is pointing a gun at my commanding officer," Ashley said, only a hint of a rasp in her voice. "If he threatens to kill her, yes, I will shoot his head off. I have to, it's my duty and I will not hesitate to protect Commander Shepard."

"But..." Liara let out a sob, "but he... I can understand Garrus, with him and Shepard being in a relationship and turians hating krogan anyway... but you can't --"

"This is not about hating krogan, for neither of us," Ashley said quietly.

Garrus searched his mind and to his own surprise found that he agreed. He didn't hate Wrex, he even considered him a friend. He wasn't free of all prejudices but the old, natural hate of krogan that had been instilled in him since his childhood was gone. What he saw was not some savage krogan but someone who he wished to understand.

Shepard had turned off the public comm, so they couldn't hear what she said. But at some point, she lowered the pistol that she had been aiming under Wrex's chin and a chilling second later, Wrex lowered his gun too. They shook hands and Ashley and Garrus collapsed their guns with a sigh.

"That was unpleasant," Ashley mumbled.

"Yes," Garrus said, "I'm gonna talk to her." He noticed that Liara had tears in her eyes and he thought that Ashley and her needed some time alone to talk. Asari hardly ever let anybody see their tears, they were deeply private about showing their pain like that.

As he walked over to the other side of the camp, he glanced back over his shoulder. Ashley held Liara's hand and Liara leaned slowly forward until her forehead rested on Ashley's cheek. It was the most intimate he had ever seen them.

Shepard walked towards him and peered past his shoulder at the two women. "What happened there?" she asked.

"Ashley aimed her gun at Wrex."

"Of course she did, I wouldn't have expected anything else."

"But Liara was upset, she felt that it was too easy for Ash, maybe?" Garrus said, not quite able to put the situation in words.
"Because she was aiming at a krogan, not a human you mean?" Shepard wondered, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, something like that."

"Liara isn't a soldier, despite her impressive fighting abilities," Shepard said. "Sometimes we forget how difficult this must be for her, being pulled into this. And I can see where she's coming from, Ash has her share of prejudices about aliens, Liara may not be so far off in her assumption."

"I don't think so," Garrus shook his head, "I have seen her work with Wrex and talk to him and she treats him like a fellow soldier. Except for that one time where I had to call you down, she has not acted like she distrusts him."

"That's good to know," Shepard said with a smile at him. "I trust your judgment on this. We had a lengthy conversation in the beginning about the aliens on board and this whole mission. She thinks the Council would be willing to sacrifice humans to save their own asses because humans would do exactly the same if the situation was reversed."

"That's a harsh view."

"I'd like to believe she is wrong but she is definitely right about humans and --" Shepard sighed, "can't say with the way the Council has been acting so far, its done much to convince me otherwise."

Garrus hissed out his discomfort with his second voice. The whole situation was a Spirits be damned mess. "What did you tell Wrex? He was pretty pissed about destroying the cure for the genophage."

"Having him aim his gun at me..." She laid her head back and took a deep breath. "There's a cultural difference at work here. I tend to forget that sometimes but Wrex is a krogan and dealing with something like this by threatening to shoot me -- I guess that's normal for a krogan. But I must say, I don't really like it when a friend point a gun at me."

"Neither do I," Garrus spit out with an angry growl in his subharmonics.

Shepard pulled on his arm to make him walk along the beautiful beach with her. "It is understandable in a way though. To have a cure on hand for that horrible plague and then destroy it -- I was expecting him to get angry about that. But I convinced him that Saren doesn't have the best interest of the krogan in mind, nothing he ever did indicates that he has an interest in helping krogan. He just wants an army of cannon fodder, slaves he can send into battle for him." Shepard let out an angry snort. "If there's one thing that Wrex doesn't want to happen, it's the krogan being slaves for anybody. I promised him that I would try to find and preserve any data about the cure before destroying the facility."

Garrus wasn't sure how she could manage to keep her word if they were going to destroy the whole facility. She was always willing to do everything for the mission but at what point would she promise too much?

"The cannon is still not working -- damn!" Shepard kicked against a rock in the sand. "We could shoot this whole complex down from the sky, this is really pissing me off!"

"Do we have comms to the Council?" Garrus wondered.

Shepard shook her head. "No, there's some kind of distortion field at work, we can't reach the comms buoy. I'm not even sure I want to talk to the Council. They pretty much left us hanging the whole time, I don't feel like I need to ask their opinion."
"I agree," Garrus said. The lack of support from the Council had been the biggest disappointment on this mission so far.

He took a good look at Shepard. Her shoulders were sagging forward, as if the weight was too much for her. Garrus put his arm around her shoulders and gently pulled her towards him. He rested his head against her forehead, spreading some of his mating scent on her. She sniffed the air and sighed and he felt her shoulders relax.

"Thanks," she whispered with a smile, "thanks for... well you know."

"Yes," he hummed.

From one of the tents, Kaidan was waving at them, gesturing them to come over. Reluctantly, they let go of each other and walked over. Kaidan and a salarian soldier stood around a big contraption that looked like some kind of makeshift project. The way Kaidan and the salarian were handling it, it appeared to be dangerous.

"What is this?" Garrus asked.

"A bomb," Kaidan said, "at least it's going to be one. The salarians converted the drive core of their ship. It will be a bit tricky to arm but it will definitely be effective in destroying this fortress."

The commanding officer of the salarians, Major Kirrahe, came over to them.

"Unfortunately we can't just drop the bomb from air," he said, "not only because of the AA guns, but the bomb has to be armed manually."

"The AA guns are our first priority," Shepard mused, "once they're down, the Normandy can bring the bomb right into the middle of the krogan breeding grounds. But we are not enough soldiers for a full-on frontal assault."

"I agree, Commander," Kirrahe said, "that's why I have another suggestion. My troops, with some support from you, will launch an attack as a distraction, while you and a small team work your way into the facility from the back."

Shepard grinned at the salarian. "I like that, what kind of support do you need?"

Ashley and Liara had joined them, quietly overhearing the conversation.

The salarian continued. "We need heavy firepower, and we need one of your officers, who is familiar with Alliance procedures and communications."

"I volunteer!" Ashley and Kaidan called out at the same time.

Ashley rolled her eyes. "Not so fast LT, the Commander needs you to arm the nuke, I'll go with the salarian team."

"With all due respect," Kaidan bit back, "that's not for you to decide."

Ashley shot him an angry look. "Why is it whenever someone says 'with all due respect', they really mean 'kiss my ass'?"

"Stop fighting, kids," Shepard grumbled. "Ash is right, Kaidan, your tech expertise predestined you for the bomb. Ash will go with Major Kirrahe. Oman and her favorite rocket launcher and Carlsson will go with you too." She looked over to Liara. "I want you to stay on board the Normandy."
Madhav and Langenfeld will have the Mako prepared for emergency evac and I want you to provide protection for them if needed."

Garrus knew her well enough to see in her eyes that she ordered Liara to stay on the Normandy to keep her out of the fight. Liara was not a soldier.

Liara nodded, her hand straining towards Ashley's. Ashley gave a respectful nod and turned around, taking Liara's hand in hers. The two women walked out of the tent, finding a little corner for themselves to share an embrace.

"Wrex, Garrus, Kaidan, you're with me. We're also taking Smith and Siddig with us. Tali -- " she hesitated, "-- Tali comes with us too." She turned back to Major Kirrahe. "Prepare your men, we'll be ready to go in twenty. Stock up on incendiary ammo and grenades, highly recommended for geth."

"Of course, Commander." The major turned and gave some orders to the supply officer.

Twenty minutes later, the fighters and marines of the Alliance Navy listened to Major Kirrahe give a rousing speech to his troops. Garrus had never considered salarians to be effective soldiers and this group had been dangerously cut down in numbers by the geth. But they all looked well trained, well prepared and were exceptionally well equipped.

The frontal assault group took off first. It was an odd looking group, Ashley and Omar in front, towering over the salarians. Omar's rocket launcher was almost as long as one of the salarians. Carlsson stayed in the back, he kind of looked like a salarian himself, slender and lithe. Only his differently shaped helmet gave him away.

Shepard watched them take off, hiding the worry on her face by sliding her helmet closed. She climbed into the Mako, the rest of the group following her. Madhav was supposed to drive them as far as possible and then take the Mako back to the Normandy. Next to him, Langenfeld was working on the shields and watching the scanner. She would man the guns if necessary.

The Dynamic Duo, Smith and Siddig, entered last, plunking down on a seat next to Wrex. They gave him a nod, let their heads fall back and closed their eyes and seemed to have fallen asleep on the spot at the same time. Garrus had worked with them only a few times, they were seasoned fighters, inseparable and worked together like one person with four arms.

The Mako took off with a jerk, driving full speed towards the compound Saren was hiding in. Garrus manned the cannon and took out most of the geth on approach. The remaining geth were quickly gunned down by the troop on foot. They worked out an efficient approach by having Wrex and the Dynamic Duo take the vanguard and just plow through the enemies. It was almost too much fun.

Finally the road ended on a network of walkways through rock formations. They had to continue on foot into the facility. Madhav and Langenfeld took off with the Mako, to return to the Normandy.

The walkways were built perfectly for sniper nests and surprise attacks from above, below and the sides. A sensible setup if you wanted to protect your krogan breeding facility, a pain in the gizzard if you wanted to enter it. Shepard split up the team in two, having one stay on the walkways and the other stay below on the sandy beach.

The 'Wrex plus Dynamic Duo' team as the ramming head with Tali's tech attacks from the background were working on the ground, while the rest stayed on the walkways. Garrus was a little worried for Tali but after watching how Wrex took care of her, protecting her and keeping her inside his barrier, he relaxed. The two shotgun wielders were doing just fine.
Shepard and Garrus both had gotten upgrades for their omni-tools from the salarians. They made a game out of who could initiate the biggest Overload. Kaidan noticed it and made a point in aiming a Warp at their targets, ripping the geth apart in biotic explosions.

"Nice, Kaidan!" Shepard called out after a spectacular explosion killed the biggest geth they had ever seen. "I hope we don't see many more of these guys, these... primal-ass-fucker-geth."

"I doubt the Alliance will go with that name," Kaidan said, chuckling quietly.

"Fine, let's call them Prime." Shepard opened her omni-tool interface and typed something into it. She seemed to open a comm channel, she had the habit to lay her head to the side when she spoke to someone. "Shepard here, how are you doing, Major?"

She listened for a little while and a deep scowl appeared on her forehead the longer she listened. Finally she raised her eyes back to her troops. Wrex and his gang had joined them on the walkway, no new geth had attacked them for a while.

"Kirrahe has some problems, we should take as much heat off him as we can." She hesitated for a moment. "Ashley has been hit. She can still fight but she's limping."

Wrex let out a loud grunt. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's give Saren's troops something to do."

Shepard grinned at him. "Let's do it!" She reloaded her gun and took point.

They took the base by a literal storm. Shepard never stopped running and the rest of the team had trouble keeping up. But inside of the base, they came to a stop. Until now, they had only been fighting geth, but inside the first building, they met asari and salarians.

Garrus hesitated for a second, these had to be members of Major Kirrahe's contingent. "Kirrahe said he lost some men. Maybe we can talk to them?"

"Honestly doesn't look like it." Shepard shot a salarian in the leg but he kept on shooting at them, dragging himself over the floor without any sense of self preservation. He only stopped shooting at them when Shepard shot him in the head. "They seem to be brainwashed or something worse, like someone else is controlling them. How did Shiala call it? 'Sovereign can dominate minds, indoctrinate them'." She clenched her fingers around the barrel of her rifle, a deep frown visible behind the visor of her helmet. "That is a terrifying thought. What if one of us falls under that influence?"

Garrus had to suppress a shudder on that thought, he had to agree, that was a terrifying thought. "But Shiala said that it took weeks to manifest, so we might be safe if we don't stay too long."

A noise made them turn around. A salarian, his helmet cracked in half, stumbled into the open from behind a pile of storage containers. When he noticed them, he began fumbling for his weapon. His movements were erratic, like a robot that had trouble with his servos. His helmet fell to the ground and they all drew in a shocked breath when they saw his face. His skin had turned a sick dark green, blue glowing veins seemed to grow out of his skin and his eyes were lifeless and glossy. His mouth moved but all that came out was an animalistic moan.

He finally found a grip on his weapon but before he could raise it, he fell from a shot from Wrex's shotgun.

"Never liked salarians much but these guys are even worse," Wrex mumbled. "Creepy shitters."
Nobody disagreed.

They pushed forward and Shepard's face turned grimmer the more salarians and asari they met. People were fighting them crazy and possessed, they fought like suicide warriors. It was sickening to shoot them down like cannon fodder, all these people who were just shells under the influence that Saren somehow had on them.

They finally reached the laboratories and here they met a krogan for the first time. The laboratory was full of husks in examination systems, protected by a powerful asari and an enraged krogan. He came at them like a battering ram, roaring in uncontrolled anger but stopped short when he saw Wrex.

"You!" he yelled, "Don't you see what we build here? A cure for the genophage!" He ripped off his helmet and they all gasped when they saw his face. There were blue glowing veins criss crossing along the skin of his neck and his eyes had an artificial blue glow. He stepped in Wrex's way and for a moment, nobody moved. "This is for the good of our species, you fool!" the krogan roared.

Wrex held his gaze, his biotics shimmering around him. With a move so fast, it was just a blur of biotics, he threw the krogan away from him and tackled him to the floor. A knife appeared in his hand, long, lean and curved. He thrust the knife under the head crest of the krogan, right between the eyes, twisting it upwards. The krogan spasmed once, and lay still.

Wrex pulled the knife out and stood up, letting it disappear in some part of his armor. The team had shot the remaining threats of asari and human husks during the fight and the laboratory was quiet except for some beeps and pings from the machinery around them. Wrex kept looking at the krogan at his feet.

Shepard walked over to him and his head snapped around, his red eyes fixing on her. "I just hope we stand on the right side, Shepard," she barked at her. She held his gaze and something shifted between them. Wrex kept looking at her but his tone was softer when he spoke, "I just hope you're right."

"I know I'm right," Shepard said and Garrus was sure that only he saw that tiny flicker of doubt in her eyes. She was unmoving conviction to anyone but him.

Wrex turned away. "I think I knew him," he mumbled, "Clan Terrnok, used to work for the Blue Suns." He threw another look at the dead krogan. "Idiot."

There was no time to further dwell on the situation, they had to push forward, using the distraction Major Kirrahe provided as best as they could. Enemies were still aplenty and it became noticeably harder to fight them. They met more krogan and asari now. The asari had been asari commandos and the influence took nothing off their abilities. Krogans were difficult to fight anyway. But the worst was that the geth seemed to learn from them.

The geth used the krogan as the first line of attacks, had the asari roll up the field with biotic shockwaves and used the resulting chaos to sneak up on Shepard's squad by employing shields that made them practically invisible. The attacks sent them scrambling for cover, narrowly avoiding death in much closer combat than comfortable.

The Dynamic Duo and Tali had to find other cover than Wrex's biotic shield, they needed the krogan and Kaidan to counter the biotic attacks from the asari commandos. When they finally reached the underground entrance near the sewers, it was suddenly so quiet, that it took them a while to actually relax. The air smelled of sewage waters but they still were grateful for a short break.

"Is everybody else also fed up with these asari commandos?" Lieutenant Siddig asked, as she fixed a
burn wound on Smith's hand. He had gotten in the way of the fringes of a biotic shockwave and it had caused an energy burn right through his armored gloves.

"Yep," Shepard bit out. She leaned against a wall and typed something up on her omni-tool. She had taken off her helmet and her face reflected the anger and frustration she felt. "I don't have a problem with shooting geth but brainwashed salarians, krogan or asari? Done with that."

A strange noise, a kind of cough came from one of the cells that had looked empty on first sight. They all jumped up, guns ready and reexpanded the helmets. Shepard took a few careful steps forward, following the noise to one cell on the far left. When she stopped before it, a salarian stepped up to the glass wall, his face partly hidden from the light.

"Now you come, now..." the salarian hissed but stopped when he saw them, "No, you're not one of them, you're not... who are you?"

"I'm Commander Shepard of the Alliance Navy, we are here on a Council mission to stop Saren."

"Someone came? They said someone would come but..." the salarian deflated, the sudden excitement gone. "It's been so long, so many voices..."

Shepard caught Garrus' look and he could read in her face what he was thinking as well. Something was wrong with that salarian.

The young man visibly pulled himself together. "My name is Private Menos Avot, I was on a reconnaissance mission when the geth caught me and brought me here." He stopped and looked around as if he heard something. "Six days I've been here, I think and I heard... there have been voices, whispering."

"They experimented on you?" Shepard asked, her pistol in her hand at her side.

"I don't know!" Avot screamed, slamming his hands against the glass wall, making them all jump back a step. "What could they wish to find out? The effects of incessant whispering on my shortening temper? Who knows!"

Garrus turned away from the cell and whispered to Shepard, "There's definitely something wrong with him."

Shepard nodded in agreement, not looking away from the salarian. Wrex mumbled something about this one being even more crazy than other salarians.

"Let me out!" Avot yelled, hitting the glass once more. "I can help," he said quietly.

Shepard shook her head. "I can't let you out, I can't trust you. We'll come back and --"

"No!" the salarian screamed and ran with so much force against the glass wall that his head crashed against it with a sickening crack. He fell down, bleeding from his head and didn't move anymore.

Shepard opened the cell with a punch on a button on the side of the cell and knelt down next to the salarian, scanning him. "He's dead, he cracked his skull," she stated, no emotion in her voice. That was a telling sign for Garrus, how shocked she really was.

She stood up, her Commander mask settling over her face. "No matter who we find in cells like this, we can't let them out. We don't know enough about the influence and how it messes with their heads. Do not engage with anyone." The squad members nodded and voiced their agreements.
A worried gloom had settled over them, killing all banter and jokes as they continued through the laboratories. They found more salarians in various states of mental confusion and Shepard stayed true to her order. She didn't let anyone out, despite the protests and pleadings from the most sane ones. An angry line had settled firmly on her forehead.

During a short pause in a firefight, Garrus took her hand and pressed it, trying to get through her solidifying wall of anger. "Hey, Shepard, you okay?" The question felt silly because she was very obviously not okay.

She looked at him and he saw with hot relief how the anger slipped from her face and made room for a tiny smile for him. "That bad, huh?" she asked.

"You look like you're about to punch someone to a pulp with a dead krogan," Garrus said, trying to find a way back to their usual banter but it felt quite inadequate.

"It better be Saren," she said with a sigh.

"Punching to a pulp or punching with him?"

A little laugh trickled out from her, almost too quiet to hear it. "God, I wish it could be both." Her face turned serious again. "Saren is going to pay for all this, for fucking with all these people."

Garrus nodded. "He's close, I'm sure about it."

Shepard took a sip of water and closed her helmet. "Let's do it then. And let's find out everything we can about this influence he has on these people." She looked over to Wrex. "And not to forget the genophage cure. As unnerving as Saren's krogan are, I don't think we can keep Wrex interested if we lose that information."

Garrus looked at the building in front of them. "If the architecture makes any sense, that building should be administration or some laboratories. The terminals in the lower sections we came through had nothing on the actual cure. Hopefully..."

"Yeah..." Shepard nodded. She squeezed his hand one more time before opening the comm to the squad: "Break's over, let's take that building. Hack every terminal, copy every datapad, we want all information we can find. Let's go."

The team acknowledged the order rather quietly and Shepard shook her head. "Oh, this just won't do, people. Are we here to kick Saren's ass or not?"

A loud "Booyah!" was the answer, even from Tali and Wrex.

The fights continued in a routine, the team working together with practised ease. It was a gruesome business, a path of death and destruction they took through the buildings. More krogan charged at them, accompanied by geth and asari. At least the salarian contingent seemed to have been exhausted by now.

After rushing through laboratories and maintenance areas, an unassuming door took them into a nice, sunny office with windows overlooking beautiful rock formations. The elegance and cleanliness was a stark contrast to the damp and greasy areas they had been running through so far.

The office appeared to be empty at first. But a quiet whimper pointed them to an asari hiding under the desk.

"Please don't shoot!" she cried out as she stood up slowly. "I'm not like them, like the others."
Shepard didn't lower her pistol. "I've heard that before today."

"I... I just work here!" the asari stammered, "My name is Rana Thanoptis, I'm a neuro specialist." She wiped a shaky hand over her fringe, the dark purple patches on her face revealing how nervous she was. "This job isn't worth dying for, or worse."

"Worse?" Shepard asked, slowly lowering her pistol.

"You think the indoctrination only affects prisoners? We all are exposed, we all hear it." She shook her head as if she tried to shake something off.

"So this isn't just a breeding facility," Shepard stated, an angry undertone growing in her voice.

"Not on this level. We are studying Sovereign's influence on organic minds." She wiped over her fringe again and Garrus wondered if she tried to wipe away the influence from her mind. "At least I think that's what Saren wanted to study, we weren't told much."

Shepard's voice had dropped to dangerously low levels. Her anger crackled around her like a physical force. "This influence, from Sovereign, you call that indoctrination?"

"Yes," Rana gasped out. "It changes the mind, the thoughts. Direct exposure for a time turns you into a mindless slave. The signal is undetectable but it's there. Like an energy field. It's a degenerative influence, the subject becomes less capable the longer it is indoctrinated. It affects everyone who has been exposed for a time but my studies indicate that --" she hesitated, wiping hard over her fringe, "my study showed that asari are especially susceptible to it, more than any other species."

Shepard made a note on her omni-tool before fixing her gaze on the asari again. "Why is Saren studying this effect, I thought he controls it?"

The asari let out a forced laugh. "Oh no, it's not Saren, it's the ship! The signal makes the indoctrinated obey Saren but I don't think he controls it. I think he's scared that it might be affecting him in just the same way."

Rana became more nervous by the minute, her arms fidgeting. "It's like a tingling in the back of your mind, a voice that you almost can't hear but it's always there and it wants you to do things and it's so hard to ignore, and if you keep resisting it gets worse and it would be so much easier --" She wiped over her fringe again, this time so hard that her that she left scratches on the scales on her skin. Her breath became ragged and she whispered: "I can't even trust my own mind!"

Shepard grabbed the asari's arm and made her look at her. "Focus! We need all files on the genophage cure and the indoctrination. Show me where everything is and then run cause I'm gonna blow this place sky-high."

Rana Thanoptis stared for a second before leading them to another office and opening access on all files. "There's an elevator in the back that leads to Saren's private lab, that's where he... I don't know, he was there a lot..." She ran off, mumbling and babbling to herself.

Shepard typed furiously on her omni-tool while the files from the main computer downloaded to hers and Garrus' omni-tool. The worry and anger made her face look like a wall of steel. But that didn't worry him, it reassured him. This was Commander Shepard, working on setting things right.

As they made their way across another bridge towards an elevator, Garrus noticed how quiet it had become. The wind made whispers around columns and corners but there were no other sounds. No birds, no other animals and also no sound of battle. They had not heard from the other team in a while and Garrus checked the text comm. He saw that Shepard had sent out a query not long ago
and that Ashley had answered with a short reply that they were still on their way but had to remain silent for the moment. Apparently they had some kind of trap in the making.

The lack of outside noise made him aware of a sensation in the back of his mind. Not a noise but something that felt like a sound, like the glimpse of a memory on the edge of awareness. He tried to focus on it, to remember what it was but it kept slipping away. He stumbled and realized with a start that Shepard stood in front of him, staring at him wide eyed.

"You feel it too?" she whispered. "Something in the back of your mind?"

"Yes, like something I need to remember, like I have forgotten something --" he stopped himself with a gasp. "Is this the indoctrination field?"

"I've been feeling something for a while now and it's been getting stronger the closer we got to this section," she said quietly. "I just couldn't put my finger on it. There is also --" she hesitated, searching for words, "like some part of my mind is fighting this. I can kind of push it away."

"Maybe that is from the beacon or the Cypher? Some kind of protection against the indoctrination field."

Her face lit up. "That... that would be great! Maybe we could develop some kind of protection against this!" She squeezed his arm, the familiar childish excitement he loved so much, back on her face. "Maybe this fucking with my head is not just some useless hocuspocus to make me dream of fire and death," she bit out.

Before she opened the elevator door, Shepard turned to her team, looking each one into the eyes, one after another. "I assume you all feel something in the back of your mind, like something that you should focus on."

After a short hesitation, each of them nodded and looked relieved when they saw that the others nodded too. Even Wrex nodded his head, spitting out an angry grunt.

"I think this is the indoctrination field and we have gotten closer to its source. It's normal that you feel this, it affects everyone. Try to ignore it," she said.

The squad members nodded one by one. The Dynamic Duo punched each other hard on the arm, to the surprise of the rest of the team. They grinned and Smith said: "That's what Miss Wilhelmina taught us. She always said 'when you can't focus, give yourself something else to focus on' and then she made us pinch our arm. Works all the time."

The rest of the team stared at them until Wrex broke out in bellowing laughter. "You humans!" he laughed out, "You humans are like tiny, crazy krogan!" He took a step towards Smith and Siddig and lowered his head invitingly. It took the Dynamic Duo a second to realize what he was offering but then a giant grin appeared on Smith's face behind the faceplate of his helmet. He pulled his head back and then slammed against Wrex's headcrest in a beautiful krogan headbump. Siddig laughed out loud and did the same, hitting her helmeted head against the krogan's.

Humans and krogan, Garrus thought to himself. It's almost uncanny. How can two species be so different and so much alike?

Shepard grinned and gave a hand signal. The squad fell into position behind her as she opened the elevator doors. The ride up was filled with banter and jokes, helping them cope with the growing tension and the poking in the back of their minds.

The elevator brought them up to a level of the building that felt big and empty. It was cold and damp
and it had to be open at one side because a wind was going through it with the smell of saltwater. They carefully walked around the corner and came into a hall that seemed to have been built hastily from prefab walls and windows. A gallery stretched over part of the room, ending opposite a column in the ground that looked like a long, erected spine.

"Commander," Garrus called out, "that looks like the beacon on Eden Prime."

Shepard stared at it, her eyes dark and angry. "Yes, it does. So, I guess I have to touch it. Not like that was ever unpleasant before."

Tali walked towards the edge of the balcony, her omni-tool alight. "I'm sorry, Commander, I get nothing on my scans. It seems to be inactive."

Shepard spit out a bitter laugh. "Oh no, it's not inactive, trust me, far from it. I can feel it." She took a deep breath and walked down the ramp towards the beacon. Her steps slowed down as she came closer and it looked like it didn't react to her presence at all. But just as she wanted to turn away, the beacon lit up in green light and a force field grabbed her and pulled her up from the ground.

Garrus ran forward on instinct but Wrex grabbed his arm and held him back. "Wait, turian, you can't help her right now."

Finally, the field dropped her and Garrus rushed over to her. She knelt on the ground, drawing in air in gasps.

"Shepard." There was nothing else he could say. He helped her up and let her rest her weight on his arm until her breathing had normalized. She gave him a weak smile and whispered, "Garrus." Something snapped in his chest and he could finally breathe again.

Tali's voice came from the top of the balcony. "Commander, there's a change up here."

"Copy," Shepard said and straightened her back. They walked up the ramp to Tali, who stood in front of a red glowing, holographic interface that looked unlike any interface Garrus had ever seen before. It looked like a visual representation of Saren's ship, Sovereign.

"This is not good," Garrus mumbled more loudly than he had intended.

"You are not Saren," the voice from the hologram boomed, hollow and loud.

"Is this some kind of VI interface?" Tali wondered.

The voice increased the feeling of pressure in the back of his head. Garrus gnashed his teeth. "I don't think this is a VI."

The voice boomed again. "Rudimentary creatures of blood and flesh. You touch my mind, fumbling in ignorance, incapable of understanding."

"Definitely not a VI," Garrus mumbled. Beside him, Shepard's face was a mask of calculated indifference, not showing any emotion.

"There is a realm of existence so far beyond your own," the voice droned again, "you cannot even imagine it. I am beyond your comprehension. I am Sovereign."

Shepard turned around to look at her squad. "You know what I think? Sovereign isn't just some Reaper ship Saren found, it's an actual Reaper!"
"Reaper?" The booming voice sounded like it almost wanted to laugh but there was something so unemotional to the voice that laughing was just not part of its build. "A label created by the protheans to give voice to their destruction. In the end, what they choose to call us is irrelevant. We simply are."

"Pretentious asshole much?" Shepard mumbled under her breath.

To everyone's surprise, Tali spoke up. "The protheans vanished 50,000 years ago. You could not have been there. It's impossible."

"Organic life is nothing but a genetic mutation, an accident. Your lives are measured in years or decades. You wither and die. We are eternal."

Shepard turned away from the display to hide her eyeroll. The hollow voice continued to speak.

"We are the pinnacle of evolution and existence. Before us you are nothing. Your extinction is inevitable. We are the end of everything."

Shepard raised her head in that distinct human way that looks so wrong to a turian. "We will not bow to you. You'll have an entire galaxy of races united and ready to face you."

A red glimmering wave ran over the hologram. "Confidence born of ignorance. The cycle cannot be broken."

"Cycle? What cycle?" Garrus asked.

"The pattern has repeated itself more times than you can fathom. Organic civilisations rise, evolve, advance. And at the apex of their glory, they are extinguished," Sovereign droned on. "The protheans were not the first. They did not create the Citadel. They did not forge the mass relays. They merely found them, the legacy of my kind."

"The fuck?" Shepard hissed out and typed something into her omni-tool. She looked up again. "What is the point of that? Why construct the mass relays and then leave them for someone else to find?"

"Your civilisation is based on the technology of the mass relays, our technology. By using it, your society develops along the paths we desire. We impose order on the chaos of organic evolution. You exist because we allow it. And you will end because we demand it."


Siddig nodded, "The name Reaper makes a whole lot of sense, suddenly."

Shepard scowled at the hologram. "What do you want from us? Slaves? Resources?"

"My kind transcends your very understanding. We are each a nation, free of all weaknesses. You can not even begin to grasp --"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Shepard interrupted, "we are unworthy. Who built you? Where did you come from?"

"We have no beginning. We have no end. We are infinite," the Reaper continued, the light of the hologram shimmering in waves. "Millions of years after your civilisation has been eradicated and forgotten, we will endure."
"Where are the rest of the Reapers? Are you the last of its kind?" Shepard asked.

"We are legion. The time of our return is coming. Our numbers will darken the sky of every world. You cannot escape your doom." There was an almost smug undertone to the mechanical voice.

Shepard turned away from the display and rolled her eyes. "I'm getting really tired of this shit." She turned back to the hologram and sneered. "You're not even alive. You're just a machine and machines can be broken!"

"Your words are as empty as your future. I am the vanguard of your destruction. This exchange is over." The voice stopped talking and the red translucent interface disappeared. The silence was threatening until, with a tingle of a thousand shards, all the windows exploded inwards.

Joker's voice came over the comm. "Commander, we got trouble."

"What else is new?" Shepard said with a sigh. "What's the matter, Joker?"

"That ship, Sovereign? It's moving," Joker said. "I don't know what you did down there but that thing just pulled a turn that would shear any of our ships in half. It's coming your way and it's coming hard. You need to wrap things up in there -- fast."

"On with the plan then," Shepard said, rolling her shoulders. "Breeding facility, AA towers, nuke. Let's go."

They fought their way back to the office and over a bridge to another complex. More krogan came into their way along with geth and geth turrets. But the squad was a well oiled machine by now and when Kirrahe warned them over the comm that the geth had turned back from them, obviously alarmed to the real threat, Shepard just shrugged.

"Let them come. Let's hope they bring Saren along," she hissed threateningly.

The breeding facility was a half-circle of buildings around a courtyard that was now flooded with water. Why it was flooded and where all the water came from was unclear and it annoyingly hindered their movements. Sloshing through water, they cleared the area of geth and krogan and deactivated the AA tower so that Joker could land the Normandy on the far side of the courtyard.

Shepard conferred with Joker while the marines and technicians placed the bomb near a reactor. "Can you help Williams and the salarians? Can you see their position?"

Joker sighed before answering, "Negative, sorry Commander. The area is just too rugged and as long as the AA towers over there are still operational, I can't get close enough. But I see the enemy coming towards this position."

Shepard opened another comm channel. "Williams, take down those AA towers. The Normandy can't get to you otherwise."

Ashley Williams voice came over the comm, the sound of gunfire and screams mixed in with static. "We'll do what we can, Commander, but the geth have us pinned down here. We're taking heavy casualties."

"How far away are you from the rendezvous point?"

"Too far, Commander, we'll never make it on time to --" a wave of shots and screams interrupted her.
"Disable the towers, I'm getting you help," Shepard yelled into the comm.

"On it," Williams answered through gritted teeth. "just take care of the bomb. I never want to see a huskified krogan again."

"Me too, Williams, me too," Shepard sighed. She closed the line, shutting out the noises of the fight and waved the marines Madhav and Langenfeld over to her. Madhav had his elbow in a supportive cast but he had the same kind of look of determination on his face that all humans marines had. Garrus twitched his mandibles in a grin, any turian squad leader would be proud of marines like that.

He stomped through the water over to Wrex and Tali, who stood a bit to the side, watching Kaidan and the engineers setting up the bomb. Krogan were harder to read than humans but the look on Wrex’s face practically came with a warning sign of 'enraged krogan - do not engage!' on it. But Tali was not disturbed by it, or she didn't notice his rage. She was calmly talking to the giant krogan and Garrus mentally went through all the procedures he knew of how to take down a krogan without killing him. There were only two, to his knowledge, and they were usually painful to the one executing them.

As he came closer, Tali stopped talking and they both looked over to him. Garrus hesitated. He was a turian and his kind weren't exactly known for their good standing with either of their species. But he had hoped that they had come past that in the last weeks.

Tali waved him over and he noticed with relief that Wrex seemed to have calmed down. Whatever Tali had said to him, it seemed to have dissipated his rage. "Garrus," Tali said, her hand making a complicated movement in the air. "Wrex and I were worrying about Ashley. Wrex thinks we can't arm the bomb and pick them up on time."

Garrus nodded, glad that his worry had been unfounded. "I have been wondering about that too. But I don't know more than you, she's keeping it to herself."

Wrex let out a grunt before staring at Garrus with his red eyes. "She always does that. Close up when shit comes at her from all sides. It's not good, you have to talk to her, turian. It'd be good if we knew the plan."

"Agreed," Garrus said, looking over to Shepard. She gave the marines some instructions as they boarded the Normandy. The bomb was secured in place, bolted to the floor next to an energy reactor. Garrus walked over to her, making waves with each step. At least the water wasn't cold and the suit could regulate the temperature without problems.

"Commander!" he called to her, hiding his worried subharmonics under the official designation. Shepard sent the marines away and came over to him. Her face was hard, the wrinkles on her forehead edged in deep. He placed his hand on her arm for a second, just to show his support. He let out a sigh when he saw her features relax ever so slightly.

"What is it, Vakarian?"

Garrus lowered his voice. "The squad is worried, it may be advisable to let them in on your plan as long as we have a minute to breathe here."

"You're right." She raked through her hair with a tired smile. "It was Wrex who got you to talk to me, right?" she said with a smile.

"Kind of, yes. But Tali and I are worried too," Garrus said. "Once the bomb is armed, our window of time is pretty short. How are we going to pick up Kaidan, the salarians and Ashley in time? And
we still haven't found Saren."

"That pisses me off too," Shepard grumbled. "Ok, squad meeting." She called the team together, gathering them around the bomb as Kaidan worked on the circuitry. "Here's the plan," she announced. She took a look around, making sure that she had everyone's attention. "A large section of the attackers have broken off from Williams and Kirrahe's squad. I hope that Saren is with them and I want to go towards them and give them a nice welcome. Meanwhile, Kadian, Siddig and Smith, you protect the bomb until we come back here and take off with the Normandy before the bomb fries us all. While we fight, Madhav and Langenfeld will drop the Mako as soon as the AA towers are down and get the other squad."

The squad acknowledged the orders with grim determination and Shepard ordered the helmets back on and ran towards a set of stairs leading out of the courtyard. Behind them, the Normandy flew away in a gust of water. As they ran over a bridge towards the forest, a geth ship appeared over them and flew towards the courtyard. Shepard stopped and warned Kaidan.

"Alenko, you have a geth reinforcements coming towards you."

"They're already here, Commander. We're under heavy fire."

"Shit!" Shepard stopped short. "Can you hold them off?"

"Not for long, they're swarming us. Help Ashley, Commander, and find Saren."

Ashley's voice cut in through the comm. "Forget it LT, we can hold this position. Protect the bomb, it has to go off!"

Shepard gritted her teeth, biting out a "Quiet!" Her hands closed around a railing, her armored gloves creaking under the pressure. "The AA towers, Williams?"

"Too heavily protected, Skipper. We in too much shit already."

Shepard studied a map of the area on her omni-tool. "Williams, Kirrahe, I've sent you an update to your map. Fall back towards that ridge, Joker, go behind that ridge as close as you can, drop the Mako. Madhav, are you ready?"

"Ready, Commander."

"Pick up the squad and drive back behind the ridge. The Mako's shields and the ridge will protect you."

Garrus swallowed any remark that wanted to rise in his throat. No turian commander would risk so many lives just to rescue a small team. Every turian soldier knew that the mission would always come first, no matter how many lives it took. The humans on the other hand, always fought to leave no man behind. For a second he had not been sure if Shepard would act like a turian or a human in this decision.

"Understood, Commander," Madhav answered. "We'll be ready to drop in two."

"Joker?"

"On my way, Commander."

Ashley's voice came over the comm with an unusual uncertainty, "It's too risky, Commander..."
"You can always file a complaint later on, Chief."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Skipper."

"That's what I thought." Shepard turned on her heel and ran back towards the stairs they had just climbed up. The sound of gunfire and the pop of biotic effects carried through the air towards them. "Kaidan, we're coming back towards your position."

Kaidan's voice was almost inaudible over the sounds of heavy fire. "We could sure use your help. The bomb is safe but I'm activating it now so that it goes off no matter what."

Shepard gritted her teeth and said nothing. She was clearly not happy with that decision but this was neither the time nor the place to discuss it.

"The bomb is armed," Kaidan said. He paused for a second and they could hear another hum of biotic effects. "Commander, there's something else coming, some kind of small platform --"

"We're here," Shepard interrupted as they rushed around the last corner of the staircase, shooting geth that had managed to come this close. Kaidan and the Dynamic Duo had hunkered down behind some containers but dangerously close to a fuel tank. Shepard ordered them to move behind the reactor, just in time as the fuel tank exploded, ripping a sizeable hole in the geth troops.

But the reinforcements kept coming, there seemed to be no end to the flood of mechanical bodies stalking and gliding towards their cover. For their defence, they relied heavily on the combination of Tali's and Shepard's tech Overloads and biotic Warps from Kaidan and Wrex. If they timed it right, the biotic fields exploded, taking out many geth at once. But Kaidan was injured, his strength waning and even Wrex began to show signs of fatigue.

"Vakarian, cover me!" Shepard ordered, indicating that she planned to get on the left flank of the approaching geth. Garrus switched to his assault rifle and sprayed the oncoming forces with suppressing fire. He didn't like this at all but he knew that they needed to get an advantage. She ran over the courtyard to a boulder on the side that would provide solid cover and give her a new angle to shoot.

It looked like a good idea but as she ran over, a new force was shooting at her. A floating platform with one bulky person on it, flew over the courtyard. It was Saren and he concentrated all his fire on Shepard. Garrus could see her shields dropping rapidly into the red on his visor. She dodged and evaded his shots as best as she could and fired at him at the same time. But Saren seemed to have an incredibly strong biotic shield employed, not a single shot touched him. On her last blip of shield in his visor, Shepard made it behind the boulder.

Saren jumped off the platform and stalked over to her cover. Garrus kept shooting at him but he waved his shots away like annoying insects. Shepard leaned around the corner and aimed her tech attacks at him. Finally, when a Warp from Wrex and an Overload from Shepard exploded around him, he stopped his approach.

"What a clever plan, Shepard," Saren said. "My geth were utterly convinced that the other team were the main attackers. You made it quite far. You won't stop me of course."

The turian looked different than what Garrus remembered from his pictures as a Spectre. Blue glowing cables snaked around his body, connected to some kind of cybernetic implants. His one arm looked entirely artificial and something about his face and his mandibles made Garrus feel uneasy just looking at it. But he didn't have much time to study the turian, they were still under constant attack by the geth as Saren kept talking to Shepard.
"I can't let you disrupt what I have accomplished here. You can't possibly understand what's really at stake."

Saren stood in the middle of the flooded courtyard as if nothing could ever hurt him. The rest of the squad was kept busy by the constant geth attacks and Garrus could only vaguely concentrate on what Saren and Shepard talked about.

"You have seen the vision from the beacon!" the rogue Spectre droned on. "You, of all people should understand what the Reapers are capable of. They cannot be stopped. Do not mire yourself in pointless revolt."

Shepard peeked around the corner. "Pointless? It's not pointless to fight."

"For some petty idea of freedom, you are willing to sacrifice everything?" Saren let out a bitter laugh. "The protheans tried to fight, and they were utterly destroyed. Trillions -- dead. But what if they had bowed before the invaders? Is submission not preferable to extinction?"

"As if the Reapers would let us live, you can't really believe that!" Shepard called out, still hidden behind the solid wall.

"We organics are driven by emotions and not logic. We would fight even when we know we cannot win. That's why I never came forward with this to the Council. But if we work with the Reapers - if we make ourselves useful - think how many lives could be spared."

Shepard leaned around the wall, still careful not to expose herself. "What makes you think you will be spared, once you have lost your usefulness? You studied the indoctrination, you know what they do."

"I was aware of the danger when I joined Sovereign but this is the only way to avoid total annihilation." Saren's voice had lost some of its conviction. "I used this facility to study the indoctrination."

"You thought you could find some kind of protection against it, didn't you?" Shepard asked, a quiet understanding in her voice. "But it didn't work, did it?"

Saren had stopped pacing and stood still on a walkway across the courtyard. The geth had stopped firing and stood motionless, waiting for commands. The turian seemed to be lost in thought for a second, the blue lights on his cybernetics were blinking. With a hum he straightened himself and turned back towards the boulder that Shepard was kneeling behind. "The stronger the indoctrination, the less capable the subject becomes. If I wasn't capable, I would not be useful for the Reapers. Sovereign needs me to find the Conduit. That is my saving grace. My mind is still my own. For now."

"But you can't be sure!" Shepard interrupted. "The effect is subtle, that's what your research showed. You are already indoctrinated, a puppet the Reaper plays with for as long as it can use you. You have to fight it, together we can stop Sovereign!"

Saren looked up to the sky as if he saw it for the first time. "I no longer believe that Shepard. The visions cannot be denied. The Reapers are too powerful. The only hope of survival is to join with them."

Shepard stood up, sliding the faceplate of her helmet back and stepped out of the cover. "You were a Spectre. You swore to protect the galaxy! And now here you are, just trying to save yourself!"

Garrus switched to his sniper rifle, aiming for Saren's head with the dim hope of making it through
his shield if necessary.

The rogue Spectre snapped around, an angry growl emanating from his cowl. "I'm not doing this for myself. Don't you see, Sovereign will succeed. It is inevitable. My way is the only way any of us will survive. I'm forging an alliance between us and the Reapers, between organics and machines, and in doing so, I will save more lives than have ever existed."

"That's what Sovereign wants you to believe," Shepard yelled, standing tall, her hand on her pistol. "Your mind is not your own anymore, it hasn't been for a while, Saren."

"You would undo my work, Shepard. You would doom our entire civilization to complete annihilation." Faster than Garrus could shoot at him, Saren ran towards Shepard and ripped her off the ground by her throat. He pulled his arm back to throw her when he stopped and sniffed. "You... you are mated? To a turian?" His head snapped around to the reactor were Garrus knelt in cover. "To him?" he spat out with foul disgust in his voice.

A bitter laugh broke out of Saren as he brought Shepard's face closer to his. Garrus could not stop the possessive growl rising from his second voice, Saren was almost touching her forehead!

The pale turian sniffed again and hissed through his teeth, "There's nothing your species wouldn't do, is there? You especially, with so much failure in your life, you would do anything to not let that happen again, wouldn't you? Even rutting with the enemy just to have a bit more help."

Shepard let out a strained laugh. "You know nothing. You know nothing about love or friendship. The only friend you ever had -- you shot in the head."

"Nihlus?" Saren loosened his grip on Shepard's throat, letting her down so that her feet touched the ground. Only now he seemed to notice her pistol pointing at his stomach. Even the best shield would not protect him at this short distance. Saren took a step back. "I didn't kill Nihlus, you did."

There was a split second of hesitation before Shepard answered to that accusation with a sly grin, "Is that what Sovereign told you? That's a lie, you shot him."

"No," Saren squeezed out. He seemed to have trouble breathing. His mandibles drew tight against his face.

"Oh yes, you did. Your student, your friend," Shepard said bitingly, stepping closer, her pistol still aimed at him. "You shot him in the head when he had his back turned to you."

"No, never!" Saren let his arm drop and clasped his artificial arm as if he was afraid that it would move on its own.

Shepard looked into Saren's blue glowing eyes. "Sovereign is lying to you. He lied about Nihlus, he lies about you saving anybody."

A loud keening escaped the turian, such an unlikely sound coming from him. "It can't be. My mind is my own..." he mumbled. He froze, staring into the distance.

"Saren," Shepard called out to get his attention, "we can stop him, we can --"

"Commander!" Kaidan interrupted, "The bomb, we have ten seconds."

That pulled Saren out of his trance and with a vicious snarl he lit up in blue glowing biotics and held Shepard immobilized in a field. "You would undo everything I have achieved, and for that, you must die!" he yelled at her.
Shepard eyes were wide, it looked like she couldn't even breathe. The geth retreated, Saren turned to call his platform over and Garrus took his chance. His vision was focused only on the turian holding Shepard trapped in the field and he ran over to them as fast as he could and rammed into Saren with his shoulder. The former Spectre stumbled and the field collapsed. Shepard's arm thrashed forward, hitting him on his mandible. Saren stumbled backwards but stopped his attack and turned to jump up on his floating platform to get away.

"Six seconds!" Kaidan yelled as the Normandy swooped over them with the Mako pull-cables extended. A net with a bar holding it apart had been attached to the cables and Garrus more or less threw Shepard over his shoulder and grabbed hold of the net. At his side he saw the Dynamic Duo, Kaidan and Wrex doing the same, Smith holding Kaidan by the neck of his armor. Tali hung limp from Wrex's arm but the krogan held her securely as the cables pulled the net in.

As soon as the mass effect field had closed behind them, Joker let the Normandy climb through the atmosphere as fast as possible. The impassive voice of the Normandy's VI announced the commanding officer to be back on board. The Hangar door closed, just as a bright light appeared, followed by the low sound of the explosion blowing a massive hole into the ground.

Shepard fell to the floor, still desperately breathing in. Despite her coughing, she opened the comm and yelled, "Madhav, do you read? Williams? Mako, systems report."

After two excruciating seconds, the comm crackled to life. "Madhav reporting in. We, ouch, shit, we took a bit of a tumble but we're fine. Under the circumstances." He took a short breath and the familiar sound of the Mako's thrusters told them that the little tank was still working. "Requesting pickup and medical assistance, Ma'am."

"You got it, Madhav, stand by," Shepard said, relieve making her voice sound wet. "Joker--"

"Way ahead of you, Commander," Joker said over the ship's comm. "Get your crap out of my hangar bay and take that embarrassing net with you. Mako pickup in fifteen seconds."

Shepard let out a tired laugh and stood up. "Alright." She winced in pain and stumbled. "Kaidan, what kind of fucking biotic effect was that, I feel like death."

Garrus helped her out of the Mako's parking space. A nurse rushed over to scan her while Doctor Chakwas and her nurses were busy treating Tali and Kaidan. The Dynamic Duo and Wrex cleared the hangar for the Mako and lined up the pull cables. As soon as they had left the area, the mass effect field went up to protect the rest of the cargo bay.

Shepard went over to Kaidan, he had blood on his arm and his stomach was bruised but the areas were already glistening with medi-gel and the bleeding had stopped. Kaidan lifted his head to speak but let it fall back with a painful groan.

"Ouch, I guess my stomach muscles don't like that."

The nurse scowled at him. "I told you not to strain those."

"Sorry," Kaidan said and turned to look at Shepard. "I think he hit you with some kind of Stasis or Reave field. I thought only asari were able to do stuff like that but Saren must have made improvements to his biotics."

"It feels like I've been put through a straw cutter. Everything hurts," Shepard said and fell on a stretcher.

The nurse kept scanning her but shook her head. "Apart from superficial scratches and burns, I can
see no injuries. But your muscular system looks like you overdid a workout, there is a high level of lactic acid in your system. I'll give you something for the pain and a high dose of magnesia to work against that."

"Whatever it takes," Shepard groaned, "I need to contact the Council and tell them what we know."

Garrus squeezed her hand, ignoring the nurse fussing over him as best as she could. "The Council won't like this at all."

"It's gonna be really difficult not to hang up on them," Shepard mumbled. She checked her omni-tool and suddenly cursed loudly.

"What?" Garrus asked.

"Did you make a recording of the Sovereign interface when it spoke to us?"

"Of course."

"Check it."

Garrus looked through the files on his omni-tool and selected one to play. There was a glimpse of the red translucent display and then it went dark and fuzzy. "Futuo, it seems to be broken."

"Mine too," Shepard said, "and I bet it's the same for everyone in that room. Must have been some kind of distortion field. Now I can't even proof that Sovereign is a Reaper! All I have are my notes and who will believe that? At least I have Saren's speech recorded, the Council can listen to their favorite Spectre losing his mind in all its glory." She let her head fall back on the stretcher. "And I have this new vision. Maybe Liara can make sense of it." Shepard tapped the comm once and then a second time with an annoyed scowl. She looked up and addressed the Normandy's VI, "Normandy, locate Liara T'Soni."

The calm voice of the VI answered, "Liara T'Soni is on not on board the Normandy. Dr. T'Soni has left with the Mako on dispatch --"

"What the hell?" Shepard grumbled, sitting up with a wince. "Silly romantic girl," she said quietly.

The hangar doors opened and the cables shot out. They hung slack for a moment and then tensed, pulling the Mako back on board. Dr. Chakwas and her nurses waited anxiously for the mass effect field to drop while the hangar door closed again. The Mako door opened and the salarian team slowly climbed out, exhaustion edged deeply into their faces.

Next Omar came out, her giant rocket launcher slung over her shoulder, followed by Carlsson. Their armor showed a lot of wear and tear but otherwise they seemed to be not seriously injured. Carlsson helped Dr. Chakwas up the ramp into the Mako. Shepard scowled and made her way over to the Mako with a limp. Garrus supported her with his arm, worried about how severely Ashley was injured if she had not come out by now.

As they came to the ramp, a nurse came back down, a stretcher floating behind her. Liara followed the stretcher, her eyes never leaving the woman on top of it. Ashley was covered by a blanket, only her face, unnaturally pale, was visible. But the mass effect field over her lower left leg indicated that something bad had happened to it. Dr. Chakwas followed them down, looking at readouts on her omni-tool.

"How does it look, Dr. Chakwas?" Shepard asked.
"Severe trauma on her lower leg. I can treat the worst of it but she needs to see a specialist on the Citadel," Dr. Chakwas said. "There's only so much I can do in the Normandy's med-bay. If we can't get her to the Citadel on time, she might lose the leg."

"We're going back to the Citadel right away," Shepard promised with a rough voice. She stepped up to the stretcher and took Ashley's hand. "Hang in there, Chief."

"Of course, Skipper," Ashley said, her speech slightly slurred by the painkillers. "Don't worry, I won't leave you alone with all these amateurs, Commander."

"You better not, Chief," Shepard said and forced a grin. She let Ashley's hand go and the stretcher floated to the elevator. Liara followed it, her hand hovering over Ashley as if she was afraid to touch her. Shepard watched, her face hard like a mask.

"Liara," Shepard called after her, "I need to see you at the debriefing."

Liara stopped still, her hand hovering in the air. As the stretcher moved on, her hand began to glow in blue biotics, faint tendrils extending from it after the stretcher. "But... Commander..." she said, looking from Ashley to Shepard and back.

"I know, Liara," Shepard said warmly, walking over to her and putting her hand on her arm to calm her. The blue biotic glow shimmered and died down as Liara focused on Shepard's face. "I won't keep you long but I need your help with this new vision from the beacon."

"Another prothean beacon?" Liara asked, suddenly very interested. "Yes I will... but..." she looked to the stretcher disappearing in the elevator and then back at Shepard, torn between her love for a human woman and her love for prothean history.

"Ashley is in good hands and you can go back to her right after the debriefing," Shepard said reassuringly. "Get yourself cleaned up and come to the comm room in ten minutes."

"Yes, Commander, I will be there." Liara nodded and hurried over to the elevator to ride up with Ashley.

Shepard walked back to the lockers and took off her armor. The team was unusually quiet, each lost in their own thoughts of what they had seen on the planet. Further down the side, the salarians had set up camp, using a spare locker to clean their armor and a workbench to inspect their equipment. Only a few members were left of the salarian team but those at least looked fairly healthy, apart from some scrapes and burns.

After setting her locker on the cleaning cycle, Shepard walked over to the salarians and spoke to Major Kirrahe. Garrus watched her as he prepared his own armor for cleaning. He could see that she was still in pain, not only from the biotic attack. Her underarmor showed enough rips and burns to send her to the med-bay but he knew that probably would not happen. He stuffed two extra packs of medi-gel into the pocket of his underarmor, planning to use them on her later on. She would forget about it and just fall asleep, making the injuries worse.

He watched her hopple over to the elevator and hurried to catch up with her. She just stared ahead as the elevator doors closed, hardly acknowledging his presence.

"Hey," Garrus said quietly, "have you got a minute?"

"Not really, sorry, I have to send a quick report to the Council and schedule a conference with them and I --."
"Hey, Sunshine," Garrus called out, grabbing her hands that were about to rip out her hair. "Let's take a breather, just a few minutes. You need a break."

Shepard stared at him with a streak of mania in her eyes. "I can't, I have to --"

"You need to clean up and change and I'm gonna help you with your injuries and then you can contact the Council," Garrus said, trying to put conviction into his voice without sounding like he was trying to order her to do something. "Ten more minutes is not going to make a difference for them."

Shepard kept looking at him, her eyes flicking around. Her hands were twitching, probably trying to rake through her hair again but Garrus kept holding them and brought them up to his mouthplates. He kissed her knuckles as best as he could and she visibly deflated. A careful smile appeared on her face and the manic expression faded.

"Okay, okay, you got me," she whispered and there was a dip in her voice that made it sound like she had just stopped crying. "A breather, I can take a breather." She leaned forward and kissed his mandible. "Thank you, my Angel."

"Anytime, Sunshine," Garrus whispered, "I'm here for you whenever you need me."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Ashley lives! I have plans for her.

Now, my friends, I'm afraid the next chapter won't be here until mid-December. I'm writing a novel for NaNoWriMo again and that will take up all the words I have in me. If possible, I will squeeze out a little thing for you but I can't promise.
"We are glad that you were able to destroy the breeding facility," Councilor Sparatus said, his subharmonics neutrally under tight control. "Nevertheless it is unfortunate that you were unable to arrest Saren. You will of course have to continue your search for him after you have been to the Citadel."

Shepard nodded, her features just as under control as the Councillors subharmonics. "We will find him, Dr. T'Soni is confident that she can infer his destination near the Mu relay from the vision she has seen in my head." A scowl appeared on her forehead. "But I want to emphasize once again that the threat from Sovereign is much bigger than anything we may have to expect from Saren and his geth."

The asari councilor threw a look to the side, outside the range of the wavering holographic projection. Garrus noted that she was not in the same room as Sparatus and Valern, who appeared in their projection together. But someone was definitely in the room with Councilor Tevos and she kept looking at them when she thought nobody noticed it.

The salarian councilor Valern sniffed through his nose, a typical salarian gesture that implied disbelief. "As impressive as your description of your conversation with the VI from Saren's ship was —"

"It was not a VI," Garrus interrupted. Shepard turned away from the camera to hide her facial expressions. She was rolling her eyes, having used up all diplomatic patience she had. They had been at this point before in the conversation and they kept running into the same wall. The Councilors were not willing to believe that Sovereign was a Reaper and that he was the vanguard of an impending invasion by the Reapers.

Without a recording from the conversation with Sovereign, they just didn't believe anything they said.

Shepard turned back to the camera with a deep breath, raising her head and then catching herself. She adjusted her body language to appear stronger and more determined by lowering her head.

"Councilors," she said, the strain of barely controlled anger in her voice. "I don't understand why you refuse to believe our account of the conversation. You have a retelling of the conversation from six people who all tell you the same things."
"Commander Shepard," Councilor Tevos said in a soft voice. "You have just explained to us how much influence the indoctrination by the geth ship has on organic minds – "

"– it's not a geth ship!" Shepard yelled out in exasperation, "it's a Reaper."

"That is what your mind is telling you," the asari councilor calmly continued, "but how can you and further on how can we believe anything from you if you have been subjected to that indoctrination influence?"

Shepard looked like she was about to explode and Garrus stepped a bit closer to her to brush his hand against her back. He felt the tension in her back muscles and tried to lay all the calm he could muster into his touch.

"If that is your assessment," Shepard pressed out between clenched teeth, "then I don't see why we're even talking right now."

"We expect you to undergo extensive neural and psychological evaluations by the leading experts on the Citadel," Councilor Sparatus said and Garrus almost growled at the smug undertone in his subharmonics.

"Of course," Shepard said, standing at parade rest, her eyes almost closed. "Then I suggest we'll continue our conversation after those evaluations."

"That seems to be wise," Sparatus said. "While you are in range of the comm buoy, I would like to speak to Opione Vakarian in private, for a report to the turian Hierarchy."

"Then I'll leave you the comm room for that, I can give my report to the Alliance from the captain's cabin." She gave a curt nod and turned on her heels to leave. The asari councilor bowed shortly and turned off her channel, her eyes flicking to the unseen person in her room before the display shut off.

Sparatus exchanged pleasantries with the salarian councilor and waited until he had left the room to turn back to the camera. "Opione Vakarian, do you have anything to add to or change about your report?"

"Everything I have said is as accurate as the report I have sent you. Everything we have reported is the truth." He kept his speech as formulaic and militaristic as possible and underlined his it with subharmonics of conviction.

"You do understand of course that we can't trust anything you said unless you have definite proof. Everything you think you saw could be an illusion by the indoctrination."

"That's not how the indoctrination works, it makes people into slaves by suppressing their free will, not by supplying illusions," Garrus said, desperately controlling his subharmonics to not reveal how insulted he felt by the councilor.

"Your personal account aside, you can hardly call yourself an expert on the indoctrination," Sparatus said, his subharmonics scolding him. "We have to do extensive research to learn how the indoctrination works. Your account, while interesting, is not enough for a scientific evaluation."

Garrus pressed his mandibles tight to his face stop himself from growling. "Right now it's all we have and I can assure you that the threat from Saren is very real. No matter what you think of the Reapers –"

An angry trill interrupted him, so much sounding like an order that he instinctively shut his mouth. Even over the limited sound range of the galactic comm system, some subharmonic sounds were just
"Ingrained in any good turian.

"— turning to mythical creatures that want to destroy the galaxy is not helpful for the cause right now," Sparatus said.

"Oh, when would it be convenient then?" Garrus spat out, not bothering to hide his anger. He wasn't that good of a turian.

"Watch your tone, Optione Vakarian," Sparatus snarled, "don't let the lax behaviour of the humans influence in such a way that —"

"This has nothing to do with the humans, you are avoiding the real threat and —"

"I expect your report on my desk right away," Sparatus said with another scolding trill and cut off the comm channel.

Garrus threw his head back and stretched his neck with a sigh.

A snickering laughter came over the comm system. "Wow, I thought only Shepard had such bad conversations with the brass," Joker said. "Then again, it's usually her who hangs up, not the other way around."

"Yeah, that could have gone better," Garrus said with another sigh, "I wonder what besides a gun to the face can possibly convince these bureaucrats?"

"Don't ask me, I was never good with talking to the higher-ups."

Knowing that Joker wouldn't understand it, Garrus let out a subharmonic curse that involved a lot of bodily harm he wished upon the turian councillor.

"Cut it out you crazy raptor, I'm getting weird static here over the comm," Joker called out.

"Looks like your comm system needs an adjustment for lower frequencies," Garrus said and turned to leave. But Joker called him back.

"Not so fast, you have another call."

Garrus let out another curse and turned back to the console. "And who wants to ruin my day now?"

The instant he said the words, the hologram flickered to life and displayed Nihlus. "Now is that the way to talk to your official contact to the turian Hierarchy?"

Garrus hung his head low. "Thanks for the warning, Joker."

"You know me, always working on better communications all around." Joker let another giggle slip out and cut the comm.

"Sounds like a nice guy," Nihlus said, "maybe I should visit him some time."

"Oh stop it, Nihlus," Garrus growled, "he just barely warmed up to me, don't ruin his opinions of turians."

"We really have to talk about the lack of respect you learned on that human ship," Nihlus said, as serious as he could. "Maybe your father would be interested in hearing —"

"— I'm going to kill you," Garrus snarled. He adjusted the holographic display so that he could sit
down in one of the chairs and talk to Nihlus a bit more relaxed.

Nihlus chuckled and sprawled out on his own chair, his long legs hanging over the side of a comfortable looking cushion.

Garrus scooted around on the chair until he found a comfortable way to spread out his legs without getting his spurs pinched. He looked back to the holographic presentation of Nihlus, who looked like a small ghost, hovering over the comm console.

"Did you get your office furniture upgraded?" Garrus asked.

"Oh no, this isn't my office, this is the living room of Feln'dra, an apprentice of Shi'al. She..." Nihlus closed his eyes for a moment and sang out an appreciative and downright lewd trill, "she is a quick learner." He continued his lewd subharmonics that made Garrus' neck run hot. "Maybe I should introduce Leo to her, the three of us would be a great team, we could –"

"Spirits, spare me the details, please," Garrus said, hiding his face in his hand.

"Aww, don't be so shy, Palaven boy, I could tell you things... what Leo can do with that mouth of his..."

"Nihlus, please!"

"Has Shepard ever given you a blowjob?"

Garrus let out an embarrassing squeak before he caught himself. "Really, Nihlus? Really?"

Nihlus grinned widely, his mandibles quivering. "Hey, the galaxy is full of wonders and human mouths and their obsession of using them on everything is certainly one of them, let me tell you..."

"Please don't," Garrus said, humming in discomfort. But one corner of his mind couldn't help wondering why a blowjob had never come up between Shepard and him. She was quite content in kissing him everywhere, even on his penis but it had never been like the kind of things he had seen in porn-vids.

"But you know what a blowjob is, yes?"

Garrus sighed with an annoyed undertone, "Yes, I have watched porn, you know?"

"The things humans can do with their tongues and their mouths... I'm telling you, Garrus, if the humans on Shanxi had done to the turians what Leo did -- we would have surrendered with our mandibles spread wide and singing in sexual bliss."

"Can we please change the subject now?" He waited for Nihlus to acknowledge his request with a short trill and turned to the notes on his omni-tool. "Have you read Shepard's and my report?"

"Yes, I have, why do you think I'd rather talk about blowjobs?" Nihlus said, his subharmonics dropping to a serious hum. "This indoctrination sounds terrifying."

"There's something else that we didn't put into the report," Garrus said quietly.

Nihlus turned to the display with a questioning trill.

"When Saren had Shepard by the throat, she said that he had shot you in the head and he thought that Shepard had shot you."
"What?" Nihlus leaned forward with an angry snarl. "I remember quite well that it was him who held the gun and said that he had everything under control before he shot me, that bastard."

"He thinks Shepard did it."

"Shepard wasn't even there, she came much later to the platform."

Garrus made a calming trill before he said, "We think that somehow, Sovereign has implanted that idea into his mind and he looked genuinely angry about her having shot you."

"Futuo, now I actually feel sorry for that asshole," Nihlus spat out and his subharmonics wavered between empathy and anger. "Does he know that his attempt on my life wasn't successful?"

"No, Shepard didn't mention that, she concentrated on making him realize that his mind is compromised already but we ran out of time." Garrus let out a frustrated hum, "Saren thinks he's doing the right thing, he thinks the galaxy is doomed when the Reapers attack and I think he is trying to form a collaboration."

"A collaboration with the Reapers?"

Garrus nodded. "That's what it sounds like."

"Did you mention that to the Councilors?" Nihlus asked, one mandible tipping upwards.

Garrus let out a snort. "The Councilors don't even believe in the existence of the Reapers, Saren seeking a collaboration with them would only confirm them in dismissing him as plain crazy. He's too dangerous to just be called crazy."

A message ping on his omni-tool from Shepard distracted him for a moment; she asked if she could join in the conversation. "Can Shepard come and join us or do we have some secret Hierarchy things to discuss first?"

"What secrets are worth keeping during a galactic threat?" Nihlus asked, uncharacteristically gloomy. He turned away from the camera and was quietly staring at nothing, his subharmonics almost too quiet to be picked up by the comm. But Garrus could sense the sadness he was trying to hide.

"I'll call you right back," Nihlus said and turned off the transmission.

Garrus sent out a ping to Shepard and a short time later, the door opened to let her in. She wore simple fatigues and looked like she had actually gotten some sleep recently. The long way back to the Citadel from Virmire was at least good for something. They were now in orbit around an unpopulated planet to vent the Normandy's systems. The star in this system was a weak red dwarf and only a small mining colony populated one of the planets close to it but at least they had a comm buoy that they could use.

She sauntered over to Garrus' chair and leaned down to place a soft kiss on his mandible. "How are you doing, Angel?"

"Annoyed seems to hit it best," Garrus grumbled, taking in her lovely scent.

"Sparatus didn't believe you either?"

Garrus leaned back to stretch his shoulder muscles and was surprised when Shepard took that as an invitation to sit on his lap. She put an arm on his cowl but remained upright. Garrus placed a hand on the small of her back, softly stroking with his thumb.
“Sparatus thinks we all just saw illusions,” Garrus said, “we are all just indoctrinated.”

“How can he believe we are indoctrinated if none of it was real?”

“Have I mentioned how much I hated the bureaucracy back in C-Sec and how much talking to the Councillors reminds of that?”

“Once or twice,” Shepard said with a chuckle.

“And here I thought Spectre authority would circumvent all that,” Garrus sighed.

“Well, Spectre authority is not the get-out-of-jail-card, as some people like to believe,” Shepard said, stroking over his mandible with a soft finger.

“Tell me about it,” Nihlus said, as he reappeared in the holographic display. “But at least it can open a comm channel without too much fanfare.” He looked them over, his mandibles quivering slightly. His dark mood seemed to have disappeared. “I must say, I was gone long enough, I had hoped for a bit more action by now.”

Shepard laughed openly and leaned forward to lick slowly over Garrus' mandible. “Like this?” she said with a look towards Nihlus.

The red turian swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes, that looks promising.” He winked towards Garrus. “Remember what I told you about humans and how they like to use their mouths.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow and threw Garrus a questioning look. He was saved from answering her nonverbal question by the appearance of another person next to Nihlus. It was Dania Va'sida from ANIS, looking not quite as angry as the last time Garrus had seen her.

The dark-blue asari sat down next to Nihlus at something that looked like a desk. Nihlus had apparently left the apprentice's apartment and was now in a room that looked like a home office.

"Dania and I have been working on finding out more about the part the asari play in this game," Nihlus said and displayed a few lists on the big terminal screen.

Dania underlined a few names on the list. "What you see here is the traditional power structure of asari society. We believe that every asari in the community has a say in the decisions of the councils. But in reality," Dania threw a look to Shepard, "a handful of powerful Matriarchs dominate the political process. What ever subject they put their political weight behind, it will usually get decided in their favor."

"Matriarch Benezia was one of them?" Shepard asked.

"Oh yes, she was very influential. She was an active follower of the Athame Doctrine, the old religion of the goddess Athame. Her followers have seen a rise in popularity recently."

"So there is a religious shift going on on Thessia?" Garrus wondered, still softly stroking Shepard's back.

"It's not just on Thessia," Dania said while Nihlus nodded beside her. "Asari always look towards Thessia and the leading matriarchs for guidance, no matter where in the galaxy they are. If they have a shift towards the old traditions, it causes a shift for almost all asari."

"I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with the Athame Doctrine,” Shepard said. “Could you give me a rundown?”
Dania nodded and scooted closer to the camera. Nihlus leaned back and looked at his omni-tool while she pulled up a few images on the feed.

“When you hear an asari say 'by the goddess', that refers to Athame.” She pointed at an image of a figure that didn’t look asari at all. “Athame came from the heavens to enlighten the asari. Together with her two helpers Janiri and Lucen, she gave us the knowledge of science, of math, medicine and agriculture. There is also a bit in the old Athame Codex that says that she gave us the gift of biotics.”

“That sounds like a normal religion, lots of cultures have something like that,” Shepard said with a shrug. “Some god or goddess forming the world and the creatures living in it. Making the one species that has invented the religion the head of the food-chain on the planet.”

Garrus nodded. “I think only the salarians don't have a religion like that.”

Dania opened her mouth but she didn't say anything. Garrus was about to check if the feed had broken when she finally started talking quietly. “There is sect of fundamentalists of the Athame Doctrine that take things a bit further. They believe that Athame gave the asari these gifts to make them —” she hesitated, wringing her hands before she hid them under the table. “— they think it makes the asari superior. They believe that the asari are meant to lead the other races in the galaxy and to cleanse them if necessary.” Her hands came back on the desk, clenched in fists and slightly glowing. Nihlus put a hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

Shepard had sat up on Garrus’ lap and his hand on her back stilled.

“Cleanse? How?” Shepard asked, her brows furrowed.

Dania was visibly upset, clenching her glowing fists. The holographic feed didn't quite represent the blue of her biotics correctly but Garrus could just imagine how she was bathing everything around her in blue light. The asari closed her eyes and took a few breaths. The glow on her hands died down and she opened her eyes to speak again.

“This sect, that we assume was lead by Matriarch Benezia among others, believes that they have to cleanse the galaxy of wrong influences or inferior species. They see them themselves as the leading class that has to teach the lesser species the right way. Species that don't follow or don't agree... need to be forced or eradicated.”

Shepard looked like she had just swallowed a Glershing bug. “Yeah, that pretty much hits all the marks for delusions of grandeur. Why haven't I ever heard of those fundamentalists before?”

Nihlus made a dismissive trill. “Most asari consider them to be kind of silly, I think. Sort of stuck in the past, like, how do you humans say, green-necks?”

“You mean rednecks?” Shepard had to laugh, “well, asari already have kind of a mullet, it could work.” She giggled a little while Garrus checked his omni-tool for a translation for mullet. “I'll explain later, Angel, it's actually not that funny,” she said and turned his attention back to the turian and asari on the holographic display. “We'll be leaving the range of this comm buoy soon so let's hurry up. We have this group of fundamentals who want to cleanse the galaxy of inferior species. What Saren said sounded a bit different but it could play right into that but how does he, a turian, fit into this?”

"We were wondering about that too," Nihlus said. "All evidence seems to suggest that an asari would have been much easier to convince as they are more susceptible to the indoctrination."

"We don't know how long Saren has been under that influence, it could have been years,” Shepard
Garrus recalled the hero-stories about the Spectres he had loved to read as a child. "After the war on Shanxi, there was something at Temple Palaven. There has never been a clear report what exactly happened there but there was an explosion and it collapsed and the site has been closed to the public ever since. The reports just vaguely said that Saren saved Palaven from a catastrophe that day. If it involved an artifact, they didn't mention it of course but he could have found something and took it with him."

Shepard opened the interface on her omni-tool and scrolled through a list of entries. She had sucked in part of her lower lip as she concentrated on the list, her face showing a kind of relaxed tension. Garrus recognized that expression from back in the day when they had poured over the data from the council network. It seemed so long ago, when it was just their first ANIS investigation together and the sake of the galaxy had not been sitting on their shoulders.

"Zilch, nada," she mumbled.

"What?" both turians said with a confused thrill.

"Nothing," Shepard mumbled. When she noticed the confused silence from the aliens, she looked up. "Sorry, it actually means 'nothing', that expression," she said with an apologetic smile. "What I meant was that I can find nothing on Temple Palaven and what Saren did there."

Nihlus chuckled a little. "Don't underestimate the thoroughness of the Turian Hierarchy in classifying all the things. I'm surprised they actually released anything to the news corps back then but I guess they had to explain somehow why the Temple was gone."

"That was when, 25 years ago?" Garrus wondered.

"26 if I remember correctly," Nihlus said.

"But that wasn't Sovereign back then," Shepard said.

"No," Nihlus shook his head in a strangely human expression. "He showed me the ship just a while ago."

Dania had been quiet during the exchange, looking through information on her terminal.

"Dania, spill," Shepard said.

The asari squirmed in her seat, opening and closing her mouth a few times. Finally, she closed the interface on her arm and faced the camera. "If we dig deep into old conspiracy theories, she said with an expression that made her disgust for those theories quite clear, "they say that there are artifacts hidden around the galaxy from ancient times. On Palaven, on Sur'Kesh and even on Thessia.""

"But I bet nobody has ever seen those artifacts," Shepard mused.

"No and frankly, I thought it was just silly stories for gullible idiots," Dania said with a deep sigh.

Garrus felt a shudder crawl up his neck. "If Saren has found an artifact at the temple or even before, and kept it around – he could have been under the influence for over 25 years. Would he even know what his mind feels like without it?"

"It may have changed his whole personality," Shepard said quietly, throwing a look towards Nihlus.
"Hey, I always said there was a nice turian hidden under his asshole exterior," Nihlus said with a sarcastic trill. But he turned his face away from the camera, his mandibles pressed tight against his face. Even over the limited audio range of the galactic comm system, Garrus could hear the faint tone of sadness that sang from his chest.

"We need to find a way to protect ourselves from this influence," Shepard said quietly, "something like an implant or a shield."

"I don't know if people would agree to wear implants," Garrus wondered.

"You think that would be a problem?" Shepard called out in surprise.

Nihlus chuckled. "You won't have problems with humans in that way, humans love using implants. They would substitute half of their major body parts if it would make life more convenient."

"We wouldn't be where we are now if it weren't for implants," Shepard said. "Myself, I'm still waiting for my personal shield implant, I'd put that in in heartbeat. I might even give up the hair control implant for that..." she hesitated for a second, "or maybe not, what a hassle that would be." She ruffled through her short hair and Garrus wondered how it would feel to have hair growing longer and longer on your head. It was such a strange concept.

Dania shook her head. "Humans are really strange sometimes."

"Says the woman who burns the carpet by flicking her fingers," Shepard said with a wide grin.

"It's a gift!" Dania said, "quite literally according to the Athame believers."

The comm system gave a warning about the range of the comm buoy they were using. The Normandy was on the way to the next relay to return to the Citadel.

"We are going to keep investigating that Athame cult from here," Nihlus said quickly, "and I gave everything you scanned and reported on the indoctrination to our research team. Hopefully by the time you are back here, we know a bit more."

Shepard stood up and stepped closer to the translucent projection. "Prepare the council that we will have to take some serious action against Saren, as soon as we know where around the Mu-relay he is. We need a fleet at the least."

Nihlus hissed out subtones of suppressed anger. "I'll try my best but I'm not exactly their favorite Spectre."

Garrus answered in an equal hiss, "Their favorite Spectre threatens to hand over the galaxy to the Reapers right now. They should reevaluate their priorities."

"I'll make sure to mention that," Nihlus said with a sarcastical growl.

"We'll see you in four days," Shepard said as the VI gave a final warning of leaving the comm buoy range and the connection closed.

Shepard turned back to Garrus and took his hand to pull him out of his chair. She kept his hand in his and only dropped it when they reached the door and left the comm room. She turned to him with a tired smile. "My cabin for a nightcap? I have beer, turian Ecellent Ale or something like that."

Garrus stopped still, his mandibles hanging down. "You have Excelsum Ale?"
Shepard nodded, grinning happily at his surprise. "I do, found it in that mercenary nest a while back. Turian mercenaries seem to have good taste in beer."

"You got yourself a date!"

"Had I known that turians are so easily impressed with Ale –"

"What, you would have offered Saren one?"

Shepard snickered. "I doubt that would have swayed him, I was thinking I could have caught me a turian much earlier."

They had reached the captain's cabin and as the door closed behind them, Garrus pulled her in his arms and pressed his forehead against hers. A wave of happiness flowed through him as his mating scent released. "So, you were looking for just any turian?"

Shepard laughed out and pressed a kiss on his mouthplates. "No, only this one. I'm so glad that I found you."

"Me too," Garrus whispered.

Shepard kissed him again and he opened his mouth to invite her tongue in. The soft tip found his own flexible one and he shuddered as she brushed along his tongue. With a sigh she pulled back and smirked at him.

"What were you talking about with Nihlus before I came in? Something about how much humans like to use their mouths?"

Garrus stretched his neck in embarrassment. "Well, we may have been talking about, ahem, blowjobs?"

Shepard took a step back and placed her hands on her hips. "Really? You've been using the extremely expensive galactic comm system to talk about blowjobs?"

"A little?"

Shepard shook her head but she smiled. "Let's just hope that nobody ever finds the recording of that conversation."

Garrus let out an annoyed trill. "Futuo, I forgot about that."

Shepard raised an eyebrow as she looked at him from under her eyelashes. "Yeah, the galactic comm system is not the best idea for sex chat and love poems across the galaxy. Better remember that if we ever call each other."

Garrus felt a pang of fear, thinking about how they could one day be apart. He didn't want to ever leave her side.

Shepard handed him the bottle of turian ale and opened a bottle of a human beer for herself. She sat down on her bed and leaned back against the wall. Garrus laid down next to her, resting on his cowl and took a sip of his beer. He leaned his head back and savored how the cold liquid ran down his throat.

Memories rose up of how he had tasted his first ale in the garden behind the house. He had just come back from the first weeks in basic and his report in shooting had not been to his father's liking. He
had stolen a bottle of his best beer to spite him and hid in the garden under the old, silver leafed Mernina tree to drink it. He remembered how he didn't like the bitterness at first but by the last sip he had decided that he would only drink this beer from now on. That proved to be difficult to keep up as the cheap bars around the Second Year Camp only stocked the cheaper beers.

Jane took a sip of her beer and grimaced. "Human mercenaries fail in beer taste." She took another sip. "Well, I had worse." She turned to Garrus. "So, you want to know about blowjobs."

Garrus choked on his beer and wiped his mouthplates. "I know what a blowjob is, I have seen porn."

"Porn, the galaxy-wide phenomenon," she said.

"I was just wondering why you never... I mean you don't have to but you do like using your mouth and I was just wondering..." Garrus stopped his babbling before he embarrassed himself even more.

"Hey, it's okay, Angel," she said, leaning over and placing a hand on his cowl. "You know, we never had this talk about what we like or dislike."

Garrus pulled her in his arms and let his mandibles comb through her hair. "We seemed to get along just fine."

She looked up to him, her breath flowing over his mandibles. "Still, let's talk about this, why not? The reason why I didn't bring up a blowjob with you --" Jane sighed and turned away, " -- frankly I think I'm not very good at it."

He looked at her and waited until she had turned to face him. "Why do you think that?"

"I have a strong gag reflex, I can't take it deep or I'll start gagging and feeling sick."

"Well," Garrus said, "it's not like I have much to compare to."

"Yeah, great, that's just the kind of encouragement a girl wants to hear," Jane snorted out.

"No! Sorry, that came out wrong. I mean, you don't have to do it if you don't feel comfortable but if you ever... I'm sure I would enjoy whatever you do." He desperately searched for words to express what he wanted to say but he could only sing out in subharmonics that her comfort was the most important thing for him.

Jane put her beer to the side and crawled up to him until she straddled him. She smiled and let her fingers play softly over the fabric of his underarmor. "So you'd like a blowjob," she said, grinning at him, "what else do you like? Or what do you not like, what about anal, things in your butt? That's something that I don't like at all."

Garrus took a breath and pushed aside any trill of embarrassment that wanted to leave his chest. "I don't mind it, if it isn't too large."

"If turian men have sex, do they...?"

"Anal sex? Yes, that is actually not that different from how humans... you know..." Garrus noticed how Jane had opened his underarmor and her fingers were playing on the soft skin between his plates. He stretched out and purred.

"Not that different, hmm?" Jane murmured, her voice husky. "What else?"

"Well, there's also the sheath." Garrus pointed towards his crotch, where his penis was already
reacting to the gentle ministrations of Jane's hands.

She scooted lower to look closely at his crotch. "Oh, you mean the inside here is also a place where I could —" she leaned down and looked closer at his groin plates. The slit was already slightly open, glistening from the arousal liquid he was producing. Jane carefully felt around the slit, her finger feeling wet somehow and without warning she slipped her finger inside, pressing down towards his hidden testicles. Garrus went from slightly aroused to ready to explode in the blink of an eye.

"Spirits, Shepard!" he cried out, his talons ripping the sheets as his fists clenched.

She pulled away with a grin, watching his penis slipping out of his slit. "We'll get to that in a minute. Anything else? Anything you don't like?" Her finger, wet from his own liquid kept stroking around his slit.

Garrus needed a moment to collect his thoughts, searching his mind to find something to say. "I don't like being drugged, not in control. I can't think of anything else, everything you do is... just wonderful." Her fingers were so distracting.

Shepard crawled back up and splayed herself out on his chest. She placed a few kisses along his cowl. "So it looks like we could add some toys here and there," she said between kisses.

"And you?" Garrus asked, softly stroking over her back. "You said you don't like things anally, anything else you don't like?"

"I'm the same with drugs, I don't mind a light buzz but I want to be aware of what is going on." She moved to the side and let her hand stroke along his waist, causing him to shiver in delight. "I know the new implant drugs are all the rage on the Citadel, they're supposed to enrich the senses and all that, but I don't like stuff like that."

"Implant drugs?"

"Yeah, you know, humans and implants? We are kind of crazy with that."

"I guess..." Garrus lost his train of thought when Jane began licking along the inside of his cowl.

"I have to say," she mumbled between licks, "I like pretty much everything you have been doing so far." She thought for a moment and then said, "I don't like being dominated, like in roleplay, you know?"

"I kind of liked it when you were dominant back then," Garrus purred into her neck, loving the joyous shudder that caused in her.

"When you explained the turian body language to me? Yeah, but that's about the extent of how I like playing with that. Some people make it into a role play with a collar and one being called slave and the other master or mistress – I'm not into that."

Garrus thought about that for a minute. The idea of Jane ordering him to be her sex slave and demanding obedience in a playful setting had a certain appeal for him. "I wouldn't mind playing your slave," he finally said, carefully gauging her reaction. She looked surprised but smiled.

"Really? Now that is intriguing." She rolled off him and took his hand to pull him up. "For now, let's focus on that blowjob you'd like. Let's get into the shower, I prefer you washed clean for that."

Garrus almost fell over his own feet as he scrambled to follow Jane, his spurs tangled in the blankets.
He hurried to get rid of his clothing, and stepped into the shower where Jane was already waiting for him, naked and wet. The water felt only lukewarm to him but he didn’t mind it. She put some soap on a washcloth and washed him, the firm pressure of her rubbing already enough to make him even harder.

She rinsed the suds off him and made him lean against the shower wall. Smiling at him, she slowly knelt down and pressed her hands down on either side of his slit, softly rubbing in circles. Garrus sighed when he saw her kissing along the side of his slit. When she moved over to his shaft, he had to close his eyes. Her kisses were soft and cold and each one made him shudder in anticipation.

Suddenly she stopped kissing him and he opened his eyes to look at her. When her eyes caught his, she took his tip in her mouth.

*Hot, soft, flexible.*

He groaned when her tongue circled around his tip. It felt nice, really nice, but he wondered if maybe Jane truly wasn’t very good at it. It wasn’t the mindblowing experience that Nihlus had promised.

Then she sucked and his world exploded.

His subharmonics dipped into the deep primal registers as his mind forgot about everything but her and whatever she was doing to him. He forgot to breathe until pure survival instinct made him suck in air, causing his gasp to mix with a subharmonic growl that felt like it came from a distant, wild past.

She sucked on his tip, her tongue playing with the underside of his penis and her hand was covering the rest of it, pumping with the same rhythm as her head bobbed up and down. Her other fingers were somewhere under his groin plates and he didn’t even know how describe the feeling of all that.

*Mandibles spread wide and singing in sexual bliss, Nihlus was so right.*

In an almost embarrassingly short time, his knees began to shake and everything around him fell away and his orgasm washed over him, white, hot and fast and he groaned loudly with both his voices as he came. He felt her mouth move away and her hands softly stroking him out. His ejaculate was dripping on the floor of the shower and she took a washcloth to softly wipe him clean.

When he looked down at her she smiled at him. Some of his seed was dripping from her lip and her tongue slipped out to lick it away. Garrus had never seen anything so sexy.

"Spirits, that was incredible," Garrus huffed when he found his voice again. Jane stood up and he pulled her close to him. "You were incredible," he whispered into her neck.

"Well, as you said, you didn't have a lot to compare it to," she said with a giggle, her lips caressing the soft skin on his neck.

"Oh shut it, Sunshine!" Garrus scoffed, "you know that you blew my mind from here to Palaven just now."

Jane laughed quietly. "Well, maybe I'm not so bad at it after all."

"If you were any better, you would probably kill me."

"Weapon grade blowjobs, very dangerous," she mumbled between kisses along his neck.

"Illegal in most of council space," he whispered and licked along the curve of her collarbone that he
loved so much.

She sighed, letting her head fall back to make it easier for him to access her neck. The water had turned off after the usual time and her skin became prickly. Garrus watched in fascination as every single hair on her skin seemed to stand up. He had never realized that there were so many tiny hairs all over her skin.

"What are you doing?" he asked, lightly feeling over the little prickles with his fingertips.

"Huh?" she said, her voice low and throaty.

"Your skin..."

"Oh that, it's called goosebumps." Jane looked down on her arms, where the prickles were the strongest. "It's an involuntary reaction, a remnant of the times when humans still had fur and puffed it up when they felt cold."

"So you are cold?"

"Yes, from the water on my skin? Doesn't that make you feel cold too?"

Garrus shook his head, "Not much, my higher body temperature probably helps with that." He put his hands on her waist and lifted her up. She giggled and pulled herself up by his neck and placed her legs over his hips. "Let's get you warm." He carried her over to the bed and wrapped her in her warm blanket.

"Now it's my turn," he growled and spread her legs apart, making sure her feet were still covered by the second blanket.

"Oh yeah," Jane breathed out. She stuffed a pillow under her head and looked at him expectantly. Garrus waited till she had put her arms under the blanket again and lifted the blanket in front of him to dive under it.

The rough skin on his fringe held the fabric in place and in front of him her vagina glistened invitingly. He took a deep breath, savoring her scent. He brushed through the hair around it with his talon, circling her entrance, letting the nub of his finger glide over the hood over her clitoris.

Jane sucked in a sharp breath and let her legs fall open even wider. He moved up and his mandibles caressed the skin on her thighs. He let his tongue dip forward, circling her wet opening. He could feel heat emanating from her the longer he stroked around, almost but not quite touching the part he knew she wanted him to. Her breath came in pants and just when he could feel her getting impatient, he took a long, slow lick over her clitoris.

She whimpered, arching her back and Garrus had to hold her hips still so that he wouldn't nip her with his teeth. He kept on stroking, licking up her delicious juices that flowed out of her sheath. Stretching his tongue, he dipped deep into her, stroking upwards against the inside. She cried out in a throaty yell that made him heat up inside. The blankets flew off her, her hands grabbing and pulling at the fabric. He did the same move again, noting her reaction. She whimpered, panted and yelled, her whole body tense and moving erratic as if a current made her twitch. He intensified his ministrations, determined to make her yell loud enough for the whole ship to hear.

Another lick over her clitoris, circling and flicking it and he got his wish. She screamed out, her back arching off the bed and he just kept on licking up her juices.

She whimpered, "Oh Garrus, you... oh gods..."
"Not done," he growled, layering a deep purr into his voice. She gasped and her fingernails were scratching over his fringe. She twitched and pushed against his mouth, whimpering incoherently and occasionally calling out his name. To hear his name said like this, while she writhed in ecstasy, was the most beautiful sound in the world. He kept on licking and purring until she screamed again, the tension rippling through her body.

Finally she moved to the side and Garrus took that as his cue to stop his caress and scooted upwards to lay beside her. His own arousal was quite obvious but he was happy to ignore it when he looked at Jane, sweaty and still panting, smiling at him.

"Gods, Angel, you are the greatest, the master of sex!" she panted, still out of breath and her voice hoarse from screaming.

Garrus couldn't stop his smug grin at that praise. "That's the kind of master I like to be."

She leaned over and pulled his head towards her and kissed him, hard and urgent.

"Love you, Angel."

"I love you too."

Garrus managed to haphazardly pull a blanket over them before they both fell into a deep and satisfied sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Credete for jumping into editing right away even though I never even gave a warning.

Thank you all you wonderful readers for staying with me and this story. Thank you for your Kudos and your comments, you are all the best!

See you in the next year!
"Ashley? Ashley.... Dr. Chakwas, I think.."

Before Shepard could finish her sentence, Dr. Chakwas and Nurse Larrsson pushed passed her and worked on Ashley's still form. Garrus took Shepard by her arms and pulled her backwards, so that the Doctor and her staff had room to work. A minute ago, Ashley had been awake and talking to them. She was obviously in pain but she had been aware until her eyes rolled backwards and her head lolled over to the side.

"What's wrong, doctor?" Garrus asked. After he had seen so many times how resilient humans were, he couldn't believe that someone as strong as Ashley was not getting better.

"She seems to have an allergic reaction," Dr. Chakwas said. "I'll inform you when I know more, please leave now. She is stable for now."

Shepard nodded and turned to the door. Garrus followed her, waiting for the door to close behind him before speaking.

"She's going to make it," he said with as much conviction as he could put into his voice.

"Yes, Ashley is strong," she said and he knew that she was trying to convince herself just as much as him. She took a breath and the Commander Shepard mask slipped back in place. "Let's have our debriefing now, this day needs to end." She typed the call to the debriefing into her omni-tool and they walked silently over to the comm room.

It only took a few minutes for the team to gather in the comm room. He looked around, all the marines were there, standing straight with their hands behind their backs. Kaidan leaned against the wall, looking pale. Tali and Wrex had sat down next to each other and looked at something on Tali's omni-tool. Garrus took a seat next to Tali and Liara sat down on a chair next to Wrex. Shepard stepped over to the control panel and gave him a small smile before speaking.

"Looks like we're all here," she said and waited until everyone looked at her. "As you know, we're on our way to the Citadel to get Ashley to the hospital and also because the Council has asked us to come and report directly."

Someone snorted out and Omar said, "Do they finally believe us now?"

"It looks like it but you never know with them," Shepard said with a shrug. "I wanted to give you all an update on where we stand right now and hear what you all think. As you know, I got a new vision from the beacon on Virmire and Liara analyzed it." She gave Liara a short nod. "Would you tell us what you've learned?"

Liara stood up and threw a blurry picture of a planet surface on the screen. "The vision from Eden
Prime, the Cipher and the vision from Virmire are combined now and they point to Ilos as the main hub of prothean knowledge."

"Prothean knowledge hub? What does that mean?" someone asked.

"I think that the visions are a warning and a guide at the same time," Liara said and walked up to the control panel. "The protheans didn't use language in their warnings, they used images and rudimentary emotions. They seem to tap into some primal core of our emotions, something that is common across species."

"Explains why they're so unsettling," Shepard grumbled and pinched the top of her nose.

"Yes, it also raises an interesting question about the similarities between current species and the protheans, who have been extinct for 50,000 years. There must be a common core of similarities, maybe even on a DNA level but..." she shook her head, "I'm sorry, I'm rambling."

Garrus noticed that her hands were shaking. He reminded himself that she had been through a lot in the last few weeks, from her mother being killed to combat involvement to Ashley getting seriously injured. Analyzing the prothean visions probably didn't help in making her feel better.

Shepard placed her hand on Liara's arm to calm her. The asari took a deep breath and straightened her back. "But as effective as these visions are as warnings, they can't provide factual knowledge. The protheans took great care of letting their warnings be heard 50,000 years after their extinction and I assume that they hid more information for future residents of this galaxy. The last vision added images of a place, one that I recognized as Ilos. My assumption is that they have hidden their knowledge about the reapers on Ilos."

"Maybe we could find something there that helps us fighting them, a weakness they have or what their plans are," Shepard said.

"We can't know for sure but it is possible," Liara said with a nod.

Wrex let out a grunt. "So far it doesn't look like the protheans were very successful. They were defeated."

"True," Shepard said, "but it could give us an edge. Maybe we're more resourceful than the protheans."

Wrex chuckled at that, as quietly as a krogan could. "You mean the protheans couldn't foresee the craziness of humans? I don't blame them."

When even krogans think that humans are crazy...

"The problem is that Ilos lies deep in the Terminus," Shepard continued, "deep in geth space. The Normandy could get there under stealth but we need a full fleet for an attack, otherwise we'd lose too many ships before we even got close. And we don't know what we will find on Ilos," she pointed at the blurry image on the screen behind her, "these pictures are over a hundred years old, taken by an asari probe over long distance scanners. Asari historians claim that Ilos was once an active prothean world, densely populated. But at some point it seems to have become deserted, the scanners showed that the buildings on top started to deteriorate even before the extinction of the protheans. What the scanners saw on the last sweep is an empty world of crumbling ruins. But there is one area on the northern continent with some intact buildings and possibly underground structures. This is probably where Saren is headed but we don't know for sure."

Garrus checked over the configurations of the Normandy's scanners with his omni-tool. "If we get
close enough, we could probably find Saren with the scanners, as a biotic turian his organic signature would be pretty unique."

"Especially under all those geth and husks," Oman grumbled, scratching at a bandage over her arm. Garrus was once again reminded that humans had incredible self healing powers. That cut on Omar's arm and the amount of blood she had lost would have killed a turian but humans just tied a piece of cloth around it and kept on running. Ashley would make it too.

"We still don't know what Saren wants there, what does he expect to find?" Shepard turned to the group, indicating with her palms up that she was open for input.

"Another beacon maybe?" Madhav asked.

Liara nodded, "That would make sense but the vision... I'm sorry I cannot say it any better but the vision felt different. It felt like an endpoint, a final direction marker. Whatever there is on Ilos, they built the beacons just for that. It was most important for the protheans, a secret worth keeping safe over thousands of years."

"I want to know where Saren will go next," Shepard grumbled. "I'm tired of always running after him."

Kaidan pushed off the wall and stepped forward, clearing his throat before he spoke. "If we assume that he'll find a weapon there, something so powerful that the protheans hid it for future generations, what would be his next target? The asari homeworld? Or Palaven?"

"Getting the turians on his side, together with his geth army, would give him a terrifying military force," Shepard mused, "while the asari would also give him a great political power."

Garrus shook his head. "No, he will go for the Citadel."

Shepard looked at him, her fingernail scratching at the corner of her lips. "Are you sure?"

"It makes the most sense," Garrus said, slightly confused why this was even a question.

"I guess..." Shepard picked on her lip as she thought, her finger flying over her omni-tool, looking up information. "Okay. Let's go with that for now. Saren goes to Ilos to find something that will let him attack the Citadel? What could that be?"

"We have no way of knowing," Kaidan said.

"The Citadel has to prepare a fleet against the possible attack but we also need to face Saren on Ilos," Shepard said, "I'm not letting the bastard get away from me again." She looked up and addressed her main officers. "I want to know how the Citadel could get attacked and how it can be defended. I need to present this to the Council."

She dismissed everyone and made a small nod towards Garrus to tell him to stay. He waited for the rest of them to leave the room and stayed in his seat. Shepard let himself fall into the chair next to him, leaning back and stretched out her legs. Her hand dangled over the edge of the chair and Garrus took it in his own.

She pulled up a message on her omni-tool and sighed, "Ashley is in bad shape."

"Futuo, did you get a message from Dr. Chakwas?"

"Yes, Dr Chakwas thinks that Ashley has an allergic reaction to that grey geth liquid. Apparently it
contains nano machines that act like viruses. She might lose the lower part of her leg if we don't get her to the hospital on the Citadel fast enough."

"Isn't there a way to filter the nano particles out?"

"On the Citadel, yes, but not here in the medbay, not yet at least. It's one of those things that were postponed in outfitting the ship when we started for the early shakedown run."

Garrus cursed quietly. It was one thing to have a soldier getting injured, it was quite another that you couldn't help them because the medbay wasn't fully equipped. He looked over to Shepard and saw the worry edged in her face with deep lines. "Hey," he said and stroked her hand with his thumb. "It's not your fault that the medbay is not ready."

"But I sent her down there..."

Garrus trilled out in a sharp sound. "Because that's her job? And you are her commanding officer. Do you think she would have wanted to stay on the Normandy and clean guns instead of doing her job?"

"Hell no," Shepard snorted and the deep frown on her forehead softened. "I know you're right." She leaned over and kissed him on his mandible. "Thanks for reminding me."

She got up and stretched her neck. Garrus stood up behind her and used the pads of his talons to massage her shoulders. She made a loud groan that sounded downright sexual.

"Oh god, I'll hire you for this!" She let her head hang forward to give him access to her neck.

"I may have some room in my list of clients tonight," Garrus said with a cheeky trill.

"A list of clients?" Shepard turned her head with a grin. "I wonder who is on that list. Does Kaidan get to enjoy your talents?"

"He would wish."

She giggled a bit but couldn't answer because Joker interrupted them.

"Commander, in about seven hours we'll be in range of an old comm buoy that might still be functional, will you contact the Council then?"

Shepard thought for a moment and sighed. "I'd like to speak to Nihlus and ANIS first, get their input. The Council has our report from Virmire, by their usual pace, they might even have started to read it by now. I will speak to them in person when we're on the Citadel."

"Understood, Commander," Joker said and closed the channel.

Shepard leaned back against his cowl. "I'd like to book an appointment with you for later tonight. After I've written up my reports."

"I see what I can do, Ma'am," Garrus chuckled and added a subharmonic trill that he thought she would understand.

She giggled and copied his trill as best as she could. He grinned quietly, it sounded so endearing to him, slightly out of tune but honest like a child learning to speak.

He left her to work on her reports and decided to start on fixing the Mako to keep his hands occupied. The little tank would need a day at the mechanics but he could at least fix some stuff now.
He stepped into the cargo bay, feeling like he came home. He looked over to Wrex' mat and was surprised to not see him there. In fact, the cargo bay was completely empty. It was startling how much that disturbed him. He had gotten so used to Ashley working on the guns in the corner while he worked on the Mako and Wrex watching them and occasionally telling a joke.

Garrus laid down on the hoverboard and slid under the Mako. The little tank had taken quite a beating during the explosion it dutifully protected the team from. He removed some plating and placed it under the repair printer. He had to do that for many plates and connectors on the underside. The shockwave of the explosion had tipped the Mako over on the side, even behind the ridge. It took the brunt of the impact with its underside and as a result, it looked like it had been punched with a giant fist.

He was so engrossed in his work that he didn't notice Wrex' return until his boots appeared in his vision. The krogan stood next to the Mako and seemed to wait for something. Garrus slowly slid out from under the vehicle and stood up.

"Vakarian," Wrex said and Garrus noted that this was the first time he didn't address him as turian. "I know I threatened your mate. When this mission is over, I offer you my honor in a fight with you."

Garrus stepped in front of him. "Do you trust Shepard, do you trust her judgment?"

"Yes, I do now." There was a deep rumble in Wrex' chest, unlike he had ever heard before. It was almost like a subharmonic sound.

"Then that is enough for me."

Wrex shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "You have the right to call for a fight of honor."

Garrus swallowed a remark about them not being savages and raised his head to appear less threatening. "If Shepard needs her honor defended, she will do that herself. I will defend her with my life when she needs it but I will not take a fight away from her."

Wrex chuckled a bit. "She would kick both our asses."

"Yes, she would," Garrus said and leaned back against the hull of the Mako. "Also, are we not friends?" He waited for Wrex to answer. In the back of his mind he wondered if this was a historic moment, if a turian has ever called a krogan his friend.

Wrex stared at him with one of his red eyes, his face unreadable. "What I did was unworthy of friendship," he rumbled quietly.

"True, but friends can also forgive." He wondered what his father would think of him if he were to witness this conversation. It would probably age him by ten years.

Wrex watched him, his red eye staring at him, unblinking. But slowly, his mouth widened into a grin and a laughter was visibly working its way up from his stomach to his throat. "Ha!" he laughed out and shook himself. "Never in my life would have thought I'd call a damn turian my friend."

"Just don't do stercus like that again," Garrus grumbled and held out his arm.

Wrex looked at it and then took it, grabbing his lower arm with his massive hand while Garrus tried to do the same around the krogan's lower arm. A gesture of trust.

Wrex lowered his head. "Vakarian," he said.
"Wrex?" Garrus answered like he had heard Shepard say it so many times. Acknowledging each others name could have a significant meaning for a krogan. He had to look that up some day.

Wrex was obviously done with the conversation. He turned away and settled down in his usual spot. Garrus slid back under the Mako and attached the panel he had fixed. He considered taking another plate off but the ache all through his body reminded him that had had enough for today. As much as he had kept in shape, the mission on Virmire had been hard.

He slid out from under the tank and decided to look for Shepard. Maybe she would appreciate that massage now. The ship was quiet, most of the crew had settled down for the night cycle, nursing their wounds and aching bones. He knocked on the door to the captain's cabin, waiting for her to answer. But she didn't.

He knocked again but finally used the code on his omni-tool to open the door. Her cabin was lit up bright but she didn't sit at her desk. Her jacket hung over her chair but she was sprawled out on her bed between pads and handwritten notes. Her eyes were closed, her mouth slightly open and her breathing deep and slow.

Garrus grinned and moved the pads and papers over to her desk. He knelt down and opened her pants and boots to pull them off. She grumbled in her sleep and pulled her legs up but he held on to the pants and boots, trying to slip them off. That made her eyes flutter and he stilled. One eye opened and looked at him.

"Hey, Angel," she mumbled, sleepiness making her voice sound wet. "You coming to bed?"

"Give me a minute," Garrus said, suddenly feeling tired to the bones.

"Okay," she mumbled. She wiggled out of her pants and actually crawled under the blankets. By the time Garrus returned from the bathroom, she seemed to be asleep again. But when he slipped under the second blanket, she moved to give him room. He adjusted the pillowroll and placed his hand on her hip. Shepard never really cuddled but she liked a little contact like that. A deep calm settled over him.

This was what being home felt like.

Chapter End Notes

Just a short teaser chapter today to let you know that we are back!

I know I know, you thought this story was dead and abandoned but fear not! It is alive!

Life has been crazy, I started a new job and the story was silent in my head. I tried to write but nothing happened. So I had to take a little break, work on some other stories to clear my head. Maybe you noticed the Dragon Age stories that have appeared on my profile, writing these has helped me to get back into writing.

I have about 15,000 to 20,000 more words planned for this story and then we will go straight into the next part with a new story to cover the events of ME2 and ME3.
I won't make promises on update schedules but fear not, I will write it all.
Garrus and Shepard waited with Kaidan and Liara in the comm room for the Normandy to jump out of the relay stream to access the comm buoy. They had another day of travel ahead of them until they would reach the Citadel and Shepard wanted to speak to Keggs and Nihlus before she presented her case to the Council.

They were silent; Kaidan stared ahead, deep in thought and Liara read something on her omni-tool. Garrus let his hand brush against Shepard's and was relieved to feel her return the pressure. He knew that Shepard was deeply worried about Ashley. Dr. Chakwas had spoken to her in the morning and her prognosis for Ashley's leg had worsened. Apparently the nanobots were still active in the wound, despite repeated tries to render them inactive.

Joker's voice came over the ship's comm: "We're dropping out of the relay now, communications should be working in a moment. Not all that well though, this is an old backup system."

Shepard thanked the pilot and tapped the interface on her omni-tool to open the call. It took a few moments until the holographic display flickered to life, showing the translucent shapes of Nihlus and Keggs sitting at their desks.

"Are we coming through alright?" Shepard waved at the two projected displays that seemed to get stuck occasionally and flickered.

"Yes, it's not perfect but it will do," Nihlus said and trilled a greeting for Garrus. It sounded a bit strange over the limited audio range of the comm system. Keggs nodded his head towards Shepard, Kaidan and Liara and flicked his mandibles towards Garrus. He wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not.

Nihlus grinned at them. "We are eagerly awaiting your return, oh mighty warriors," he said in greeting.

On the other projection, Keggs chirped at Nihlus and shook his head before looking at Shepard and him. Garrus felt himself sitting straighter, Keggs had a way of making everyone try to be a better officer.

Nihlus leaned forward, the bad transmission making his uneven fringe look like it was made of feathers blowing in a storm. "I have some good news! The Council is discussing a possible attack by Saren and his geth troops."

"Don't you mean the Reapers?" Shepard said with a sigh.

"No, the councilors are convinced that Saren will attack the Citadel."

"What do they know that I don't?" Shepard grumbled.

"What do you mean?" Keggs chimed in.

"Why is everybody so sure that Saren will attack the Citadel?"

Nihlus and Keggs both let out a surprised trill and Nihlus began to grin. "Well, how interesting, it
looks like you are truly a human and not a turian in disguise."

Shepard laughed out, "A turian in disguise?"

"There have been rumors..." Nihlus said and snickered.

Keggs trilled a rather unfriendly remark at him that made even Nihlus stop his silliness.

"It may not be obvious for humans how important the Citadel is for all the other species in this galaxy," Nihlus said, now serious, "it is the connection between the species, the one safe haven. It has always been the neutral ground where peace between the different people of the galaxy was made possible. If Saren gets the Citadel under his control, our current society will fall back into chaos."

Shepard nodded. "Okay, I get that. But we need more, we also need a fleet to go to Ilos."

"What's at Ilos?" Keggs asked.

Liara stepped forward, wringing her hands. "I have identified the location in the visions as Ilos. The message is now complete, the protheans wanted us to know about Ilos. We don't know what we'll find there but it must be very important for the fight against the Reapers."

"If Saren is headed there, we have to stop him before he finds that information first," Keggs said and started to furiously type on his terminal.

Nihlus sighed. "The council is always very reluctant to call for fleet deployment, especially outside of Citadel-space. But I will see what I can do, I have made some connections. I've danced so many diplomatic dances lately, I should start teaching that. I may even have to take you along, my friend," he said to Keggs. The other turian's head snapped up and his face contorted like he had just sprained his mandible. "Yes, keep looking like that, it will scare everyone so much, they'll give us fleets just so that you leave them alone."

Keggs expression turned even grimmer but Nihlus was unimpressed. He trilled happily and winked at them. Garrus trained his face to be calm, Nihlus may have been utterly at ease with Keggs but he was not taking any chances.

"Anything else we should know?" Nihlus asked.

"Not at the moment but I need a favor," Shepard said.

"What can we do for you, sweetie?"

"The fucking cannon is still not working. I think the problem lies on some part in the software and the combination of turian and human technology and we need a specialist for turian code to work with the technicians on that as soon as we've docked. Do you know of someone who could help? The smartest turian smartass you can find?"

"Oh, I think I have just the guy." Nihlus grinned widely. "The smartest smartass, oh yes. Leo loves him to bits, I bet you'll like him too. His name is Leran Petarik, I'll contact him right away."

The name sounded strange to Garrus, it wasn't a turian name as far as he knew.

"Mirhale might be helpful too," Keggs added and both Nihlus and Shepard nodded. The salarian tech expert of the ANIS team was familiar with all kinds of technologies, even turian systems.
"I had your repairs marked as high priority already," Nihlus continued. "Leran and Mirhale will hopefully be waiting for you when you arrive."

The translucent display flickered violently and static crackled from the audio feed. "I think we're losing you, see – " – with that the feed broke down.

Joker's voice came over the comm system, "I'm sorry, Commander, but that seems to be all we can squeeze out of that thing. We could try kicking it but I'm not sure that will change anything."

"No kicking of comm buoys," Shepard said. "But issue a repair request or something like that when we're on the Citadel, I don't know who is in charge of the comm system but someone needs to fix this thing."

"Will do, Commander."

Shepard turned to the people in the room. "Everyone get some rest, once we're on the Citadel, the next few days are going to be busy."

"What do you mean, you won't send a fleet to Ilos?" Shepard ground out between tight pressed lips, struggling to keep her voice from getting louder. She stared at the councilors on their pedestal as if she tried to project her thoughts directly into their brains.

By the unfazed reactions of the councilors it was not working. Garrus took a small step forward to stand closer behind Shepard. Not that she needed his support but he wanted her to know that she wasn't alone in this situation.

"Your reports have made it quite clear that the most logical next step for Saren is to attack the Citadel," the asari councilor said. Her voice was calm, as if she was talking about the flowers on Thessia. "Our first priority is to protect the citizens here and defend the integrity of the Citadel."

Shepard took a deep breath and spoke calmly, "But we don't know what kind of information or technology Saren will find on Ilos. We need to stop him on Ilos before he even gets a chance at attacking the Citadel."

"Our forces need to be here," Sparatus said with an angry growl under his voice, "we can't afford spreading ourselves thin on some vague assumptions and fairy tales."

Shepard opened her mouth and closed it with a snap. Garrus saw her fists clench at her sides. When she spoke again, her voice was calm and controlled. "In that case, let me and my team go to Ilos with the Normandy alone. With her stealth systems, we can land on Ilos undetected and..."

"Ambassador Udina," councilor Sparatus interrupted, "the Commander can't seem to let this go."

"Yes, councilors, I apologize," the human ambassador snarled while he looked at Shepard as if he wished she would go up in flames on this very spot. "Your results have been admirable but you are becoming a burden now. We thank you for your efforts, the Council will handle this now, with my help," he added quietly.

"How convenient for you," Shepard mumbled just loud enough for him to hear. She turned back to the councilors, ignoring Udina seething beside her. "If I could just ask for the Normandy to take us to Ilos, the ship can return to the Citadel right away and we will – "

"The Normandy is not your personal skycar, free for you to take around!" Udina yelled out. A thick vein stood out on his forehead as he opened his omni-tool and punched the interface as if it was a
physical object. "The Normandy is now under lockdown at the dock until further notice," he said
and a triumphant grin played on his face. "You will await your orders from the Alliance or the
Council here on the Citadel." He looked at Shepard, daring her to defy him and judging by the
whiteness of her knuckles, it took all her self control to not punch the small man in the face.

"Understood," she pressed out between clenched teeth and turned on the spot without looking at the
council or Udina and Anderson and walked down towards the park like area with its blooming trees.
Flower petals flew to the side as she hurried towards the exit, her eyes cast to the ground. By the
looks of it, she was barely holding it together and Garrus feared for the next person who would set
her off and receive all that penned up rage.

As it happened, that person was Nihlus.

"Where the flying fuck were you?" Shepard yelled at the turian, who waited for them in the elevator
that took them down to the Presidium. "They fucking put us on lockdown, you must have known
about that, why the fuck didn't you help me?"

Nihlus just raised a finger, pointing at the cameras above them. Tali looked up and started typing on
her omni-tool.

"Oh who gives a fuck," Shepard spat out. "Why weren't you there?"

Above them, the cameras gave a short whine and let a few sparks fly. Tali closed her omni-tool and
by the way she raised her head and folded her hands behind her back, it was easy to imagine the
smug grin she was hiding behind her mask.

Shepard gave an appreciative nod to Tali before fixing her angry stare back on Nihlus. "Spill!"

Nihlus rumbled out a calming tone before speaking, "Shepard, I know a losing battle when I see one.
That decision was final before you even entered the tower. Someone let a few internal files fall into
my hands, trust me when I say, nothing you could have said would have changed this outcome." 

Shepard's face had turned pale. "You mean they just played me?"

"If you mean they just waited for an excuse to get you out of the way and away from the Normandy,
yes, they played you."

"Fuck!"

Garrus needed a few moments to process this information. "This doesn't make sense, without
Shepard and the Normandy they wouldn't even know of this threat."

"But it was also really embarrassing for the Council to have their favorite Spectre defamed and to
have to admit to their failings," Nihlus said, adding a tone of disgust to his subharmonics. "And the
Reaper issue is not helping your case, Shepard. Makes you sound like a lunatic to them." He added a
trill to indicate that he didn't agree with that. Garrus hoped for his sake that she understood it.

"I'm so very sorry that I uncovered a galactic threat and interrupted their spa time at Sha'ira's place,"
she spit out.

Nihlus trilled a humorous note and Garrus felt himself relax. Shepard could be a burning force of
rage but luckily she didn't stay that way very long.

Kaidan, who had been quietly staring ahead, raised his head and looked around. "What I don't
understand is, how the Alliance can agree to have the Council order the Normandy under lockdown.
Also, why is this elevator taking so long?"

"I stopped it," Tali said, "I thought we needed some unobserved time to talk."

Nihlus and Garrus both let out a chirp of amazement. "You stopped the elevator for the Citadel Tower?" Nihlus said, his mandibles flapping.

"The security on this is insane!" Garrus added, staring at the translucent, purple mask of the quarian.

"I have some tools," Tali said, a smile in her voice.

"I bet Mirhale would love to have a look at those," Nihlus said, shaking his head.

Shepard had been quiet and stared in Kaidan's direction without really looking at him. "You're right, Kaidan," she mumbled.

"Right?"

"About the Alliance letting the Council walk all over them." Shepard's voice had lost the anger, she was back to analyzing the situation and finding a solution. "Anderson didn't say a single word during the whole thing, that's so unlike him. There must be something at play here that we don't know about."

"Can we get this elevator going again?" Nihlus asked. "By now, they probably already sent a poor technician into the ducts to find out what's wrong with it."

Tali typed a few things on her omni-tool and with a small shudder, the elevator started moving again. When the doors opened at the Presidium level, another familiar turian greeted them with an annoyed subharmonic growl.

"Why did the elevator take that long?" Keggs asked sharply.

"We had an elevator conference," Nihlus stated.

"I thought that's my thing."

"Not exclusively, at least when you have our magical quarian around," Nihlus said and threw a wide smile towards Tali. Even though her face was hidden, Garrus was pretty sure that she was currently very much blushing.

"Let's go," Keggs said and briskly walked towards one of the bridges that stretched over the Presidium lake.

"Where are we going?" Shepard asked. Garrus, Kaidan, Tali and Liara, who had not said a word after her statement to the council about the visions, fell in step behind her. Nihlus and Keggs took long strides and the non-turians struggled to keep up.

"We're meeting someone," Keggs said. He was discreetly looking around, checking for hidden followers, Garrus realized.

*What have we gotten ourselves into?*

Keggs turned right at the end of the bridge and took a sharp turn into an deserted alley that looked more like a service access path. A keeper was working at a terminal at the side, ignoring them as they always did. Shepard made a wide berth around it and eyed it suspiciously as she walked past it.
"Can you still feel them?" Kaidan asked her, making a quick double step to catch up to her.

"Yes, it's like a change in the barometric pressure. Not enough to be headache inducing but on the verge of it," Shepard said, massaging her temples.

"You feel the keepers?" Liara asked, finally speaking again.

"Yes, Kaidan does too."

"But not as strongly, at least I never fainted from being next to one," Kaidan said with a smirk.

"You fainted?" Liara called out.

"Yeah yeah, rub it in, why don't you."

"Do you get that weird hum next to the relay statue too?" asked Kaidan Shepard.

"The one at the lake?" Shepard shook her head. "No, I don't think so, I'll check it out next time I'm close to it."

Liara had opened her omni-tool and almost ran into a garden arrangement when they exited the alleyway. Garrus quickly pulled her to the side.

"Oh, thank you Garrus, I didn't see..." Her attention was back at the information on her omni-tool and the rest of the group didn't notice that she had stopped walking.

"Guys?" Garrus called over to them.

Shepard turned around and came back. Liara was still reading, a frown had appeared on her forehead. "What is it, Liara?" Shepard asked, placing her hand on her shoulder.

"Some asari can feel the Keepers too, but most don't," Liara explained, her eyes on the texts on her omni-tool. "Asari scientist assumed that it has to do with a certain flavor of biotics, some variation that has a link to the keepers." Liara looked up to look directly at Shepard, "That would explain why Kaidan can feel them but you are not biotic. How can you feel them?"

"Well, it's a new thing and it definitely has something to do with the beacons and their visions. I never could feel them before that."

"But that would mean..." Liara stared at Shepard as if she expected her to finish the sentence for her.

Shepard took a step towards Liara and held her by her shoulders. Garrus also took a step towards her and placed his hand on her back. The asari was trembling.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"The reapers built the Citadel, the protheans used it just like us. Were the Keepers also built by the reapers? Or by the protheans? Are the sensitive asari, the biotic humans and you, feeling a prothean or a reaper connection?" Liara said quietly as if she was afraid someone else could hear her.

"Oh, I don't like this," Shepard mumbled.

"No, me neither," Nihlus said. The whole group had gathered around Liara, listening to her thoughts.

"If the reapers control the keepers, we can't trust them. Spirits be damned, if the reapers built the Citadel, they could know of a backdoor to take control of it. The keepers could be their tools for that."
Keggs shook his head, "If there was such a backdoor, they would have used it already, there must be some kind of protection installed to prevent that."

Shepard's eyes went wide, "Maybe that's what Saren is after, a key to override that system. Maybe the protheans messed with the keepers so that they don't follow Sovereign's orders."

"And because the protheans changed the keepers," Garrus said to Shepard, "you can sense them through whatever the protheans added to your neural system with the beacons. I like that idea much better than you being able to feel reaper technology."

Shepard gave him a weak smile, "Yeah, me too."

"If such a backdoor exists," Nihlus said, urging them on with his hands and a subharmonic trill, "it's even more important that we stop Saren on Ilos or at least find out what he does there."

Shepard let out a snort. "We need the Normandy for that and working cannons and – oh! – the fucking lockdown lifted! And some protection against reaper influence would be nice too!"

"One thing at a time," Keggs said with a mysterious hum in his undertones. He seemed to have a few more pieces hidden in this game.

Shepard kept muttering under her breath about not having time for this as Keggs led them to an office building and stopped and seemed to wait for someone. After few moments, a skycar slowed down at the railing and Dr. Chakwas stepped out. She greeted the group with a nod and followed them as Keggs led them through a simple door on the side of the office building. It opened as he approached and closed automatically behind them.

"Why did you ask Dr. Chakwas to join us?" Shepard asked Keggs, as they walked through the dimly lit corridor.

"You'll see why," he said, his tone indicating that Shepard should just be patient. Behind his back she pulled her face in a grimace in answer.

The corridor ended at a big door that also opened when Keggs approached. They stepped into a huge hall that seemed to be under construction. An area in the middle was blocked off with fences, covered in white tarp. Behind the fences they could hear sounds that made Garrus' plates itch. When he looked over to Shepard he could see that the sounds made her uncomfortable too. It was quite obvious because she already had her pistol ready.

"I know this noise," Liara whispered, her biotics wavering around her like blue light.

"Me too," Kaidan whispered, his pistol ready as well, "That's a husk."

Keggs nodded, "That's correct but you're not in danger." He opened a section in the fence and let them through.

"Keggs! There you are!" The cheerful greeting came from Pauline, who was once again dressed in an extraordinary ensemble of some flimsy black thing and stockings with polka dots. She also seemed to be taller, her shoes had the thickest rubber soles Garrus had ever seen. But even Pauline's outfit was not enough to distract from the cage, surrounded by blue mass effect force fields, that stood at the far end of the enclosed area and housed a husk.

Pauline pointed towards the deformed, only vaguely human figure with a bright smile and said, "Meet Franklin, our guest."
"You keep a husk in here?" Shepard said with a low growl in her voice. She turned to Keggs, "You knew about this?"

Keggs just made a short trill to say that he did.

"Shepard, honey," Pauline said and left her workplace to put her hand on Shepard's arm, "we needed a test subject to develop that block for the reaper signal. How else were we supposed to test if it works?"

Garrus lowered his gun that he had aimed at the snarling figure in the cage. "That sounds reasonable, we really need that block."

Shepard looked around and finally lowered her pistol as well. "Fine, I get it."

"We are using every safety and precaution we have," Pauline explained in her cheerful voice, "we never enter the cage, we only use robotic arms to take samples, we scan from the outside, the mass effect field never gets dropped." A turian peeked out from behind an analyzer machine, trilling out an assuring tone.

Shepard kept looking at the husk like she wanted to kill it right on the spot. "That thing still makes me nervous." She looked around, "Where's Tali?"

"Tali?" Garrus turned to the left, expecting to see the quarian there but she was nowhere to be seen. He walked back to the fence door and looked out into the empty hall. "Tali?"

"Here," a quiet voice came from a pile of boxes that were covered in tarp. Garrus walked behind them to find Tali sitting on the ground, leaning against the boxes, her omni-tool glowing.

"I found her, we'll be right there," he called back to the fence door.

When he approached Tali, she stopped him with a shout and deactivated her omni-tool. "That would have zapped you if you had gotten any closer," she said.

Garrus sat down next to her and put his arm over her shoulder. Even through his armor he could feel that she was shaking. "What's wrong?"

A sob left her speaker. "That noise..."

"But you fought husks before with us," Garrus said, thinking back on the many missions where Tali had had no problem shooting husks with her shotgun.

"Yes and it felt like therapy, like making up for all those people on that ship," she said, almost too quiet for him to hear.

Garrus felt shame creep up his neck, he had never even spared a thought about how terrible it must have been for Tali on that ghostship where they found her. Locked up in the medbay, hearing the crew being torn apart by husks outside, unable to help. How long did she have to hear those noises, the screams of the dying and then the low growling of the husks looking for more prey? And still she agreed to help them in any way she could and fought husks with them like it didn't affect her.

"I thought I was over it but that noise, it... it sounded just like..." she sobbed once, "when it had all gotten quiet, there was one husk in front of the door, it kept sniffing and scratching and it sounded just like..." with a sob she fell forward and cried.

"I'm so sorry, Tali, I had no idea," Garrus said, underlying his words with hums of apology.
"I'm sorry for being so weak," Tali sniffled.

"You are not weak, you are one of the strongest people I know," Garrus called out, pulling her closer to him. "You survived all that and still signed up for this crazy mission to save the galaxy, you fought husks and geth despite all you've been through. There's no one else like you, Tali and you are not weak!"

Shepard came around the corner, "Couldn't have said it better myself." She sat down on Tali's other side and pulled her into a hug, giving Garrus a grateful smile over Tali's shoulder. “That was really bone-headed of me to never ask you how you feel around husks.”

“Bone-headed?”

“Substitute with any word from your vocabulary meaning stupid-head.”

“Bosh'tet,” Tali said and she didn't sound like she was crying anymore.

“Sorry for being a bosh'tet,” Shepard said, peering into Tali's mask and holding her helmet with her hands on either side.

"Is it safe in there?" Tali asked.

“Yes, the husk is locked up and surrounded by a mass effect force field. It can't get out.”

“Okay, I'm coming with you.” Tali stood up in one fluid motion and picked up her shotgun from the floor. Shepard jumped up from the ground like she didn't wear all that heavy armor and held out a hand to Garrus to help him up as he struggled with getting his legs back under himself.

“All these crazy and flexible pyjaks,” he mumbled.

“You mean if we see a turian attack, we just have to knock him off his feet and he'll be busy struggling to get back up?” Shepard asked as she leaned backwards to pull him up.

Garrus pushed himself off the ground, but that made Shepard lose her balance and he caught her and pulled her to his body before she would fall backwards. For a second they stood frozen in that embrace, her face looking up to him, just a handwidth away from his. He could feel her breath hitch and a blush was rising on her face. “Just promise me not to try that with Saren, please,” he murmured with a low growl in his subharmonics that had more lewd undertones than strictly necessary.

They stared at each other, their lips almost touching, lost in the others eyes for an eternity.

*By the Spirits, I need her.*

A giggle from Tali woke them from their trance. Shepard stepped back, a blush spreading on her cheeks and she punched him lightly on his armored arm. "So distracting, Vakarian, really unfair," she mumbled.

Garrus hummed a short apology that he didn't quite mean. If he could have had his way, she would be naked by now and gasping under his kisses.

"Go ahead, we'll be right there," Shepard said and walked back to Tali.

Garrus acknowledged her order with a nod and went back to the fenced off area. He took a deep breath to calm down the hum behind his cowl.

He stepped back into the make-shift laboratory, noticing the two women following him a few steps
They were whispering to each other and stopped abruptly when they caught up with him as he held the door open for them. Shepard grinned at him and he noted that one down for later to ask her what they had been giggling about.

Pauline held a tiny glass case between her fingertips and the turian next to her held a slightly bigger case between two talons. Pauline looked up and beamed her characteristic bright smile at them.

"There you are, just in time."

Shepard walked up to her and curiously peered at the thing in her fingers. Tali joined the group too but her eyes stayed trained on the cage, her shotgun loosely in her hands. Garrus was convinced that she wouldn't shoot the husk right now but damn if she wasn't prepared to do so if it just as much as flinched at her.

Pauline also assessed Tali's reaction and, apparently satisfied with it, she turned back to the group in front of her. "This is the emitter for a human implant, it will be part of the implant itself and not use any of the ports. I just need to scan your implants to adjust it to the different configurations."

"Go right ahead," Shepard said and turned so that Pauline could scan the back of her neck with her omni-tool. "It might be more practical if you gave me that program and I scan the members of my crew that will come with us."

Pauline nodded and swiped over the interface on her arm, "Done, you should send me the scannings back as quickly as possible so that I can make the necessary adjustments. The extensions should be done by tomorrow."

She turned to the turian who stood next to her. "This is Leran, he helped develop the turian implant. We had to devise a whole new implant because turians usually don't have one and it also has free ports for extensions. Once you have an implant, you might want to get other uses out of it too." She held the glass case up to the overhead light and Garrus saw something tiny glinting inside. "We thought that the emitter should be hidden. It is part of the base design for the turian implant and we did our best to integrate it into the human implant so that it's virtually undetectable."

Leran handed Garrus the glass case to look at and he saw a small circular device swimming in a clear liquid. The thought of an implant in his head momentarily distracted him from the fact that the turian handing it to him was clearly female but had been addressed as a male.

Keggs took a closer look at the implant, a disapproving trill in his subharmonics. Nihlus came up too and eyed the thing. "Where do you want to put it?" he asked the two people in front of him.

"Not the back of the neck like on humans," Pauline said hurriedly, anticipating a protest. The back of the neck was an extremely sensitive bundle of nerves and an erogenous zone. No turian would ever allow that area to be disturbed by a foreign object.

Dr. Chakwas broke her calm silence and stepped forward. "We are going to set it under the side of your fringe. We can connect the implant directly to your temporal lobe and it will be protected, invisible but still easily accessible."

It sounded good in theory but Garrus still winced at the thought of someone putting a device directly into his brain. He didn't even like the idea of attaching rings and piercings to his fringe, let alone an implant. But then again, getting his mind controlled by a reaper was a much more frightening prospect and if it took an implant to prevent that, he would be willing to do it.

"Are we sure that it works? Has it been tested?" Nihlus asked.
Instead of an answer, Leran tilted his head so that they could look under the lowest ridge of his fringe. The tiny implant was faintly visible in the shape of a circle that was protruding slightly from the skin under the ridge.

"I have been wearing our prototypes in the last seven days," he said with a voice that was wavering somewhere between male and female. "The first ones were not effective but now we found the right brain waves we need to block out."

"Brain waves?" Shepard wondered.

"Yes," Pauline called out excitedly, "that's how the signal works, by overlaying certain brain waves with the reaper pattern. We can shield those brain waves by cancelling them out with projections of the exact opposite. We can actually detect them quite easily because brain waves normally don't tend to be broadcast between species. If we detect brain waves-like patterns outside of a head, we know that we're dealing with reaper signals."

"Are brain waves that similar across species?" Shepard looked around between them, turians, humans, an asari and a quarian.

"Yes! Isn't that weird?" Pauline said, smiling even wider. "I was surprised too. Some things are common even across different species."

Keggs stared at the device and his subharmonics hissed and trilled an impressive collection of slurs. "I still don't like to get things stuffed under my fringe," he growled.

Nihlus shouldered him aside. "Put the first one under mine, it can't look any worse." He gestured to the disfigured side of his fringe, where Saren's shot had almost killed him. Fringe disfigurement had a social stigma among turians and even Nihlus, despite his sunny nature, probably suffered under it.

"It can only make you look prettier, baby," Shepard said, putting her hand gently on the mandible on his disfigured side.

"If you say so, sweetie." He turned back to the other turian with a suggestive chirp, making Leran stutter a confused trill. "By the way, this is Leran, I put my hopes in him to find the problem with the Normandy's guns."

Leran chirped a greeting and Garrus couldn't stop staring at the turian and his short fringe. Only female turians had such short fringes and with the high rise of his cowl and the voice, he was certain that Leran was a woman. Her name was probably Lerana, a fairly common turian name. Why then did everybody address her like a man?

Pauline pulled a transportable operating unit forward and stepped aside to give Dr. Chakwas access to the control. The unit was just big enough to have Nihlus sit on a reclining chair and put his head into it. Dr. Chakwas worked the interface and with a whirr, a mass effect field built up around his neck and the opening of the device, shielding the operating area against the outside and sterilizing the air inside.

Nihlus kept on talking, a nervous hum underlining his voice, about Leran and how capable he was until Pauline took his hand.

"It's going to be fine, you won't feel a thing," she said, bending down to look into his eyes.

Nihlus sighed and relaxed. "Just... don't take a wrong turn there and suddenly I'm attracted to Hanar." He gave his characteristic smile and laid his head back.
Pauline smiled warmly and administered an injection to his neck. "We'll be careful," she said as Nihlus' eyes fell closed.

After a quick look on her omni-tool, she nodded towards Leran, who stepped forward with the implant. Dr. Chakwas and the turian worked quietly at the operating station. Garrus couldn't see exactly what they did, despite craning his neck. He wanted to know what he had to expect when he got the implant himself.

The procedure was over quickly, the operating device turned off but Nihlus stayed under sedation. Leran pushed his chair over to another station and placed Nihlus' under a scanner arc. "We're going to monitor how his immune system and his brain adapt to the object and the brain waves," she or he said.

Garrus walked up to the sleeping form of Nihlus. He looked over to the turian besides the chair and only realized that he was staring when Leran trilled at him. "Oh, I... why... I'm sorry," he stuttered. But he couldn't stop staring at the strong fringe and the elegant shape of the mandibles. Leran was an attractive turian, in whatever gender.

"Yes, it's true," Leran said with a subharmonic undertone that was only a little annoyed. "I look female and I was raised as a woman but I never felt right. I'm a man, no matter what this body looks like." He looked over to Shepard, who was talking to Pauline. "The humans call it transgender and when I heard how they explained it, suddenly it all fell into place. All my confusion, all my "wrongness". Suddenly I knew." A barrage of subharmonics spilled from him, making Garrus feel his troubles with him. Leran straightened and wiped his short fringe. "I know that many turians think I'm a freak but this is me. I'm not pretending to be someone else anymore."

Garrus recalled a segment from a vid-show he had seen. Older, traditional turians called it "another one of those stupid human ideas!". While humans had a long history of gender issues and difficulties with gender roles, it was a new subject for turians. Every turian was expected to contribute to the society and the rise of the Hierarchy in any way he or she could. According to the traditionalists, there was no reason for turians to deny their born gender because their roles in the society didn't change.

Garrus had to admit that he had agreed with that view, simply because he never had to question it. But seeing Leran and hearing the conviction in his voice made him wonder what exactly it meant to feel like you were born with the wrong gender.

"I'm sorry that I was staring," he said, putting sincerity in his second voice. "You are the first transgender turian I have met."

Leran accepted the apology with a hum and checked Nihlus' vital signs again before he looked over to Shepard. "That is Commander Shepard, your anima?"

"Yes," Garrus said, his subharmonics singing without reservation.

"I have not seen that before, a turian with a human anima." He looked over to Shepard and then back to Garrus with a shy grin. "I almost want to ask how that works but I hate to get that kind of question myself."

Garrus sang out a friendly note that made Leran look up. "I offer you a deal. I'll answer any question you have if you answer any question I have without getting angry."

Leran trilled his agreement and blurted out the first question right away. "Don't your talons cut her? Human skin is even thinner than asari skin."
Garrus held up his hands to show Leran his talons. "Like most turians I know, I don't keep my talons sharp. But you're right, sometimes I scratch her and her skin suffers from the friction against my plates. But we have lotions to help with that and humans have incredible healing abilities."

"I heard about that, I couldn't quite believe it."

"I'm sure some things are exaggerated but I can vouch that her skin heals very fast."

"Fascinating, I wonder how their cell regeneration adapts to..." the familiar science babble that all highly intelligent people seemed to fall into after a while, only stopped when Dr. Chakwas approached them.

"Let me see your implant," Dr. Chakwas demanded and her voice, despite lacking the deep subharmonics, allowed no disagreement. But Leran seemed unsure and pulled away.

"My implant is fine, I made it myself and implanted it and – "

"Exactly," came Chakwas' voice, which had never been this snide before. "Are you a medical doctor? No, you're an engineer, an excellent one from all I heard. But I'm the leading expert in turian physiognomy at the Alliance and the best doctor you'll find right now. And now I will look at that implant."

There was a clear 'Yes, ma'am' in Leran's subharmonics and he dutifully layed his head to the side to give Dr. Chakwas access of the skin under his fringe. The doctor had to stand on her tiptoes to scan the area with her omni-tool.

"It looks good, the cut has healed well, the connections to your temporal lobe are straight and healthy. I have used a different neural support on Nihlus but this one looks good too. And your skin has attached to the implant without any reactions to it." She shut down her omni-tool and lowered herself back on her heels. "Well done," she said to Leran with a smile. "I can see that you have done excellent work but I would still ask you to contact me if you feel anything unusual or if there is any reaction at the implant's location, okay?"

Leran nodded. "Yes, Dr. Chakwas, I will."

Dr. Chakwas turned around and fixed a scolding look on Keggs. "You and I will have a conversation about how you allowed such an implantation without medical supervision by me or someone equally well trained for such a procedure."

Keggs looked downright scared and his subharmonics hummed in apprehension.

Dr. Chakwas turned away from him and pulled up a chair next to Nihlus. She obviously intended to stay and watch over her patient.

Leran watched her and slowly let out a breath, a soft trill escaping him. "Human women can be scary," he mumbled quietly.

Garrus trilled his agreement and grinned. He turned to Dr. Chakwas and asked, "When can we put the implant under my fringe?" He threw a trill to Leran to include him in the question as well. While Leran trilled out that he could be ready anytime, Dr. Chakwas shook her head.

"Not before tomorrow. I want to see how Nihlus heals first and if there are any reactions." She noticed that Leran opened his mouth in protest and raised a hand. "I don't have to tell you how highly unusual and dangerous it is to work with new and experimental technology like this and that one or two successful implantations are in no way sufficient proof for the functionality and safety of
this procedure."

Leran closed his mouth with a snap and nodded. "Yes, of course," he said.

Garrus had to grin, if Leran had never worked with human women before, he sure had some impressive stories to tell now.

"Then I'll be going to the dock and check the Normandy's software," Leran said.

Shepard smiled brightly at him, "Oh yes, please, I put all my hope on you to fix the damn cannons."

Leran made a nervous trill but switched it to brave acknowledgment, indicating that he would face all challenges as they came. Keggs gave him a short nod with a proud trill and Leran seemed to grow taller just from that.

"I'll be around later, to see what you find," Shepard said and turned to Keggs. "Please tell me you have a solution to our lockdown problem."

"I might, but we have to gather some more information first."

"Every minute we wait, Saren may be closer to the key to the Citadel," Shepard growled.

"But if we rush, we'll be vulnerable, not to mention that we don't have enough implant enhancements yet for all of you to be protected against the reaper signal," Keggs said and the calming hum of his subharmonics seemed to have an effect on Shepard.

She let her shoulders drop and nodded. "Right, as you said, one step at the time."

Garrus turned to Pauline, "How quickly can you have enough enhancements made for the marines and for me?"

Pauline pointed to a professional printer at the far end of the lab. "The enhancements are being made as we speak, by tomorrow morning we'll have enough for every human of the combat crew on the Normandy. She picked up a closed jar with a familiar looking, circular device. "You implant is already done, we just have to wait until Dr. Chakwas gives her okay to implant it."

"What about Tali and Wrex?" Shepard asked, stepping up to his side.

"I'm not sure how quarians use implants and how we can add the reaper block to them."

Tali stepped forward to the table. "We use many implants, our suits are directly connected to our nervous system with implants. I'm sure I could adapt the enhancement that you made for the human implant."

"Excellent!" Pauline said. "Do you need need a sterile environment to work on that?"

"No, this table is just fine." Tali took the enhancement unit and began scanning it with her omni-tool.

Pauline turned back to Shepard. "Now with Wrex... the problem is, we have hardly any information on krogan and krogan immune systems. They don't get sick, at least no doctor has ever seen a sick krogan. I don't even know where to start with krogan, can they wear implants? Wouldn't their bodies just reject it?"

"They do have implants for their biotics," Shepard said with a shrug.

"They do? I didn't know that," Pauline said, smiling excitedly. "Then we could probably make an
enhancement work like with human implants."

Shepard nodded, already typing on her omni-tool, "I'll bring Wrex here so that you can scan his implant."

"Try to get him here now, then check on the Normandy and then get some rest," Keggs ordered.

"With the lockdown, we have all the time in the world to rest until Saren and Sovereign hit us," Shepard sighed.

Garrus had to suppress a shocked trill. With everything that was going on, the actual, final threat they would be facing had fallen into the background, forgotten like the hum of the engine on a spaceship. He had been so focused on Saren that he had forgotten about Sovereign.

"I'm working on the lockdown," Keggs said quietly.

Garrus let out a trill of relief. He didn't know Keggs all that well but he had such an air of conviction around him that he trusted him completely to solve all their problems.

"But once you're out of the dock, we'll need a distraction so that flight control doesn't shoot you out of the sky."

Then again, maybe he didn't solve all their problems but rather made the right suggestions to make others work at them.

"I think I have an idea for a distraction, give me a few hours," Shepard said with a mischievous glint in her eyes. Garrus was curious as to what she had in mind.

"Go, get Wrex here," Keggs said. "And gather some supplies, discreetly. It's a long way to Ilos."

"Yes, Sir!" Shepard said, straightening her back.

Keggs nodded with a short trill and left with long strides. Shepard turned to Kaidan. "Lieutenant, I want you to get us some nice supplies, stock us up on food, maybe we can get some decent beer?"

Kaidan grinned, "The foods of my people, got it, Shepard."

She took the few steps over to Dr. Chakwas and Garrus heard her asking about Ashley. He stepped a bit closer so that he could overhear her answer.

"We were able to filter out the nano particles but her left lower leg was too damaged. We had to amputate under her knee," Dr. Chakwas said. "She's stable now and we are working on fitting her with a cybernetic prosthesis. But it will be a while until she can go back to work."

Garrus trilled in surprise, "She will go back to work?"

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "You want to tell Gunnery-Chief Ashley Williams that she should take up a desk job?"

"Futuo, I wouldn't dare," Garrus snorted out.

"Exactly," Shepard said with a grin. "And if it takes the leg from a chair tied to her knee, Ashley will find a way to get back into doing her job." Her face turned serious. "I just hope the Alliance lets her, they have a bad track record in their treatment of the Williams family."

Shepard rolled her neck and indicated with a dip of her head to Garrus that he should follow her.
They left the fenced-in laboratory with one last look onto the husk in its cage, that was following their movements with its blue glowing eye sockets. Garrus hurried to close the covered fence door behind them, he had no desire to keep looking at the eerie expression on the husk.

Shepard came up to his side and closed her omni-tool. "I told Wrex to meet us in front of the Citadel tower and then we can bring him here."

"Are you sure you'll find the way again?" Garrus teased and received the expected punch on his arm for that.

"Yes, you ass, I had my omni-tool trace the way, I'll find it."

"And if that fails, you have a C-Sec detective with you, who knows the Citadel like the back of his cowl and has an impeccable sense of direction – "

A light Overload charge hit him and made him stumble, as his armor stiffened for a millisecond.

"Ouch!"

"You so deserved that, you cock-sure turian you!"

Garrus laughed and grabbed her arm and pulled her close to him. Greenery and some trees protected them from onlookers and he honestly didn't care anyway. He wrapped his arm around her and pressed his forehead against hers. It felt like weeks since he last had been alone with her and his whole body and soul were missing her. He breathed her in, his marking scent releasing on her skin, marking her to be his.

She slowly tilted her head back and her hands came up to his head to tilt him until she could kiss him. By the way she held onto him, their armors scratching against each other, her fingertips playing over and under his fringe and her lips nipping and sucking at his mouthplates, he could tell that she had missed this intimacy just as much as him. His mouth fell open, his tongue meeting hers in an electric touch and the world around them ceased to exist. He didn't know where he was and what he was supposed to be doing, all he could think and feel was her – how she sounded and smelled and moved...

Some part of his rational brain urgently reminded him that the flowerbeds on the Presidium were not a good location to take off their armor and finally feel her naked skin. He slowly pulled his tongue back and she let go of his lips with a sigh.

She was panting, almost whimpering when they broke their embrace. She looked up at him with hooded eyes, full of desire and lust and Garrus was just about ready to fuck her right here over the rail at the lake. His erection wanted to burst his armor and he wouldn't even have felt embarrassed about it if it did.

Shepard cleared her throat but her voice still sounded hoarse when she spoke, "It's been way too long."

"Agreed." Garrus tried to calm his breathing and his heart. Not very successfully.

"Way too long," she murmured and stepped out of the shadow back into the blinding white light of the Presidium. They walked side by side, their hands almost touching, both quietly panting.

"To change the subject," Shepard mumbled.

"Oh yes please," Garrus blurted out, desperate to get his mind off anything involving soft skin and
strong arms.

Shepard snorted. "Alright. This Leran, something is different about him, right? He doesn't look like other turians."

"No, he's actually.... I mean was.... he – she was originally a woman..." Garrus stuttered, unsure how to phrase this.

"Oh, he's transgender? I've never heard of a transgender turian before."

"I saw a vid about it once but she – I mean he's the first one I have ever met."

Shepard looked up at him with her nose scrunched up. "What do you mean a vid about it?"

"It was a documentary about... well, traditionalists call it 'another stupid trend from the humans', it featured a man and a woman who explained what being transgender means."

Shepard slowed down. "Wait, how is that our fault?"

Garrus stretched his neck. "Turian society is pretty gender neutral. We honor mothers of course and they get some advantages for birthing and raising children but other than that we don't distinguish between genders. Every turian is expected to work at his or her best for the Hierarchy, regardless of gender. So, there is no need to question your gender, according to the traditionalists."

"But," Shepard raised a finger, "that's not what transgenderness is about, cause that's gender roles, not how you identify yourself. It's like, how did Svend say, " she pinched the skin on her nose as she thought. "He said it's like you look in the mirror and think 'I'm not that one, I don't want to pretend anymore'. When you transition, you can finally stop pretending to be that gender."

"Is Svend trans?"

Shepard shook her head and began to walk again. "No, Svend says he's genderfluid. He is who he is but he doesn't believe in binary genders. On some days he feels more female and on others more male. And he likes playing with gender roles."

"Was that what he did when he picked up Kaidan at the dock?"

"Oh yes," said Shepard, laughing, "did you see how red he turned?"

Svend had waited at the dock in his combat boots, wearing a wide, yellow dress that fluttered in the gust of wind from the Normandy's docking. A yellow band was tied around his short, blond hair with a small bow on the side. Garrus wasn't well versed in human fashion but by the way Kaidan was blushing he figured that this wasn't the usual attire to pick up your boyfriend. But Kaidan had quickly collected himself and had pulled Svend into a tight hug.

They had almost reached the elevator doors to the tower but Wrex was nowhere to be seen. Shepard sat down on a bench to wait and Garrus sat down next to her. "You know, this whole discussion about gender seems kind of silly," Shepard said, "Here we are, on a station full of alien species, one of them doesn't even have more than one gender and we worry about how people fit into binary genders? Who cares?"

Garrus trilled a snort, "Turian traditionalists care, according to the vid I saw."

Shepard leaned over to him, their armored arms clunking against each other. "Poor old turians, having to deal with all these annoying new ideas."
"It was so much simpler before humans started to ask all these questions."

"I know," Shepard laughed, "we're like a pest."

Garrus turned to her and smelled her hair. "I feel like I should say something poetic now but I'm drawing a blank on combining pest and destiny."

"That's the kind of poem I would like to hear," Shepard said and stretched up to almost give him a kiss on his mandible. But she stopped herself, probably realizing how very much in public they were. She sighed and whispered, "Later, Angel, later I will kiss you so hard."

Garrus' frustrated hum was so loud, that a turian couple walking past them turned around and stared at him. He trilled a short apology for his lewd sound.

"There's Wrex," said Shepard and stood up. Garrus followed her towards the large red krogan, who stomped towards them with another krogan in tow.

Shepard stood up to greet Wrex and discreetly squinted at her omni-tool before waving to the other turian. "Hello Skeev, good to see you again," she said, grabbing his lower arm like greeting an old friend. Garrus had to grin, Shepard easily acted like she remembered who the young krogan was, while she had actually checked her omni-tool for his picture.

He hid his amused smile by turning to the side and checking the area for people watching them. Which was unavoidable – two krogan, a turian and a human talking to each other wasn't that much of a familiar sight, not even on the Citadel. But it seemed to be just curious looks, not the kind of covert stare that an officer would have on a stakeout. Garrus had been on enough of those to know what that looked like.

"Shepard," said Wrex and then turned to look at Garrus. "Vakarian," he greeted and both Shepard and Skeev looked up in surprise at this unusual display of friendly respect.

Wrex ignored the pointed looks and nudged Skeev forward. "Tell her," he ordered.

The young krogan looked like he was about to burst but he kept his voice low as he spoke. "I have a friend, an asari –"

"His girlfriend," Wrex said, chuckling.

"Good for you," Shepard said to Skeev.

Skeev shrugged, "I like biotics."

"Yeah, I don't think we need details on that," Shepard laughed out, "what did you want to tell me about your asari friend?"

Skeev lowered his voice even more making it surprisingly quiet for a krogan. "She works in the office next to Tevos, the asari councilor. She told me that Tevos has had many visitors recently, more than in the last year combined. And one of the Matriarchs has not left, she's always around Tevos."

"Interesting," Shepard said, her finger playing on her lower lip. "We already noticed that there seemed to be someone with her in the room when we spoke to her but a Matriarch? Did she know the Matriarch?"

"I didn't ask her, we were... busy." The young krogan pulled his mouth wide into something that Shepard liked to call a shit-eating grin.
"No details, please!" Shepard interrupted, "Can I talk to your friend?"

Skeev opened his omni-tool and nodded after a few moments. "She'll be off work in about two hours and would talk to you."

"Have her contact me," Shepard opened her own omni-tool and exchanged her contact data with Skeev. "But don't have her mention anything about the council or the Matriarch, not over the omni-comm system."

Skeev acknowledged the order with a grunt and trailed off. Shepard took Wrex to the laboratory but Garrus excused himself and agreed to meet Shepard later on at his old office at C-Sec. He wanted to ask around the team if they had heard anything unusual and how the general mood on the Citadel was. But most of all he wanted to take a break.

Working with humans at C-Sec, he had quickly noticed that humans tended to stay up for close to 20 hours and then crash for the night, sleeping as much as 10 hours if possible. For turians, that kind of rhythm was unhealthy.

He stopped at his apartment and sat down on his couch without taking off his armor. He was asleep before he could order the windowpanes to darken.

When he woke up again, his omni-tool told him that over an hour had passed. Looking further down, he noticed a shock of black human hair on his thigh. Shepard was curled up on the couch, her head resting on a pillow on his armored thigh and she was fast asleep.

He softly drew his talons through her hair and she stirred. When he stroked his thumb over her cheek, she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"Hey sleepyhead," she murmured, "why were you so tired?"

Garrus kept on stroking over her soft cheek. "Turians sleep differently than humans."

Shepard's eyes became wide. "Oh? I didn't know that. I probably should've read that brochure."

Garrus grinned and began to explain, "Turians usually stay up for about five hours and then take a short sleeping break for an hour before returning to work. It's perfectly normal for turians to lean back in their chairs during the day and sleep for a short time. As a result, night time sleep doesn't need to be as long so that most turians only sleep for four hours at night."

Shepard said up, concern showing as a frown on her face. "Wait, so I forced you to follow my schedule even though it wasn't right for you? Why didn't you say something?"

"I'm used to the human rhythm from working with Frank and I know how to take my breaks when ever possible."

Suddenly a smile spread on her face, "I knew it! You said you were working on the Mako but you were actually hiding down there to sleep!"

Garrus hummed a smile at her. "I did sleep right next to the Mako a couple of times but I worked on it too!"

"How did you sleep there? There's no bed or chair."

"Turians can sleep in any sitting position."
"Just like a cat, I knew you were a cat," Shepard said and then turned serious. "I'm very sorry that I didn't know all that and didn't accommodate for that. I'm going to adjust your schedule to that and we'll find a way of fitting that in. Actually, in some areas on Earth, they traditionally take a sleeping break during the day because it gets too hot. It's called Siesta."

Garrus let out a subharmonic sound of surprise, "Not only do you have areas on Earth that are as cold as Noveria and people still live there – you also have areas where it gets too hot to work during the day? And people also live there?"

"We are a resilient species."

"I am aware, believe me."

"I'm going to get you a Siesta chair," said Shepard, already typing things into her omni-tool.

"No need, I can sleep just fine by sitting down anywhere."

Shepard lowered her head and looked at him sternly from under her eyelashes. Garrus felt a shiver crawling down his lower back. He loved it when she looked at him like that, even if she didn't mean it in a sexual way in this moment. "On my ship, the representative of the turian Hierarchy will have a Siesta chair to take his nap in. End of debate."

She closed the omni-tool interface and punched him on his arm. "I can't believe you let me sleep everywhere and anytime and don't tell me that you need to sleep too."

"We're not that different that way it seems," Garrus said and thought fondly about the many times when she had fallen asleep on a transport or on the Mako, her head resting on his shoulder. He loved those moments when she trusted him to watch over her and protect her while she slept for a few minutes.

Shepard stood up, agitated. "But that's just the thing, I was counting on you to take care of me while I took the obligatory navy-nap. But I would have watched your sleep too if I had known that you're tired."

"I know you would have, don't worry about it so much." Garrus grabbed her arm and pulled her back down to him.

Shepard leaned back against his cowl with a sigh. "You have to tell me these things. Angel, I'm just a dumb human. They didn't mention sleeping patterns in the military brochures. Actually," she sat up and looked at him, "I heard that turians need less sleep, there were tales of turians that never slept during the war on Shanxi."

"Funny, I heard the same kind of stories about humans during that war."

"Well, there are ways to stay awake – certain drugs, combined with implants..."

Garrus shook his head, "You humans are terrifying with your ease of implant use."

"You really don't like implants, do you?" She looked at him and softly stroked over the area where the implant would go.

Garrus' subharmonics vibrated with deep discomfort. "I find the idea of attaching technology directly to my brain disturbing."

Shepard kept stroking, her thumb brushing over his mandible. "But turian biotics use implants too."
"You may have noticed that biotics are stigmatized in our society?" Garrus sighed, even during his time at the base camp, biotics had been separated from the military. Saren was the only turian biotic he had ever heard about and he was more feared than admired. "People think that biotics are dangerous and cannot be trusted. They are trained in the Cabal, separated from their family and clan..."

"That doesn't sound good," Shepard said. "But humans have issues with biotics too, Kaidan has some stories to tell about that." She looked at the spot on the side of his head again, softly poking at it. "And that biotics use implants put a stigma on implants too?"

"I never thought about it but, yes, that could be a contributing factor." He thought back to the stories he heard as a child, told by older children who watched vids that were not quite for their age. About biotics and killers that went crazy from implants, told in hushed voices as if they were real.

*Am I still influenced by spooky stories from my childhood?*

"I wish I could say that you don't have to do anything you don't want but..." Shepard huffed out a breath, "I'm afraid without an implant, you could turn into a liability. The combat team for Ilos has to be protected against the reaper signal."

"Don't even think about leaving me behind," Garrus interrupted her, "I'm getting that implant tomorrow no matter what."

Shepard placed a kiss on his mandible. "Alright."

Her omni-tool chimed and she checked the interface. "I'm meeting Dania and then we'll talk to Skeev's friend. I hope Dania can pick up on asari things that I would miss."

Garrus tried to stand up but Shepard pushed him down. "No, you keep taking your break and later..."

"I was going to check at C-Sec what they've heard and poke at some old informants," Garrus said, stretching back out on the couch.

"Good idea, I wonder how much of the geth and the reaper threat has transpired here on the Citadel."

She stood up but leaned back down to press a kiss on his mouthplates. He eagerly opened them to meet her tongue with his own. Her soft lips were hot and cold at the same time and she hummed as she nipped and sucked along his mouth. She sucked his tongue into her mouth and kept on humming. The vibration of her hum traveled straight down his spine and he thrummed a subharmonic answer of his own.

With a smacking sound she released his mouth and pressed her cheek against his mandible. "That hum, I want to hear that inside my body tonight, do you hear me, Mister?"

Garrus almost choked on his own tongue. "Yes, Ma'am, certainly."

She snickered and gave his mandible a small peck before she left, turning one last time at the door to act out a kiss to the air. Garrus had trouble falling asleep because he just kept on smiling.

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Chapter End Notes
- Reaper blocking signal inspired by Spyke1985=actually-fen-harel

- I'm aware that the expression "born in the wrong gender" is not the correct term but it
  would be what Garrus is calling it at this stage where he has not learned about less
  transphobic language

- I so want to write a story about SkeeV now. Oh, he actually features in Know Real
  Fear, where Jack has an interlude with a krogan who likes biotics!

- Leran deserves a story too

- and we have a new editor: divadevi8088. Applause!
Garrus had never seen so many asari on the Citadel.

Asari had always had a dominant presence on the Presidium but today it seemed like they were the only ones. All Garrus could see was blue skin everywhere.

By the time he had spoken to what felt like the entire department and all their friends at C-Sec, the Presidium had switched to the night cycle. The lake was lit with colorful lights with glittering patterns and the statues were illuminated with new floodlights. At this time of the artificial night, the promenade filled with people strolling around, looking for a place to eat or drink. Couples were holding hands and watching the lights in the lake.

It took him a while to make out the familiar shapes of Shepard and Nihlus at a table of an interspecies restaurant. Nihlus turned around, trilling a greeting at him. He hid his disfigured fringe under a headscarf that made him look regal and authoritative. But the familiar spark in his eyes and the lewd undertones in his subharmonics destroyed any notion of regality. "Come here, Garrus, come come," he shouted and it sounded like he was inviting him to a sexy party.

Garrus had to wind his way to their table around groups of asari, who stood quietly together and were talking to each other with hushed voices. He also noticed a turian C-Sec officer at the side of the restaurant, who was apparently checking the legality of a pistol that an asari was carrying.

Garrus let himself fall into a chair next to Shepard and trilled at her in greeting. Shepard answered his trill with a tone of herself and a smile. Nihlus sang out in mocking, "Now aren't you two just adorable? Singing and trilling like two little fledglings in love." He made another note of teasing but Garrus also heard how happy he was for them.

"Here, Garrus, I ordered us roasted Kalkenda with fresh Sirtberries from Thessia, you have to try it, it's quite delicious," Nihlus said and nudged the plate over to him. Garrus swallowed two pebbles from the decorative bowl next to his plate took one of the roasted lizards and a few berries and pressed them against his gums before swallowing. It did indeed taste very good and he savored the taste of fresh food for a change. As fresh as Kalkenda could be if it was not eaten alive like it was traditional.

"I haven't had fresh Sirtberries in a while," Garrus remarked.

"There’re many transports going to Thessia right now and when they return, they bring lots of fresh wares," Nihlus said.

"What's with the strict gun-control?" Shepard asked, pointing at the officer and the asari at the far wall. She twirled an orange stick of some fruit or vegetable around in a bowl of white sauce in front of her but seemed to have forgotten to actually eat it.

Nihlus turned around and looked at the officer. "Ah yes, I can explain. You may have noticed that I had Spectre level gun licenses transferred to your omni-tools as soon as you arrived on the Citadel."

"Yes, I had wondered about that but then forgot all about it over the discussion with the Council."
"Well, enough rumors of the geth and the Reaper threat have filtered down to the general public and people have begun to arm themselves. As it turns out, when more people have guns, more people die by guns."

"Funny how that works. Most nations on Earth have learned that too by now, we have almost planet-wide gun-control," Shepard said. She turned to Garrus. "Let me guess, no gun-control on Palaven?"

Garrus shook his head. "Or any of the colonies, no. Every turians is expected to take up arms to defend the Hierarchy at any time anyway."

Shepard laid her head to the side in thought. "Well, for a disciplined species like turians this might work but humans seem to be too impulsive for that."

"Asari can be very impulsive too," Nihlus said, "the recent rise of asari getting shot in private disputes was actually the main reason for the stricter gun-laws."

"Asari are shooting each other?" Garrus wondered. "During my time at C-Sec I had asari hurting each other with biotics most of the time, hardly ever with guns."

"There's something weird going on among asari, have you noticed how many asari are on the Citadel right now?" Shepard said.

"It's been that way for weeks now," Nihlus said, "they're waiting for transports to Thessia. The carriers have doubled their scheduled routes to and from Thessia. That's why we get so many fresh fruits from Thessia."

"Dania told me about that," Shepard said, "it looks like some asari, not everyone but some of a certain standing and... well – isolation I guess, have received a 'call home'."

"Isolation?" Garrus asked.

"I don't know how else to describe it, Dania for instance has not received such a message. She has lots of contact with other species like turians and humans. Maybe she is seen as a security risk?"

Nihlus lowered his voice, "It's like a secret message. Calling asari home – but for what?"

"I don't know," Shepard said equally quiet, "Dania has been trying to find out what's going on but she said it's really eerie how old friends suddenly avoid her and how the few she talks to change the subject whenever she tries to find out what is going on. She says she feels alienated."

"I know what she means," Nihlus said, his voice unusually glum. He pointed his chin toward an asari with white symmetrical markings who stood in a group, waiting for a table. "I know her. Watch."

He raised his glass towards the asari in a toast and for a second as she saw him, she reacted in a smile, even turned as if she wanted to go towards him to greet him. But then her eyes moved to his company and the smile fell off her face. With a sudden jerk she turned her back to Nihlus and pretended to engage in the conversation between her friends.

"That's not the first time I've had that kind of reaction," Nihlus said under his breath. "Asari friends, who I thought I knew well, don't return my calls anymore, brush me off, pretend to not see me when we run into each other."

Garrus leaned forward to keep their conversation private at their table, suddenly feeling like he was at a conspiratorial meeting in enemy territory among all the asari around them. "Asari used to pride
themselves on their interest and open mindedness towards other species. Not only for sexual reasons. This is a weird shift for them."

"I bet this has something to do with the old Amathe religion and matriarchs like Benezia." Shepard had kept her voice very low but two asari standing close to her turned their head on her mentioning that name.

"Anybody else feel like we should go somewhere else?" Nihlus said and hummed low in his subharmonics.

"Agreed," said Shepard and Garrus hummed his agreement. He gestured to a waiter to pack up their food and stood up. A group of asari immediately gravitated towards their table and they had to shoulder their way towards the door. When they got their packed up food and left, Garrus looked over his shoulder and noticed that the room was now exclusively filled with asari.

Outside, they walked over to the lake and settled down on a lonely bench. Shepard chewed on her orange vegetable stick, making weird crunchy noises with her teeth.

"That sounds ridiculous, my dear," Nihlus said.

"What, me chewing?" Shepard said and crunched even louder towards him. "Not everyone gobbles their food up whole, some people have to chew before the food reaches the stomach."

"One wonders what you even have a stomach for if it is not grinding down your food."

"We have acid in our stomach to liquefy our food."

Nihlus and Garrus stared at her. Nihlus shook his head, "Spirits, you humans are terrifying," he mumbled.

"Well, I don't even want to think about how that works with your gizzard and the pebbles you swallow," Shepard said and shuddered as she watched Garrus and Nihlus each swallow a Kalkenda whole. "Anyway, let's get back to our asari conspiracy. I talked to Skeev's girlfriend with Dania. She was very... strange."

"How strange?"

"She was so nervous, she was practically shaking and whenever we tried to go deeper into something, she changed the subject. It was really disturbing, she was like... like... almost like something stopped her from talking about certain things."

"I got the same feeling when I talked to one of my friends," Nihlus said, "she just ignored what I asked. Even Leo noticed that."

Shepard pinched the ridge of her nose. "So, let's go with this, asari are getting called back home and are not allowed to talk about why and who ordered that. Am I the only one who thinks that this has something to do with the Reapers?"

Garrus hummed in accord. "It would be too much of a coincidence otherwise."

"I wonder if Liara knows anything about this?" she said, scratching at the corner of her lips. Garrus found that very distracting and looked over to Nihlus.

"If there is some kind of ranking," Nihlus mused, "in how much an asari is involved with other species, Liara would probably have a high risk ranking, being a member of your crew."
"Still," Shepard raised a finger, "she's the daughter of Benezia and I have a feeling that Matriarch Benezia had an influential position in that religious... conclave? Sect? Whatever it is called. Her name may still mean something." She opened her omni-tool. "I'll send her a message, let's see what she can find out."

Soon after Shepard had sent off her message, they decided to call it a day and make their way back to the Normandy. The Presidium was still bustling with asari and a few other species, who looked slightly bewildered by all the shades of blue around them.

They passed a Keeper, Shepard once again making a wide berth around it. It was working on one of the Keeper consoles that no one else had ever been able to access. Nihlus ignored it like everyone who lived on the Citadel long enough but when he was right next to it, it suddenly emitted a shaky beep and turned around in a disjointed movement.

Nihlus jumped, "Stercesti, what?" He stared at the Keeper, who was extending its long upper extremities towards him as if it was trying to grab him. Nihlus stumbled backwards, trying to get away from the sharp, claw-like appendages. The Keeper was beeping and wheezing, trying to walk forward on legs that didn't quite seem to listen to it. As Nihlus scrambled to get away from it, the Keeper got stuck on a support structure and beeped loudly. It kept waving its claws towards Nihlus until he had reached a certain distance. Then it froze, shuddered and walked back to the console. It attached itself to the console and seemed to be oblivious to its surroundings again.

"What in the blazing Spirits was that?" Garrus blurted out, looking at Nihlus who just made a weak trill, indicating that he had no idea.

A groan behind them made them turn around. Shepard was getting up from the floor where she had been kneeling, holding her head. Garrus hurried over to her, helping her up.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Major fucking, nail-gun shooting wild in brain fucking headache from hell," Shepard groaned out between her teeth.

"I've never seen a Keeper reacting to anybody," Nihlus said, "and your headache could indicate that it was transmitting something."

"It must be the Reaper signal block you have implanted that it reacted to."

Nihlus hand went up to the disfigured side of his fringe, feeling for the circular implant with his talon. "We should test that theory, I'm going to go close to it again."

"Whoa, hold it," Shepard called out, "let me get far, far away from you first. One headache like that was enough." She jogged up a walkway and moved up to a balcony overlooking the path they were on. She gave a thumbsup and Nihlus took slow steps toward the Keeper. He held his arm with his glowing omni-tool in front of him as if he carried a shield.

Garrus scanned the Keeper with his omni-tool. As always, its signals were low in energy and appeared to be scrambled, randomized. No one had ever managed to make sense of them. He saw a signal coming from Nihlus, a normal signal peak from his armor. The new implant didn't show up on his scan among the normal 'noise'.

The Keeper didn't react to Nihlus, it kept on working at the interface and its signals didn't change. Until Nihlus was about two steps away – Garrus' omni-tool gave a beep as the translucent display suddenly filled up with an array of signals, patterns he had never seen before. The Keeper turned
again and stalked towards Nihlus, its upper appendages extended and twitching. Nihlus took a step backwards but then stopped himself and Garrus could see in his display that he turned on his shields. He looked up to Shepard. She stared at her own omni-tool, to Garrus’ relief apparently unaffected by the Keeper.

The Keeper twitched, its legs shuddering as it took small steps towards Nihlus. It didn’t quite stop when it reached Nihlus, rather it bumped into him and its hind legs kept on trying to walk forward. Nihlus’ shield shimmered golden around him as it stopped the Keeper from touching him.

Garrus alternated between looking at his omni-tool and at Nihlus. The Keeper was still sending out a dense signal. He tried to remember what the pattern reminded him of when it suddenly stopped. The Keeper stepped to the side and made a strange whistle. Garrus could see a new signal on his scan as the Keeper made to walk out to the main walkway. But when it reached a certain distance to Nihlus, the signal disappeared, the Keeper stilled, shuddered and turned around with a jerk and returned to its station.

Garrus kept on scanning it but the Keeper disappeared among the background noise. It ignored them again. Garrus saved the file of the scan and let some analyzing algorithms loose on it.

They quickly made their way to the Normandy, all three of them dividing their attention between winding their way through the groups of asari on the walkways and the read-out from their omni-tools.

"You got anything off it?" Shepard asked in the elevator. Both Nihlus and Garrus hummed negatively. "Me neither. Maybe Tali can get something out of it." She typed on her omni-tool, probably sending the file to the quarian right away.

Tali was already on the Normandy when they arrived, her console brightly lit and her omni-tool flickering. She just nodded at them and kept on working as she spoke. "The Keeper did send out a direct signal, this was not just a random broadcast. I'm sure it was trying to communicate something to you specifically."

"It reacted to the Reaper block as if it recognized it," Shepard said.

"Yes, it looks like the Reaper block has triggered a response, something like an emergency signal. I'm comparing it to all signal patterns we know."

"Could it be a geth-signal?" Garrus asked.

Tali shook her head and her speaker flickered. "No, the geth still use signals that are similar to the original quarian systems, only with new encoding. This is very different."

Shepard kneaded her lower lip as she often did when she was thinking. "Did you compare it to the readings we got from the beacons on Eden Prime and Virmire?"

Tali shifted her stance and her body language indicated frustration. "My scans from the beacon on Virmire are gone, just like yours. I don't have access to the Alliance data from Eden Prime."

Shepard cursed quietly and entered a long line of commands into her omni-tool. "There, that's everything from Eden Prime. I copied it to your console here on board."

"Won't you get in trouble for that? I'm a quarian after all and not a member of the Alliance." Tali asked, her eyes so wide that they were visible behind her mask.

Shepard let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "If what we believe is true, Saren
and Sovereign are threatening the galaxy. And if a bunch of people don't pull their heads out of their asses, we might end up having to steal this ship. What's a few military secrets compared to that?"

Tali made a squeak unlike anything Garrus had heard before and he wondered briefly if this was how quarians sounded without translator modules. The gravity of what Shepard had said was slowly sinking in and he couldn't stop a subharmonic growl. He had been vaguely aware that if the council kept stalling them, they would have to do something drastic. But hearing it put into words like that was something different.

Stealing the flagship of the Alliance, a Council vessel at that! He was all for bending the rules a little but this was not only a career suicide, this could get them charged with high treason and land them all in prison.

He listened for a reaction like his own from Nihlus but heard nothing. When he saw how calm the Spectre was he realized that Nihlus had been aware of these implications from the beginning. Maybe he had already planned this with Keggs even before their meeting with the Council.

"That's the plan? Stealing the Normandy?" he blurted out, his voice vibrating with conflicting emotions in his subharmonics.

Shepard looked at him with a forced smile. "If you have any better ideas, I'm all ears. We're stuck here and nobody is doing anything. If Saren gets access to some kind of super weapon on Ilos, the Reapers will kill everyone in this galaxy. I know it sounds crazy but I've seen them do it, I see it in the visions. They've done it before, killed every civilized being in the galaxy and they will do it again." She looked at him with pleading eyes. "I don't know why this task has fallen to me but if I can stop the death of billions, the fall of the galaxy with this ship, do I even have a choice?"

Garrus swallowed the lump in his throat and stepped in front of her. "You are wrong about one thing," he said and raised his hand for a turian salute. "This task has not just fallen to you but to all of us. We are all with you."

"Please think about this," Shepard said quietly, "you're risking everything, your job, your reputation, your chances of becoming a Spectre one day..."

Garrus kept his talon on his cowl in salute. "There is not much of a career to be had in a dead galaxy. And my reputation in the turian Hierarchy is not my concern."

Nihlus trilled a sarcastic tone. "The kind of turians who care for their reputation in the Hierarchy are not the kind of turians you like, Shepard."

Shepard placed her hand on her chest in a turian salute and nodded at Garrus. He let his hand drop and almost leaned forward to press his forehead against hers. But he stopped himself, that could wait until they had time to themselves.

"Thank you," she said quietly and her eyes were shining. "If it comes to that, if we have to steal the Normandy, I'm gonna ask for volunteers and let the rest of the crew stay on the Citadel."

"Do you think they won't follow you?" Garrus wondered.

Nihlus laughed out. "This is your crew, Shepard, they will follow you. Don't even doubt that."

"You can't be sure of that. Treason is no easy matter."

Nihlus hummed reassuringly. "Your crew, Shepard. Explain it to them and they will follow."
Shepard looked like she was still in doubt but she nodded. "Before we can worry about that, we need a way to get the Normandy out of the docking bay and to the relay. The docking clamps are secured by council order and C-Sec's relay guard won't let us waltz out of the Widow system either. And the guns need to work."

Nihlus scrolled through messages on his omni-tool. "Didn't Leran send you an update?"

Shepard checked her omni-tool and her expression brightened. "Oh, I must have overlooked that, they're making good progress on the new programs. Leran promises that the guns will work with 99% precision after calibrating."

"I'd like to get familiar with the new programs," Garrus said, "then I can take care of the programs and the calibrations on our way to Ilos."

"Yes, good idea. Join Leran and Mirhale in the forward battery. Tali," she turned to the quarian, who was already working on her console again, "you keep analyzing that Keeper signal and all other signals we have from Sovereign and the geth. I'm going to collect the scans from the crew for the Reaper block -"

"No, have someone else do that," Nihlus interrupted, "check your messages, Anderson wants to see us, he might have a solution to our docking clamps problem."

"Captain Anderson?" Shepard called out, "you can't involve him, he can't risk his career like that!"

"It was his idea," Nihlus said. "Keggs and I have been meeting with him for days. He knows what's at stake, he believes you, Shepard. He's our access to get the grounding order revoked on Council level."

"But... not the Captain," Shepard said almost inaudible.

"It is his decision," Nihlus said. "He wants to meet us at Flux right now."

"Alright," Shepard said and tapped her voice interface behind her ear. "Kaidan? Are you back on the Normandy?" She waited for his answer and ordered him to meet them at the docking bay so that she could copy the scan program to his omni-tool.

Outside of the Normandy, Kaidan Alenko waited for them and let Shepard copy the program to his omni-tool. Shepard ordered him to scan everyone on the crew and send the scans immediately to Pauline. He accepted the order but looked a bit uncomfortable.

"Commander, may I speak plainly?" he asked with his back perfectly straight.

"Of course, Lieutenant."

"With the Normandy grounded, what is the point of this Reaper block? Saren isn't here."

"I'll explain later," Shepard said. "Collect the scans of those who are willing to receive the enhancement and let everyone know that they can't stay without it. The Reaper block is mandatory to serve on the Normandy. My orders."

"Understood, Commander." Kaidan gave a short nod and turned to step into the Normandy at a brisk pace.

Garrus turned to Shepard as soon as Kaidan was out of earshot. "What will Kaidan say to our plan?"
"You mean stealing the ship? Mr. By-the-book himself?" Shepard made a snorting sound. "I'm not keeping my hopes up. He's had enough trouble in the Alliance as a biotic, I'm sure he doesn't need this mark on his career."

He had to agree with that, it was hard to imagine that Kaidan would break the rules like that. Which was a damn shame because his phenomenal biotic abilities would have been useful against Saren's biotic attacks.

"I thought you wanted to work on the guns?" Shepard asked quietly as they made their way back to the Lower Wards, winding through crowds of asari. Some were in agitated discussion, others stood around rather aimlessly. Garrus felt their looks on him and it made his plates itch. They weren't threatening, at least not yet but they looked like they just needed a small spark to turn to attack.

Garrus kept looking at the crowds, estimating their level of aggression like he had done during his C-Sec days. "That can wait, I'd rather – you know – see how we get out of here."

"Yeah, I know what you mean, we're wasting so much time here."

"We have to wait for the reaper block and working guns anyway," Garrus said, straining his ears to listen to the conversations around him. It seemed to be normal, everyday stuff but the looks they were giving them told a different story. "As long as those things aren't done, we are not really wasting time."

"I just hope we won't be too late. Whatever Saren does or finds on Ilos, I just don't want to be too late for it." Shepard took his hand for a moment and squeezed it. Garrus saw her shoulders relax and she let out a long breath before letting go. A tiny sound of happiness escaped his subharmonics, knowing how his support, him just being there, helped her.

Captain Anderson had messaged them to meet him in the Flux bar. Flux had always been frequented by many humans and they at least didn't act any differently. Anderson waved them over to his table at the large window that overlooked the Ward stretching towards the center ring of the Citadel. A magnificent view that none of them paid attention to.

"Captain?" Shepard said respectfully as she sat down next to him. He looked tired, and his hair was sticking out from his head as if he had raked through it with his hand too many times. The dark rings under his eyes stood out even on his dark skin.

Nihlus and Garrus sat down and they all leaned forward over the small, circular table and shielded their conversation from the other patrons.

"Captain, Sir," Shepard said, "when did you last sleep?"

Anderson smiled weakly. "I'm not even sure."

"I told him to just grab some sleep here and there," Nihlus said, "but you humans are just too set on one long stretch of uninterrupted sleep at night for hours! Who has time for that?"

"The one good thing that came with the bloody desk job was the regular sleep, I'm not going to change back to N7-bulkhead sleep now," Anderson grumbled and hid a yawn behind his hand. To Garrus' surprise, Shepard joined right in with a yawn of her own.

"Not fair with the yawning, Sir," Shepard said and shook herself. Garrus had no idea what she was talking about and made a mental note to ask her about yawning later. Shepard looked around in the bar. "Where is Keggs?"
"If he isn't here, not even special asari interrogations can get anything useful out of him," Nihlus said gravely.

A shocked silence spread out at their table. Interrogations by asari mind melds were more akin to mind torture and absolutely illegal in Citadel space. But the rumors of them still being used never stopped.

"You think...?" Garrus couldn't quite finish the question and stared at Nihlus in disbelief.

"Some bad stuff is going on, my friends, more than you are aware of," Nihlus said and Garrus felt more than heard his warning subharmonics.

"There's been some strange reports coming over my desk," Anderson said, "Admiral Hackett keeps asking me for reports and intel."

"Well, good to know that he's not just bugging me all the time. Sir, Nihlus said you may have an idea how to get the Normandy free." Shepard made a short pause and lowered her voice when she continued. "I assume, technically we still would have to steal the ship."

"Technically you would be correct," Anderson said. "I can issue an order to release the Normandy through the Alliance but that would not overrule the Council order. Udina could overrule those orders but—"

"— my special friend Udina, right," Shepard said with an angry grin. "I'm sure he's pissing himself in glee that he could outmaneuver us like that. No way in hell that he will release the Normandy on my suggestion."

"I could issue the command from his terminal in his office," Anderson said.

Shepard raised one eyebrow in question. "Without him noticing?"

"I'm tempted to just punch him in the face," the Captain said, his hands on the table closing into fists.

"With all due respect Sir, that's a stupid idea," Shepard said, shaking her head.

"Can I punch him in the face?" Nihlus asked, trilling in happy anticipation.

"No one punches the human ambassador, especially no turian," Shepard said with a sigh, "the relations are strained enough as it is."

"Diplomacy stercus, so annoying," Nihlus mumbled, humming a string of subharmonic curses.

"Maybe you could distract him," Anderson said to Nihlus, "I just need access to the terminal on Udina's desk, to issue the command in his name."

"He'll notice that eventually," Garrus said, quite familiar with the data trail that every terminal collected and saved on the Citadel servers. He had solved many cases with data like that, even if often, too often the lawyers and shady practices had taken the cases out of his hands.

"Yeah, our window of opportunity is not very big," Shepard scrolled through the messages on her omni-tool and smiled. "Captain Martel just agreed to be our distraction, he can be here in 20 hours. Once the cannons work and everyone on the crew has the reaper block, we are good to go."

"Can we get the reaper block on everyone in 20 hours?" Garrus asked.

Nihlus grinned. "Pauline already has 100 enhancements for humans and about 20 for asari
preprinted. That will be plenty for the crew and the people at ANIS, they just need to be
programmed. Pauline is working on that as we speak. The turian implants take longer but she already
has one for you and one for Keggs.”

Garrus nodded, suppressing the queasy feeling in his gizzard about an implant under his fringe.

"So, let's see how this will go down." Shepard looked around the table and lowered her voice.
"Nihlus and Anderson visit Udina, Nihlus distracts him and Anderson issues the release command.
The docking clamps release, we take off like a cat on fire and go into stealth. Then Captain Martel's
Ferdele will cause some kind of chaos, keeping Citadel Traffic Control distracted until we have to
drop stealth to jump the relay. Once we're inside the relay network, we have to keep going in direct
jumps so that they can't lock us down at another port. There's just one problem though – we need
fuel."

"I'm afraid that's not your only problem," Nihlus said. "The Normandy is pretty famous by now,
Citadel Traffic Control will most likely ask for confirmation when they receive the release
command."

"Maybe Captain Martel's distraction will prevent that?" Garrus said hopefully.

Shepard shook her head, "Too risky, I would rather have someone in there to maybe prevent the
confirmation being asked. Do we know anybody at CTC?"

Nihlus made a thoughtful hum, "Not quite at CTC but Leran is with Citadel Technical Support, he
could probably do something to the terminal so that the release order gets approved automatically. At
least the turians at CTC probably won't even look at him, he can pretty much do what he wants."

Shepard made a surprised sound in the back of her throat. "Why won't they look at him?"

"Embarrassment?" Nihlus said with an uncertain trill. "We don't like asking personal questions or
dealing with differences. You know how turians say that we don't care how you live as long as you
fulfill your duty to the Hierarchy? That also means that we like to ignore things we don't want to deal
with or don't want to look into. Leran could be almost invisible in a way."

"As shitty as that is," Shepard said with a frown, "it could help us in our situation." She checked her
omni-tool. "I would like to hinge this all on Captain Martel's arrival. Once the SSV Ferdele comes
out of the relay, we have to get going. I'm giving you all the countdown for their arrival. I'm not sure
what they will do but I bet we have to move quickly."

They all agreed, synchronized the countdown across their omni-tools and left the bar. Garrus and
Shepard hurried back to the Normandy where they explained to Leran what he had to do and gave
him the countdown timer as well. The turian, who looked like a woman but sounded like a man,
agreed eagerly, only a hint of fear lacing his subharmonics.

Shepard left to find a way of fueling the Normandy to capacity. She had put her hopes in Keggs at
ANIS to provide her with a discrete way of putting fuel into the ship. Garrus stayed with Leran and
Mirhale and studied the cannon's software. It took him a while to get into but he was relieved to find
that his background in game programming helped him in analyzing the algorithms.

Hours later, he hadn't even realized how long he had stayed, enchanted by the elegance of the
algorithms, he went into the mess hall in search for Shepard and something to eat. The ship was
quiet, it was the sleeping shift for the human crew. Only a few people manned their stations and even
Joker had left his chair to sleep somewhere.
He found Shepard in the captain's cabin, busy writing reports and sorting through pictures and recordings from her omni-tool. She told him to wait a bit and he laid down on the bed, watching her at the desk. The bright lights from the Citadel and the purple shine of the Widow nebula poured through the window and formed a halo around her head. It wasn't the warm light of the sunset on Palaven but it was still beautiful. He fell asleep before he could tell her that.

At some point during the night, Shepard must have crawled into bed with because he woke up with her pressed against his back. That was unusual, Shepard never really cuddled but now she had one arm thrown over his ribs and her face pressed against his cowl. He took great care not to wake her as he twisted his neck to look at her. She was asleep, breathing deeply and her eyes were moving behind her eyelids. After once waking her because he had thought that the moving eyes meant that she was almost awake, she had grumpily explained to him that this phase was actually the deepest and healthiest phase of sleep. He had sworn to never disturb her during that phase again. Which meant that he now had to stay where he was even though he was wide awake.

He pulled out his arm and adjusted his position so that he could work with his omni-tool. With time to spare and no access to the programming algorithms he had learned about today, he decided to continue the letter to his sister Solana that he had started awhile ago. So much had happened and he didn't even know where to start.

*How do you write about a rogue Spectre, a famous turian at that, who threatens to hand the galaxy over to a sentient machine?*

It felt like he should warn her about the possible doom. But how could he do that? Where could she go? If Saren was successful and if Sovereign hadn't exaggerated, every person in this galaxy was under threat. There was no place to run to.

Chapter End Notes

Closer and closer we are getting to the grand finale!

Big thanks to divadevi8088 once again for editing this chapter.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Well well well. In hilarious news, someone on ff.net was angry with me for writing about gun control in the last chapter. I find that so funny, of all the things to get angry about... This isn't Texas in space, sorry. Never was, never will be.

Anyway, let's have some sex, shall we?

Big thanks to divadevi8808 for beta reading!

Shepard's omni-tool buzzed to wake her and it startled Garrus awake. At some point in the night he must have drifted off again. He felt Shepard stir behind him, wrapping herself tighter in her blanket after turning off the alarm. He turned over to face her and combed through her hair with his talons.

Shepard purred and pressed against his touch. "That feels good," she murmured into her blanket. She stretched her neck and Garrus admired that beautiful curve.

He leaned over to nuzzle into that curve, taking in her scent. She sighed happily, leaning her head to the side to give him access to that area above her collarbone that he loved so much. He lightly licked along that elegant slope of soft skin, reveling in her shudder and quiet moan.

"Do you think we have time...?" he asked, keeping his nose pressed into her neck.

Shepard stretched and twisted her body until she faced him. She kissed along his mandible and let her tongue play around the tip. "I hope so," she whispered, pressing her hips against his. Her hands found his waist, playing over the sensitive skin there and she kept kissing his face and neck.

Garrus groaned, desire making his head swim. He sat up to lean against the wall and she followed him and straddled him. Her knees pressed into his sensitive sides and he could feel her wetness on his softening plates. She was only wearing a shirt and it scrunched up around her waist.

Their intimacy was well practiced by now, their movements in harmony. Where his body was angular and hard, her body was soft and flexible. Where he held her tight, she molded against him. Just from the way she angled her hips he knew what she intended and he didn't need to look down to know how she offered herself so that she could take him inside.

Her moans and gasps sounded like erotic subharmonics and he answered in his own. He tipped her over, trying to set a faster pace. He didn't mean to rush towards their release but the need was so urgent, so overwhelming. She clung to him, just as needy and desperate as him, gasping and chanting incoherent words. He knew by the way she held onto him and undulated her hips that she was rubbing her most sensitive parts on his genital plates and he held on with all his will to wait – wait for her, to feel her and he almost couldn't do it – the flow – the dance so wild and rushing and then he felt her clench and she moaned and he finally let go, tumbling over the crest of his release with her, his forehead pressed to hers and her name in his breath.

They rolled to the side and Garrus had to catch Jane by her shoulders to stop her from falling out of the bed. She laughed and kissed the softer skin under his eye. "Thank you, my savior."
"Thanks for the sex or the catch?"

Jane laughed and pressed another kiss under his eyes. "Both, my Angel, both." She sprinkled tiny kisses along the blue marks on his face. Garrus wondered where her sudden fascination with his markings came from but a chime from her omni-tool interrupted them.

Shepard sat up and laid her head to the side like she always did when she listened to the audio over her communicator implant. It seemed to be a recording because she didn't answer in any way. She jumped out of bed while listening and ran towards the bathroom. Her omni-tool flared up as she typed in commands, which severely hindered her efforts at brushing her teeth.

Garrus joined her in the bathroom to use his own cleaning utensils. She looked up to him, white foam around her lips and her toothbrush buzzing in her hand and said, "That was a relayed recording from Captain Martel via the last comm buoy they passed. According to their calculations, they'll be here in 3 hours so we better get this show on the road."

Her toothbrush was flinging tiny specks of white foam around. Garrus snickered and wiped some toothpaste away that was sliding down her breast. "Maybe you should concentrate on doing one thing at the time, Sunshine."

Shepard spit foam into the sink and sneered at him, "Oh stop it, you sound just like aunt Marianne, she used to say that all the time."

"She must be a very patient woman," Garrus said. He ducked to narrowly avoid a sponge being thrown at him.

Shepard finished cleaning her teeth and washed herself. As she used a towel to wipe the moisture off her water-repellent skin, she stared thoughtfully at the wall. "You know, she really was very patient, aunt Marianne," she said after a while. "I never really thanked her for it."

Garrus swallowed as a stab of pain in his gizzard reminded him of his own break-up with his family. In a way, Shepard and him were now much alike, they both had broken with their roots and past to live as far away as possible from their families.

"Maybe, after all of this is over, we could visit her, you know, just to talk," Garrus said.

Shepard looked at him and he couldn't decipher the expression on her face before she said, "You think we..." she stopped herself and a forced looking smile appeared on her face. "Yes, why not, we could do that." She turned and left the bathroom to dress herself.

Garrus watched her dumbfounded and replayed what she had said in his mind. She had looked upset, hopeless.

And then it hit him.

*She thinks she will not survive. She thinks she will die fighting Saren on Ilos.*

He hurried after her. "Wait!"

She was already at the door, practically fleeing from him. He held out his hand and waited till she took it and let herself pulled back towards him.

"What?" she asked.

"Don't."
"Don't what?"

"Don't go into this to die."

She stared at him for a moment and her eyes darkened in anger. "No! I don't... , no. We can't have this conversation, not us! No."

"Don't cut me out like this," Garrus blurted out, harsher than he intended. "This is about us, you can't deny me a conversation about it."

"Deny you a conversation?" Shepard asked, her voice pitched high in confusion.

"Am I your mate or not? We are together in more than just..." he looked over to the bed and his anger evaporated. He reminded himself that he was probably missing some human facial cues and the whole range of subharmonics a turian would add. "Do humans not talk to each other about their worries?"

She took a deep breath and her face softened. Her hand, raised as if she wanted to punch him, lowered slowly. "Of course we do, it's just not easy...." She put her hand on his cheek. "I guess I'm not a good example when it comes to talking about things. This is what I do, what we do. We both know what it means to be a soldier and there is no promise, no guarantee –"

"I know," Garrus interrupted her.

"And I dragged you into this," she whispered.

"You think I would have been safer at C-Sec?"

"No, I would worry about you just the same," she sighed.

"Jane."

"Jane." He held out his hand and she took it, her thumb stroking over the back of his hand. "We always knew this, we always knew how dangerous our lives are. All I'm asking is that you don't go into this to throw your life away."

She pulled herself closer and rested her head against his collar. "And I ask you for the same."

"I promise."

She looked up to him. "I will be careful if you remember to duck."

Garrus stretched his neck. "Hey I'm a big guy, I can't hide like you pyjacks."

"Who are you calling a pyjack?"

Garrus laughed, a rumble in his gizzard telling of his relief that the tension between them was gone. "I would never. I heard Wrex say it."

"Yeah, right." She smiled to him and picked up her jacket. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, let me just put on my boots," Garrus said and sat down on the desk chair.

Shepard watched as he slipped into the boots, smiling at him. There was something in the way she looked that made him want to continue their conversation but now was just not the right time.

They hurried to the secret medical facility and Shepard immediately engaged Dr. Chakwas and Pauline in a conversation. Tali was sitting on a gurney, typing on her omni-tool and Garrus went
over to her.

"Did Pauline make an implant for you?" he asked her.

Tali looked up and laid her head to the side. "As Pauline said, my whole suit is basically a neural implant with all the connections we have. Getting the reaper block enhancement integrated was the easiest thing she's done, she said."

"And does it work?"

"I think so yes," Tali said and put a recording on her omni-tool. It showed the caged husk, rushing towards the glimmering mass effect containment field. Right in front of the camera, held by Tali he realized, the husk suddenly stopped and its distorted face looked confused. It was only a moment before the humanoid monster regained whatever remained of its senses and ran straight into the barrier but it had definitely reacted to the reaper block.

"Are you ready to receive your implant now?" Dr. Chakwas said to him. Shepard gave him an encouraging smile.

Garrus hummed positively and walked over to the chair they had used for Nihlus' implantation yesterday. Shepard came to his side and took his hand.

She leaned down to whisper in his ear, "Are you nervous?"

"Yes," he said, suppressing the jittery rumble of his subharmonics. He trusted Dr. Chakwas but he still was a bit anxious about the whole concept of neural implants under his fringe.

Nihlus strolled in, a bright headscarf in daring blue and purple draped over his fringe. "Ah, I see you're getting ready to join my exclusive club."

Keggs pushed past him and gave a nod to the other people in the room. "Not that exclusive," he murmured, poking a bandage on the side of his head with a talon. Apparently Garrus was the last turian in their group to receive the implant.

Pauline packed a technical looking box with hand drawn red hearts on it and closed it with a snap. "I'm heading to the Normandy to install the enhancements on the human crew."

"How many of the crew have agreed to receive them?" Shepard asked.

Pauline smiled at her, "All of them."

"Do they even know what it means to stay on the Normandy for what we're planning?" Shepard said, looking around as if she asked for confirmation.

"Yes they do, what did you expect?"

Nihlus shook his head, "Why are you even surprised? This is your crew."

Shepard sighed, a soft blush spreading on her cheeks. "Well, I guess the cat is out of the bag now. Let's just hope this all works. Pauline, when you're done can you please visit Ashley in the hospital and install the reaper block on her implant too?"

"Sure," Pauline said and left with a smile.

Dr. Chakwas turned her attention to Garrus. "I need to put you under anesthetics to connect the implant, alright?"
"Just a minute please, doctor," Garrus said and caught Shepard's look. She leaned over and Dr. Chakwas stepped away to give them some privacy.

"Don't worry, it will be done in no time – "

"I know," Garrus interrupted, "I just wanted to... when we are through with all of this and are on the way to Ilos..."

"When we successfully turned to a life of crime," Shepard continued with a smile.

"Yes, when all that is done, we'll have a bit of downtime until we reach Ilos and I would like to have dinner with you then, just you and me."

"Like a romantic date?" Shepard asked with her eyes drawn wide.

Garrus nodded, "Yes, I think it has a special name, I've read about it... candlelight?"

"A candlelight dinner!" Shepard smiled at him, bright and beautiful. "You're such a romantic, it's unbelievable."

"I don't quite understand what open flames have to do with the romantic setting though," he admitted.

"No candles on Palaven?"

Garrus shook his head. "It's doesn't get dark for a long time on Palaven anyway and the fires of our ancestors were torches or jars with Sinu-fat and scales from Brin."

"I'm pretty sure that's how candles have started on Earth, with whale fat and stuff like that." She took his hand and her thumb stroked over it. "I think we can manage without open flames."

"Good," Garrus said and laid his head back. Dr. Chakwas came back and placed a mask over his face. He kept looking at Shepard until his eyes fell closed.

"Wake up, Garrus," a soft voice said close to his ear just a moment later. "Come one, it wasn't that much anesthetic."

He opened his eyes to see Shepard smiling at him and for a moment he wasn't sure if he was dreaming.

"Is it done?"

"Yes, all done, can you feel something?"

Garrus tried to focus on any new sensations in his head but he didn't know what to feel for. "How would I... What am I supposed to feel?"

Shepard looked thoughtful, like she was looking into her own head. "I don't know how to describe it but there is something... I can feel that my implant is connected."

Garrus closed his eyes and poked his mind in any way he knew. Something was there, something felt different but he couldn't say what. He hummed, testing if the new thing reacted to his subharmonics and he heard Shepard giggle. He opened his eyes to see her muffling the sound of her laughter with her hand.

She leaned forward and whispered into his ear, "I'm glad your sexy hum still works alright."
Garrus grabbed her shoulder and pulled her towards him, pressing his forehead against hers. Immediately the tension fell from his shoulders. The softness of her skin, her warmth, the way her scent mixed with his marking scent – it felt like home.

Dr. Chakwas clearing her throat behind them made them break apart after endless seconds. "I would just like to say that the procedure went well and that you are fit for duty but I need to be informed if you feel anything strange."

"Yes, doctor," Garrus said with a quiet hum for Shepard.

"Dr. Chakwas?" a familiar voice called from the entrance to the laboratory. Liara stood there, wringing her hands.

The doctor gestured towards her to come to her desk. "I have your enhancement module here, it will slot right into your biotic amp."

Garrus noticed that Shepard stared at Liara just like him. There was something strange about her, she looked unfamiliar. Her face seemed to be much rounder, her fringe strangely soft.

"Liara?" Shepard called to her and stepped closer to her. "Did you change something... something about you?"

"What are you talking about?" Liara asked, looking down on her clothes.

"Nevermind," Shepard said. "I'll see you later. Garrus?" She turned to him and he jumped out of the chair to follow her as she sped out of the laboratory. They were silent until they were outside of the building. Shepard grabbed his arm and pulled him over to a corner under some trees at the lake.

"Did you see it too? How different she looked?" Shepard said to him, her eyes wide.

"Yes! She looked..." he stopped and looked at the many asari he could see from their corner. "They all look different!" Every asari in their vicinity looked softer, rounder.

Shepard turned around to follow his line of sight. "You are right! They look more... scaly."

Garrus shook his head. "Their skin always had scales but now they look rounder and more rubbery."

"Rubbery?" Shepard turned to him. "Is it possible that asari have always looked differently to you than to me?"

Garrus thought about that for a moment, remembering some conversations he had had in his time at C-Sec. "You know, a salarian colleague once told me that asari looked like salarians to him. Frank thought that was really weird."

"It is." Shepard leaned on the balustrade to the lake, looking at the water. "Did asari brainwash everyone to look attractive to them?"

"And now with the reaper block it doesn't work anymore?"

"That's the only thing that changed for both of us. But why does blocking the reaper frequency result in this?"

"What is the connection?" Garrus asked, checking off his mental checklist like he used to do at C-Sec. "It can't be anything new, our society has been in contact with the asari for about 800 years and I never heard of a record of them looking differently. They have always been considered attractive.
Although...

"What?"

"There is this phenomenon that asari look differently in pictures sometimes, it's one of those things that everyone kind of takes as given, you know?"

"Like how everyone always looks terrible on their IDs?" Shepard asked.

"That's a universal thing?"

"Apparently," Shepard said with a shrug and looked around again. "I guess we just have to get used to it, it's not like they look hideous now. But I really would like to know why blocking a reaper brainwave pattern has an effect on how we perceive asari." Her omni-tool chimed just as she was typing in notes. "Shit, fuck," she spit out.

"What is it?" Garrus strained his neck to see what had made her upset.

"The asari councilor wants to speak to us, of all people. Our distraction will be here soon, we don't have time for a lengthy meeting with the Council."

"Does it say Council meeting or is it just her?"

Shepard checked the message again. "Huh, it's only her it seems. I wonder what that means? I think..." she rapidly scrolled through the contacts on her omni-tool, "I think we need reaper-blocking support for that." She laid a finger on her subdermal comm-speaker behind her ear and waited for an answer.

"Doctor," she said, obviously talking to Dr. Chakwas, "has Dania Va'sida of ANIS received her reaper block already? Thank you." She initiated another call. "Dania, can you meet us right now at the Citadel Tower? We need to talk to Councilor Tevos and I'd like you to be there with us." She nodded, despite the fact that the asari could not see her. "She'll be right there, let's hurry. Captain Martel will come through the relay in less than an hour, I want to be on the Normandy then, ready to go."

They hurried over the bridge towards the Tower, but not too fast to raise suspicion. Dania was waiting for them at the elevator's doors and stepped inside when they opened, keeping them open for them. The doors closed behind them as they slipped in and Shepard started to say hello to Dania but the words seemed to be stuck in her throat.

She stared at the asari, looking at her like she saw her for the first time. And Garrus did the same, he couldn't help himself. It was the same as it had been with Liara, a subtle but glaring difference, impossible to pinpoint to a specific thing. She looked rounder and softer but not as much as Liara, her face still had a strong chin and jawbone.

"What?" Dania asked annoyed.

"Holy shit, you look amazing!" Shepard blurted out.

"I've worn this before," she said and looked down on her armored dress suit. Dania's fringe quivered in suppressed anger and wrinkles appeared on her forehead, making the scales under her dramatic red markings glitter in the light.

"No, it's... with the reaper block, all asari suddenly look differently," Shepard said, "and with you... damn. Amazing."
Garrus almost felt jealous at the way she looked at Dania but he had to agree – Dania looked incredible. Her skin seemed to be of a even darker purple than before and the red markings accentuated the edges of her face. She looked like a fierce goddess.

"We look differently since you had the reaper block installed? How is that possible?" Dania searched their faces. "You still look the same to me."

"We know that the reaper block has a short range, the husks and the Keepers react to it when they get close. Something in that range influences our perception," Shepard said. "It seems to be only about our perception of you."

Dania scanned him and Shepard with her omni-tool and Garrus recognized the peaks of the reaper-block in the readout. "You know, I've had some strange reaction this morning at the coffee place. When I came close to asari, they got this weird look on their faces. I thought..., I mean, I felt a bit strange this morning and I thought it showed on my face or something but... ." She looked at the readout on her omni-tool and frowned. "I'm going to talk to someone I know about this, see what they make of it."

"Just keep it on a low burn," Shepard said, "we don't want to raise suspicion."

"Understood."

The elevator slowed down on the office level and they turned towards the councilor offices. There were more guards than ever, at least two in front of every door and four more patrolling the hallway; most of them turian and a few asari. Shepard kept her head down, walking without looking at anyone and Garrus and Dania mimicked her, staying single file behind her.

The door to Tevos' office was guarded by two tall and impressively looking asari. These looked much stronger and more physical than other asari he had seen before. With his new impressions of asari, Garrus started to notice things about them that he had not been aware of.

The guards stepped in their way like human medieval guards did in the old vids that Shepard liked to watch. All that was missing was the crossing of their long sticks in front of them.

Shepard looked at her omni-tool. "Commander Shepard and advisers. The Councilor is expecting us."

For a moment nothing happened. The asari guards stared at them, expressions flitting over their faces in rapid succession. It was like they were stuck in a programming loop.

Dania leaned forward and whispered, "That's exactly how the people in the coffee shop looked at me this morning."

Shepard nodded. "Must be the block," she said under her breath. "I kind of wish we had a way of turning it off, this is getting a bit obvious." She looked up and made her voice loud and deep. "Can we pass? We are expected and would prefer to not let Councilor Tevos wait."

One of the guards looked like he woke up from a dream and initiated a call, announcing their presence. After a short nod, the guards stepped aside and let them in.

The front room where they had met the receptionist the last time was dim and empty. The door to the main office stood open and the adjacent room seemed to be equally dark. Shepard stepped in, her hand hovering over her sidearm. Dania and Garrus followed her, equally ready to pull their guns if needed.
Movement and a sigh alerted them and the room became a bit brighter by the biotic glow from Dania. A soft voice spoke up, "Come in. Commander Shepard, Opione Vakarian and Agent Va'sida how good of you to come."

The voice belonged to a shadowy figure who stood up and walked over to the desk. A few omni-pads illuminated the desk but the rest of the room remained dark. Garrus could now recognize the councilor but he wondered how much Shepard could see in this darkness.

"Councilor?" Shepard asked, "can we turn up the light in here? I can't see a thing."

"Apologies, I sometimes forget that humans can't see in the dark." The windows turned brighter and the light from the Citadel illuminated the room. Councilor Tevos sat down behind her massive desk and folded her hands in front of her. "Have a seat Commander Shepard."

"I prefer to stand, councilor, I have another appointment to keep so I hope you don't mind that we keep this meeting short." Shepard stood with her back straight, her hands clasped behind her back. She appeared to be at rest but to Garrus could see the tension in her neck. She was a predator, relaxed but waiting to strike.

A disturbing laugh came from Councilor Tevos. "Do you really think you will get through with this, Commander?"

Shepard did not let any emotion show on her face and took a step closer. "I'm sorry?"

The councilor stood up and stepped around her desk. "Whatever you're planning, it will fail. No ship will take you off this station and without the Normandy you can't... can't... ," she stumbled, holding onto the desk to not fall. "You can't take... the ship, you can't..." She took another stumbling step and Dania rushed to her side to prevent her fall. The councilor stared at her with the same looping expressions of fear, confusion and curiosity flicking over her face as the guards had shown. Her voice, strong and confident before, changed to a high pitched whisper. "What is happening?"

A sound that seemed to vibrate in the back of his mind, drew Garrus' attention away from the councilor and to a small black object on the desk. If it had not been for the noise, he wouldn't even have noticed it. It was shaped vaguely rectangular, about the size of his palm and seemed to be a fragment of a bigger object. It lay still on a silver plate but at the same time it looked like it was moving, vibrating just at the edge of his perception.

"What is that?" Garrus asked and stepped closer to the desk.

Shepard came to his side and glared at the object. "I don't know but it's giving me a headache."

"Me too," Dania said and took the thing and threw it into the farthest corner of the room.

Tevos gasped but did not try to stop her.

"How do you feel?" Dania asked the councilor, leading her to a chair near the windows and helped her sit down.

"I feel like... like there was something I should remember, something I should do." Faint blue waves of biotics ran up her arms and flickered out over her shoulders. "I feel better but I don't remember feeling bad before..."

"That object," Shepard asked, gesturing in the general direction of it's whereabouts. "How did it get here?"
Tevos looked like it was painful for her to talk about this. "I can't tell you that but..." She looked up to Shepard. "Commander, if you intend to take the Normandy to Ilos, you will fail before you reach the Widow-Relay. The docking locks will send out a warning when they get released and that warning goes straight to all councilors."

Shepard's controlled facade fell away. "Councilor, we have to stop Saren on Ilos," she pleaded. "This is not about politics, not about humanity playing with the big kids. I have seen what the Reapers will do, you saw it too! We have to stop this before it even starts." She stepped closer and took Tevos' hand. "We have to take the Normandy to Ilos, right now."

Tevos' eyes softened and she nodded. "I know. I can issue a release command but the councilors will get an automatic warning when I do, just like when the docking clamps release."

"Can you distract the councilors Sparatus and Valern so that they don't notice the messages right away?"

A smile spread on her face. "A meditation would be good in these stressful times I think."

Shepard grinned and exchanged a look with Dania. "Thank you Councilor, Agent Va'sida will stay with you to help you."

Tevos stood up and interlinked her arm in Dania's. "I wonder why I feel so tired... I would like an explanation one day why I felt so strange when you came in." Her fringe tentacles shivered, the scales glittering in the light from the Citadel. "I'm calling Sparatus and Valern now but I can't call Ambassador Udina to a meditation. It would be highly suspicious."

"I take care of Udina. Thank you Councilor and please be careful." Shepard shook Tevos' hand and smiled warmly at her.

The Councilor bowed her head. She typed a message on her omni-tool and slowly walked on Dania's arm towards the door. They followed her and before they entered the hallway, Tevos stopped and turned around.

"I can't trust anybody, can I?"

Garrus shook his head. "I'm afraid not, councilor."

Tevos sighed. "When this is over, I expect a thorough explanation for all of this."

"I promise," Shepard said.

"Very well, I have to get to the garden. You better hurry, I can't keep them for too long." Tevos made a short bow and then hurried to another elevator with Dania.

Shepard ran towards the elevator that would take them back down to the main level, urgently typing on her omni-tool. She looked up to Garrus for a moment. "Call Leran, we don't need him at flight control if the Council issues the command but we need him at the docking clamps so that they don't sound an alarm."

"On it," Garrus said. They reached the elevator and stepped in. Shepard was impatiently tapping her foot, waiting for a call to connect. Her finger kept flicking against her subdermal comm unit behind her ear.

"Come one, come on... Anderson! Finally!" she called out. "Captain, you have to distract Udina, right now. The release of the Normandy will issue a warning message and Udina should not see it."
She waited for a moment. "Thank you Sir, you too." The call had ended and she turned to Garrus.

He had typed the message to Leran, and the turian had already answered that he was on the way to the docks. Shepard's omni-tool pinged with a message and she cursed when she looked at it.

"The Fedele will be here soon, we are running out of time." The elevator finally stopped and they ran as fast as they could over to the elevator that would take them to the docks. Shepard called Joker on the Normandy while they ran in zigzag through the crowds.

"Joker, everybody needs to be on board this minute, make sure we have our supplies and call everyone back. We are leaving now!"

Garrus grabbed her arm to pull her to his side before she ran into an elcor. "Are we good, do we have everything?"

"Joker said the only problem is the fuel but he has an idea about that."

"I hope so, that would be an embarrassing adventure if we ended up stranded somewhere in the Kepler Verge because we ran out of fuel." He jumped into the dock elevator and started a little C-Sec program from his omni-tool to give them priority. Hopefully the elevator would move a little faster now.

Shepard laughed out. "Some pirates we are."

At the dock, Leran hung neck deep in a control system and grinned over his shoulder. "I got it, I have to hold this insulator here but I think this will stop the alarm from the docking clamps."

"Good work Leran and please be careful," Shepard said before running into the Normandy. Garrus gave a short turian salute to Leran and followed her. As soon as the decontamination cycle released them they stormed towards the cockpit. Joker and Kaidan were in full start preparation, their hands flying over the interfaces in front of them. A big red indicator glowed on one side, showing the status of the docking clamps.

"Everybody accounted for?" asked Shepard.

"Everybody and even more," Joker said and at the same time a familiar voice behind them made them turn around.

Nihlus grinned at them, wearing his black and red armor and a red patch on his disfigured fringe. "We were just waiting for you."

"What are you doing here? You can't..." Shepard started but Nihlus interrupted her.

"Saren was my teacher, my mentor and my friend and he shot me in the head when my back was turned. He's going to have to face me and nothing you say will keep me off this mission," he said, his voice rumbling with bitter and angry subharmonics.

The inside of the cockpit lit up with the light of the relay and they all turned to look at it.

Shepard sighed. "Well, you're not leaving now, that's for sure, cause there's our distraction," she said, pointing at a ship that came tumbling out of the mass effect stream with a trail of smoke behind it.

All eyes stared at the indicator for the docking clamps, glowing red.

"Come on, Tevos, don't leave us hanging," Shepard mumbled.
Outside, the C-Sec Gate-and-Perimeter-Control started with three shuttles and steered towards the smoking Fedele.

The indicator still glowed red.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

A shorter chapter today my friends. We are getting closer and closer to our big finale!
(Did I mention that I'm fucking terrified? I'm fucking terrified!) On with the show:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The MSV Fedele soared or rather tumbled across the viewport, wrapped in a cloud of black smoke that clung to its rough and dented surface like wisps of fog. The shuttles of Gate-and-Perimeter-Control tried to direct the ship away from its current vector but they looked like insects buzzing around a garlefka and were ignored just like that.

Garrus scanned the docks for C-Sec activity or anybody who could put Leran in danger at his position at the controls outside. So far everything looked quiet and he turned to Nihlus to ask him what exactly he intended to do on this mission when his omni-tool chimed with a message. It flagged the code for his sister and he couldn't ignore that.

"Solana, now is a really bad..."

"What under the frying sun have you done?" Solana yelled at him as soon as the connection established. Her angry subharmonics even crossed the limited range of the messaging system and made Nihlus trill out in mocking shock.

Shepard raised an eyebrow at him and Garrus hurried to switch the conversation to the aural connector and rushed out of the cockpit. "Solana, listen, not now..."

"Don't you dare cut me off! The Notarius was here, readjusting your position in the chronic he said, Aethius is even more unbearable than before, mother is keening all the time when she thinks nobody's listening..."

"He forced the decision," Garrus interrupted, his yell making the heads of the crew turn. He lowered his voice. "He made me choose and I chose her."

Solana let out a string of curses in voice and subharmonic that would have earned her a week of chores on any turian ship.

In the viewport the Fedele got closer and closer, the smoke making it hard to see the relay in the background. Garrus began to worry. "I can't talk right now, I have to...

The proximity alert made an obnoxious noise and the unemotional voice of the ship's VI warned them of an object coming closer.

"What is going on?" Solana asked through the comm implant, hearing the alerts through his omni-tool.

Garrus strained his head to see inside the cockpit. The indicator still glowed red, the Normandy was still tied to the docks. "I can't talk right now, sorry," he said, "I'll contact you again soon if I can, but I don't know – " he couldn't even be sure if he was able to contact her at all, any message could trace
a fleet to the Normandy's position. "I don't know if I can, just know... tell mother that I did what I knew was right."

"Wait, what are you...?"

Garrus ended the call, wincing at the thought of how rightfully angry Solana would be and hurried back into the cockpit.

"Are we sure this is an act? The ship looks like it's out of control," Nihlus asked as he entered.

Outside the Fedele had slowed down but still let out smoke.

Joker pulled up a display of messages on the his left side and said, "I'm like 90% sure that it's an act. I mean, it looks like they're tumbling but they keep their path. And they still send us messages, crazy messages but messages are a good sign, are they not?"

"Crazy messages?" Shepard and Garrus asked at the same time.

Shepard leaned over Joker's shoulder, trying to read the messages on his screens. "What kind of crazy?"

"Well, they don't want to get arrested for playing games with Gate-and-Perimeter. They want us to pull them along with us through the gate. Sort of like catching them in a mass effect net and dragging them after us."

"Is that even possible?"

"Theoretically? Sure!" Joker gave her a sheepish grin but quickly faced forward again when he caught her murderous stare.

"How theoretically are we talking?" Shepard asked and Garrus could have sworn he heard a subharmonic growl from her.

"It's been tested, just not with a ship of our size..."

The ship's VI announced: "Message by Admiral Anderson."

"Let's hear it."

"You're good to go Shepard, hurry, I –" the message cut off.

"What the fuck?" Shepard pressed out between clenched teeth.

"What the fuck?" Shepard spat, her hands clenching around the back of Joker's seat.

They all stared at the indicator glowing in red. Outside, the Fedele was slowly moving back towards the relay with noticeably less smoke trailing behind.

"Come on..." Shepard grumbled. "Can't we pull out?" she asked Joker. "Just rip this shit off?"

"Sure, I bet we don't really need that plating or even that whole emitter, I'm sure we can easily do without that."

"Damnit!" Shepard spat, her hands clenching around the back of Joker's seat.

The indicator turned green. A shiver went through the bulkhead as the docking clamps released and for a moment the ship was swaying.

"Finally. Take us out Joker, nice and slow," Shepard said.
"Aye Commander," Joker said and let the Normandy float out of the dock. The ship moved through the cloud of smoke left behind by the Fedele and made a wide arc towards the Relay.

"Commander?" Kaidan said from the copilot seat. He gestured towards a display showing schematics of flight mechanics. "What Captain Martel suggests sounds a bit crazy but it can be done. We have to extend our mass effect field over their ship, kind of like we do when we pull in the Mako. That way we go through the relay as one object."

Shepard crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Is it safe? I can't risk this mission for some crazy idea, as much as I don't want to be an asshole and leave the Fedele behind – Ilos is more important."

"We need them," Joker stated, his fingers gently dancing over the orange glowing interfaces in front of him. "They can get us fuel outside of the Alliance network, Captain Martel has some contacts in the Fortuna system."

"Fortuna is known to harbor pirates and slavers," Garrus said, recalling the C-Sec reports he had read about the system.

Shepard sighed. "We can't exactly stop at a Council station, they'll lock us up."

"I guess we really are pirates," Garrus said, weighing the implications in his mind.

"Do I get an eye-patch and a parrot on my shoulder now?" Joker asked to Garrus' complete bafflement.

Shepard snorted. "I think you still need that depth perception and I won't have a bird shitting in my ship."

"What in the name of...?" Garrus began but stopped when he saw Shepard grin. "Weird human stuff, got it," he said and stopped the translator program from figuring out what Joker and Shepard meant.

The Relay loomed in front of them and Joker let the ship hover for a moment. A section in the displays showed the rear view where the Fedele came closer. The ship had stopped smoking but the lack of the black clouds did its looks no favors. It was a miracle that the thing even stayed on its vector in one piece.

"No alarm from the Citadel so far," Kaidan said with a look over to Pressly. Garrus had been surprised to see the older human in the cockpit, he would have thought that Pressly would not want to risk his career for stealing an Alliance ship.

"Thank you Tevos, Leran, Anderson and whoever else stuck their neck out for us," Shepard said under her breath. In front of them, the relay became larger as they approached, filling out the viewport.

"Almost there," Joker said, turning the Normandy in an arc like an atmospheric glider to align her with the mass effect stream. The Fedele showed as a blip next to them on the proximity display, synchronizing her flight vector with the Normandy.

The rings in the relay started to spin faster. "I'm extending our mass effect field over the Fedele."

Garrus moved behind Kaidan's seat and looked at the displays in front him. He watched how Kaidan transferred energy to the external emitters and the mass effect field that encompassed the Normandy all the time, stretched and wrapped around the Fedele.

"That was surprisingly easy," Garrus said.
Kaidan nodded, "Yes, I expected more problems actually. If the relay takes us through like this, this will be a new step in mass relay mechanics."

"Only if we actually make it through," Joker said between clenched teeth. "Gate Patrol has noticed us, they're coming for us." He switched one of the translucent displays to a backwards view.

Three shuttles flipped over and rapidly closed the distance between them and the Normandy. Joker sped up and on the screen the Fedele almost dipped out of the Normandy's mass effect field.

"Hey, Normandy!" The message crackled over the comm system like it came from an ancient warship. "We're at top speed here, so if you would be so kind and slow down?"

"We're trying to get away from Gate Patrol," Joker answered but he slowed the ship down.

"I got that," the Captain of the Fedele said, "but I'd like to remind you that we had a deal and you need us to get fuel and we're also just too pretty to be left behind like that."

Joker was about to answer but Shepard stopped him and spoke instead. "Captain Martel, I have no intention to leave you behind but you have to fly faster. We are about to –"

The ship shook from an impact and a groan ran through the bulkhead. Shepard pulled up a ship diagram on a display and angrily flipped through the reports. "Did they just fucking shoot us?"

"Yes, Commander," Kaidan reported. "A small impact in our rear, the shields absorbed it."

"Must have been a low energy particle shot," Joker said. "They don't want to make scratches in their flagship."

"Well, let's say our goodbyes then," Shepard said. "It looks like we're not welcome here anymore."

"Aye, Commander," Joker said, "Kaidan, tell Captain Martel to give her all he has, we have to jump now."

Kaidan switched one display to a view of the Fedele and typed a message. The other ship was visibly shaking and a greenish substance was leaking from one side but she sped up and aligned herself with the Normandy again.

"Relay is hot, vector is clear," Joker announced.

"Mass effect field is stable," said Kaidan, nodding towards Joker.

"Here we go," Joker said and hooked the Normandy into the relay field. They could not be stopped now, not even by Gate Patrol. The gravitational shift was more abrupt than usual, making them all stumble for a moment but then the familiar pull drew them forward, the light of the relay filling the cockpit.

Garrus kept his eyes on the displays, watching for tension or tears in the mass effect field. But the field remained stable, holding the Fedele tied to the Normandy and pulling her along.

"Are they following us?" Shepard asked.

Joker checked his interface and shook his head. "No, they stayed behind. If they're not encapsulated by the same mass effect field, the relay could tear them apart."

The Normandy entered the stream and the ride instantly became calm and quiet.
"How's the Fedele?" Garrus asked Kaidan.

"I couldn't even say, I mean she's still leaking something and her surface tension is completely out of whack but she still going, so it's probably good." Joker pointed at a display showing the Fedele. "And she hasn't crashed into us so far."

"Was that an expected outcome?" Shepard asked, her eyebrows raised.

"Well," Kaidan said, "there aren't too many test cases we can look at. I mean, it was more theoretical..."

"Just a theory?" Garrus and Shepard asked at the same time.

"A sound theory, really," Joker hurried to say, "there's been a thesis and all."

"A thesis? One?" Shepard's voice was cutting like a knife. "Do I want to know who the authors are?"

"Probably not, Commander." Joker looked straight ahead, his fingers dancing over the controls.

Shepard looked over to Kaidan who looked like he wanted to disappear into his seat.

"Fine," she said, "where are we heading?"

"Horse Head Nebula. From there we have a few options, courtesy of our friend Captain Martel," Kaidan said.

Shepard turned on her heel to go. "Carry on then." She threw a nod to Garrus and Nihlus and they followed her out of the cockpit.

"Why did you not want to hear about the authors of that thesis?" Garrus asked while they walked to the Captain's cabin.

"I bet you a thousand credits that it was Joker himself who wrote it," Shepard said with an angry grin. "It was probably his own Master's Thesis or something like that." She shook her head and mumbled something under her breath.

Nihlus made a nervous trill as he walked next to Garrus. Shepard led them into her cabin and waited for the door to close before she spoke.

"Okay, Nihlus, why are you here?"

"Like I said, I want to confront Saren. I was probably the closest he had to a friend and maybe I can get through him. And..." he paused and his mandibles twitched in a smirk, "and that's exactly what you had planned to do."

Garrus trilled in surprise. Shepard scowled at him but just when he expected her to get angry, a grin spread on her face.

"Yeah, I guess I did," she said. "At some point I really wanted to see his face when you showed up." She sat down on her desk and offered her chair with a gesture to Nihlus.

Nihlus sat down and the soft hum from his subharmonics told Garrus that he was exhausted. "Thanks, I guess I'm not quite up to form yet. I had to run to get here in time."

Shepard folded her hands and looked at him before she spoke again. "Let's make one thing clear. I'm
a Spectre like you, you're not my mentor anymore and this is my ship. On this ship, this mission, my word trumps yours. I'm not sure where you stand in relation to Garrus' rank but for me he is my turian advisor, not you."

Nihlus raised his hands. "I'm not here to undermine your authority. I'm just a passenger, hoping to find an old friend on some spirits forsaken rock in the darkest patch of the galaxy and maybe...," he hummed in frustration, "maybe I can find a way to..."

"Knock some sense into him?"

"Yes, maybe," Nihlus sighed, "or something else..."

Garrus sat down on the bed and hummed to Nihlus in sympathy. "Do you hope that he will realize what happened to him?"

"We've seen that the block has a range, maybe that combined with the shock..." Nihlus softly touched the implant on the side of his head and hummed again, sadness and loss in his subharmonics. "I know he's an ass, but he was also a good teacher, almost a friend. I just want to try to get through to him."

"Alright," Shepard said, "I'm all for this plan but you will not fight groundside with us on Ilos. I'm expecting some heavy fights with geth and you and Liara will stay in the background until we cleared the space. You're still not well enough and Liara is not a soldier."

"Maybe she should stay on the ship?" Garrus wondered.

"She is our one and only prothean expert and from all we know, Ilos is pretty much one giant prothean artifact." Shepard stretched her neck to release some tension from her shoulders. "She would probably kill me if I left her on the Normandy and I hope she can give us some insights."

"What about the Normandy?" Nihlus asked.

"If Saren plans to attack the Citadel, I can't keep the Normandy tied to Ilos. The best ship of the Alliance fleet has to be there to defend the Citadel."

"But then we'll have no way of getting back," Garrus said.

"I know, I'm not sure what to do yet. We'll have to figure something out. For now I want to use the six days it takes to Ilos for combat simulations and maintenance." She jumped off the desk and gestured to Nihlus to vacate her chair.

"I guess we are dismissed," Nihlus said and pushed himself out of the chair.

Garrus stood up too and nodded towards Shepard. "I'm going to check the programming on the guns and calibrate them again."

"When you're done with that, are you going to check over the Mako?" Shepard asked as she sat down in her chair.

"Yes, Commander, I plan on doing that tomorrow."

"I'll see you later then," Shepard said and turned to Nihlus. "You will have to find a place to sleep in the crew quarters I'm afraid. Speak to Pressly about that."

"Yes, dearest Commander, I'm sure I can manage." Nihlus made an elaborate bow and backed out of
Garrus was about to follow him but turned back to Shepard and leaned down to take her face between his hands. He pressed his forehead against hers, her presence and her scent grounding and calming him. He felt her taking a deep breath and her shoulders lowered.

"How do you always know what I need?" she whispered.

"Are you okay, Sunshine?"

"Yes, I will be fine." She softly kissed his mouthplates and leaned back to look into his eyes. "I'll see you later, my Angel, okay?"

Garrus nodded and left the room to find Nihlus waiting for him. He fell in step next to him and waited till they were alone before he spoke.

"Is Shepard all right? There's a lot of pressure on her."

Garrus sighed. "She's remarkable, so strong. But this would have been so much easier if the Council wasn't so stubborn. What is wrong with them, how can they not see what is going on?"

Nihlus slowed down and stopped behind some lockers, hidden from crew walking past. He took his time to answer, his subharmonics humming in worry. He seemed unusually serious and it made Garrus' plates itch.

"I've been pleading and arguing with Tevos for weeks. Only now, with Dania and me with the implants close to her, have we finally gotten through to her. I doubted it at first but there really is something going on with this influence over asari from somewhere. Tevos is on our side now but the rest of the Council... ." He growled loudly, anger vibrating in his subharmonics. "Sparatus is the most stubborn turian in the galaxy and probably the next one too and he is still angry that humanity is not cowering at turian feet. And our friend the spineless salarian Valern just agrees with whatever Tevos and Sparatus decide on. And since for once they don't agree – Valern just sits at these silent meetings between them and twitches." Nihlus trilled his frustration in an angry hiss.

Garrus trilled with him in sympathy. He had not been aware how hard Nihlus had worked for them behind the scenes.

Nihlus gave him a subharmonic hum, indicating that he was giving him advice. "Take care of Shepard. She's the best hope we have to stop Saren and that damn Reaper."

He hummed his promise to Nihlus. It felt more important than anything else he had ever expressed.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to divadevi8808 for beta reading and editing and for telling me the truth.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Damn, I struggled with this one. It's so cheesy but also romantic and I almost deleted it a few times. But my awesome beta divadevi8808 said that I should keep it so you can all thank her for getting this cheesy smut.

The next few days were filled to capacity with combat simulations, strategy meetings, strengthening the Mako's plating and going over the programming of the main cannon. The new algorithm worked so smoothly that Garrus adapted part of it to the programming of the Mako's cannon. It took many hours but Garrus loved it. It was such a refreshing return to his old life, to dive into the code, blocking out all of the rest of the world and only following the trail of variables and event states until it all worked perfectly. He had forgotten how much he had loved programming his games, how relaxing it was.

The closer they came to Ilos, the more the tension became tangible on the ship. When in the first days it had felt like they were a group of kids who had run off on adventure, the confrontation with the reality of getting fuel at the pirate base in the Pegasus system had sobered up everybody.

They had stolen the most famous Alliance ship in the galaxy, they were wanted fugitives and they were all alone. They were on their way to their most important confrontation, and they had no support and no escape plan.

It had become clear in one of the many strategy meetings that Shepard would send the Normandy back to the Citadel as soon as she dropped them off on Ilos with the Mako. If their assumptions about Saren were wrong, they would be stuck there, on a deserted planet full of geth and unable to help against whatever Saren was planning.

Despite being busy, Shepard and he seemed to gravitate towards each other all the time. While he was thinking his way through algorithms, she was sitting opposite of him, working on reports and strategies. When he worked on the Mako, she was improving and maintaining guns and armor at Ashley's workstation. They were hardly ever alone but even just the occasional glances and smiles over the rims of datapads were enough for them.

It was quite possibly the most unsettled time of Garrus' life but he had never felt more secure. If a Spirit of guidance would have come to him and ask him if he wanted to live like this for the rest of his life, he would have said yes without a breath of hesitation.

They were on their last relay jump in the Attican Traverse towards the Mu relay that would take them right into the Terminus. Shepard had ordered intense physical training for all combat crew on the last two days but had given the crew time off before their arrival at the Mu relay. Garrus planned to finally have that promised candlelight dinner with her tonight. But before that, him and all other crew had to work on one of the hardest things for any mission.

They were writing their letters to their friends and families. The Alliance soldiers would store them in their tags, he would store his in his signaculum, Tali in the impressive storage of her suit and a copy of each of their letters and digital keepsakes would travel back to Council space with the Normandy.
Only Wrex had grumbled about not having anything to write about but Shepard had a long conversation with him and later that day, Garrus saw him with his ceremonial armor, taking pictures of it. Whatever it inspired in him, he was currently on his mat, typing out a long letter just like every other member of the crew. Silence had settled over the Normandy as everyone reflected upon the mission and its possible outcomes.

Garrus had started with writing a letter to his sister. It was the easiest for him, they had always had a loose exchange of letters and vids going between Palaven and the Citadel. He had always felt most comfortable with her, he could tell her everything. He wrote about the galaxy wide threat as much as he thought it was safe for her to know. He didn't want to make her the target of the turian secret service by giving her classified information. But soon his letter drifted towards Shepard and he was embarrassed of how much he was gushing about her to his sister. He deleted half of it as he read it back, reducing his capital fanmail to a few sentences of how he hoped that Solana would one day find someone like Jane for herself.

The woman in question just now came up to him and settled down next to him on the bench, leaning her back against the table. He finished his typing and turned to her. She played with the tags on the chain around her neck.

He leaned over to her to keep their conversation private. "What's on your mind, Sunshine?"

She hesitated a bit before turning to him, looking at him from under the blue streak in her hair. "I know you want to have that candlelight dinner now and I would love that but..."

"But you would rather spend the last night before our most dangerous fight with the crew."

"You knew that?" she asked with a big smile.

"A wild guess," he said, taking her hand in his. "And I can understand that, you're their commander, they look to you for guidance and you don't want to leave them alone on such an important day."

Shepard sighed and leaned her head against the rim of his armor cowl. "And they're all so young." She looked around the mess hall, at the marines and crew writing their letters, whispering to each other, showing the others pictures of their families. "And look at them, doom and gloom everywhere. We need a party, raise the spirits..."

"Raise the Spirits?" he asked, faking a trill like he was offended.

She stared at him in shock. "Oh, is that like a bad thing, like trying to raise the dead? That's not what I..."

Garrus burst out laughing, "Relax, I know love, I was just kidding."

"Damnit!," she called out and shoved his shoulder. "You cheeky bastard. I was just about to explain ancient necromancy to you, a speciality of my family line as a matter of fact..."

"What?"

"Hah! Got you." She poked his chest with a triumphant grin.

"You have to admit, with all the crazy human stuff you keep telling me, I have to at least consider the possibility," he said, rubbing his neck.

"True." She leaned back on her elbows, her head tilted back. "So I thought, we could all eat together, put music on, drink some beer, nothing extreme, just have some fun together."
"Is that a human tradition before a major battle?"

"Not really, depends on the Commander I guess. Anderson was always up for a beer with his troops but Wilkins... let's just say we drank our beers in our cots without him. That didn't necessarily help with battle readiness."

Her fingers played on his palm, so many of them. He remembered how disorienting they had felt for him, such a long time ago. That one night where two strangers had met in passion and darkness, exploring each other's alienness. If someone would have told him back then how much this one night would change his life, he would have never believed them.

He wrapped his fingers around hers, keeping their hands under the table. "We can have our dinner for just the two of us some other time." He tried to sound casual but he was keenly aware that it was a promise that they would both come out of this fight unharmed. A promise that neither of them could really make.

She nodded and the way she looked at him told him that she had similar thoughts. A smile wiped away the worried expression and she gave his hand a last squeeze before letting go. She got up, her eyes not leaving his until she almost ran into a wall.

"You okay there, Commander?" asked Kaidan with a grin.

"Fine. just fine," Shepard mumbled and hurried over to the stairs and out of sight.

Kaidan and Garrus couldn't help but chuckle quietly at her display.

Kaidan shut down his omni-tool and placed the tags on the silver chain back under his shirt. He looked up and stared at Garrus, chewing on his lower lip.

Garrus waited. He knew this kind of expression, he had seen it before on suspects and witnesses. This was the moment where an investigation could turn, when new information was revealed. Kaidan looked like someone who wanted to talk about a secret, something that had been on his mind for a while.

"Garrus, listen" he finally said, his gaze dropping to the table. "Maybe you noticed that Ashley and me were watching you and the other aliens on board. And I know, Ashley isn't here but I think I can speak for both of us that..." he stopped, looking anywhere but Garrus' eyes.

"You were suspicious, I know. Ashley especially was wary around Wrex and me at first."

"We all had little experience with working with aliens as one crew on a ship and Ashley had even less. But I know that she warmed up to you and even to Wrex and she sees you as a skilled member of Shepard's combat crew." Kaidan played with the cuff of his sleeve and Garrus waited for him to continue. He knew enough about human expressions to know that the Lieutenant was not done yet.

"I don't know if you know this," Kaidan said, "but there were rumors going around that the Normandy would have a full turian squad and that she would be run by a joined command of a human and a turian commander. Everyone still wanted to be part of this crew of course, this is currently the best ship of the Alliance but for a while... some marines were worried about the presence of aliens on board."

Garrus shook his head. "A turian squad and a turian commander and Shepard's style of leadership and this squad — that would have been a nightmare." Kaidan looked at him critically and he trilled out a calming tone. "I don't mean to say that this is a bad crew, quite the opposite. All the soldiers I have met on this ship are very efficient and extremely capable. But a turian squad is so different..."
he didn't even know how to describe the difference. No turian commander could ever work with a squad like Shepard's.

Kaidan grinned as if he knew what Garrus was thinking. "I gather they're not all like you?"

"I have been called a bad turian many times."

Kaidan snickered. "Still, I wanted you to know that I trust you and the others in the squad do too. Same goes for Tali and Liara. And even Wrex, to a point. I'm still not sure what his... his thing is though."

Garrus hummed in agreement at that. "Maybe he doesn't know that himself. When we helped him get his ceremonial armor, he talked about returning to his clan and taking his place as their leader. I think that was a new idea for him."

"Urdnot Wrex, leader of the krogan," Kaidan said as if he tested what it sounded like. "You know, I've heard crazier things on this mission."

Garrus spread his mandibles in a grin. Their omni-tools pinged simultaneously with every other omni-tool in the room to announce a new message. Kaidan read the message and grinned.

"I guess we're having a party tonight," he said. He looked up to Garrus. "Do turian teams have parties before big events like this?"

Garrus sang out a small curse with his second voice. "Not officially, no. There are combat trainings and simulations until the last moment. But that doesn't mean that squadmates won't find ways to celebrate life in secret so to speak."

"Who celebrates life in secret?" came Shepard's voice from behind him.

Kaidan grinned. "Turian troops," he said and winked at her.

Shepard grinned too. She shooed them away from the table to wipe it clean with a cloth and ordered Kaidan to get a cooler from the cargo bay. She placed a few color coded bowls with snacks on the table and looked at her setup with a satisfied smile.

Kaidan reappeared, carrying a large box with one of the marines. It had a cooling system and Kaidan explained to him that it would normally be filled with ice cubes which was of course not feasible on a spaceship. As if the appearance of the cooler announced the official begin of the party, the mess hall began to fill with people.

Apparently, a box with cool beer and a few snacks was all that was needed for a party among humans. Not that turian soldiers had their unofficial parties any differently but an official get-together with the squad commander would have been much more formal. There would have been a seating order, food reserved for higher ranks and sanctioned music.

There definitely wouldn't be a squad Commander chatting with the engineers about the drivecore, clinking bottles with the maintenance crew and talking shop about their favorite access tubes on the ship. He watched her for a moment, how naturally she mingled with her crew. A turian would have considered that to be undermining to her authority but he knew that every single one of her crew stood behind her 100%.

Garrus never knew that quarians had so many funny stories. Or maybe it was just Tali, who showed a surprising sense of humor and entertained their little group at the table with stories of quarian
children in protective sterile bubbles rolling around on spaceships. Even Wrex made a sound that was almost like a giggle and Garrus put "heard a krogan giggle" down as another entry on the list of things he never would have thought to hear or see one day.

His look gravitated towards Shepard, engaged in a deep discussion with Pressly. When he saw her clinking her bottle with his and getting up, he rose too to meet her in the middle of the room.

"I think that was everyone," he said when she was close enough to hear.

"Everyone?"

"Your tour among the crew, I think you spoke to everyone now, Pressly was the last."

"You've been counting?" she asked with an amused smile.

"Paying attention." He gently took her arm and pulled her to a corner. "I can say from my perspective that everyone seems to be in a daring and optimistic mood, rather typical human I would say."

She nodded. "Yes, that's kind of what I'm getting too. It worries me a bit, I hope they still take it seriously."

"We don't know what we'll be facing there."

"Yeah and this is a great crew. No matter what we'll face, I have complete trust in them."

He pulled her close and nuzzled her hair. He turned her so that she faced the room. "Look at them. I can say with all turian honor I have that this is the best team I have worked with and it's because of you. You bring out the best in them."

"I..." she stopped and he could feel a shudder in her shoulders.

"What is it?" he asked, turning her towards him to look at her.

She looked down to her feet. "I don't want to lose any of them."

He put a finger under her chin to make her look at him. "Hey, Jane, listen. They're all soldiers, they all know what that means."

She sighed and leaned into his hand. "I know that rationally, I just... thinking one of them won't make it back home."

Garrus pulled her back into the shadow. "Hey, relax, it will be okay." This party was not the place for a serious conversation. He looked around to find a better place to hide for a little while but the party had spread out over the whole deck. Even the corner in front of the captain's cabin was occupied by a marine and one of the crew members kissing. He turned back to Shepard. "You want to get out of here for a bit?"

Shepard looked up at him surprise. "What do you have in mind?"

Garrus took her hand and pulled her along the bulkhead towards the elevator. Shepard looked at him with a wide grin while the elevator took them down to the cargo bay.

"So, where are you taking me, Optione Vakarian?"

The door opened and Garrus pointed towards the Mako. "Can I interest you in my carriage?"
"Oh yes, it's my favorite."

He opened the side door for her and ducked his head to follow her in. The door closed with a soft thud and the internal lights turned on and laid a blue shine over everything. The Mako wasn't built for people to be standing in, especially not turians, so he quickly sat down on a bench. Shepard sat down next to him, leaning against him. They were silent for a while, listening to each other breathing.

Shepard began speaking, her voice soft and almost inaudible. "I know how to be a soldier, I know how to be a commander, I know that I lead them to their potential death every day. I know all that and I will do everything to fulfill this mission and any other successfully but... we almost lost Ashley. Ashley! The best damn soldier I have ever met. What if the next one is Tali? Or Liara? They're not even soldiers." She stopped and Garrus knew that she wasn't done, that there was more. She looked up to him, her eyes glistening. "What if it's you?"

"We talked about this," Garrus said, his second voice thrumming with his own worry for her. "And we both know about the risk and we said —"

"I know what we said but I can't bear the thought — " she interrupted and took his face in her hands. "You, you can't...!"

"I know," he said, leaning into her touch, "I know, I do," he shuddered and a shrill keen left his throat. Just thinking about her dying, gone from his world, felt like his tether to life itself being cut.

"Promise me... ," she whispered, "promise me you won't die."

He choked on his worried hum. "You know I can't promise that."

Shepard climbed on his lap, straddling him and pressed her forehead against his. "I know that but please, just this once, just lie. Please." Her voice sounded wet. "Promise me."

He answered her plea with a shuddering trill, an ancient song of belonging and trust vibrating in his chest. His marking scent released as he pressed against her forehead. "I promise, I promise to not die." He leaned back and looked into her glistening eyes. "Do you promise to stay alive too?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes dark and serious. "I promise to stay with you forever," she said and pressed a kiss against his mouthplates. For a moment they stayed like that, sharing each other's breath.

Then, with desperate urgency, they started to undress each other. Garrus' upper armor clattered to the Mako's floor, her boots flew against the window pane separating the cabin from the cockpit. She pulled him up to release the latches on his lower armor while he struggled with the straps and zippers on her standard Alliance suit. They didn't need words, they both knew what they needed. Her scent and her panting breath spoke of the same desire that roared inside of him.

Finally his underarmor pooled around his feet as he sat down and Shepard was naked. She didn't hesitate, straddled him, rubbing herself against his crotch. It didn't take long for his plates to part and he moaned as she kept moving. His mouth found hers and with a whimper they kissed.

This was nothing like their usual kisses, soft tangling of tongues, strokes and dips. This was urgent need, trying to consume the other and be consumed. Her hands roamed over his neck, sending shivers right down to his very core. He pulled her closer, as close as possible and he worried for a moment if his rough skin hurt her but she moaned and pulled herself even closer and her hips kept moving, rubbing her wet entrance over his penis and he forgot everything.

Shepard wrapped her arms around his neck and rose up to lower herself down on his hardened
length in one fast move. They both grunted and stilled, waiting for their bodies to adjust. Jane looked at him, her eyes glistening.

"I don't want to think about anything, I don't want to think about our chances," she said. "Just... let's just fuck — no — let's make love as if the world is not ending tomorrow."

He stared at her, his subharmonics buzzing in his chest. "There is no world tonight," he said. "There's only us being alive." It sounded like the stupidest thing he had ever said. "I love you?" he tried, wondering if that made his babbling any better.

Jane smiled and he felt marginally better. "I love you too. And I love what you said and it wasn't cheesy at all."

Garrus hid his face in his hand. "You're asking a lot of this turian if you want romantic speeches and declarations of love."

Jane laughed out and began moving her hips in delicious circles. "How about if we skip the declarations and you show me?" She rose and lowered herself down again in one quick push, making Garrus sing out in bliss.

"I can do that, love," he said. He grabbed her waist and leaned forward, changing their angle. He licked over the nubs on her breasts and up to her clavicle. His teeth scraped over that lovely boney part, softly, not enough to scratch her. Her hips kept moving as he nuzzled her neck and she shuddered, pulling closer to him. She seemed to like that even more than him licking her nipples. He loved her neck, how soft and sensitive it was.

Her hands were doing terribly wonderful things to his waist, her many fingers applying pressure on his skin. Every touch made him shudder and all he could do was to nuzzle into her neck even more.

He used his mandibles to flutter over her skin and licked along that weird looking earlobe. She gasped and he could feel her vagina getting tighter. He tried that again, a soft flutter, a lick while he let his finger search for the connection between them, using his knuckle to pleasure her clitoris. His reward was a shudder that he felt on his own genitals as it went over her whole body. She whimpered, her breath coming in gasps and he kept going until she cried out, her back arching, her head lolling back and her inside muscles pulsing around him.

She came back forward, claiming his mouth in a kiss, her hips still moving. But it wasn't enough for him to keep sitting there, he wanted — he needed to move. He scooted down on his knees and every movement made her gasp. He put her down on the floor, leaned against the other bench. He was still connected to her and looked over her for a moment as he kneeled between her legs.

Her soft curves, her wide hips and slim waist, her messy hair and her gorgeous smile. The strength in her body, reflected in her strong mind. His heart was beating too fast, his subharmonics were singing to her, for her.

"I love you, Jane, I love you so much."

"I know", she whispered. "I love you too, Garrus." She moved her hips a bit and he fell forward with a grunt, grabbing the bench with his hands. She wrapped her arms around his cowl and pulled herself closer to whisper in his ear canal. "And now, please fuck me my love."

"Yes," was all he could say and then his vision narrowed to the light in her eyes. He forgot where they were, how the metal was cold and hard under his knees, he ignored the squeaking of the Mako's shock absorbers. His body moved on its own, driving into her with long steady strokes. He felt her
shudder, building up to a second climax.

Her body was all around him, a fluid motion of touch and being held. There was safety in her touch, her strength, her love. He felt the wave of physical pleasure run up his spine but it was overwhelmed by the feeling of belonging. He belonged to her, her human soul and his turian Spirit, combined forever.

Her gasp brought him back to reality and he felt her orgasm around his penis. With a shout from all his feelings he came too, driving into her one last time. As the waves of pleasure ebbed through his body, he pressed his forehead against hers, his marking scent mixing with the smell of their love making.

They stayed like that, forehead to forehead, her arms wrapped round him, holding each other until their breathing normalized.

Shepard was the first to move, pulling out a bandage from the first aid kit to soak up the remnants of their love making. They helped each other to get dressed again, lingering a bit with touching each other before they covered themselves again. Garrus climbed out of the Mako to stretch and put on the upper part of his armor. Shepard followed, her suit looking only a bit disheveled.

She took his hand in hers and didn't let go until they were in the captain's cabin, not even when they had to maneuver through the few crew members still in party mood. A short order from Shepard put an official end to the party and the people dispersed except for a few who were wrapped in very close embraces.

Shepard smiled and left them alone. She pulled Garrus into the cabin. She turned to him with an apologetic smile. "I think I need some sleep now," she mumbled. "So much for endless sex before the world ends."

He hugged her, nuzzling her hair. "The world won't end and this crew needs a well rested commander."

They got ready for bed and Garrus waited for her to get out of the shower. He was getting worried that she took so long and just as he was about to get up and check on her, she stepped out of the bathroom in a loose shirt and climbed into bed with him.

"You okay, Sunshine?"

She sighed. "Yes, I just needed a moment..." She let the thought trail off and wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Anything I can do?" he asked.

She smiled at him and scooted down under the blanket. "Just hold me, my Angel. Just hold me."

"Come here," he said and pulled her close to him. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, her head resting on a pillow on his upper arm. He nuzzled into her hair, listening to her breathing. It took a long time but finally her body sagged and relaxed and her breaths came long and slow.

He kept holding her, watching over her sleep.

His life, his mate.
Yes it still lives!
Hello to returning readers, thank you for still being here and welcome new readers. The games may be old but the love is still fresh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do we have a lock on Saren?" Shepard leaned over Joker's shoulders as she stared at the translucent display and the surface of Ilos behind it.

"Yes, I have an 80% accurate reading of a turian lifeform with a biotic signature. Only know of two other spiky guys in this quadrant and they're not biotic."

Garrus and Nihlus trilled at each other, acknowledging the other's presence.

"Alright, I want you to drop the Mako right on his head."

"There's not enough room," Pressly yelled from the back.

Garrus accessed his console through his omni-tool and had to agree. The valley was not long enough for an approach with the Normandy.

"There has to be another place," Kaidan said, scanning the surface from his station.

"There isn't," Pressly said, louder than necessary. "The next valley is separated by a mountain range."

"And we don't know if we can even get to him from there," Shepard grumbled. "We have to get down there, before he disappears into these underground structures we detect there."

"I can do it," Joker said.

"It's impossible!" Pressley yelled from the back.

"I can do it!" Joker said, loud and certain. "I can do it if you keep the Mako on the vector I'm giving you," he said to Shepard.

"Okay," Shepard said, "you drop the Mako, I bring it down safely and then you get out of here, keeping stealth. I want you back at the Citadel as fast as possible."

Joker, for all his ease and cavalier behaviour with his commander, knew exactly when it was time to shut up and follow orders. "Yes, Commander," he said, furiously typing in his calculations.

"We can't go back to the Citadel!" Pressly yelled from the back, obviously not having gotten the memo about shutting up and following orders.

"You can and you will, I'm not keeping the best ship of the Alliance tied up here, while Sovereign attacks the Citadel." She put her hand on Joker's shoulder and said to him more quietly, "Wait with
communications until you're at least in the Artemis Cluster. Find Hackett, he'll be ready."

Joker nodded, his fingers nonstop working on the interface. Pressly looked like he wanted to protest but Shepard gave him a look that made him instantly straighten and turn back to his console.

She opened a comm channel and made a ship-wide announcement. "Ground Team, get ready, we're dropping in the Mako in ten. The rest, prepare your stations for space combat on your way back to the Citadel. I'm counting on all of you, Shepard out."

She turned back to Joker, giving him an affectionate clap on the shoulder. "Make it happen, flyboy."

"Sure thing," he answered, leaning forward in his seat as his finger flew over the interface.

Kainda, Garrus and Nihlus followed Shepard out of the cockpit, past the stations with the ship controllers and engineers. They saluted respectfully as Shepard walked by and she answered with a quick salute herself to every single one. Hurrying to the elevator, Liara joined them, dressed in unfamiliar armor and a collapsed helmet under her arm.

Nihlus sighed when the elevator started and shifted his weight to the side. Garrus had noticed that he was still limping, as much as he tried to hide it. He was walking without a cane but Garrus wondered if he did that to hide his injury or because he didn't need it anymore.

When the elevator spilled them out into the cargo bay, Shepard made short sound to get Nihlus' attention. "A word, Nihlus?"

Nihlus sagged against the rail in the elevator and trilled sadly. "I know, I know, I'm not well enough for ground combat."

"Indeed," Shepard said. "As much as I would like to take you with me but it would be irresponsible."

Nihlus sang out his disappointment and understanding in subharmonics and Shepard seemed to sense what he meant.

"I know," she said, "you wanted to confront him and I hope you still get that chance but for now, you're going back with the Normandy. You are going to explain to the Council and the Alliance why we took her and have the Citadel prepare for an attack, if there's still time for that. Kick their asses."

She gripped his arm and stared into his eyes. "Listen, nothing happens to this crew, you hear me? You'll make sure that there will be no negative consequences for anybody on the ship. I don't care if you have to dance in front of a mirror with a chicken and say 'Spectre Authority' three times over your shoulder. Nothing happens to them."

Nihlus looked bewildered at her. "Yes, Commander, it'll be my pleasure," he said, grinning, but also trilling his confusion for Garrus to hear.

Shepard gave him a nod and walked over to the lockers to put on her armor. Snapping on her armor with swift, well practices moves, she spoke quietly to Tali and Liara. Both looked nervous, their body language almost identical. Watching them in contrast to Kaidan and the marines, calm and speaking only in short remarks, made it obvious that they were not soldiers.

But Shepard had insisted on taking them both with them. Liara obviously because of her knowledge about the protheans and Tali actually on Garrus' advice. While working with her on the shielding algorithms of the Normandy, Tali had beat him several times in figuring out the complicated algorithms. They didn't know what kind of systems the protheans would throw at them and it was a no-brainer to bring Tali and her deductive abilities with them. Her proficiency with a shotgun didn't
hurt either.

Nihlus turned to Garrus. "Dancing with a chicken in front of a mirror?"

Garrus trilled his own confusion back at him. "I don't know, this official expert on humans has officially given up on understanding what that means. Just make sure the crew isn't arrested or she'll have your head."

Nihlus' face lit up. "Yes, having the head on a plate, I've heard that saying before. What a gruesome thing, certainly not what I had in mind for me and my wonky fringe." He twitched his mandibles, and his hand played with the hem of his headscarf. "I promise I will do everything I can to keep the rulebook wielders away from this crew and this ship." He held out his arm and Garrus grabbed it and held it for a moment, humming his greetings and well wishes at him.

"See you on the Citadel," Garrus said.

Nihlus hummed back at him, putting all his hope and worry into his subharmonics.

Garrus knew that there was a chance that he would not see Nihlus again but he shoved that thought aside as he hurried towards the cargo hold. His official mission was to get Saren but in his mind he knew that his most important mission was to protect his mate.

***

It was cramped in the Mako when they had all piled in. Everybody needed to be strapped in for this drop. A tense silence loomed over their heads as Joker verbalized his approach and counted down to the moment of drop off.

"And go! Good luck Commander," he said over the comm and the Mako jerked as the cables pulled it forward through the porthole and released it over the jagged cliffs and towering ruins of Ilos. Garrus held his breath as the Mako fell down in free fall, hurtling towards the surface with no landing terrain in sight. Shepard's hands tightened around the control sticks. She used the thrusters to stir the falling vehicle around spires that had once been towers and massive buildings and now stood around like decaying statues.

Murmuring rose in the cabin, even the hardened marines began to get nervous as no flat terrain came in sight. Another cliff rose up and Shepard lifted the Mako over the edge with a push from the thrusters and then let the Mako drop down on the other side of the cliff, narrowly avoiding the ruined structures as she went head first towards something that looked like a courtyard. Garrus was beginning to doubt this operation, there was no way the they could land the Mako safely in this area, coming down at this speed.

He was about to voice his concerns when Shepard looked over her shoulder to him and winked. She pulled hard at the controls, bringing the Mako's front up so that all they could see through the front windows were the green clouds in the sky, fired the thrusters and with a thud set the Mako down, skidded forward a few steps and came to a halt right in front of a rocky archway.

Nobody said anything. For a moment the whole cabin collectively took a deep breath.

"Disembark," Shepard said, fastening her gun to her armor and holding out her pistol. She jumped out first, followed by Oman and her trusty grenade launcher, the other marines and Wrex. Garrus nodded to Madhav, who stayed in the Mako with Langenfeld and followed Kaidan and Tali out. He bumped into Liara, who had jumped out but apparently was now frozen in shock and pressed her back against the Mako as if she wanted to melt into the plating.
Garrus had no time to reassure her, a troop of geth emerged from the natural archway, shots hitting the Mako right next to them. He grabbed Liara's arm and dragged her behind the vehicle. She blinked once, visibly pulled herself together and then send out a biotic shockwave that staggered the geth enough so that Garrus and her could make it over to the boulders where Shepard and the others cowered.

"Did you see him?" Shepard hissed when she cowered down to reload.

"See who?" Garrus asked.

"Saren. Bastard went through that gate just as I got out of the Mako."

"Gate?"

Shepard pointed to a vertical rock face, overgrown with green moss. "That's a gate, big enough for the Mako." She looked over the boulder and shot at an approaching geth until one of the marines took it out. "I want you and Tali to hack that gate open."

Tali held her shotgun tighter and nodded. "Understood Commander."

Fewer geth came through the archway and Shepard ordered her squad to move forward, drawing the attention away from Tali and him. Garrus switched to his assault rifle and provided the cover Tali needed to work on the access panel.

The air tasted heavy and moist and everything was overgrown with lichen and moss. The ground felt slippery on every step and sometimes soft but Garrus didn't dare to look what exactly he had stepped into. Ilos had been taken back by hardy flora but they didn't know if it also had wildlife. So far, the only movements he could see were geth troops. He took out two geth approaching but then the battle moved away from their position and he turned to Tali. "Can you get it to work?"

Tali tilted her head and her glowing eyes blinked behind her mask. "There is a problem. The power is cut."

"Mechanically or by security protocol?"

Tali turned to him. "What do you mean, mechanically?"

"Did they cut the power lines for the gate from the other side or did they just issue a lockdown via security protocol?"

"Security protocol."

Garrus got up and checked the perimeter for the rest of the team. "That's at least something. We can probably find a station somewhere on this side to unlock the gate and as long as it still has power we can open it." Even though they were on the day-side of the planet, Ilos' sun didn't do much to illuminate the planet. The light was so dim that he switched his visor to night vision mode. It made everything look bright green and let infrared sources like electronics stand out with a red glow.

Tali took her shotgun in her hand and nodded to him to indicate that she was ready to move. Garrus stepped forward, consciously covering Tali as they approached the stone archway. The fighting had moved to the back of the courtyard and Garrus spotted a red glowing console along a wall that he wanted to check.

Tali came up to his side as he walked over, looking for movement behind every boulder and statue scattered around the courtyard. "You don't have to cover me like that," Tali complained and her
"I am good at this, I even did Ashley's training."

"Sorry, it's a habit I guess? And with your suit..."

"I have shields." She raised her shotgun and stepped around him to take the lead.

Garrus chuckled. How foolish of him to underestimate the women Shepard surrounded herself with.

Tali had reached the console and checked it for power. She crawled behind it while Garrus kept watch. The battle had moved far away from them but his scanner was still jammed and that wasn't a good sign. He adjusted the settings in his visor, even geth had to emit some kind of heat signature from their processors.

A movement at the peripheral of his vision made him snap around just as the familiar whirr of geth servos reached his ears. He started shooting, taking the surprisingly agile geth out as he rolled out of its line of sight and pushed Tali along with him.

"Bosh’tet!" Tali shouted, pulling her shotgun out from under her and shot the geth in the chest. It fell with a screech, only to reveal another one. This one was aiming a rocket launcher.

"Jump!" Garrus yelled, grabbing Tali's arm and pulling her over the hip-high wall next to them. The drop was deeper than expected, instead of level ground, it was a ramp leading up from the lower level. The shock absorbers in Garrus' armor crunched as he landed on the ramp. His head hit the ground hard, making him dizzy but he held on tight to Tali, buffering her fall and he skidded on his back into another hip-high wall. From above, the debris from the console and the wall they had just jumped over rained down on them. The rocket had hit right where they had been standing.

Tali raised her shotgun and shot the geth that looked down through the gap into the headlight. It fell forward with a high pitched whine and crashed headfirst onto the ramp. "Bosh’tet," Tali said again and pushed herself off Garrus. The good turian inside of him made him trill an apology to her for the close contact but she didn't react. He couldn't move anyway and had to wait for the health systems in his armor to fix him up.

"Can you get up?"

"Yes, just a moment." Garrus looked at his omni-tool and checked over his own vital signs. According to his armor's scanners, nothing was broken, he only had a few dents in his plates and a scratch on his fringe. He sat up, waiting for the short dizziness to pass. Bright spots danced in his vision. Tali stood before him, her omni-tool glowing as it scanned their surroundings, her shotgun at the ready.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Yes, nothing serious."

"I hope so, Shepard would kill me if I got you killed," Tali said with a grim tone in her voice.

"Don't worry, I'm sure she wouldn't kill you," Garrus said, putting a humorous trill into his subharmonics.

Tali made a noise that sounded like distorted grunt through her speaker. "She would kill a universe for you, I hope you know that."

"I..." Garrus stuttered, unable to form words about that terrifying feeling of overwhelming love that ran through him.
"Come on," Tali said, pointing her shotgun to an area further down the ramp they were standing on. "I get a reading for electrical circuits from there." She waited for him to get back on his feet and lead the way to an overgrown structure.

Garrus felt the painkillers taking hold and let out a sigh. The headache faded and his vision cleared. The sound of the battle was somewhere behind them and higher up, down here, everything seemed to be eerily quiet.

The overgrown terminal was a disappointment, as were the next three they found. The terminals were happy to display various warning symbols but seemed to have no connection to the security grid.

Tali hissed something under her helmet and turned back to the ramp. "We have to look up there," she pointed to the higher ground where Shepard and her troops had been fighting, "according to the maps I downloaded, there should be something like an elevator connecting to the lower levels."

"Understood." Garrus took up the lead this time, walking up the ramp until he could look over most of the courtyard. It was quiet and his scanner wasn't jammed anymore, a good sign for sure but he only relaxed when he saw Shepard on the other side with her helmet off.

They walked over to them, stepping over the smoking remains of dead geth on their way.

"There you are," Shepard called out and waved them over. "Could this be an access elevator? What do you think?"

"Agreed," Tali said. "We got maps from other terminals and I think if we go to a section 11 levels down, we'll find a major node of the security network."

"Great news!" Shepard gave Tali's shoulder a soft pat and then pointed to a console next to her. It had been cleared of the vegetation and was blinking in angry red. "Now we just need to hack this access console to get the elevator to work."

"Are you sure it's the control console?" Tali asked.

Shepard shrugged. "It's the only one that has schematics about the elevator stored. I think it's our best bet."

"Yes, I agree," Tali said, already poking around in the innards of the console with her omni-tool.

Garrus did his own scan and then joined Tali on the floor to remove more protective cover from the console. It looked like nothing he had ever seen before and he wasn't even sure where to start.

Kaidan and another marine came over to them and set the toolbox from the Mako on the ground. Tali was diving into it and retrieved various cables from it. Garrus was impressed that she even had a starting point as he was staring at the arrangement of circuits and wires and blinking lights in front of him like a schoolboy looking at his first toy Cersor, broken in pieces.

"What's your plan, Tali?" he asked.

Tali laid her head to the side and made a squeak that almost sounded like a subharmonic trill. "I don't know enough about how this system works, I thought we could try to reroute the main power to this section here," she pointed at a circular area, "for I think this one controls the power to the elevator itself."

She made a connection, held the omni-cable to the blinking circle and shrieked as sparks flew out of
the console and an angry sound came out from the display.

Shepard looked at it as if it smelled bad. "I think it said 'unauthorized access' or something like that."

"You understood that?" Garrus asked, trying to keep the worry out of his voice.

"Not really word for word," Shepard said, her fingers hovering over the display. "But I got the gist, you know?"

Tali stood up and waved her omni-tool over the display. "Can you read this Shepard?"

"Only parts, I know this here means that the console is locked and I think this here means something like override."

"Good, maybe we can get to it from here," Tali said, sounding way more enthusiastic than Garrus felt. He kept on scanning and mapping the inner hardware of the console, trying to find a technical solution in case Tali's software solution wouldn't work.

He turned to Shepard. "This is going to take a long time."

She nodded and turned to the marines. "You heard him. Get comfortable, we'll be here a while. Spread out, set up watch."

In a short time, the marines had arranged boulders around their position to protect them from all sides and one had started on preparing food. The human ability of preparing and eating food in any situation was truly legendary.

That was good at least. Things would turn bad soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to divadevi for answering the unexpected call for beta reading.
The only thing worse than sitting around waiting for a door to be hacked open, was sitting around with hyped up soldiers, waiting for a door to open.

It had been three days, as much as it was possible to measure the time in the dim, unchanging light of Illos, and the mood worsened every day. The only one not obviously affected by that dangerous combination of boredom and thirst for fights was Wrex. He had settled down against a wall and slept.

The marines took turns around the perimeter but except for one geth troop that got dropped on the first day, they had had no other enemy contact. Ingrained discipline kept everything under control but Garrus could feel the tension like an itch on his plates.

They worked on the console, trying different approaches and failing with each. At some point the bright green schematics began to dance in front of his eyes. They took turns, Tali and Shepard working on it for a while and then Kaidan and Garrus. After the second day they switched teams, pairing Kaidan and Tali and Shepard with him. Now, after the third day, he was considering letting Wrex try his luck.

"I feel like we're missing something obvious," Shepard said and let herself drop to the floor, next to Garrus.

"I'm certain that you kicked it everywhere," Garrus said.

"Well, you gotta try everything." She turned to him. "Do you think we should let Wrex try his hand?"

"Thought about that too," Garrus said and grinned at her. "By now I'm almost ready to give it to him."

"Bosh'tet, bosh'tet, bosh'tet!" Tali yelled and kicked the console casing. She stomped over to them and sat down next to them. "I'm out of ideas. We have fixed everything, I think we fixed errors that have been there when they constructed it. But the power fizzles out before we can route it, the voltage is too low."

Shepard took a sip from her water bottle. "You know, it feels like something or someone is actively working against us."

"Do you think it's Saren?" Tali looked like she would have wiped sweat from her brow if she could have taken off her helmet.

"I don't know. Actually, I hope not, I hope he struggles just like us on some stupid door because otherwise he's long gone and we're sitting here while the Citadel falls."

A worried silence fell over the group. One of the marines asked for permission to check the door at the gate again. Shepard grunted her permission at him. This wasn't the first time that one of them had tried to get the gate to open with brute force. So far nothing had worked, not even Omar's rocket
Shepard let her head fall back against the mossy wall. She spoke quietly, so that only Garrus could hear her. "What a fuckshit. We're sitting here, with no exit plan, trapped on a dead planet — what was I thinking?"

"You had no way of knowing." Garrus said.

"Maybe I should have? I put all my bets on catching Saren here, stop him from whatever he wants to do here and now we're stuck."

Liara came over to them, her omni-tool glowing on her arm. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Yes, of course." Shepard nodded and spread out the tarp she sat on for Liara.

"Tali, could you come here too?" Liara sat down gracefully, a stark contrast to how the rest of them were spread out, all bulky armor and gangly limbs.

Tali sat down next to her, her omni-tool flickering as she probably had it overloaded with background programs. Kaidan's tool started to flicker too. Tali quickly issued a command and the tools stopped flickering. "Sorry, I didn't mean to hijack your omni-tool."

Kaidan looked at his omni-tool. "You can do that?"

Tali shrugged and tilted her head. "I thought more resources would help me in hacking the console."

Kaidan was still staring at his omni-tool, his fingers flicking over the interface. "You can just pull processing power from my tool?"

Tali's eyes turned to slits behind her mask and she giggled. "I won't do it again."

"You need to show me how to do that," Kaidan said, more fascinated than annoyed.

Liara pulled up a schematic on her omni-tool. "I was wondering if we go about this the wrong way. This is a prothean system and we are trying to use it like one of our consoles. But we should try to activate it like a prothean."

"And how? We don't have a prothean at hand," Shepard said.

"We kind of do," Liara said and looked pointedly at Shepard.

"Aww, shit."

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The galaxy's most reluctant prothean interpreter alternated between staring at the console and glaring at Liara, with no obvious success either way.

"Anything?" she asked Tali, who monitored the console. Tali, standing next to her with her omni-tool glowing, shook her head.

Shepard hunched over the console again. "I don't know what to do, I try to do the jedi mind trick but no matter how hard I think 'open', it's not doing it."

Liara put a hand on her shoulder. "Open your mind, like you would for an asari mind meld."
Shepard scrunched up her nose. "You know how good I am with those."

Liara, quickly turning into the galaxy's most patient asari advisor, nodded serenely. "Let go of your physical shell, open your mind to the universe."

Shepard looked like she was in pain. "How? My mind is running a mile a minute, wondering what we can do, when the geth are going to attack again — "

"Ey, boss!" Omar leaned her rocket launcher against a boulder and came over to them. "With respect, do you trust us, Commander?"

"Of course."

"We got this, we'll watch over y'all. You worry about getting that shit open and we'll take care of geth or anybody else attacking."

A smile spread on Shepard's face. "I wouldn't expect any less." She gave a short nod and Omar dipped her head in answer. The other marines stood up as if on command and gathered around her, receiving short, precise orders as to where to take up positions. With a short yell, they spread out and took up their posts, leaving a wide berth around the console.

Garrus snapped his gun to his back and stepped behind Shepard. He wrapped his arms around her and made her lean against him and spoke quietly into her ear. "Relax. We're all here, I got you, let go."

He felt Shepard shudder. She murmured, "Baby, you keep talking like that and I'm gonna have to ravish you right here on the floor."

Liara turned her face to the side, her cheeks slightly purple and Garrus chuckled. "Just trust us to protect you and do that 'open your mind to the universe' thing." He felt her settle against him, letting her head rest against his cowl.

"I'm trying, I just don't know how."

"Ashley said — " Liara spoke quietly, "when we embraced eternity that it was like a deep prayer or like a meditation." She sighed and Garrus realized that he hadn't even asked how she felt, knowing that Ashley was on the Citadel, injured and alone.

"I'm sorry," Shepard and him said at the same time.

Shepard put her hand on Liara's shoulder. "I'm sure she's fine by now, the doctors said she was on the road to recovery when we left."

"I know," Liara said. "But I couldn't even speak to her one last time."

"Sorry," Shepard whispered.

"It's..." Liara shook herself, "let's just concentrate on this, open the system and then we'll see."

Shepard widened her stance and leaned back against Garrus. She placed a hand on the console, closed her eyes and breathed slowly. Garrus's visor fed him stats from her suit, her heart rate slowed down, her breathing evened out to a slow, relaxed pattern, almost as if she was sleeping.

For long minutes nothing happened but Shepard stayed calm. Her breathing stayed in the rhythm and only occasionally did she frown in concentration. Garrus watched the display on the console. It
flickered, differently than before, at least that's what he thought. He couldn't deny some wishful thinking on his part and may have possibly imagined the changes.

Just as he was about to give up hope, Tali made a noise like a choked laugh. "I can see a power spike. I don't know what it does but you're having an effect."

Shepard sighed and rubbed her forehead. "I can't quite get it, it's like one of those visions but it keeps turning away from me." She looked over to Liara. "Maybe you have to be asari for it to work?"

"What do you mean?" Liara asked.

"You said that some scientists think asari share genetic traits with protheans. This system could be coded to prothean genetics."

"But I don't have the cypher."

Shepard turned to her fully now and looked at her with a lopsided smile. "We have to try it together. Embrace eternity and all that."

Liara smiled back at her. "That's the first time you are asking me to do it."

"Don't get used to it." Shepard took Liara's hand and placed it on the console next to hers and closed her eyes.

Liara didn't hesitate, she put her free hand on the side of Shepard's face and murmured, "Embrace eternity."

At the same moment, they both snapped their eyes open, staring at each other, unseeing. Liara's pupils were completely black and Shepard's eyes seemed to have a green shimmer flickering over them. Garrus couldn't even begin to say how much that disturbed him.

Tali was frantically typing on her omni-tool, nodding along as the symbols on the display jumped and scrolled. Her speaker was flashing but Garrus couldn't hear what she said over the nervous hum in his own ears. It took him a few moments to register that the noise came from around them.

Lines in the ancient walls lit up, pulsing in a slow rhythm. Green light crawled along old connections towards the floor and then to the console they all stood around. When the lines connected, the image on the display stilled and one symbol stood out in bright yellow. Neither Liara nor Shepard noticed it.

Garrus looked at Kaidan, silently asking for help and he nodded. Garrus used the tip of his talon to push Shepard's finger over the symbol and immediately it changed colors and a loud crack sounded out behind them. It broke Shepard and Liara from their meditation and they looked around confused as everybody else was pointing guns at the wall behind them.

"What?" Shepard asked, her pistol already in her hand.

Before Garrus could answer, the wall slid upwards and revealed a small room that looked like an elevator car. A panel on the side glowed softly and lines pulsed with the energy lights all around the car.

Garrus let out a breath and relaxed a bit. "Who knew that elevators are the universal constant."

"No kidding. Let's see where it takes us," Shepard said and appointed two marines to hold position with a hand signal and stepped into the car, her gun checking out every corner like a search beam.
But the car was bare and looked as unassuming as an elevator car could look.

"Wrex, you're coming with us or would you rather sleep?" she called over to the softly snoring krogan. To his credit, he woke instantly, unfolding from the floor like a battle armature. He stomped over to the cabin and made an grumpy huff as he walked passed Shepard.

She grinned at him. "Unfortunately, I don't have coffee for you."

"I'd rather have some ryncol to warm myself," he mumbled as he leaned against the back of the car.

"When we're done with all this, I will personally plunk you into a desert with a nice ryncol drink," Shepard said.

Garrus stretched his shoulders, the constant dampness of this area was getting on his nerves too. "I wouldn't say no to a nice desert place too, but skip the ryncol."

Wrex grunted with a wide grin. "Hah! A bit of ryncol too much for you, little turian?"

"I like my intestines intact, thank you very much."

"Yes," Shepard cut in as she signaled the rest to step in, "I second that preference." She winked at him.

"Now, let's see what else this place has in store for us." She put her hand against a softly glowing panel. The cabin shook and then slowly descended at an angle. It was almost disappointing.

The doors opened to a dark tunnel. Thick roots had taken over the tunnel walls, making it more narrow that it originally was. The green moss covered everything and it felt even colder and more damp down here.

Liara shuddered visibly. "It feels like we're being watched and not by the geth."

They followed the tunnel quietly, listening for the whirr and clicks of approaching geth but all they could hear was the echo of their own steps as they walked along.

"Tali?" Shepard asked, keeping her voice low.

"Interference on my scanner. I can only tell that we're hundreds of meters under the ground."

Shepard poked at her omni-tool. "Same for me. Let's keep it nice and quiet." She walked forward, her Heavy Pistol raised and the others followed her. Even Wrex managed to be light on his feet next to Shepard.

The corridor made another curve and they could see a large cavern at the end. The doors stood open and a faint hum could be heard as they stepped inside. The lights on their helmets illuminated green and black shapes, statues, holding watch over this dead place that had been untouched for an unfathomable long time. The air tasted even staler here and of rotten water and decay. The statues all seemed to resemble giant people, kneeling in prayer and a cape thrown over them. Garrus was just going to comment, when the familiar click and whirr of a geth made him raise his assault rifle.

The shots came from everywhere. They dove into cover behind the statues but giant red geth, bigger and bulkier than they had seen so far, stepped out of the shadows behind them. Their shots were devastating, one hit turned an ancient statue into floating dust particles. Shepard rolled out of the line of fire just as her cover evaporated. Wrex pulled her towards him, his biotic barrier and his massive body shielding her from at least four impacts.
Garrus felt the biotic field from Liara prickle on his skin. It held for the moment but it wouldn’t withstand the barrage of energy shots for long. Shepard pointed to a row of columns at the wall on the side and on her nod, they all ran as fast as possible towards them. Two geth stepped in their way but quickly fell to their shots. Their main problem were the geth giants in their back, still shooting their devastating energy bombs. But at least the columns protected them for now.

The scream of pain made the blood in his veins come to a halt. His body seemed to know before his conscious mind who screamed and why. He vaulted over any obstructions in his way, shooting at every mechanical monstrosity moving towards them and was at Shepard's side before he remembered to breathe again.

Shielding her with his own body, he glanced over to her. Her face was hidden behind her helmet but he could tell from the way she held her side that she had been hit.

"What happened?" he asked, trying to keep the desperate whine of his subharmonics down.

"Just a glance, don't worry about it."

He looked down to her hip where her armor had been discolored and charred. His barely suppressed subharmonics wavered in panicked worry.

She sighed and sat up. "Medi-gel is the greatest invention ever."

Garrus wanted to do so many things, none of them in any way appropriate during a firefight and especially not with a commanding officer. He reigned his subharmonics in and gave her a nod before he turned back towards the line of enemies.

Shepard scanned the area with her omni-tool and called Tali over, using Garrus' fire as their cover.

"Does this look like a defense system to you?" she asked and pointed at a section on the scan.

"Yes," Tali said, lighting up her own omni-tool. "But they seem to be broken."

"If we can fix them, they might solve our problem here."

"Or they could attack us as well," Tali said, ducking as another shot hit Liara's barrier.

"I'm willing to risk that, as long as they take care of those giants first." She readied her assault rifle and got up on one knee, still keeping her head down. Garrus got a clear look of the charred side of her armor and winced, trying not to think about how her skin had to look underneath. "Siddig, Vakarian, you cover us. Tali, behind me. Kaidan, how's your barrier?"

"Pretty and blue, Commander."

Shepard grinned, despite the pain Garrus could still see on her face. "My favorite kind. On my side, keep us inside your barrier."

Shepard waited for the marine Siddig to take her position next to Garrus and then got up in one fluid motion and ran forward. Kaidan stayed on her side, his biotic field extending over them.

Garrus sprayed his shots wide, knowing that Siddig would cover their back. They got shot much less than he expected though, it seemed like the geth had trouble aiming for them. A triumphant "Hah!" came from Tali and he noticed that her omni-tool was glowing brightly.

"What is it, Tali?" Shepard asked as she dove behind the huge aperture she wanted to fix. Lucky for
them, a few boulders that must have crashed down from the ceiling centuries ago, had not flattened
the machine but provided convenient cover now.

"I hacked the geth's optical processing. They have trouble seeing us now," Tali said with a smug grin
in her voice.

There was stunned silence before all three of them asked "What?"

"You did fucking what now?" Shepard pulled off some plating at the back of the apparatus.

"I can't quite get into their short range systems but I overlaid them with a scrambler. Since they
instantly share all optical information with each other, as long as they're in my range, they have
trouble aiming."

"Damn!" Siddig said. "You're a fucking genius."

"Another point for interspecies collaboration," Shepard said with a grin. She used her omni-tool on
the back of the machinery, peering into its open guts. "I think this is just plain corrosion. Everything
is covered with this green moss."

"Maybe a short energy blast to fry off the organic film?" Tali suggested. "We have do that on the
flotilla sometimes when the environmental controls fail."

"How much do you think, 20k?"

"8k should be enough," Tali said.

Kaidan, his biotic barrier still flowing from his hands, looked over and nodded. "I agree, we don't
want to fry it. Do you have omni-gel?"

"Plenty," Shepard said.

"Give it a seed to follow the connections, that should do it," Kaidan said.

"Yes, good idea," Tali agreed.

Shepard adjusted her position, wincing as she had to stretch her arm into the machine. Garrus
clamped his mandibles tight as her pain felt like a knife in his own gut.

He leaned down, opening his visor, so that only she could hear him. "Sunshine," he murmured.

She let her visor snap up to reveal her face. "I'm fine." Her omni-tool made the machine glow yellow
from the inside.

His helmet scraped against hers. "I know but, please..."

She turned her head, her eyes pleading and loving. "Not now," she whispered.

Garrus fought his subharmonics down. "Just..."

"I know." She fixed his look with her own and it felt like a physical connection between them.

He trilled quietly and nodded. Now was not the time. From somewhere he summoned his turian
training and clamped down on his emotions and subharmonics.

Shots were hitting their cover more frequently again. Garrus unfolded his sniper rifle and jammed it
through a gap between boulders. His omni-tool fed the visuals to his helmet and he took out the
approaching geth without leaving his cover. One of the red giants turned its optics to his position and
started marching towards him. It needed more shots to be taken down and his gun warned him of
overheating. After five shots, the thing finally collapsed with a stuttering wail but not before it
directed an energy bolt at the gap where his gun poked through. He ripped it out and rolled to the
side just as the boulder vibrated from the impact and a gust of dust shot out of the gap he had been
using.

"I think they can aim again," Garrus said.

"They must have learned to filter out my signal."

"That was fast," Shepard said.

"The advantage of networking," Tali said.

"I wish I could tell your ancestors what a thoroughly bad idea that was."

"They probably wouldn't have listened to you." Tali's long sigh told of many frustrations.

"That should do it. What do you think, Tali?" Shepard scooted to the side and let Tali scan the
machine.

"Only way to be sure is to turn it on."

"Everybody keep your head down." Shepard poked a section with her omni-tool and Tali connected
to another part. On a nod, they both shot an energy arc into the machine. Immediately the machine
shrieked with a deafening noise, shuddered and unfolded to twice its original size. The shriek
stopped and was replaced by guns starting up and mowing down the approaching geth before they
had even managed to find a defensive position for themselves.

"Best idea ever," Shepard yelled over the noise. "Let's fix the other one too."

It took them a lot less time to fix the second machine. All the geth, including the red giants had
focussed on the defence weapon and didn't bother with the puny organics running over the center of
the courtyard. Tali and Shepard wordlessly fixed the weapon and it unfolded just like the first one
and took down the remaining attackers before they had even managed to find a defensive position for
themselves.

With the noise of the battle gone, the silence felt like an absorber over their heads being slowly lifted.
Bit by bit, the silence filled with the noise of water dripping, dust crumbling out from impact holes,
of decades old structures settling again, and an insistent whistle from the far side of the room.

They hid behind the columns on the other side of the rest of the team. The comms crackled to life,
jarring loud now.

"So, what's the verdict, Commander. Are those things going to attack us now?" Smith asked over the
comms.

Shepard stood up and signaled them to follow her. "We'll see."

Kaidan hastily extended his barrier over them and on the other side they could see Liara spreading
hers over the group on her side. They walked slowly towards the center of the courtyard, practically
on their tiptoes to make as little noise as possible. When they reached the two machines, the upper,
head-like parts swiveled around towards them. Their guns were very much pointed at them,
following them as they walked between them towards the other side of the room, but the green lights
they had seen before on the sides were dim.

When they had passed the machines, the heads jerked back, as if they were watching the entrance to
the room.

"Yes, this isn't creepy at all," Kaidan said.

"Can't say I like this much," Wrex said, taking up position next to Shepard.

Garrus shook off all the memories of stories with robot revolutions he had read as a child. Hopefully
these things would not decide that they had to wipe out the organics. They already had the Reapers
for that.

At the far side of the room, stairs on either side led up to a gallery, where the whistling came from.
Upstairs, they found an arrangement of grey boxes, most overgrown with moss but a few had
recently been wiped clean.

"Looks like Saren has been here too," Garrus said.

"He has such a head start on us," Liara said.

Shepard had taken off her helmet and was scanning the consoles with her omni-tool. "Liara, can you
interpret any of this?"

Liara stepped closer to the box in the middle to scan it and the whistling stopped and the box opened
up to reveal a console. Her hand hovered over it and was enough to activate something in the
console. A projection started up with someone speaking but it was unrecognizable.

Liara had stars in her eyes. "This must be a prothean language! We are hearing a message from
50,000 years ago from a real prothean! This is incredible, I wish I could understand what he's
saying."

Shepard pressed two fingers against the side of her forehead. "I think I understand some
of it."

"By the goddess, that must be the Cipher!" Liara had never looked more excited than in this moment.
"What does it say, what is it?"

Shepard sighed. "I wish this wouldn't feel so weird in my head. I think it's a log of what happened
but it's only fragments, the recording is damaged." She listened some more to the foreign sounds.
"They were attacked, then something about the Citadel, seeking refuge, something about the side of
the archives." She listened again as the voice got louder and more desperate. "All is lost... the
Conduit... act of desperation... cannot be stopped... cannot be stopped," she translated. She stepped
away from the console. "Now it starts over again, that's all there is."

Garrus looked around, shock and hopelessness were visible on everyone's face. Wrex looked like he
would have loved to shoot the console to pieces.

"Seems like the Reapers found this place," Wrex said.

"I wonder what that act of desperation was," Shepard said.

"Securing their knowledge, probably," Tali said thoughtfully.

"Why do you think so?"
"The protheans took great pain to hide their knowledge but also make it accessible when needed all over the galaxy," Tali said. "The beacons were warning systems for when the Reapers came back and were supposed to lead us to this place. It only makes sense if the knowledge here would actually survive."

"I hope they were successful," Shepard mumbled. "I think this is the security station, let me just..." Her fingers danced over the console, activating symbols that Garrus didn't understand and it creeped him out that she could. The console changed color and Shepard stepped back from it. "I think that was it." She put her helmet back on and listened as she looked at her omni-tool. "I can't connect to Madhav and Langenfeld, we're probably too deep down. We have to go up to see if the gate opens now."

The way back was uneventful. They had to pull Liara away from artifacts and markings as she tried to inspect everything.

"I have to come back here with a team, there's so much to catalogue here, we never had such a rich resource to investigate and it's in such good condition!"

"Yes, but let's save the world first," Shepard said as she pulled Liara away from a decorative sign peeking out under the roots that had overgrown the walls.

"I'm sorry, this is everything I ever dreamed about."

"You'll get exclusive rights to Ilos when we're done with the rest of this tiny problem." Shepard dragged her into the elevator and hit the control panel.

Garrus watched her face, the tension in her jaw. He read grim determination but also relief on her face.

The elevator doors opened to eerie silence in the courtyard and the urgent comm chatter of Madhav and Langenfeld.

"The gate is open. Do you read, Commander? The gate is open, do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Langenfeld," Shepard said as they stepped into the courtyard. "Warm up the Mako, we're going to get that bastard."

Chapter End Notes

_Thanks to divadevi for beta reading again._

_This is Chapter 50. Fifty!_

_When I started writing this story, in November 2012, it was just this idea of "what if Garrus and Shepard met before all the events and what if they weren't bumbling virgins? What if they were already in love during the hunt for Saren?". And now look at_
it. It's over 250k words, it's still growing and to my eternal surprise and gratefulness, you readers still seem to like it.

Thank you, dear readers. Thank you for reading and sticking with me on this journey where I learned how to write at all. Thanks for watching me grow.

And my greatest thanks to all of you who commented, who gave me confidence when I doubted myself, when I wondered who would even read this. Thank you.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

A big part of this chapter is Vigil being a chatter bug. I swear I already cut half of what he said but he still keeps on monologing in this chapter like a failed Shakespearean actor.
But what he says is just so important to the story of Mass Effect, this is actually the one place where we get an explanation, that I felt I had to keep it in here.

Next chapter will be less chatter and more action, I promise.

Shepard drove slowly and carefully, despite the urgency. The tunnel was wide and so high that the upper ceiling disappeared in fog. Everything was covered with thick roots and vines, making the ground uneven. Dust particles drifted in front of them, swirling away in the airflow from the Mako.

"I never dreamed I would discover anything like this," Liara said quietly, staring out the windows. "I've studied the protheans all my life but this is more than I ever hoped for."

"What are those things?" Shepard wondered aloud about circular containers protruding from the walls.

"Cryopods, maybe," Liara said. "They must have thought they could stay in stasis until the Reapers came back. This bunker was possibly the last refuge of their whole species."

"You mean there could still be frozen protheans in there?"

"I'm not getting any energy readings in here, from anywhere," Garrus said. "This building is dead, I don't think the cryopods still work."

"There must be thousands of these pods," Langenfeld said.

Liara sighed. "They were still hopeful. Even in their defeat, they hoped to survive to fight the Reapers again."

Shepard scrunched up her nose. "Sounds either arrogant or delusional."

"Yeah," Wrex grunted. "They lost the war once and thought they could win it on second try?"

They drove on in grim silence. Shepard avoided the roots, a thick as the Mako's tires in some cases, as best as she could but they still almost tipped over on more than one occasion.

"Commander! Vehicle up ahead."

"What kind?"

"About the size of the Mako. Could be Saren's." Madhav was sticking his head out of a side window and increased the amplification of his omni-tool with a special tool-attachment.

A grin spread on Shepard's face. "Please tell me he was stuck down here the whole time too."
Madhav came back inside and closed the window against the stale, damp air.

"It doesn't look like the TAP tank has been damaged. Something must have kept them here." Garrus scanned for energy signatures and obstacles ahead of them but there was nothing to find. Nothing that could have stopped a Turian All Purpose tank.

"That's the best news I heard all week. Saren's head-start is much smaller than I expected, " Shepard said and sped up the Mako.

Excitement churned in Garrus' gizzard, finally they were making progress. He could almost feel that traitor under his talons. It was about time.

He kept scanning, trying to get a reading on the TAP tank. As he stared at the data, something flickered in the background of the image.

"Stop!" he yelled.

Shepard reacted instantly, slamming the breaks and making everyone happy to be strapped in, as the Mako skidded over the wet surface. They came to a sudden stop, the Mako crashing into an invisible barrier and the vehicle shut down.

Not a single light was on on the dashboard and the lack of sound from the engine made every noise louder than a gunshot. Shepard turned around and made one small movement with her hand and the marines nodded in unison. No words were spoken, only the sound of scraping armor, charging shields and weapons being readied could be heard.

They exited the Mako one by one, leaving only two marines as guards behind. A barrier glowed golden in front of the Mako, sealing the tunnel off.

"Is this a trap by Saren?" Shepard asked.

Garrus and Tali both scanned the barrier, trying to trace it to the emitters. "It does not look turian," he said.

"Agreed and it's not geth either," Tali said. "But it looks — "

"It looks prothean," Liara said with conviction. "As little as we know about prothean technology, this mass effect field looks like the ones we have encountered with the security fields of this place."

"But..." Shepard looked around at the pods sticking out of the walls, overgrown by thick roots and vines. "But we do agree that the protheans are all dead in here?"

"It must be another automatic system."

"And it wants us to go in there." Shepard pointed to an opening in the wall. It was the only gap in the solid wall that stretched up into the permanent fog of Ilos. It was lined with vines and low plants seemed to spill from it like an unfinished welcome carpet.

Garrus scanned the area but all he got was a faint image of movement on the other side of the shield. The opening led to an elevator and he scanned again, trying to find a trap, a sign, anything that he could prepare for. But Ilos kept its secrets.

Shepard ordered the marines to stay behind and entered the elevator with Wrex, Garrus, Tali and Liara.
"I hope, when all this is over," Liara said, "I can come back and really study all of this. Just imagine what kind of knowledge we could gain."

"If the reapers didn't destroy everything," Shepard said.

"Ilos seems to have escaped the reaper threat." Liara looked out a window on the side of the cabin with a wistful sigh. They could see the underlying structure of the complex, huge support beams, tunnels and ramps connecting to various structures. These underground systems were gigantic, they had obviously only seen a fraction so far.

The elevator opened to a hollow in the giant cavern with a bridge leading into it that seemed to go nowhere. It looked rather pointless to have an elevator stop here. But as they walked over the bridge, a holographic image flickered to life at the end.

Shepard raised her pistol. "If that is another one of those 'rudimentary sacks of liquid and flesh' things. I'm just gonna shoot it. I don't have time for this shit."

Garrus couldn't agree more. He considered this whole stop a waste of precious time, now that they knew that Saren hadn't gotten far either. This could be their only chance at stopping Saren's plans, whatever they were.

As they came closer to the hologram, it looked like a representation in golden light of the spinning rings in a mass effect relay. But it flickered and distortions rippled over it.

"Looks like some kind of VI interface," Tali said as she scanned it, "but it's badly damaged."

"You are not Prothean," the hologram spoke in a pleasant voice. Shepard slowly lowered her pistol.

"But you are not machine, either," the VI continued. "This eventuality was one of many that was anticipated. This is why we sent our warning through the beacons. I do not sense the taint of indoctrination upon any of you. Unlike the other that passed recently. Perhaps there is still hope."

Shepard holstered her pistol and stepped closer. "So it is real? The indoctrination is used on purpose, as a method of warfare?" "Your nomenclature is abt. I have been monitoring your communications since you arrived at this facility and have analysed your descriptions."

Garrus stepped forward. "That's why we understand you?"

"Yes, I have translated my output into a format you will comprehend."

"Who are you?" Shepard asked. "My name is Vigil. I am an advanced non-organic analysis system with personality imprints from Ksad Ishan, chief overseer of the Ilos research facility. You are safe here, for the moment. But that is likely to change. Soon, nowhere will be safe."

"Why are we here? Why did the beacons and the visions draw us here?"

"You must break a cycle that has continues for millions of years. But to stop it, you must understand or you will make the same mistakes we did."

Vigil continued to explain how the protheans had just been one civilisation in an endless cycle of civilisations that had been wiped out by the reapers. Every civilisation at some point discovered the mass effect relays and the Citadel and built their society around them.

"But the Citadel is a trap. The station is actually an enormous mass relay," Vigil said. "One that links to dark space, the empty void beyond the galaxy's horizon. When the Citadel relay is activated, the
Reapers will pour through from dark space. And all you know will be destroyed."

Shepard looked sceptical. "Nobody ever noticed that the Citadel is a relay?"

"The Reapers are careful to keep the greatest secrets of the Citadel hidden. That is why they created a species of seemingly benign organic caretakers. The keepers maintain the station's most basic functions."

Wrex snorted. "With the keepers, nobody needed to understand completely how everything works."

"But," Shepard looked at Wrex in confusion, "was nobody ever curious? You've been using the relays for centuries. I mean, nobody ever wanted to take things apart to see how they work?"

Wrex chuckled at that. "If humans had been the ones to discover the Citadel, I bet they would have crawled all the way down into the deepest tunnels to look for the bolts that held everything together. Unfortunately, it was only asari."

Liara's head whipped around. "What do you mean unfortunately?"

"Well, they just accepted it, didn't they? The asari discovered the Citadel, and just took it as given. Said hello to the keepers and invited other species to come." Wrex shrugged. "Not that they allowed them to participate on that governing idea for the longest time, but they sure could come and be impressed by the technology."

"Enough, Wrex," Shepard said.

Liara looked furious but didn't say anything.

Vigil's hologram blinked and then he continued. "Reliance on the keepers ensures no other species will ever discover the Citadel's true nature. Not until the relay is activated and the Reapers invade."

"And then the Reapers can wipe out the Citadel and the entire Citadel fleet in a single surprise attack," Garrus said.

"That was our fate. Our leaders were dead before we even realized we were under attack. The Reapers seized control of the Citadel and through it, the mass relays. Communications and transportation across our empire were crippled. Over the next decades, the Reapers systematically obliterated our people. World by world, system by system, they methodically wiped us out."

"And the reapers live in dark space, just waiting?" Shepard wondered, more to herself but Vigil answered anyway.

"We have only theories. The researchers here came to believe the Reapers enter prolonged states of inactivity to conserve energy. This allows them to survive the thousands and thousands of years it takes for organic civilization to rebuild itself."

"But what is the point of that? Why wait for civilisations to grow, only to wipe them out?"

"The Reapers are alien, unknowable." More distortions rippled over the VI interface. "Perhaps they need slaves or resources. More likely, they are driven by motives and goals organic beings cannot hope to comprehend. In the end what does it matter? Your survival depends on stopping them, not in understanding them."

Shepard shook her head. "Yeah, you clearly don't know much about us. We want to understand everything."
"I'm afraid you won't have time for that." The interface now flickered randomly. "Your enemy has a
single goal: the extinction of all advanced organic life. That's what happened to us. Through the
Citadel, the Reapers had access to all our records, maps, census data. Information is power, and they
knew everything about us.

"Their fleets advanced across every settled region of the galaxy. Some worlds were utterly destroyed.
Others were conquered, their populations enslaved. Theses indoctrinated servants became sleeper
agents under Reaper control. Taken in as refugees by other Protheans, they betrayed them to the
machines. Within a few centuries, the Reapers had killed or enslaved every Prothean in the galaxy.
They were relentless, brutal and absolutely thorough.

"Our worlds were stripped bare, harvested by the indoctrinated slaves. Everything of value--all
resources, all technology--was taken. Certain that all advanced organic life had been extinguished,
the Reaper retreated back through the Citadel relay into dark space, sealing it behind them. All
evidence of the Reaper invasion had been wiped away. Only their indoctrinated slaves were left
behind, abandoned. Mindless husks no longer capable of independent thought, the indoctrinated
soon starved or died of exposure. The genocide of the Protheans was complete."

Shepard squared her shoulders, looking ready to take up anybody in a fight. "How do we stop
them?"

"The Conduit is the key. Before the Reapers attacked, we Protheans were on the cusp of unlocking
the mysteries behind the mass relay technology. Ilos was a top secret facility. Here, researches
worked to create a small-scale version of mass relay. One that linked directly to the Citadel: the hub
of the relay network. The Conduit is not a weapon. It's a backdoor onto the Citadel."

"Did you use it?" Garrus asked.

"Yes. The keepers are controlled by the Citadel. Before each invasion, a signal is sent through the
station compelling the keepers to activate the Citadel relay. After decades of feverish study, our
scientists discovered a way to alter this signal. Using the Conduit, they gained access to the Citadel
and made modifications."

Shepard's face lit up. "And now Sovereign sent his signal, the keepers ignored him and that's why he
needs Saren on the Citadel to control the systems manually."

Vigil's interface seemed to twitch. "The one you call Saren will use the Conduit to bypass the
Citadel's defenses. Once inside, he will transfer control of the station to Sovereign. Sovereign will
override the Citadel's systems and manually open the relay. And the cycle of extinction will begin
again."

"We have to stop him, now," Shepard said, turning to leave.

"Take a copy of this data file with you." The interface on a terminal blinked urgently. "When you
reach the Citadel's master control unit, upload it to the station. It will corrupt the Citadel's security
protocols and give you temporary control over the station. It might give you a chance against
Sovereign."

"It might?"

"We could never test it. When our team went through the Conduit, it was already too late. We could
only give the next civilisation a chance to fight the Reapers."

Liara stepped forward, worry on her face. "What happened to the team that went through the
"The Conduit is only a prototype. The portal only links in one direction, so they were trapped on the station. I do not know what became of them then. It is unlikely they found any food or water on the station. I fear they suffered a slow, grim death. I only know they succeeded in their mission to seal the relay. Your presence here proves their sacrifice was not in vain."

"How did this project stay hidden?" Liara asked, gesturing at the massive structures around them.

"All official records of our project were destroyed in the initial attack on the Citadel. While the Prothean empire came crashing down, Ilos was spared. We severed all communication with the outside and our facility went dark. The personnel retreated underground into these archives. To conserve resources, everyone was put into cryogenic stasis. I was programmed to monitor the facility and wake the staff when the danger had passed."

"We scanned the cryopods," Tali said. "They are all dead."

Vigil's light dimmed. "The genocide of an entire species is a long, slow process. Years passed. Decades, centuries. The Reaper persisted. And my energy reserves were dwindling. I began to disable life support of non-essential personnel. First support staff, then security. One by one their pods were shut down to conserve energy. Eventually, only the stasis pods of the top scientists remained active. Even these were in danger of failing when the Reapers finally retreated back through the Citadel relay."

"So many people, killed while in stasis," Liara whispered.

"This outcome was not completely unforeseen," Vigil continued. "My actions were a result of contingency programming entered on my creation."

Wrex grunted. "I bet they didn't tell the 'non-essentials' staff about this contingency."

"I saved key personnel. When the Reapers retreated, the top researchers were still alive. My actions are the only reason any hope remains. When the researchers woke, they realized the Prothean species was doomed. There were only a dozen individuals left, far too few to sustain a viable population. Yet they vowed to find some way to stop the Reaper from returning. A way to break the cycle forever. And they knew the keepers were the key."

"What about the beacon on Eden Prime? And the one on Virmire? Did they program them?"

Shepard asked, massaging her temple.

"At our apex, the beacons spanned the breadth of our empire. We used them as a single galaxy-wide network, to transmit data and communications rapidly from world to world. Virtually all the beacons were destroyed during the invasion. But once the Reapers were gone, the survivors here on Ilos decided to risk sending out a message. We knew it was unlikely there were survivors. But if there were, we wanted them to know about Ilos. We wanted to give them hope. So a message was sent across the network."

"Risky," Garrus said. "You could have exposed yourself to the Reapers."

Vigil's light dimmed further. "In truth, we didn't expect any of the beacons would still function, but we had to try. If there were survivors, we had to reach them. The message was meant for our own people. It was coded so only organic beings could interpret it. We still didn't understand the power of Reaper indoctrination. We never realized it could lead an agent of the machines — like Saren — to this world. But it has also led you here. So perhaps we did not fail after all."
The VI interface was almost dark now and it was flickering more rapidly.

"My energy reserves are almost depleted. I've dropped the shield in front of your vehicle but I won't be able to stop the one you call Saren much longer. But he has not reached the Conduit. Not yet. There is still hope if you hurry."

"Thank you," Shepard said, waving her omni-tool over the prothean terminal. "I got the file, let's go."

She ran back towards the elevator. Looking over her shoulder, she called back, "Liara, come on!"

Liara was still standing at the dimmed interface, wringing her hands. "I have so many questions."

Vigil's voice seemed to become weaker. "You are asari. My people had high hopes for your kind."

"You knew us?"

The interface went dark. Vigil's voice came from the walls of the caverns, tinny but encompassing.

"You must go now. Stop the cycle. This galaxy needs hope"

"Liara, now!" Shepard ordered. The cadence of her voice of made Liara snap to attention and she ran back to them, crashing into Wrex inside the elevator.

"I'm sorry."

Wrex grunted and peeled Liara off him. "And they say asari are so squishy."

"I wish we could have stayed longer, asked more questions," Liara said wistfully. "What their world was like, how they lived before the Reapers attacked."

"Probably hit each other over the head like everyone else," Wrex rumbled. "And enslaved lesser creatures along the way."

"How can you say that?" Liara looked like Wrex had personally insulted her.

"Become old like me," Wrex said, "and you'll see."

Liara glared at him but held back. The elevator opened on the upper floor and they hurried back into the Mako. Madhav drove the Mako forward as soon as the door had closed.

Garrus sat down next to Shepard, took off his helmet and looked at her. She was pale and unusually quiet. "Hey," he said quietly.

She gave him a small smile. "Hey."

"What's the matter, Sunshine?" He had a feeling he already knew why she was so quiet but he wanted to hear it from her.

"It's so much bigger than we thought. A cycle that has been repeating over and over again, indoctrination, more Reapers. Nobody is going to believe that, no matter what I say."

"I took a recording," Garrus said and checked his omni-tool. The distortion made it difficult to understand but at least they had something. They could improve the recording later.

"Oh, good thinking. As soon as we're in Citadel space, upload that somewhere public."
"You think the Council would hide this?"

"I'd bet my pistol on it," Shepard said with an angry frown. "They don't want to hear this, mark my words."

The tunnel was winding further down, passing endless rows of cryopods overgrown with vegetation. A few geth attacked them, but nothing they couldn't handle with their combined firepower and the Mako's cannons.

They rounded a corner as they shot at a geth armature and saw that the tunnel ended. Right at the end, a miniature mass relay was glowing, its rings spinning.

"This must be it," Tali said. "I had no idea a relay could be made in this size."

"Now what do we do?" Garrus wondered.

"We take the Mako through it," Shepard said and gestured to Madhav to let her take over the controls.

"The Mako?" came from many voices.

"I'm so not walking through a mass relay dislocation," Shepard said. "And I don't see the TAP here, so Saren must have taken it through that relay."

Garrus took out two geth troopers that got a bit too close and closed the hatch. "Strap in," he ordered. Around him, seat belts fastened with clicks just like his own.

"Ready?" Shepard asked, her fingers tightening over the control sticks.

"Ready, Commander."

The Mako's engine roared and then Shepard careened towards the miniature relay at full speed, ignoring the remaining geth shooting on either side. The spinning wheels filled the Mako's front screen, the light blinding bright. The familiar gravitational pull grabbed the vehicle, pulling it along just like a spaceship. The noise of the relay stopped and darkness enclosed them.

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