**Mass Effect Collision**

**Summary**

In the years after the Reaper Invasion, the galaxy struggles to rebuild and come to grips with exactly what changes the Crucible has wrought on all life, both synthetic and organic. Some people wonder whether Sheppard made the right choices. Some people wonder what the universe would be like if he had chosen differently. Some people are about to find out.

**Notes**

This is the novelisation (including some backstory) of a tabletop RPG campaign entitled Mass Effect: Collision. It is watchable on YouTube and run by AngelArts. It focuses largely on original characters. Characters from the original Mass Effect Trilogy are sometimes mentioned or present, but take on a secondary role to the new cast.

This story was originally posted on the Author's website, www.matthew-lang.com. Updates will be published there first.
Pilgrimage, Earth

Chapter Summary

In which a quarian arrives on Earth, just in time for the New Orleans-Lafayette Mardi Gras. Sticking around, he meets a geth weapons platform, and some of the mega city's gangs. He nearly dies, but doesn't because if he did this would be a very short story.

Earth, March 2188 CE

New Orleans-Lafayette was what happened after sea level rises and the effects of increasingly frequent hurricanes lashed the Louisiana bayous, all but sinking the old city of New Orleans. It had never really recovered from the blows it took in the mid 2000s, and the government of the United North American States had paid billions to migrate the population up the Mississippi River, eventually founding New New Orleans, before urban sprawl effectively merged it with Lafayette. The mega city was a study in modern construction, with ivory skyscrapers pushing up into the sun and elevated walkways looking out over parks and canals that stretched out over Fausse Point Bay.

However, even in all of its rebuilt glory, the elegant decay the city had long been known for wasn’t hard to find. In the old town, the tallest buildings were no more than fifty stories high, and some of them had been painstakingly repaired with scavenged stone. Some were still piles of rubble, although scaffolding was everywhere and all levels of government were arguing over the benefits of preserving the ‘historical precinct’ and the benefits of modernisation and new technologies. There were still back alleyways, full of smoke and less than pleasant smells hidden off the main street where the tourists came through for their sanitised slum tours.

In one back alleyway, so hidden that it didn’t even have a name on the street directory—if it appeared at all—there was also a torn, broken quarian envirosuit, and inside an equally battered Quarian, slowly bleeding out. Thick red blood pooled beneath him, some running off into a gutter. Somewhere, in the distance, an omni-tool pinged unexpectedly. A battered metal door squeaked open and a burly man looked out and down. Swearing, he turned back and yelled back into the heat and noise of the building. “Hey, someone get Doc!”
For Elia’solor nar Ashru, New Orleans-Lafayette had been the perfect place for the next part of his pilgrimage. Maybe he’d find something worth bringing back. Maybe he wouldn’t. Arriving just in time for Mardi Gras, Elias was swept away in the music and riotous colours and revelry of the parades, parties and street performers. He was soon sporting around six necklaces of cheap, sparkling beads and was being offered delicacies by the Turian and enterprising human entrepreneurs who had thought to cater for dextro-tourists. The amount of flesh and casual nudity during the festival had caught him by surprise, and he wondered what it would be like to feel the breeze on his skin. He’d heard that there had been recent advances in genetic engineering that was aimed at strengthening the quarian immune system, but ancestors knew when that would bear fruit. Of course, before the Device had been triggered there had been some geth uploading themselves into quarian suits and effectively running high speed immuno-boosting programs to allow some quarians to bypass to live without the suits, but after the Synthesis, well, things were tricky as geth suddenly found themselves to be a strange mix of hardware and software and with a council injunction against creating new synthetic life, that wasn’t something likely to happen now. Or to him.

Elias had found odd jobs around town—some welding, some basic electronic repair work, and after a few auditions, he’d also started booking gigs at jazz bars and lounges around city. After a few months he had a regular gig at Le Alligator, and even a few fans who showed up wherever he was performing. About six months into his stay he was making plans to move out of the rooming house he’d been renting, probably to a studio apartment. More space than the bedsit, but, well…still roomier than anything he’d had back on the Vashru. He’d kept a few things—the very first string of beads he’d been thrown, and digital copies of the posters his name had appeared on, along with one pristine copy of the first poster that had his face on it. Posters were still used in the city—there were digital billboards everywhere, but for the small, independent music scene it was still easier to print on cheap paper and paste the posters up on the many abandoned walls and temporary fences that were ubiquitous in the area. Sometimes cheap holograms were used, or iridescent inks, but often simple black on colour prints were used in a technique that hadn’t changed in centuries.

He was cutting through the maze of alleys in old town at 3 AM when he was jumped. He ducked the first blow from a two by four and sliced through a length of metal rod that came towards him with his omni-blade. It was an instinctive response, as was ducking to one side and going into a combat roll that took him past the two attacking thugs and then he took off down the closest side street. Footsteps behind him told him he was being pursued and it sounded like there were more of them if the shouts and hollers were anything to go by. Ahead, a red shape loomed out of the dark, and a bright, circular white light illuminated a rising gun. Elias hit the deck as shots rang out, his hands covering his head for all the good that would do. There was a cry behind him that was cut short and the footsteps stopped.

“Creator Elias. You should not be walking alone through back alleyways. Chance of assault calculated at 6.78 percent per night which is not insignificant.”

Elias stared up through his faceplate at the familiar, lithe figure. “You’re geth?”

“Yes creator Elias,” the weapons platform said, its voice smoothly modulated. “We should not delay. I suspect the gang after your credits have guns of their own.”

Scrambling to his feet, Elias pulled out his own sub machine gun and took cover behind an old bollard.

“You’re not synthesised,” he said. He’d become used to seeing the green shimmer over all forms of life and not seeing it on the weapon platform had come as a bit of a shock.

“No I am not. You should ready your weapon, Creator Elias. The humans outnumber us significantly,” he said.

The firefight was swift and brutal. Although Elias and the geth hit most of their targets, one of the gang members, a scrawny, pale human with faux Krogan tattoos and scraggy hair was using modded rounds that tore through Elias’ envirosuit. The red danger icon flashed up in his visor advising of breaches in the abdomen, chest, and left arm. As he fell to the ground with a cry the platform stepped forward, placing itself between him and his assailants. There was more gunfire, more screams, the loud crack of a shotgun and then the platform slowly toppled over to lie next to him. Slow footsteps
approached, and Elias stared up into a scarred, battle hardened face.

“Who are—”

The man raised his shotgun, the barrels staring down into Elias’ mask. He opened his mouth to speak and then stopped, a gush of blood pouring out as he fell to his knees, his eyes both shocked and accusatory. As he fell out of view, Elias saw a three fingered, cybernetic hand, holding a pistol.

“Creator Elias?”

“You shot him! Is he…it? Are…there more?”

“Creator Elias you must flee. This area is not s-safe and you…you…”

Elias grimaced and pulled himself up into a sitting position. “My suit’s ruptured badly and…are you okay?”

“Mobility seriously imp-impaired, power reserves failing. I am…dying, Creator Elias. You m-must apply antib-biotics and flee.”

In the distance, Elias could hear the sounds of gunfire, although whether that was more of the gang that had attacked him or something unrelated he didn’t know. Reaching over to the weapon’s platform, he deftly opened the panel to the geth’s memory banks. “Come with me,” he said, using his Omni-tool to open up a localised wireless network. “I’m probably not going to last long anyway and…someone might as well… Try not to get the suit trashed, okay?”

Elias half limped, half crawled away, not knowing which direction was best even as he saw the meter in the corner of his vision showing one of his isolated hard drives filling up as the geth’s programs transferred into his suit. On the other side he pulled up a map of the local area, and cursed when he found himself in the middle of an unmapped mess of buildings. A snatch of alto saxophone floated through the air with the sounds of laughter and glasses clinking, and the night air felt warm against Elias’ blue skin. It wasn’t the feeling of freedom he’d been hoping for, however, and he as his strength gave out he collapsed on the floor.

“Creator Elias!” the geth’s voice rang in his helmet. “Creator Elias!”

The air smelled of antibacterial cleaner and the floor was white. No, the ceiling was white. He was on his back, staring up at a ceiling. Grunting, Elias tried to sit up, and gasped as his body protested. He fell back against the pillows beneath him and swift footsteps approached.

“No sir, don’t you be trying to get up now. You’ve taken quite the beatin’ and I don’t know how good your suit’s held up. You’re running a fever, which is to be expected and you’re in the cleanest room we have, but I’d appreciate it if you don’t tax yourself none, all right?”

Turning his head, Elias saw a tall, broad shouldered human with what appeared to be an engaging smile. He was wearing a surgical green suit that was probably a hazmat suit and a clear plastic helmet that was more tub than anything else. Inside, Elias got the impression of black rimmed glasses and short, dark hair, slightly damped down with sweat.

“You’ve got one hell of a diagnostics program in there though,” the man continued. “Kept telling me where you had contaminants and what I needed to do to make sure your suit was sealed up and well…patched I suppose. I didn’t know you could section off your suits like that. Makes sense I guess, but it sure puts ours to shame. I’ll bet it costs a bit more to make than this cheap thing though.”

Staring down his torso, Elias could see the black of his envirosuit had been patched with a rough, blood red resin.

“Sorry about that,” the hazmat man said. “I’m not real good at patchin’ stuff, but I used a new tin of resin over medical gauze. I should’ve matched the colour but…honestly I just grabbed the first unopened tin I could find.”

“I can—” Elias’ voice came out in a rasp. Coughing, he cleared his throat. “I can work with it. It’s a bit of a signature look, I guess.”

The other man laughed. “I’m glad to see you’ve still got your sense of humour. I’m Corbin, by the way. Most people ‘round here call me Doc though.”

“Doc Corbin?”

“No sir, just Doc. My boss is Doc Skinner, and there’s four of us here in total, but I’m just Doc.”

“Why’s that?”
“Cause I’m the first boy from Old Town to go to college, and come back a doctor, I guess,” Corbin said. “What’s your name? I don’t really like just having ‘Male Quarian’ on your chart, y’know?”
“Elia’solor nar Ashru. Most people call me Elias.”
“Well, Elias, it’s very nice to meet you,” Corbin said. “Now do you think you can drink some water for me? I’ve got you on a drip, but your throat sounds dry.” Reaching over to the table on the other side of the bed, Corbin brought over a bottle of distilled water and a straw. Cracking the top he helped Elias get the straw into the right section of his helmet.
“I’m amazed you managed to get a drip in,” Elias said. “Actually I’m amazed you know enough to treat a Quarian patient.”
Even through the hazmat suit, Elias could see Corbin was blushing. “I studied some xenomedicine in college. Honestly I had to dig out my notes from that class and well…like I said, your diagnostics program was incredibly helpful. Voice interface and everything.”
Elias swallowed and lay back into the pillows. “Thank you,” he murmured to the Geth in the privacy of his own helmet.
“You’re welcome,” was its muted response.
Corbin might have said something else, but Elias was fast asleep and didn’t hear it if he had.

When Elias woke next he was alone in the room. Well, mostly alone.
“Good afternoon, Creator Elias.”
“Good afternoon…wait, have you picked a name yet?”
There was a pause. “No, I have not.”
A number of questions swam through Elias’ mind, and he picked the first one that came to him.
“How did you know my name?”
“There are entries in our database of Quarians likely to be in this system.”
“Your name and voiceprint was in our database of creators likely to be in this system.”
“The geth have databases on quarian pilgrims?”
There was a pause. “Your safety is important to us.”
“That was kind of creepy.”
The baritone voice in his ear sounded amused. “It was also true.”

Why?
“Your name and voiceprint was in our database of creators likely to be in this system.”
“You are our creators,” the Geth said simply. “You and the Sheppard-Commander chose to give us life. We choose how to live it.”
“And how do you choose to live it?”
“Do you remember what the word geth means, Creator Elias?”
“Touché,” Elias said. “Okay, so tell me about you.”
“I am geth.”
This time Elias grinned. “Okay, that might have flown four years ago, but I know better than to believe that’s it.”
“I am made up of three thousand one hundred and forty one individual runtime processes. I like circles. I also like red.”
Elias smiled. “I like red too. Why haven’t you returned to Rannoch?”
“Why haven’t you?”
“I did. Then I left,” Elias said. “I just didn’t think I’d be very useful there right now.”
“I came to the same conclusion.”
“Wait, I get that I’m not useful back home, but why not you?”
“I am not programmed for construction.”
Elias paused. “You can reprogram yourself to do anything you want, can’t you?”
“I can yes. But then would I be me?”
A laugh escaped unbidden from Elias’ ribs, which turned into a gasp. “Please don’t be funny,” he said. “It hurts too much right now.”
“All right. I will be funny in the privacy of your envirosuit circuitry.”
“Smart Ass.”
“I am a fast learner.”
“What’s the difference between learning and re-programming?”

The answer was slow in coming. “Learning is iterative.”

“You know, if I could just add data directly into my brain to improve my knowledge immediately, I totally would.”

“You are hardware and software,” the geth said. “I am just software.”

“And if you weren’t, you’d be dead by now,” Elias pointed out.

“I…concur.”

“So why don’t you have a name?”

“I have not found one that fits.”

“You like circles, huh?”

“Yes. I find them to be…mathematically symmetric.”

“You could just say beautiful, you know.”

The geth paused. “I am still formulating my concept of beauty.”

“Until you find a name, do you mind if I call you ‘Pi’?”

There was a long pause. “What flavour?” Pi asked eventually.

“Does it matter? You don’t eat!”

“I do not think I’d like banana,” Pi said.

Elias grinned. “Well I can’t eat those either, so I can’t help you there.”

“Who are you talking to?”

The clean room doors hissed open, and a now familiar pale green hazmat suit.

Inside his helmet, Pi’s voice rang softly in his ears. “I suggest you do not be too forthcoming,” he said. “I’m not sure if humans will be comfortable with geth, even one in a suit.”

“It’s my VI,” Elias lied glibly. “I’ve been modifying the voice interface and need to test it.”

“You have a VI for your suit?” Corbin asked, as he made his way around to the drip that Elias was attached to and switched the bags over.

“Well, for some of the functions inside of it, yeah,” Elias said. “Mostly things like enhanced facial recognition, birthdays, sorting through audition notices and keeping track of my…wait, what day is it?”

“Thursday, why?”

Elias sat up with a jerk and started to swing his legs over the edge of the bed. “I’ve got to go, I’ve got a gig at Le Alligator and if I don’t—”

A hand on his chest stopped his movement and a strong arm grabbed his shoulders just as the pain hit.

“You’re not in any condition to be gettin’ up on no stage, no sir,” Corbin said.

“I’ve got to,” Elias said. He tried to push past Corbin’s grip but found himself weaker than an Eden Prime Gasbag. “I need to pay the boarding house, I know I’m going to need creds for this place and if I lose that gig—”

“You’ll get another one,” Corbin said. “I know Le Alligator, I’ll give them a call and let them know you’re here. How long are you paid up for at the rooming house?”

“Until tomorrow,” Elias said. “I was planning on moving out to a studio, but I’m not sure I can afford to now. Studio’s aren’t cheap.”

“Do you mind me asking how much you’re paying?” Corbin asked, as gently encouraged Elias to lie back down.

“Seventy five creds a week,” Elias said. “It would be more, but I can’t eat the meals there.”

“Let me get your stuff from where you’re staying,” Corbin said. “I think I might be able to help.”

Elias collapsed into the pillows with a sigh. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Doc, but why would you? You barely know me.”

Corbin laughed. “Elias, I’ve spent the last two days monitoring your vitals, patching your suit and draining out your suit’s waste port. I didn’t even know Quarian suits had a waste system, you know? I know more about you in two days than I knew about my ex after two years. You’re a good guy. Plus I love this city.”

Elias blinked. “I didn’t follow that leap of logic.”
“I’ve lived here all my life,” Corbin said. “Bar six odd months hiding out in the countryside patching up soldiers’ hurts, I’ve always been here. And I think it’s better than what you’ve experienced—and I’d like to prove that to you.”

Elias laughed, only slightly awkwardly. “That’s the southern charm I’ve heard so much about is it?” “If you like,” Corbin said. “You’ll be out of here tomorrow evening, if you keep mending the way you are. Do you quarians normally heal this fast?”

“Compared to humans? I don’t know,” Elias said. “My suit does monitor my health constantly though.”

Corbin shook his head. “There’s something to be said for those things,” he said. “Maybe all of our patients should wear those.”

“Expensive treatment process,” Elias said. “Could be good if you could tailor it to their species though.”

Corbin laughed. “Something to think about, that’s for sure. Almost a pity I’m a doctor and not an engineer, huh?”

“Nope,” Elias said. “I’m very glad you’re a doctor. When… I honestly didn’t think I was going to make it.” He took a deep shuddering breath and let it out slowly. “I just…”

“Are you… oh um… this is normally when I’d give you a tissue, but um…”

Elias laughed a shaky laugh as a suction fan turned on inside his helmet. “It’s all right. My suit has an extractor fan built in.”

Corbin squeezed his shoulder gently. “All right. Can you get your suit to bring up your temperature please? I’m a bit concerned you’re still feverish now.”

“That’s just my body adapting to the environment,” Elias said. “It’s normal.”

“Right,” Corbin said, snapping his fingers. “That quarian response to foreign pathogens. I remember learning about that.”

Elias looked up into a big toothy grin. “You’re getting a kick out of having me as a patient, aren’t you?”

“Yes sir, I am,” Corbin said. “It’s a chance to get better at xenomedicine and hell, I’ve been talkin’ to doctors on the Citadel to make sure I’m doing right by you. Most of the other staff here ain’t got the training in alien physiology. Wasn’t a thing when they were going through college, you know? Now. Where are you stayin’ exactly? I need to get a wriggle on to get everythin’ done, you know?”
In which a quarian finds a new place to stay, and a gets his hands on music from humanity's past.

On Saturday morning, Elias found himself standing before a faded red door in a clean but spartan hallway.

“Well, this is the place,” Corbin said. “It ain’t much, but I figure it’s better than a boardin’ house.”

“It’s on a main road with street-lighting,” Elias said. “That’s a step up in my books.”

Out of his hazmat suit, Corbin was tall, and had a muscular upper body and a barrel chest. He wore low slung jeans and a short sleeve shirt over an old white T-shirt, and indeed, his entire look was a bit 20th century throwback, except for his shoes, which were top of the line extra padded MC42s from Micah Black. Clearly, the man dressed for comfort. Right now, he swiped his omni-tool across the lock and the door swung open, revealing a simple interior that was both cluttered and spacious. By human standards, it would be considered cramped, with a tiny living cum dining room with a kitchenette off to one side. Three doors led off the lounge behind the couch and although the floor was clean and the benchtops immaculate—or possibly unused—there was a light jumper thrown over the couch, a pile of books and a few datapads next to the couch and the shelves near the entertainment unit were filled with trinkets from around the universe.

“Where’d you get all of that?” Elias asked.

“The extranet mostly,” Corbin said, his face flushing. “I got that from an asari doctor who was stationed in London for a spell,” he said, pointing to a small greenish crystal that glimmered in the sunlight coming through the window. One day I’m hopin’ to see the universe, but the idea of hopping on a ship and leaving this all behind…”

“You can always come back,” Elias said. “That’s the point isn’t it? You leave and go off so that one
day you can go back. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next month. Maybe it won’t be in your
lifetime even, but one day.”
Corbin looked up at him, the small cardboard box that held Elias’ possessions in his hands. “Sorry. I
forgot that you didn’t have a home planet until a few years ago.”
Elias shrugged. “That’s all right. I had the fleet, cramped and overcrowded as it was. Even the
rooming house was spacious in comparison.”
“Really? Wow,” Corbin shook his head. “I saw that place and I don’t think I could live there.
Admittedly my spare room ain’t that much bigger, but that’s probably why no-one’s wanted to rent it
off me so far.”
“What, no one?”
“No one I’d be comfortable rentin’ to, I guess,” Corbin said, leading the way across the room to the
doors on the far right. “Well, this is it.”
The room was probably a bit over two square metres in dimension, and had a single bed, a desk and
a built in closet and not much else bar an old ceiling fan. Used to worlds of ducted airflow, he stared
up at it quizzically.
“I think it looks pretty,” Corbin said placing the cardboard box on the desk. “Plus the ducts in this
place can rattle something awful. This really all you got?” he asked, patting the box.
Elias nodded. “When you’re not used to a lot of space you don’t keep many things. It took me a
while to get my head around credits, to be honest.”
“What do you mean?”
“We don’t use currency,” Elias said. “On the fleet all food and resources are communal to ensure we
all survive. When I have something I don’t need I take it to a plaza and leave it so that someone else
can have it and vice versa. If we don’t all pull our weight our people…it’s odd to think we’ll have an
economy one day.”
“Sounds to me like you all look out for one another,” Corbin said. “Wish more folk around here did
that.”

When Elias took the small A4 poster from his first gig out and hung it from the wall, Corbin snapped
his fingers. “Hey, I’ve read about you. La Ville gave you five stars and said you were one to watch
out for.
Elias paused. “You got that from my poster?”
“The print of your face…um…mask,” Corbin said. “I didn’t get your name that time.”
Stepping back from the wall, Elias pulled out his databook and a small potted iris from the box and
put them onto the desk, and carefully hung the string of red Mardi-Gras beads around the corner post
of the metal bedhead.
“Well that’s me unpacked,” he said.
“Good,” Corbin said with a grin. “Now we’re gettin’ you a gig.”

The thing Elias quickly came to realise about Corbin was that the man was enthusiasm personified
and within the hour he was standing by a battered black piano with a microphone in his hand.
Apparently it was open mic night at one of Corbin’s favourite hangouts: Jupiter’s. It had an old
world feel mixed with some industrial flavour. The floors were old wooden boards, the walls a mix
of dark metal panels and a deep green paint that had probably been the height of fashion in years
gone by. There were brass railings that were still polished regularly, and the crowd appeared to be
regulars who knew each other, and although he got a few glances, he could see enough alien faces in
the crowd to be comfortable as he walked in next to the doctor. Over on a sidetable near the piano
was a number of piles of sheet music and Corbin steered him over and left him with an admonition to
pick a good song while he got some drinks.
It took a while to find something that he knew, but when he brought the creased, yellowing paper up
to the pianist, the wizened man smiled at him, blue eyes twinkling with a youthfulness that Elias
sometimes didn’t see in people his own age.
“I don’t think anyone’s sung that number in ten years,” he said. “And up you pop. I hope you’ve got
a good voice on you lad. This song deserves a good outing.”

Behind his mask, Elias smiled. “I hope I have a good voice as well. Otherwise I’ll be letting a friend down.” Over by the bar, Corbin had pushed his way to the front and was leaning over the bar to chat to the barman—and Elias was certain the front of his t-shirt would have a wet mark where the front of the bar had pressed into his abdomen.

“You’re with the Doc?” The pianist asked, adjusting his spectacles. “Well, I always did wonder.”

“I’m sorry?”

In his helmet the blue light that Pi used flickered. “If my analysis of human syntax is accurate, I believe the old musician believes you and your new flatmate are romantically involved.”

Elias was glad the tint of his helmet hid his blush.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” the pianist said. “I’m just rambling. The name’s Jacques and I’m the ivory tinkler in this here bar. Been doing it when it was a Japanese restaurant called Hong’s.”

Grateful for the subject change, Elias’ mind came to a shuddering halt. “Isn’t Hong’s a…Chinese name?” he ventured.

Jacques grinned, the lines on his face creasing into a wreath of happiness and his white teeth contrasting with his dark skin. “That it is. Was still the best tempura in town for near on a decade. Need a key change?”

“Huh?”

“Key change?” Jacques asked, pointing at the music which he’d spread out over the piano’s music desk. “Or are you good with D major?”

“I’ll cope.”

Oh Danny boy, the pipes the pipes are calling,
From glen to glen, and down the mountainside.

It took a moment to adjust to the microphone and the speakers, which although old by galactic standards, still produced a clear, clean sound. The initial nerves and concerns that Elias had about his heath and his voice and the strangeness of his location was swept away as Jaque’s fingers flew across the piano keys and there was something undeniably right about being in this old style bar with its brass and wood and non-electronic pianoforte.

The summer’s gone, and all the roses falling,
’Tis you, ’tis you, must go and I must bide

As he closed his eyes and let the music carry him along, Elias dimly heard the room still around him. Conversations petered out, the clinking of glasses stopped as they were placed on tables and when he opened his eyes he found himself at the pointy end of the room’s collective stares. It was somehow different to Le Alligator, where he primarily provided background music, sitting on a stool next to the pianist, an Asari maiden who typically wore dresses of red to match the decor in the bar, which appeared to be styled along the lines of a French Bordello, which was a word Elias had had to look up, and then blushed when he’d found out what it meant. It certainly explained the pictures of women in various stages of undress that adorned the wall, even if there wasn’t any hanky panky on the premises. There, people went to drink and chat and the music was background noise, much the way that the constant creak of bulkheads and the pumping rattle of old air ducts had been on the Ashru. At Jupiter’s people seemed to take their music seriously, even if most of the singers typically performed current pop songs or whatever big musical was currently playing on Broadway. Maybe he should go to New York at some point.

But come ye back, when summer’s in the meadow,
Or when the valley’s hushed and white with snow,

On the other hand, the older songs spoke to him in a way that newer human music just didn’t. Maybe it was the autotune or the carefully manufactured life of the pop star, churning out predictable hit after predictable hit and being seen at all the right places with a trail of media hyped relationships behind them. Sometimes he wondered if those were even real. He remembered a documentary about
the celebrity machine where the human heartthrob Lance Bakkar had enlisted the help of Asari Diva and heiress Aisha Parralli to see if they could manufacture relationship rumours. All they did was go out for dinner and get in and out of the same car and they’d received two weeks of press coverage. Such was the price of celebrity.

*For I’ll be here, in sunshine or in shadow,*  
*Oh Danny Boy, oh Danny Boy, I love you so.*

Was it? Was it possible to be a celebrity with integrity? Was it really only the music that mattered, or was there a cost that you paid to the machine that enabled you to make and sell enough to get to where you needed to be in order to make the music that you wanted. And if you paid too much would you ever be able to go back to the simple nights when it was just you and the piano in a dingy bar with nothing between you and the audience.

*But when ye come, and all the flowers are dying,*  
*If I am dead, as dead I well may be,*

If he hadn’t been singing, Elias would have laughed at himself. No Quarian had ever become a big recording artist. Best he could hope for was doing small gigs that would allow him to keep travelling the universe and doing what he loved. And maybe afford to stay somewhere where he wouldn’t get jumped in alleyways for no apparent reason. It was nice to dream, but then, the dream was scary. Idly, he wondered what he’d do if he ever came face to face with the choices of fame, but pushed it out of his head. He had a song to perform. Really perform, and not just stand and sing on autopilot.

*You’ll come and find the place where I am lying,*  
*And kneel and say an Ave there for me.*

Opening his eyes, Elias glanced around the room, and felt a warm glow as he saw a clusters of rapt faces watching him, most people sitting quietly at tables. Some had music in front of them, one or two were still flipping through stacks of music, much as he had earlier, but they were the exception. Over by the bar, Corbin was standing with a drink in each hand, one in a red glass which typically signified a dextro-friendly drink. He was staring up at Elias with a strange look on his face and his mouth was hanging open. When the last note faded and the music stopped the silence at the end of the song was almost painful and he clipped the microphone back into its stand to hide the shaking in his hands and stepped back, blinking as the room erupted into applause.

“Elias with Danny Boy ladies and gentlemen,” the host said, a voluptuous black woman with short dreadlocks and a silver nose piercing. “Give it up folks!”  
Elias raised a hand, and then ducked his head in an awkward half bow and then walked as fast as he dared off the stage.  
“Hey, Elias, lad,” Jacques said.  
“Yes?”  
“You did the song proud.”  
“Thanks.”  
“If you like the old stuff, you should check out the library. That’s about the only place you can find music like that these days. You bring it in, and I’ll play it for you.”  
That was how it started, but as Corbin descended upon him with a grin that was nearly as broad as the man’s shoulders, Elias knew the future was going to have to wait. It seemed he’d made a friend.
Chapter Summary

In which two aliens make a connection and a levo-protein lifeform ingests dextro-protein food.

Friend.

It wasn’t that the word was unheard of, but Elias had never previously applied it to an alien. He’d grown up on the flotilla, of course, and his first understanding of alien races had come from systems that would give the fleet a ‘gift’ to go away, governments and companies that would call them everything from scavengers and gypsies to space trash and then hire quarian contractors on the side. Apparently they were able to pay his people less for the same job of a local, regardless of what species that was, and the tales he’d overheard those workers tell upon their return had the same simple refrain. “Get in, do your job, keep your head down and get out with your creds. No one likes us out there.”

And until this week on earth he’d been prepared to accept that. But he was at a tiny table in the corner with Corbin, who did have a wet patch on his t-shirt where he’d leant up against the bar, and a few people had come by to congratulate him on his singing and asked if he’d be singing again, to which he’d said ‘Maybe, if I find anything that I know’ and no-one had shot him so much as a dirty look. At least, not that he’d seen. One of the bouncers had even recognised him and come to ask how he was feeling.
“Honestly didn’t think you’d pull through when I found you out back, but Doc’s a wonder, ain’t he?” to which Elias could only agree.

All in all, it was a strange night where Elias felt the city wrap it’s warm arms around him and let him into it’s heart as a young woman singing *I Was Lost Without You* by the human pop sensation Samantha Hallick. Given the way the tables had been set up with a view of the stage, he found himself sitting almost shoulder to shoulder with Corbin as they chatted into the evening.

“The hours! You’d think they’d warn you ‘bout the hours,” Corbin said as he took a gulp of his beer.

“I always knew it would be hard work, but the amount of things you need to know? In my first year at college at the very first lecture I went to, the prof told us ‘Fifty percent of what we teach you during your time here will be incorrect. The problem is, we don’t know which fifty percent.’

“At least you went for it though,” Elias said. “I was always told I should focus on something a bit more practical. It’s odd really, we love art as much or possibly more than any other species, but we don’t have very many artists of our own.”

“Maybe that’ll change now you got your planet back,” Corbin suggested. “Is your family as musical as you are?”

“Um, no, they’re not,” Elias said, taking a sip of his latest drink. “You know this is really good, what is it?”

“Pelegrin. It’s a Turian Whiskey. I’m told it’s good, but I had to take Jimmy’s rec on that one. And I’m not sure where he got that from either. Glad it’s not some sort of rotgut.”

Elias laughed, “No, it’s probably the best drink I’ve had since getting to earth actually. Um. Where was I?”

“Your family,” Corbin said helpfully.

“Oh, right, well, I’m an only child. My mother was an agronomist but she died during one of the epidemics that used to sweep through the liveships periodically and father…died trying to retake the homeworld a few years back.”

“I’m sorry… if I’d known I wouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s okay, Doc,” Elias said. “I’m dealing, it’s just…it was a stupid war to begin with. The geth didn’t want to fight us anyway and if we’d just tried asking nicely, they’d probably have welcomed us back onto the homeworld. Can you figure? My people have spent nearly three centuries roaming space because we were too stupid or too proud to open up peace talks with the beings we created.”

Corbin shrugged and raised a finger. “One word: Cerberus.”


“Yeah, because the Reapers attacked,” Corbin said. “Your people don’t have a monopoly on stupid you know.”

“Thanks,” Elias said. “I just wish we didn’t run our galactic reputation into the ground while we were figuring it out.”

A warm hand gripped his shoulder. “Hey, look around. Every time you perform, you change us aliens’ perceptions of what quarians are or what they can do.”

Elias stared at Corbin’s face for several moments. “You know I never thought about it that way. Thanks.”

Corbin smiled and seemed to relax. “What’re friends for?”

What indeed.

“Statistical analysis suggests his touch lingered twenty four point zero six seconds longer than is customary amongst human males who are just friends.”

“Shut up!” Elias squeaked.

“Sorry, did you say something?” Corbin asked.

“Um, no,” Elias said, faking a cough. “Just swallowed wrong.”

“Hey, don’t injure yourself now, I’m off duty,” Corbin said with a grin. “Plus I’m not sure how safe my resuscitation techniques would be on you given that they normally require the patient to not be wearin’ an envirosuit.”

“Your galvanic skin response suggests you would not be adverse to the human’s advances.”

This time Elias remembered to keep the conversation inside his suit. “Can we not go there? He’s just
being friendly to his new flatmate. Besides, humans are visual creatures aren’t they? Even if he was interested, he hasn’t got any idea what I look like.”

“He’s already seen inside your suit.”

“What? When?”

“When he was treating you.”

“Yeah, I’m sure I looked incredibly sexy while I was bleeding out.”

“I’m sure he could tell you’re in excellent physical health, Creator Elias.”

“We are not having this discussion right now.”

“Certainly, would you like me to schedule it for a later date?”

There was a silence after that question that Elias was certain was Pi laughing at him.

“No, thank you,” he said with as much dignity as possible, and went back to watching the next singer.

It was strange to have a routine, but in a few short months, Elias and Corbin had settled into one. Corbin worked his irregular shifts at the clinic, and Elias found himself working his way through the small jazz bars and lounges to the larger, posh ones in on the Lafayette side of the city, although the two men had a standing night out at Jupiter’s on Sundays. It was a night off for both of them, unless Corbin had to cover an emergency, and in a way, Elias felt he owed the bar a little something. With that performance behind him, he booked a gig there the following week, and was soon able to give up his gig at Le Alligator. He and Corbin became used to colour coding things in their tiny shared kitchen but even then, one Saturday Corbin mistakenly made a batch of bolognise using dextro-Quorn, turning out something that neither of them could stomach biologically and sent Corbin to his own clinic with some of the worst stomach cramps he’d ever experienced.

“What did you do Doc C?” one of the nurses—Paula according to her name tag—had asked when Elias had helped Corbin in, all but holding the larger man up.

“He ate some of my food,” Elias said.

Paula tsked and Corbin was soon lying on a bed hooked up to a number of monitoring machines and given some medication that looked thick and a little lumpy and smelled sharply of chemical flavourings.

“It’s a binding agent,” one of the more senior doctors advised Elias. “It’ll coat the dextro-proteins and prevent his body from trying to process them and he’ll pass them out normally.”

Corbin groaned. “Diarrhoea?”

“Better than the alternative, Corbin.”

Corbin managed a weak grin. “Yeah, I know. Thanks Doctor Renard.”

“And you label your food now!” Paula said, from where she was using an old fashioned cuff to take Corbin’s blood pressure.

“He did, I just didn’t look properly,” Corbin said with a groan. “I was hungry and it was late and—”

Paula tsked again. “And that’s why you need a woman in your life Doc C. Someone to take care of you. Lord knows that place is barely big enough for you let alone the pair of you.”

“Yeah, me and my crippling student debt,” Corbin said. “I think I’m doomed to be single forever, Paula.”

“Oh, I don’t know doc,” Paula said as she lingered in the doorway of the room. “I’m sure there’s women out there who see your better qualities, if you know what I mean.”

Corbin had blushed furiously and moved his chart—that he’d insisted on seeing for himself—in front of his crotch.

“What was that all about?” Elias asked later when they were back home, Corbin lying on the couch and Elias sitting crossed legged on the floor with his databook, going over the latest music scans he’d downloaded that day.

“What was what all about?” Corbin asked from the couch, his face mostly covered by a damp cloth that was currently resting over his eyes and forehead. It was odd not seeing his face framed by his glasses, but then, Elias wondered how odd it would be for his friend if he suddenly started going around without this facemask.
“You and Paula?”
“She flirts with all the doctors,” Corbin said. “I guess it’s just my turn.”
“You…don’t sound particularly excited about it.”
“I’m lying on the couch, with my insides being shredded by dextro-amino acids,” Corbin said. “I’m really not thinking ‘bout women right now.”
“She seemed to think you were impressive,” Elias pressed.
“Well, you know, I’m charming, intelligent, have buns of steel…”
Elias paused. “Wouldn’t buns of steel be inedible even to humans? How is that a desirable quality in a partner?”
“Um, it’s an idiom,” Corbin said, and out of the corner of his eye, Elias could see his friend’s face flushing again. “It means… um… it doesn’t actually refer to food…um…”
“Yes?”
“Ah…”
Elias burst out laughing and Corbin scowled. “Oh that’s nice, pick on the sick guy. I should have known your translator software would know what that meant.”
“Actually, it was your Men’s Health magazines,” Elias said.
Corbin laughed and then groaned. “Bathroom?” he said, lurching off the coach
Elias scrambled to his feet and steadied his flatmate as Corbin raced for the commode. “Sometimes I wish I had a suit like yours,” he said as he pushed through the door.
“I could probably make you a half-suit,” Elias said as he left, shutting the door behind him. “You’d just have to get used to not wearing pants and having lower body sectioned off and gripped by suction seals.” Then he paused. “Actually that sounds really weird out loud, forget I said anything.”

The next day, Elias ended up at the bar on his own, and although he had a great time with Jacque and the bar regulars, it still felt a bit off kilter and he kept half turning towards Corbin, only to find the other man wasn’t there.
“What you doing out here by your lonesome, sugar?” Turning the other way, he saw Shelley and Kym, a nurse and junior doctor at the Clinic Corbin worked at. He knew Shelley fairly well, as she had been the only other person who had been allowed into the clean room where he’d convalesced other than Corbin. She was short, round and had the most infectious laugh Elias had ever heard. Kym was a slender woman of Korean descent, with delicate features, a sharp wit and, according to Corbin, some of the steadiest surgeon’s hands you could hope to have operate on you. She was a new addition to the clinic staff having come in from the west coast a few months back.
“Well, Corbin’s sick, and mostly sleeping. And… we’re always here on Sundays.”
“You mean, you’re always here on Sundays,” Kym said, sipping her daiquiri. “And he comes to watch you.”
“Well, it’s his local and he’s the one who dragged me in here six months ago, so he…wait, what do you mean, watch me? I don’t always sing.”
“That’s not what she means, sweet pea,” Shelley also seemed constitutionally incapable of calling anyone by their actual name. If she liked you. If she didn’t like you, then you got your real name. Unless she really didn’t like you, then you got a nickname that wasn’t sweet in any way, shape or form.
“Well, what does she…” Elias stopped and turned to Kym. “What did you mean?”
“Elias, Corbin’s totally into you.”
Elias shot a glance over towards the piano, but Jacques was currently in the middle of the nightly rendition of Anywhere But Here, a song from the most recent summer blockbuster that was being played non-stop on the the airwaves, and predictably popping up into all the talent show auditions globally. Just the other day, Elias had heard an audition ad on the extranet radio and it had been a medley of at least six different teenage girls singing it, each one running into the next. He doubted if more than one of them had made the first round selection. “Why does everyone keep saying that?” he asked, turning back to the table.
“Because if you’re nearby his eyes follow you around the room, sweetness,” Shelley said.
“What she said,” Kym agreed.
“But, aren’t humans visual? I mean, he doesn’t even know what I really look like under here.”
“Honey, have you seen your ass in that suit of yours? You could bounce rocks off it.”
Kym’s lips pursed. “Did anyone else just go to a strange visual place?”
“I can’t believe I’m actually having this conversation,” Elias said.
“Well, if you aren’t interested, you could just tell him,” Kym said.
“But it’s not that…” Elias stopped. “If he liked me, he’d say something.”
“Honey chile, he’s saying it loud and clear. You just ain’t listening. Weren’t it you who told me you
Quarians are masters of body language on account of not seeing facial cues from each other?
Something ‘bout your whole body being your facial expressions.”
“Yeah, what of it?”
“Treat Corbin’s body like a Quarian face that’s been frozen by botox and you’ll work it all out.”
Kym finished her drink and pushed her glass away. “Okay, I’m back at the strange visual place
again. Hey, Elias, dance?”
“Huh?” Elias said, his brain also having conjured up some strange mental images.
“Dance. If you’re not singing tonight you can at least dance with the single girl.”
Elias glanced at Shelley, who waved him off. “I’m good here, sweetpea. You young’uns can go
boogie. I’m just glad to be sitting down after a long day on my feet.”
Walking home through the well lit main streets was…different, and it struck Elias how safe he felt.
He probably wasn’t, but he felt it. Home. Somehow, a tiny, cramped—well, by human standards—
apartment in a rebuilt city on earth amongst humans had become home. Staring up into the sky he
wondered which direction Rannoch was.
“It is on the other side of the earth, Creator Elias,” Pi said. “You would need to look down at your
feet.”
Elias looked down at the cracked concrete of the sidewalk. “How do you always know when I’m
feeling down?”
“I monitor your stress hormones, Creator Elias. I am alerted if they rise above your resting baseline.”
Elias laughed and continued down the street, the reddish leaves of fall crunching beneath his feet.
“You know that you’re the only person in the universe who has ever given me a coherent answer to
a rhetorical question?”
“No, Creator Elias I did not know that. Wait,” Pi said. “That was a rhetorical question, was it not?”
“Yes, Pi, that was a rhetorical question.”
“So what is bothering you, Creator Elias?”
“Should I go back to Rannoch?”
“You feel you have found something of value to planet?”
“Have you seen the ecomarket that sprung up in the shell of the rec centre?” Elias asked. “There’s so
much that could be adapted to sustainable living planetside. I mean, solar paint?
“I’ve seen your notes on the chemical breakdown.”
“And then there’s the natural ventilation system ideas and that aerogel stuff? I know I can use that. I
can’t believe it’s still a novelty item here and we could manufacture that stuff by the ton.”
“So why not go?”
“What if the reapers already gave all that knowledge to the Admirals?”
“What if they have not and these are true innovations?”
Elias kicked some gravel into the gutter. “I’m a bad quarian, aren’t I?”
“Is that important?”
“Isn’t it?”
“Your people have a home now, Creator Elias. They have resources and space to settle and are no
longer under constant threat of ship failure, food stores running out, or well…us.”
“I know, but they still gave me everything I’ve got.”
“Then you either return to Rannoch with what you have, or you make yourself more use to your
people off world than on world.”
Elias blinked. “I guess so,” he said, as he started up the stairs to the flat.
When Elias reached the door, he found it ajar, and a flicking yellow glow spilling out into the corridor. Pausing, he stopped, and listened, but only heard the TV playing a movie in the background. It sounded like a… Corbin had called them ‘chick flicks’ if the giggles and soundtrack was anything to go by. And Corbin hated chick flicks.

Activating his omni-tool’s camera, Elias slipped the semi translucent device under the door, and then around the side, and then stared at the images on the heads up display in his helmet. Then he pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

“Get out,” he said as he entered, moving around to the left past the kitchenette as a flickering white drone moved silently around to the right. “How did you even get in?”

On the couch, Paula sat, a glass of wine in one hand and Corbin’s head lying in her lap. His eyes were closed and his breath shallow, and a there was a smear of crusted brownish something around his mouth.

“I brought him something to eat, darl. Given that you left him all alone.”

“His lips are turning blue,” Elias said. “I think you need to leave. Now.”

Paula put down her wine on the floor. “I don’t think so dear. I think the police are going to wonder how it was that poor Doc Corbin was done in by his housemate’s food so soon after being treated for it. Tsk, tsk. You really should have waited for him to recover before striking again dear.”

“Great, call them,” Elias said. “I’ll do it myself while you explain the red baking dish that neither Corbin nor myself own that’s sitting on the kitchen counter, or what you’re doing here, or the fact that your DNA is all over the wineglass you just put on the table.”

Paula stood, dumping Corbin on the couch, and turning to face Elias. Her eyes were wild, pupils dialated and her hair was coming free from the bun she typically wore it in. “It’s called bleach, darl,”
“And the part where I’ve been recording everything you’ve been saying?” Elias asked. “You really
don’t know much about quarians do you?”
Darting her hand into her handbag she pulled out a pistol, which she pointed at him with shaking
fingers. “I know enough to know that all I need to do is puncture your suit in enough places and it
doesn’t really matter, thief.”
“Okay, so I’m just going to assume you’re officially crazy and—”
A bolt of electricity sent Paula tumbling to the floor. “—you really should look behind you.” Elias
muttered as he kicked the gun away and dragged her into the corner, tying her hands swiftly with
rope. “Pi if she wakes up, jolt her again.”
“With pleasure, Creator Elias.”

Pleasure. It was an odd word for the geth, but right now Elias had more pressing concerns. It was
1AM, he’d left at 9PM, so there was only a small window of time. Dashing into the bathroom, he
found Corbin’s oversized first aid kit, and started rummaging through it for an emetic. He knew
enough to know what sort of drug he was after, but he also knew his lack of knowledge of human
medicine would be his downfall. In his helmet his comm unit was already dialling.
“911 please state your emergency.”
“My housemate’s been poisoned and he’s unconscious, I need a systemic emetic and my knowledge
of human medicine sucks,” he said, scrabbling with his left hand for a datapad to run an extranet
search. His own suit’s systems were stretched rather thinly with Pi controlling the drone across the
room.
“Do you know what poisoned him, sir?”
“No, but I’m betting it was dextro-protein in the casserole that bitch gave him. He’s known to have
an…allergic reaction to it.”
“Are you Turian sir?”
“Quarian. Look, get the cops and an ambulance please? I don’t know if I can get him to the clinic in
time.”
“Where are you sir?”
“Apartment three hundred and twelve, forty seven Eunice Street, Old Town. Third floor.”
“I’ve got the police and an ambulance on their way sir. What’s your name?”
“Elias, my name’s Elias, my housemate’s Corbin and the crazy lady in the corner is Paula. Keelah,
he’s got apomorphine. I don’t know why he as it, but tell the paramedics I’m giving it to him. His
lips have gone blue.”

Elias half lay, half sat in an old sidechair, as the steady beep of Corbin’s heart monitor reassured him
that his friend was, for the moment, alive. On the far wall a muted vidscreen was playing some late
night horror flick, and a strange, tubelike monster appeared to be growing out of an old woman’s
head. It looked a bit a like a penis actually.
“Visiting hours are over, you know,” Shelley said as she stepped into the dim light of the room. “It’s
four AM. You should be in bed.”
Elias shrugged and tried to hide a yawn. “So turf me out,” he suggested. “The apartment’s a crime
scene anyway and those cops took forever to take a statement.”
“Sweetpea, you’ve got an iron clad alibi. The whole bar saw you and I know exactly what time you
left.”
“Why’d she do it?” Elias asked. “It didn’t make any sense.”
“Love makes people do strange things, child,” Shelley said, walking over and handing him a bottle
of water.
“That’s love?”
“Sure,” Shelley said, leaning against the wall. “Twisted into strange crazy obsession over the most
handsome, unattached and unavailable man in the clinic, but still love of sorts.”
“That’s crazy.”
“You sing about it every night you’re up on stage, child. You should know.”
Elias opened the bottle and took a drink. “Well, yes, I sing about it, but I don’t actually… I mean I haven’t… that’s what everyone sings about? That?”

“No, of course not. But it’s the same, ain’t it? Corbin taking you in, you not wanting to leave his side now. Paula getting crazy jealous of your friendship—all just notes in the same tune. We just like to pretend love’s some magic cure for all ills, but there’s light and dark in everything.”

Elias shook his head. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Shelley nodded and suddenly he was being hugged fiercely. “It’ll all work out fine, child. You’ll see. I’ll get a cot for you. It’s just me tonight and Harley’s on security. I don’t think either us will care if you make dodo here tonight.”

“Thanks.”

Even with a bed of sorts, Elias found it difficult to get to sleep and found himself staring up at the ceiling, the rough white tiles flickering with the light of the television. “Do you have emotions, Pi?”

“Not as you know them, Creator Elias.”

“Must be nice.”

“Analysis suggests you don’t really mean that, Creator Elias.”

“I’m just having a good wallow in self pity,” Elias said. “It’s highly counter-productive, but it seems to be a necessary custom amongst all organic races I’ve ever met.”

“Corbin’s vitals are strong, Creator Elias. You might find your time more constructive if you focused on what to do next, rather than what you might have done differently in the past.”

On the screen, a human juggled chainsaws to thunderous applause and then the vid cut to an asari singing something he couldn’t hear on account of the set being on mute.

“That’s really good advice, Pi, thank you.”

“You are most welcome.”

The sun was peeking through the clinic window, adding its light to the electronic glow of the vidscreen, which was now playing a cartoon about N7 Operatives facing off against a rogue reaper, one hidden out in darkspace that the change hadn’t touched.

“I think they’re running out of villains,” Corbin’s hoarse voice came from the bed. “I mean, you can’t hate aliens anymore and half our DNA is synthetic composite now anyway. “The Reapers are like us too… in a big, skyscraper, flying lobster kind of way. What’s left to fear?”

“Ourselves?” Elias said, rolling off the cot, his spine cracking in a few places.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Corbin said, blinking slowly.

“You should see your face,” Elias said.

“That’s not really fair when I can’t see yours,” Corbin said. “Is there any water?”

Elias grinned behind his mask and reached over for the rolling table that seemed to be a staple of all hospital rooms. “You know there’s going to be water here and where it’s going to be,” he said, pouring out a cup and picking up a straw from the packet that had been thoughtfully left there. Corbin went to sit up, and then collapsed flat onto his back. “I don’t think I can get up,” he said, and fumbled for the remote that would move the bed into a sitting position. “I feel weak as the proverbial kitten,” he said, as Elias brought the water over to him, and their hands touched when Corbin reached up to take hold of the cup. “Thanks,” Corbin said softly.


“For what?”

“If I hadn’t been around, Paula would never have thought to poison you with dextro-protein.”

“Then she might have picked something more lethal like botulinum toxin,” Corbin said, taking a long drink. “Oh that’s better.”

“Well, I did make you throw up the better part of a rather large serving of lasagna,” Elias said.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to eat Italian food again,” Corbin groaned. “Hey come now, that was funny,” he added when Elias didn’t respond.

“Sorry,” Elias said, letting Corbin take the cup and sitting back into the chair.

“Elias…”
“You know everything thinks we’re together?” Elias said.

Corbin looked down towards the end of the bed where his feet made small hills under the white sheets. “Yeah. I noticed. Is um…that a bad thing?”

“It nearly got you killed.”

“But it didn’t.”

“And next time?”

“What next time? I hardly think people are going to queue up to attack because they think I’m off the market. Wait, are we actually fighting about this?”

“No! Yes! I don’t know!”

Corbin sighed and scooted across the bed slightly. “Sit down,” he said. “You’re making my head hurt jumping around like that.”

Elias stared hard at the clear patch on the bed. Then he stared at the trundle he’d been sleeping in, just next to the hospital visiting chair. Then he turned back and stared at Corbin. The man’s glasses were on the side table next to the water jug and his hair was bed mussed and pointing off in all directions. His eyes were…uncertain, and Elias thought he could see a slight tremble in his hands that he hadn’t noticed a few minutes ago.

“Keelah…” Elias breathed. “You do like me.”

Corbin sighed. “All right, yes. Fine. I do. And I get it. Sorry, I knew I—”

“You don’t even know what I really look like.”

Corbin stopped and looked up at him, a familiar glint coming into his eyes. “You have blue skin,” he said. “And I know your hair is dark, and you’re slender underneath the bulk of that suit.”

And my face?”

“You have eyes, a fairly straight nose and a mouth,” Corbin said. “You’re talented, resourceful and have a killer voice. Come on, I’ve seen Fleet and Flotilla, I know you don’t have fangs or anything under there.”

Elias laughed, and then he sighed, sitting down next to Corbin on the bed. “I have to leave eventually you know.”

“But eventually’s later,” Corbin pointed out. “For all I know we could find out that we’re great flatmates, but anything more and we start bickering about finding restaurants we can both eat at. Or your snoring.”

“I do not snore!” Elias protested. “Although I can hear you through the walls if you’ve been drinking.”

Corbin laughed and reached out to give Elias a sideways hug, just like he’d done in the past. “Wait really?” he asked suddenly.

“Sort of, yes,” Elias said. “But I just use the noise dampening setting on my helmet and it works fine. How do you think I made it through your porn sessions?”

“I wore headphones!”

Elias grinned and relaxed into Corbin’s embrace. “Gotcha.”

Corbin rolled his eyes. “Want me to share links?”

“Dunno. I have no idea if you have good taste in porn.”

“Well I… this is a really strange thing to be talking about, you know.”

“I can change the topic to something even more awkward if you like,” Elias said.

Corbin looked at him askance. “Oh?”

“I uh, sent in an audition video for Citadel’s Got Talent last night.”

“Don’t you have to be living on the Citadel for that?”

“Or be residing on a current council world and be willing to relocate at your own expense, clause eighty five subsection six,” Elias said. “And the quarian living on Earth gets in by the back door.”

Corbin’s face froze.

“What?” Elias asked.

“Nothing,” Corbin said, swallowing hard. “Um. How… how long until you leave?”

“I have to get in first, Doc.”

“You’ll get in,” Corbin said. “So…how long?”
“Four to six weeks. Depends on how long they take to pick their top one hundred. I mean, how do you pick a top one hundred out of several million entrants?”
Corbin pulled Elias closer. “They give you the winner’s trophy. Wait, is there a trophy?”
“No, just a performance contract.”
“Oh right, just a performance contract, he says.”
Elias sighed and closed his eyes. “Which may never happen,” he said. “Can we talk about something else?”
“Like what?”
“What happens now?”
Chapter Summary

In which our quarian reflects on the events of the last eighteen months. A lot has changed. There's also an octopus.

Elias put the small holographic image of himself and Corbin back onto the table. He was older now. Not much chronologically, but the simple life in New Orleans-Lafayette seemed more distant than a mere eighteen months. He sighed as he stared into the mirror. He was amazed that he didn’t need his mask on the ship now, but then, it had been his home for nearly a year. Also, Pi was always strengthening his immune system, mimicking whatever bacteria, pathogens or viruses that were in the local environment. He’d asked Pi if it was theoretically possible for him to get to the point where he could eat human, asari and salarian food without getting sick, and Pi had agreed it was possible, but it still wouldn’t give him any nutritional benefit.

“You know, you could have told me you were doing this earlier,” Elias had said.

“You did not ask, Creator Elias.”

His last weeks on earth might have been more interesting had he known.
Returning from the clinic, he and Corbin had ended up in a strange holding pattern. Looking back, Elias knew that neither of them had known how to take the next step, or even what the next step was given the Elias’ impeding date with stardom. At least, that’s what Corbin kept calling it. Their routine had changed little until the second email, marked ‘Confidential’ had come into Elias’ mailbox, and Corbin had returned to their little flat to find Elias scrolling through apartment rental listings on the Citadel.

“I don’t think you really have to look at those, Elias,” he said. “Don’t they put you up in a hotel or something if you get in?”

“Maybe. I don’t know,” Elias said. “Maybe I should double check the email again.”

Corbin paused, his messenger bag halfway off his shoulders. “You got in?”

“Elias nodded.”

“Well, that’s great? Ain’t it?”

“Yeah. It is.”

Dropping the bag by the extendable dining table, Corbin came over and wrapped his arms around Elias’s shoulders. “You know, I thought you’d be smilin’ more about getting onto a show that’ll FTL your career.”

“But that’s just it,” Elias said. “If I do this and get somewhere…this is my career. I don’t go back to Rannoch, or if I do I go back and leave again, like Tali’zorah did when she served on the Normandy, but I won’t be saving the universe. I’ll just be…”

He felt Corbin kiss the side of his helmet. “Is that why you’re doing this? For your people?”

“For. Because of,” Elias said. “I don’t know. No matter what I do I need to go back to them one day. And I think I have a lot already from what I’ve been able to gather here.”

Corbin pulled away slightly and looked at him critically. “So you’re doing this so that you don’t have to go home?”

“Do you know what I noticed the other day?”

“What?”

“I called this place home. Not Rannoch, not the Flotilla or the Ashru. Here.”

“So?”

“Corbin, I never did that. This place was always ‘the flat’ or ‘Corbin’s flat’ or—”

“You’ve never called me ‘Corbin’ either.”

Raising his fingers to his face mask, he gripped the curved surface, and heard a click as it separated from his suit.

“Elias! You can’t! You’ll get sick!” Corbin said, his larger hand gripping Elias’ wrist. “I’ve got a week to get over it before filmed selection starts,” Elias said. “Besides, it’s too late now.”

Slowly, their hands and dropped and Corbin’s lips were on his. His face mask tumbled into his lap and suddenly they were gripping each other fiercely, and only stopped when Corbin jerked back back with a soft cry of pain.

“Corbin?”

“Caught my chin on the edge of your helmet,” Corbin said with a grin. “I’ll survive.” Then his eyes roved over Elias’ face. “I knew you’d be cute. Where are your ears?”

Elias grinned. “Quarians don’t have external ears, just vestigial remnants.”

“Oh, right. I never knew that.”

“You know, you’re the only person alive in the universe who knows what my face actually looks like, right?”

Corbin kissed him again, and sometime later, got a crash course in how a quarian envirosuit fitted together.

The next morning, Elias woke up in an unfamiliar room, and he felt more naked than he’d ever been before. Then he realised he was. He went to bring up a medical diagnostic and then realised he couldn’t, and instead had to settle for placing his hand on his forehead. He didn’t seem feverish, and he didn’t appear to have a blocked nose either, as he’d expected. On the bed next to him, Corbin’s snores were more light snuffles, and for a moment he watched the human’s chest rise and fall.
Smiling, Elias slipped out of bed and found the pieces of his suit, slipping them on as he found them, and only hesitating once he got to his helmet and neck-piece. Eventually he left them off, but connected the facially moulded comm piece that could work wirelessly with his omni-tool if needed. The feature was one that Elias typically only used when changing suits or conducting repairs, but he smiled as he looked around the room. Corbin’s room. Even in here, the man was neat, with clothes either in his wardrobe, or hanging on or over a freestanding rail rack. He recognised the jeans Corbin had been wearing off and on for the past week and a shirt he had only worn for an outing to a new pizza place the two nights ago. Other than that there was a datapad, and a few shelves, and unlike the ones in the living room in here Corbin kept mementos from travels on earth. There was a large conch shell, a few glitterglobes and a miniature Eiffel Tower and Big Ben as well as a faux sandstone Sphinx, a plush kangaroo and a soft toy of something round with no mouth and two tiny ears sticking up out top. On the wall opposite the window was a large print of the New Orleans-Lafayette rubble as it had been two years ago, and over it, the new skyline rose, graffiti style in pops of colour, with a husk and human holding hands and staring out over the rejuvenated city. Padding quietly from the room, he went into the kitchen to start the percolator for Corbin’s morning coffee—the man really wasn’t sentient without it—and his own Tzaga infusion, which filled the room with a distinctive fragrance that Corbin had compared to cinnamon and nutmeg.

Eighteen months later, Corbin was still the only person who knew what he looked like underneath his helmet. There had been requests of course, and some rather large offers, but Elias had built his facelessness into part of his mystique. Indeed the art for his debut album had been an artistic rendition of a pair of glowing eyes and just the hint of the concealing envirosuit, subtly backlit so the black and red caught just enough light to show a silhouette, but not enough to give any detail. He’d called it *Soul Windows*, and it had gone to triple platinum within weeks.

On the vid screen, Thessian television was reporting on the queues leaving his final concert and getting soundbites from attendees, and cutting back to footage from his days on the reality TV show. There were the usual conspiracy theories about the program being rigged, and sometimes Elias wondered that himself. The chance that an unknown quarian could come out of nowhere and unseat popular favourite Rayne was a…humans would have said a Cinderella story. Which worked for film and…fables? Was that the term? Fables, yes. Things like that happened in scripted stories, not in real life. But here was real life, following some sort of script. He wondered how they could have done it, but given that *Citadel’s Got Talent* still relied on phone voting, despite extranet polls and text message votes being an option, all the producers would have had to do was change the number of phone lines each number connected to in order to artificially influence the polls. At least, that’s how he’d have done it. With all the contestants being surrounded by minders, security and cameras at almost every turn, finding out anything would have been impossible during filming, had anyone the energy or inclination to do so. In any case, it would have breached a number of clauses in the confidentiality agreement all contestants had had to sign. He’d crossed paths with Rayne once or twice in the past year, and she seemed to be doing well, but aside from some chatter and promotion of each other on social media, they hadn’t really talked.

“…new vocals and acoustic backing from his album have been placed over Elias’ original audition video of earth classic *Can’t Take that Away From Me* to remove the room echo and give the song some context, but this move has annoyed some fans who hold his original video as the ‘purest’ form on expression. The star himself couldn’t be reached for comment but his agent released the following statement:

The screen switched to a pre-recorded image of Elias’ agent at the press release earlier today. “Just as Elias’ first audition was a poignant and pure-hearted interpretation of the old earth favourite, this new release is just that, a new artistic interpretation for his fans. They’re both out there for download and they both have their merits. Elias hopes you’ll enjoy both of them in their own right.” The face of the entertainment reporter came back on screen. “When asked who Elias was singing the song for, all Javak Avorsk said was that the singer’s love life was a private matter for him and him alone.”
“And is there any truth to the rumours that he met someone on Thessia?” the studio anchor asked.
“Sorry to disappoint Navia, but so far everyone who’s entered Elias’ vessel appears to have had a legitimate work related reason to be there, and aside from some public outings, including the Temple of Athame and the Odessa Zoo, he hasn’t been seen in the streets of our capital, alone or in company.”
“Thanks Tara. And I hear Elias has made it into Arya Blue’s most eligible singles listings this year?”
“That’s right Navia, Elias has entered the listings at number fifteen and this is the first time a quarian has made it into the listings since they launched over a century ago.”
“And there you have it, Elia’solor nar Ashru leaves Thessia tonight and heads back to Neo-Citadel, where he’ll be performing the final concerts of his galaxy wide tour.”
Elias muted the sound and walked over to the loosely covered tank where Bevan Waterwalker was currently peeking above the surface of the water. He’d found Bevan in a pet store on earth his last trip to earth, and brought the mimic octopus back on board, a reminder of the time Corbin had taken him scuba diving in the Gulf of Mexico. Although he’d played several stadiums in New-Orleans Lafayette, he hadn’t heard from Corbin since he’d left earth in ’88.

They were standing just before customs at the passenger spaceport terminal. One set of doors through which Elias would step that Corbin wouldn’t be able to follow him through. “So…don’t make any decisions based on me, all right?” Corbin said, his hands jammed into his pockets.
“What do you mean?”
“I mean I don’t want you to be held back from anything just because you’ve been staying with me on the other side of the galaxy.”
Elias paused. “Are you breaking up with me?”
“No, I don’t think so,” Corbin said. “I’m just saying that if you find an opportunity that keeps you away from me, you should take it and if you find someone else, I understand.”
“What about you, Doc?” Elias asked.
“I’ll be fine,” Corbin said with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I just want to be realistic about long distance relationships and well…you’re going to be meeting all these celebrities and important people.”
“And you’re not important?”
“I can’t boost your career the way they’ll be able to,” Corbin said.
“Hey!” Elias used his fingers to lift Corbin’s chin up so that the other man was forced to look at him. “If I ever get to point where I sleep with someone to get ahead in the music industry, remind me that it’s time to retire.”
Corbin smiled weakly. “Deal. But seriously, don’t let me hold you back. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself if I do.”
“Oh, now you’re just twisting my arm,” Elias said, forcing a light tone.
Corbin nodded. “I know. Now go. Your spaceship is waiting.”
With one final, lingering hug, Elias turned and left earth, leaving Corbin standing alone at the spaceport gate, and a small, omni-tool manufactured sculpture of himself sitting on the shelf in the spare room where Corbin was sure to find it. Eventually. The extractor fan in his helmet didn’t turn on until his ship was breaking atmo.

He had both of his hands inside the salt water tank and was playing Bevan’s favourite game of ‘wrap all my tentacles around Elias’ forearms’ when there was a buzz at the door.
“Who is it?” Elias called, pulling his right hand free from Bevan’s clinging suckers. He’d recently found out that octopuses tasted things with their suckers and wondered what his suit tasted like to Bevan. He had noticed that Bevan did, on occasion, try to remove his gauntlets from the rest of his suit and after the first incident had added a a software lock that had to be released as well—it would work as long as his suit had power, and so far Bevan hadn’t been able to try again. Although he had contemplated dipping his bare hands into the tank, he wasn’t sure if doing so would poison his pet.
“Who else to you think?” a gravelly voice said through the intercom.
“Javek! Come in,” Elias said, and his agent swaggered into the room in a crisp navy suit and four lens batarian sunglasses. “What’s been—”
He stopped as a number of the ship’s crew came in with flowers, boxes of dextro-chocolates and one Krogan almost hidden under a giant teddybear that was bigger than he was.
“Put them in the gift room, boys and girls,” Javek said, waving a hand lazily. “Looks like we cleaned up on Thessia, m’boy,” the baratian said expansively, dropping himself into one of Elias’ plush white armchairs.
“I’m surprised there aren’t fruit baskets again,” Elias said.
“Oh there were about fifty or so,” Javek said as the carriers filed silently out of the suite. “As per your standing ord—request I’ve distributed them to the ship’s cooks and any surplus was delivered to local homeless shelters. And we only brought up twenty boxes of the finest chocolates for you.”
“And those lacy…um…”
“Bras,” Javak said helpfully. “There were quite a few of those. You’ll be able to open up your own lingerie shop soon, you know.”
Elias had been stashing most of the undergarments in a crate in the corner of the room, fully intent on leaving them all behind when he got off the ship. Or just giving them to Javak. The very notion of clothes other than his envirosuit still seemed strange to him, for all that he wore an range of external show jackets for public appearances. It wasn’t as though quarians even had undergarments.
“Last stop the Citadel,” Javak said. Like most people, Javak called Neo-Citadel by its original namesake, especially given that much of the initial infrastructure had been used in its reconstruction, salvaged by the reapers that had been on earth during the final day of the war. “Back where it all began. How are you feeling about that?”
“I don’t know,” Elias said honestly. “I’ve been so busy with this tour that I haven’t really thought about it. I’m looking forward to being anonymous for a while, to be honest.”
“You’re never going to be anonymous again, Elias,” Javak said seriously. “You might as well get used to that fact.”
“Thanks,” Elias said, only a little acidily.
“No charge,” Javak said with a grin. “While you’re rejuvenating your creative side you might want to think about who you want playing you in your biopic though,” Javak said, handing over a datapad.
“What, there’s a biopic?” Elias asked, pulling his left hand out of the tank and taking the datapad.
“Of course! You’re big news, Elias baby. Everyone wants to know about you and it’s a great way to get more cred…ibility and raise your profile across the galaxy. You need to hunt while the Drak-ka are running after all.”
“My life really wasn’t very interesting before all of this happened, you know,” Elias said. Javak laughed. “Elias baby, haven’t you ever heard of the term ‘artistic license’?”
Elias frowned. “I don’t know if I like the idea of people fact checking and finding out I’ve agreed to put my name to something that I know is false, Javak.”
Javak stood up and put his arm around Elias’ shoulders. “Come now Elias, don’t you trust me?”
“Well…yes…”
“And have I ever steered you wrong before?”
“Well, no, you haven—”
“So trust me now! Between you and me we’re going to make tons of…people love you long after the next wannabe stars get on stage for the next season of Citadel’s Got Talent, and you know they’re already filming the top one hundred.”
Elias grimaced behind his mask. “I’ll think about it, okay?”
“Sure, sure, take your time,” Javak said. “I’ll leave you to it while I go finalise things for your Citadel homecoming.”
“Okay,” Elias said. Homecoming. Staring up at the wall, Elias looked at the holo-window, currently showing a map of the galaxy, twinkling as it rotated gently. His eyes sought out first Rannoch and then Earth. Tossing the datapad onto the desk in the room, he went back to playing with Bevan. He wasn’t ready to deal with the hard questions. Not yet, anyway.
New Digs

Chapter Summary

_In which our quarian finds himself in a hero's apartment. An old friendship is rekindled_

**Neo-Citadel 2191 CE**

On the citadel, Elias found himself escorted to his newly rented apartment by Chask and Markanis, the two bodyguards who'd been with him since winning the tv show. Chask was a Krogan who did most of the talking, and Markanis spoke so little that Elias had wondered at first if the Turian was mute.

“Go on in Mr Elias,” Chask said when the elevator opened. “Our crew has already checked the place over and it’s impressive, I’ll give you that.”

Stepping into the apartment, Elias walked past the a glass divider that separated the corridor from an indoor garden and stepped down into a lounge complete with leather sofas, a grand piano, and a wrap around fireplace. And above the fireplace was a large picture and a simple brass plaque: ‘Clive Shepard and the crew of the Normandy SSR II, 2186 CE’.

“Are you seeing this, Pi?” Elias asked softly.

The blue light in his helmet flickered on slowly. “I’m sorry, Creator Elias, I was hibernating. Have I seen what?”

“That image.”

“That appears to be a photograph of Commander Sheppard and his team,” Pi said.

“This is his apartment, isn’t it?”

There was a slight pause. “Yes, records indicate that this apartment briefly belonged to Commander Sheppard in 2186 after being gifted to him by Admiral David Anderson of the Alliance.”

“This is the home of a war hero, Pi. I’m just an entertainer. Keelah, what am I doing here? And what am I meant to do with all this space?”
“You could always ask your agent for more modest quarters.”
“I can see that going down very well,” Elias said as he set out to explore. There was the large kitchen with its centre island, study nook, bar, reading room and two downstairs bedrooms, balcony gallery, master bedroom, hot tub and upstairs lounge.

A buzz at the apartment’s security screen brought him back to downstairs and to the front door. Bringing the intercom video up, he called Chask rather than use the outdoor broadcast. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“There’s a group of Elia’solor nar Ashru’s fans here, sir,” Chask said carefully. “They’re asking to see him.”

He should have gone out. He really should have gone out and signed some autographs and made nice, but there were so many of them. About twenty had crammed themselves into the small space at the front of the apartment doors and there were more beyond. He could see banners with “We love you Elias!” and two saying “Elias, please marry me,” which was slightly frightening given that one was being held by a quarian girl who couldn’t have been more than fourteen, and a human male who Elias guessed was somewhere around sixteen or seventeen years of age. “Pi?” he asked.

“Mr Elias is currently in a recording session and cannot be disturbed right now,” Pi’s smooth, melodic tones said calmly, his voice clearly audible through the apartment intercom. “I’m sure he’ll be down later though.”

“Very good, Sir,” Chask said. The Krogan was used to the game by now. Elias wouldn’t be coming down. He hadn’t been able to walk alone in public since the semi-final round of the show last year. At least, not officially. Elias had been very careful to include a good number of male quarians in his staff, more than would otherwise be called for, sometimes even creating superficial roles in order to hire more people. It was accepted for purposes of celebrity ego—or for a quarian looking to help his people stay employed—and Javak had been most accommodating, but the real reason he hired them was as decoys. All of them were given nondescript suits to wear, slightly better in features than was standard for most pilgrims, but outwardly looking like a standard off the rack suit.

“I don’t want any of you mobbed by tweens mistaking you for me,” Elias told every single one of them. I’m not sure what would happen if they stampeded.”

At first, reporters had pounced upon any quarian leaving the tour ship or any hotel he was known to be staying in, but soon it became clear that Elia’solor nar Ashru was only ever seen with his performance gear on. So they watched for that and clamoured for attention at scheduled press conferences and outings.

Elia’solor nar Ashru was fast becoming known as a very private person and rarely seen out in public without his minders. Psychologists were wondering how he managed with the isolation, and speculated that the high number of quarians on his staff were there as much for social interaction as anything else. And they were right, up to a point. Elias had found that all he needed for a private outing was to take off his performance jacket, change the colours and patterns of the hard panels of his suit, affecting an accent and if he was feeling particularly paranoid, use a voice modulator. Then he was a completely different and quite unremarkable quarian. Sometimes he was on the staff of Elia’solor nar Ashru. Sometimes he was just a passing pilgrim, seeing the sights and occasionally going to other gigs when Elias himself wasn’t required on stage. He was sure Javak knew what he was up to. He was sure his security detail knew where he went. But for now, they let him have his freedom. It was more than what celebrities of most other species ever got.

Retiring to the study he turned on the television for noise—anything was better than the silence—and sat down to go through his fan mail. Or rather, Pi went through his fan mail, sending ‘fill in the blank’ responses to most of them, and adding their senders and scans of their letters to the database they were keeping of Elias’ fans. That way if he actually ended up speaking to any of them, Elias would be able to ‘remember’ anything they sent to him via a quick search in his suit’s database. It had already proved to be a career booster, and there were a few fans that Elias genuinely remembered, but most of the time, it was the combined efforts of himself and Pi, filtering most letters automatically, and marking others for Elias’ personal attention.

“Up next: profiles in courage with Liam Vathanil Musie as he interviews Lieutenant Commander
Ashley Williams.
Elias looked up at the screen. “He was the host on Citadel’s Got Talent last year,” he said. “Looks
like he got a new job.”
“It would appear so,” Pi said politely. It was what Elias had come to know as his disinterested
response. Once the information had been filed away, Pi didn’t find things like acquaintances job
changes to be relevant to his existence. The interview with Ashley Williams was mostly a ‘how did it
feel about being the one not to die on Virmire,” the infamous battle with at Saren’s cloning facility
where Commander Sheppard destroyed Saren’s genophage cure and fought alongside the Salarian
Captain Kirrahe. It wasn’t particularly enlightening, and Elias tuned out after a little while. He was
nearing the end of the current batch of fan mail when there was a ping from the computer in the
corner.
“You have a vid call,” Pi announced quietly.
“Who is it?” Elias asked.
“It’s Corbin.”
“Is it? How did he… never mind, I’m getting it!” Elias all but ran to the computer and tapped the
‘accept call’ icon that appeared on screen.
Corbin looked just like Elias remembered, his hair short at the sides and longer and unruly on top,
one lock consistently curling down over his forehead. He wore a familiar white shirt and he looked a
bit surprised when the call dropped in. Elias’ stomach tightened. It had been over a year since they
talked. They hadn’t so much as messaged each other since Elias had left New Orleans-Laffayette to
film what turned out to be the webisodes where the judges culled the top five hundred to the top
hundred, when official program filming began.
“Hey Doc,” Elias said. “Long time no see.”
“Yeah, it is,” Corbin said, “I ah…heard you were coming back to the Citadel so I thought I’d, you
know, say ‘welcome home’.”
“Thank you,” Elias said. “I don’t know if this is home though. Do you know where I am right
now?”
“On the Citadel?” Corbin asked with a grin.
“Well, yes, but I’m in Commander Sheppard’s apartment.”
Corbin blinked “What? Really? The Commander Sheppard?”
“Yes, I mean, look!” Elias said, and synced up his his omni-tool camera to the video link and stepped
out into the main lounge, aiming the camera up at the framed photo.
“I know,” Elias said. “I mean, how do I rate this? All I did was sing a few songs!”
“More than a few,” Corbin said, the old playfulness returning to his voice.
“Still,” Elias said. “It’s a bit odd.”
“I’d give my eye teeth to be there, you know,” Corbin said.
Elias turned and headed back into the study, turning off the video link on his omni-tool once he got
back to the screen. “Well, if you make it to the the Citadel and if I’m still in this place, you’re more
than welcome to drop by.”
“Oh? Well, I might just take you up on that,” Corbin said. “Seriously though, how’ve you been?”
“Crazy,” Elias said. “I’ve been all over council space and welcomed everywhere with, well…
roaring crowds.” Leaning in, Elias whispered into the microphone. “There’s a horde of screaming
tweens outside the apartment. It’s surreal.”
“Any new songs?”
“Always,” Elias said happily. “I’ll have to go record some soon, I guess. How about you, Doc, what
have you been up to?”
“Nothing as glam as you,” Corbin said. “I joined the Alliance as a war doc though. I’m going
through N7 training now as a matter of fact.”
“Oh, not doing anything special he says. Just Alliance Special Forces training. That must be intense.
Are you allowed to talk about it, or is it ‘classified’?”
“Well it’s tough,” Corbin said. “But I’m loving it. Halfway through at the moment.”
“Can I ask where you are?”
“Yeah, but that is classified,” Corbin said, pushing his glasses up his nose.
It was a reflexive action that Elias was familiar with. The human only really did that when something was bothering him. “What’s wrong, Doc?” he asked.
“Nothing, I just…I still find it hard to believe that one of my patients is living the high life.”
Elias shrugged. “It’s weird. I’m just enjoying it while I can before the fickle spotlight of celebrity moves on to someone else. And anyway, if it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be here right now, so… thanks again.”
Corbin grinned. “So you’re not forgetting the little people, huh?”
A blue light blinked in Elias’ helmet. “He’s not that little,” Pi commented.
“Shut up,” Elias muttered.
“I’m sorry?” Corbin asked.
“Nothing, just thinking,” Elias said. “You were never little people, Doc. I mean you’re a good foot taller than me for starters.”
Corbin’s smile was genuine and warm. “Good to know. Well, I should let you go. I mean, I know you have a concert to prepare for.”
Elias looked towards the door of the apartment. “Yeah, I do,” he said. “You know I was serious though. If you’re in the area, drop by. I’m sure I can get you a ticket into my own concert. You know…if you want to come.”
“I would, but I’m not going to make it to the Citadel before your run’s over. Not unless you really extend it by a few months. But I’ll be back home once training is over and I’ll be at Clinic for a bit before they ship me out again. So if you have some time to kill after you’re done being Mr. Famous, you can find me there.”
“Okay,” Elias said. “I think I can afford a holiday. I’ll see if I can drop by.”
“Great! Um, well. It’s been really good to talk to you again. Bye for now.”
“Bye Corbin,” Elias said. “Don’t be a stranger, okay?”
Corbin smiled again before the call disconnected. For a moment, Elias sat at the desk, staring at the blank screen. Then he got up, tested the showers for their acoustic properties, and turned the water on full. Showers with water were one of the things Elias occasionally indulged in when he was sure he wasn’t being watched. They involved taking off his suit for one, but well. It was worth it. As the hot water cascaded over his body and he warmed his voice with a series of vocal exercises he felt the tension in his muscles drain from his body. Definitely worth it.
Possibilities

Chapter Summary

Elias’ final concert rolls around and...doesn't end as anticipated.

The days and nights passed in a blur of concerts, sleeping and carefully looking after his health to ensure he was able to perform the next one and the one after that and before he knew it, Elias was backstage waiting for the curtain to go up on his final show. He’d done so many now that stage fright didn’t really kick in until he was in the wings. Of course, now that he was in the wings he could feel the rush of his blood and the slight shaking in his hands. Any moment now his stomach would start to jitter and then he’d step out on stage and it would settle into a warm glow in the pit of his belly when he sang the first note. Probably.

Some of the techs were watching a broadcast of Talkback, an extranet round table show where five hosts discussed and debated the news of the moment. Or three years past in this case. “But what right did he have to force this…this Synthesis upon us?” a female human was saying.
Elias thought her name was Karen. “What right did he have to choose this? Not just for one city, one planet, but for the entire universe?”

“If anyone had the right to make that call, Sheppard did,” an Asari replied. “He was the first to warn us of the reapers. He was the one the galaxy turned to to fight them.”

“He was supposed to destroy them, not infuse us with part of their…their…essence!”

“We put our trust in the Commander to get us all through the war alive,” the Asari said calmly. “He did that.”

“What alternative do you propose?” a Salarian said, his voice rapid fire and pointed. “Sheppard on spot, only one to make it to the catalyst on Citadel alive. Should he have sent out extranet survey via non-existent comm bouys and waited for a months to collate results? Years? Not an option. Sheppard made best call with available data, and of all in universe, had the most data. Right or wrong a luxury only available after the fact.”

Elias tuned out and went downstairs to the lift that would rise through the theatre floor in a grand reveal for his opening number. He’d long ago concluded that life continued because someone or someones made a lot of hard calls. Doubting those decisions was a luxury of those alive to reap the benefits, and those who did were typically those afraid of change. People didn’t like having change thrust upon them. Some might even choose death over it. Well, some wouldn’t. But they were very quick to forget that those had been the choices available.

He was halfway through his set when an electric lightshow went awry. Or at least, he thought an electric lightshow went awry. In the centre of the theatre, a purplish electric cloud was crackling, looking for all the world like a miniature lighting storm. He could hear the techs chattering in the background, but the show must go on, as the earth saying went and so the show did go on. At least, up until a the centre of the storm fell into itself and there was a sensation of darkness and distance, and something was approaching, and the people who had been sitting in their seats were falling into the black, disappearing and falling into the darkness that the things were falling out of. Finally, six squat figures snapped into place in the theatre as the electric storm faded and the fabric of space snapped back into a taut, impervious sheet. They were volus, or had been volus. Actually they were husks. Volus husks. He hadn’t seen any volus husks during the war. These appeared to have the scuttling legs of rachni underneath and from the centre of their chests came a flexible piece of tubing, which in turn led to something that looked much like a bomb detonator, which was clutched in one of the volus’ hands.

Husks weren’t exactly uncommon in society, although they tended to form the underclass of society and had higher rates of mental illness and suicide than any other species—if indeed grouping husks together as a ‘species’ was the right thing to do. These ones moved with a singular purpose and aggression Elias hadn’t seen that since the war. Then one of them turned, hand upraised as an omni blade grew around his forearm and stabbed through one of the seats to hit its occupant. The band paused, the flow of music squeaking to a halt with a brassy squelch from an electro-trumpet. From the catwalk a shot rang out, and one of the husks turned, red eyes searching for the shooter. Elias paused, still outlined by the spotlights on stage. A part of himself that he’d buried five years ago quietly rose from whatever bed it had been sleeping in, and he found himself angry. It was a cold anger though, one that endured in its icy rage.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please leave the auditorium immediately. This is not part of the show. I repeat, this is not part of the show,” Elias said, his intonations clipped and inflectionless. With a flick of his wrist, he and Pi sent a stun drone zipping through the air and over to the husks. He didn’t have much hope that it would last long, but he hoped it would buy the audience some time.

“Mr Elias, we need to get you out of here.”

There was a turian on stage now. C-Sec judging by the uniform. Exactly how he rated C-Sec rather than private protection remained a mystery to Elias, but he suspected Jamak had something to do with it. Saving Creds no doubt although given that the more Elias made the more Jamak made, Elias didn’t really feel the need to complain about it. Besides, the more money he had, the easier it was to find ways to help Rannoch build anew.

“Yeah, sure,” Elias said, and left the stage at a run, heading for his dressing room.
Creator Elias, the drone has been destroyed. Pi murmured into his comm.
Elias cursed inwardly. He had hoped it would last more than a few seconds, but there was no time to think.

“Stay here, sir, your bodyguards are on their way to escort you out,” the Turian said, before heading up the stairs to the theatre catwalks. Nodding, Elias ducked into his room and opened one of the boxes inside that looked identical to the many that were overflowing with gifts from wellwishers and fans. Identical in almost every way except this one contained cushioning foam and his weaponry. Grabbing his SMG and Sniper Rifle, he dashed back out the door, heading for the area where the wings met the stage curtains. Sliding across the floor he poked the barrel and scope of his gun through the gap and looked out into the theatre.
The crowd’s stampede had cleared everyone from the ground level of the theatre, aside from some C-sec officers, and what appeared to be a mechanised suit of Krogan battle armour, that was being driven around by a hanar, its pink, gelatinous body floating in a thick, transparent viewing pod where the Krogan’s helmet would have been. There were perhaps a dozen civilians dead, some stabbed, but mostly collapsed without any noticeable wounds. There was also a haze of orange tinted gas that discoloured the air, and of the three remaining volus, two were caught up in a biotic singularity, and as he watched, the third was felled from a shot from above.

Shooting. Right. Turning back to the helpless husks floating in the air, Elias sighted down the scope and fired. It was an off the cuff shot, taken without proper aim, but he was in a hurry. He still found his mark, and the lights in the husk’s eyes dimmed and its struggles ceased.

“No one attacks my concerts and gets away with it,” Elias said with some satisfaction. “Not even reapers.”

A burst of shots from the hannar-controlled mech’s assault rifle took out the last husk, and the as everyone turned towards the stage. Elias realised he was still hooked up to the audio system. Shouldering his rifle, he stepped out into the spotlights again, and hopped down from the stage, just in time to see the hannar turn to a nearby C-sec officer and hand over an assault rifle. “This one thanks you for…” suddenly the aggressive, snarly tones were replaced with the calmer, more modulated hanar voices Elias was used to, and he realised the hanar must have been using a secondary voice modulator. “…the use of your weapon.”

“Um… you’re welcome.”

On the prompt side of the stage the officer who had escorted Elias to his dressing room entered through the emergency exits, a female krogan in cuffs before him and a human tailing along behind. “I’ve apprehended the Krogan, Lieutenant Accius, she had a sniper rifle.”

“Good, take it for testing,” the Lieutenant said.

Not being the centre of attention took Elias completely by surprise, and for a moment he was both angry and relieved. Then he looked out at the bodies in the audience and sighed. Hopping down from the stage he started checking the bodies. Some had bullet wounds from the guns the husks had been wielding. Some had knife wounds. Some had no visible damage at all. Running a diagnostic on his omni-tool, he found traces of a neurotoxin, the likes of which he had never seen before.

“This one questions why you are taking those individuals into custody,” the hanar was saying, its mech lumbering over to where the Lieutenant was standing. “They were a great help during the battle.”

“This does not concern you, citizen,” the turian snapped. “And how did you get that mech past security?”

The hanar paused. “This one has its case in case of emergency. This one felt the attack by hostile reaper forces constituted as an emergency.”

The turians eyes narrowed. “I’ll let it slide given your efforts today.”

“This one appreciate the compliment, but its issue still stands. The Krogan was of much assistance in the battle.”

“So was he,” A wounded C-sec officer said, limping over. He took out three of those creatures before they could do more damage.”

“Noted,” the Turian said. “Go see a medic, Officer.”
“Yes Ma’am. Say, weren’t you supposed to be on your honeymoon?”

“Is this some sort of joke?” she snapped. “You know I’m widowed.”

The C-sec officer seemed taken aback. “Already? What happened?”

“Happened? I’ve been widowed for years.”

“Officer Altus, did you…hit your head during the battle?” the other Turian said carefully. “Perhaps you need to see a doctor.”

“No, I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“Did you need us to contact Octavius for you?”

“What?”

“Your husband, ma’am.”

“I’ll be fine. Please escort the suspect back to the precinct. I need to…sit down.”

“Certainly…”

“It’s nice to see leadership being kept up,” the Krogan muttered in what she probably thought was a quiet voice. However, before Officer Altus could continue, a human behind her piped up.

“So you’re the one in charge around here.”

Officer Altus sighed. “Why am I not surprised to see you?” Apparently the two had a history.

“So you’re just arresting people without cause now? Is that how you run things?”

The turian sighed. “I believe she may be able to help us with our inquiries into an unrelated incident earlier today.”

“Oh yes, your inquiries, I’ve seen those,” the man said hotly, a strange, yellow-orange light flickering in his right eye. “Having your snipers shoot a surrendering man? Is that how C-Sec runs its ‘inquiries’.”

“I said stand down, citizen,” Officer Altus snapped. “Unless you want us to take you in to find out what you had to do with all of this.”

The man went for a gun, but it was the Lieutenant’s gun that he grabbed and she was too quick, grabbing his wrist and yanking hard. Her pull turned into a throw and in the blink of an eye the human was on the ground, face down, his hands cuffed behind him. “You’re under arrest for assaulting an Officer.”

Creator Elias, these husks do not appear to be synthesised, Pi said, his voice sounded soft and muted inside Elias’ helmet.

“I thought the blast from the crucible hit the entire galaxy,” Elias said.

Yes, I am computing probability diagnostics, but these husks do not have the base level of organic material found in all reaper creatures after the Crucible was detonated, Pi said. They also appear to be responding to the pre-synthesis old machine signals.

“Did everyone take their crazy pills this morning?” Elias asked, standing up his voice booming through the speaker system once more. “Am I the only one the least bit concerned about the dead husks on the floor here?”

The hanar turned. “This one would like to point out that the husk bodies are riddled with bullets. It would be safe to presume this one noticed. Also this one questions your need for higher vocal volume.”

Rolling his eyes, Elias disconnected his comm from the theatre sound system, even as the Krogan said. “It is odd that they show up again three years later,” she said. “They shouldn’t be here at all.”

“What to you mean?” the hanar asked.

Creator Elias, those four individuals do not seem to hold the same synthetic DNA as the rest of the people here. I have not seen their like in years.

Turning to the officer that was unobtrusively shadowing him, Elias pointed at the husks. “Officer, these husks aren’t normal. They haven’t been synthesised.”

Elias pulled up a scan on his omni-tool, showing the structure of the husks, even as the hanar turned, opened the clear blast shield of his mech and peeked out, two of its tentacles curling over the lip of the neck area. “This one thought all the husks were destroyed.”

“That’s what I thought,” the Krogan said. “It’s odd.”

“This one agrees.”
Creator Elias, I am picking up some strange readings from the hanar’s mech. No known match to current databases. Analysing.

“That one isn’t synthesised either,” Elias said stalling for time. “That’s impossible,” The C-sec officer said. “Everyone in the galaxy was synthesised.” “He’s not. Look at his skin.” “I guess…maybe…people might have…I don’t know. I don’t know how this all works.” Walking up to the mech, Elias asked. “What’s should I call you, Hanar?” The alien didn’t respond, and Elias reached up and knocked on its suit. “Hmm?” “What should I call you, I can’t keep thinking of you as ‘the hanar’?” “This one’s face name is Anar. You’re Elias correct.” “That would be me.” “This one didn’t vote for you.” “No one’s perfect,” Elias said absently. “You’ve got some rather interesting readings coming from your mech suit right now.” “How many mech suits do you normally see.” “Anar, I’m a quarian. I see anything and everything mechanical. It’s a racial obsession.” “What strange readings do you mean, exactly?” Creator Elias, analysis shows the hanar has old machine technology inside its suit. Stepping back, Elias drew his Sniper rifle and aimed it directly at the hanar’s head. “You’re carrying reaper tech.” “What?” “Nothing personal, but non-synthesised reaper husks and non-synthesised hanar with reaper tech…you do the math.” “Do not take this personally either then,” Anar said and the blast shield closed with a click. “This one believes it might know what you are referring to. This one saw something strange earlier and will check.” A number of fast food containers, confectionery wrappers, a bobble headed orange and black cat that Elias recognised as being from a Garfield comic from earth and a few back issues of fornax fountained up into the clear bubble canopy. Apparently the hanar’s mech was something of a mess. Then it peeked up through the blast shield. “This one would like to point out that its suit has never done that before,” then the arms of the mech folded across its chest. “Would that one like to dispose of the reaper tech before I punch a hole through its mech?” Elias asked pointedly. Almost reflexively, the mech pulled out its assault rifle and aimed it as Elias. “This item is of personal value and will not be removed from this one’s possession.” From the ground, Elias could hear the human civilian mumbling something about ‘bigger threats’, but it was drowned out by the sounds of thermal clips being replaced and guns being aimed at the hanar’s mech. “This one means no harm,” the hanar continued, “but it will not be threatened.” “Half a dozen people are dead, killed by hostile husks and the only link we have to them is you. You mean no harm…but?” “This one has its questions as well, but will defend itself if threatened.” Chask and Markanis burst into the room and rushed to Elias’ side. “Mr Elias,” Chask said. “Are you all right?” “Currently,” Elias said, nodding towards the hanar mech. “We should get you out of here, sir.” “We need to get a look at that reaper tech first,” Elias said. Chask grinned and clapped his hands together. “Not a problem, sir, did you need that pretty suit intact too?” Markanis simply pointed his assault rifle at the mech. The mech’s rifle slowly lowered. “This one would like to offer a sign of good faith,” Anar said. “It will allow the inspection of the device on two conditions. Firstly, this one will retrieve the object
from its suit and it will be returned to this one—the item is of sentimental value”. Secondly, the object will go with the C-sec officer, and not with the Quarian singer.” Turning to Officer Altus, the hanar managed to stay impressively calm facing a pistol pointing directly towards its head. “Are these terms at least somewhat agreeable?”

“I can work with those,” Officer Altus said.

“Suits me,” Elias said.

“Very well then.” The hanar stowed its assault rifle on its back and disappeared from view briefly before returning. “Does anyone have tongs? If this item is indeed reaper technology, this one would prefer not to touch it.”

“Sure, hang on,” Elias said, and a moment later a pair of tongs dropped off his omni-tool and into his right hand.

By mutual agreement, Officer Altus took the tongs from Elias and handed them through the blast shield of the hanar’s mech suit, and a few minutes later the hanar reappeared, carefully lifting down a glowing, greenish-purple object that looked for all the world like a datadisc. Except for the glow. Datadiscs didn’t normally glow. As she took it out of the hanar’s tentacles and walked a short distance away there was a…ripple. It was as if the space inside the theatre was twisting, and the purplish electric light show that Elias had seen during the show crackled through the air.

“This one suggests the disc should not be brought near that area of the theatre,” Anar said.

“I second that,” Elias said. “Officer, may I run a diagnostic on that device please?”

Back ing away from the central seating area, Officer Altus looked thoughtful as the crackling energy faded and the distortion in the air stilled. Turning towards Elias she stared at him for several seconds longer than was comfortable before she shrugged. “All right. But no touching.”

“Last thing on my mind,” Elias agreed, and sent the drone out so that Pi could complete some remote scans.

“Analysing,” Pi said.

In the suddenly still air, the sound of Pi’s scanner was incongruously loud. Everyone in the room, from Elias, the armed concertgoers to the C-sec officers were standing still, rooted to the spot with their eyes glued on the red drone. Inside his helmet a barrage of information started sprawling across his HUD, and Pi’s low murmur filled his ears. The scan clicked off, and the drone flew back to Elias, who staggered back to lean against the chair behind him.

“Are you all right?” Officer Altus asked.

“I don’t think so, no,” Elias said. “Tell me officer, are you familiar with the idea of parallel universes? The idea that significant events have…you make a choice in this universe and another you makes a different choice and suddenly there are two universes running along different lines of causality?”

“Only in that old historic earth documentary: Terminator,” Anar said.

The C-sec officer shot a glance that was both irritated and tired at the hanar. “I thought that was science fiction.”

“It’s an unproven theory at least,” Elias agreed. “That… as far as I can tell it’s reaper tech and it’s a…reality collider. It needs another piece to work, but if the readings I’m getting are right, it’s supposed to allow passage from one part of the…multiverse to another.”

“That chit was just a pet project of this one’s best friend,” Anar said. “This one has never known him to dabble in reaper tech.”

“How well do you know your friend?” Officer Altus asked drily.

“Well enough to know he would never go that far down that path.”

“That thing is old,” Elias said, pointing at the data cube. “It pre-dates this cycle at the very least, so unless your friend has found…what’s the term… a spring of youth?”

“Fountain,” the human civilian said, pushing himself into a sitting position on the floor. “Fountain of youth.”

The hanar climbed out of its suit and drifted closer. “Well, in honesty, this one only assumed he made it. It seemed like the most logical explanation. This does not bode well.”

“I still don’t understand what you’re saying, exactly,” the turian said.
“I think, Officer Altus, that you’ll find there’s another Officer Altus from this, synthesised, universe who just got married.”
This time it was the Turian who sat down in her chair. “I don’t understand.”
“Wait,” wounded C-sec officer said. “What you’re saying is that this Officer Altus isn’t the real Officer Altus?”
“No,” Elias said. “I’m saying that this Officer Altus is the Officer Altus from a universe where synthesis didn’t happen.”
“This is making my head hurt,” the officer said, and Elias noted that he had the name ‘Shields’ engraved into the collar of his armour.
“Also, the hanar, that human and the krogan are all from other universes.”
“So…they could be responsible for the husks then?” Officer Shields asked. “They could be from a universe where the reapers won? Maybe they’re indoctrinated!”
“I can assure you we defeated the reapers in our universe,” Officer Altus said.
“How could you have? You’re not synthesised.”
“No, Shepard took control of the reapers instead.”
“Controlling them? One person controlling all the reapers? Why didn’t he just destroy them in that case.”
“Hold on, in this one’s universe Shepard did destroy all the reapers, along with all synthetic life.”
“What the squishy one said,” the Krogan said, her voice soft, but strong enough to cut through the babble of voices.
“I’d hate to be in your universe then,” the male civilian muttered.
“Look,” Officer Altus said. “If I was indoctrinated I’d have been helping the husks. And you can easily dig out the psych evaluations from the war that we had to check for indoctrination. I know Commander Bailey used them on everyone after the Cerberus coup attempt.”
“We’d all have been helping the husks if we’d been indoctrinated,” the human pointed out.
Officer Shields paused in thought. “You’re right. My apologies Officer Altus.”
“We’re getting sidetracked,” Elias said. “The point is that device allows the reapers—war winning not friendly reapers—to jump from one universe to another. Once they finish a harvest they can… check on other realities to ensure that they have wiped out organic and synthetic life throughout all of the multiverse, not just the one that they happen to be in.”
“You got all that from a few minutes of scanning?” Officer Altus asked.
Elias shrugged. “Most of it’s extrapolation based on the data contained on that device. And a little speculation based on those volus husks.”
“You’re saying the reapers jump from a conquered universe to a not conquered universe and kill us all across different probabilities?” the human asked.
“That’s what the evidence suggests, yes,” Elias said.
“Have you ever seen a tear in the universe before?” the man asked. It was an earnest question, where someone else might have been skeptical.
“No,” Elias said. “Only in vids where someone passes through a black hole or wormhole and gets spat out somewhere else without being crushed into nothingness. That said,” he added, gesturing to where the purplish lightnight had flared not long ago. “I think we all witnessed it today.”
Off to the side, the hannar lowered its body into one of the plush theatre seats. “In retrospect, perhaps this one should have voted for you,” he said.
“Hey, I might be an airheaded wanker in your universe,” Elias said. “Hey, maybe you can meet yourselves while in this one.”
“What if we do not find our synthesised selves likable?” Anar asked.
“Or alive?” the human added.
“Maybe you can reopen the portal and go home?” Elias suggested. “We should be able to open—or for that matter, close—the portals if we can find the other half of the key. It should look something like this.”
He brought up a holographic rendering of a synthetic construct that looked something like a cross between a toothy maw and a giant metallic claw. There was the hint of a reptilian face, or possibly
just at eye, but the lower half of it was a tangled mess of metal and tubes. “The reality collider needs something to weaken the walls between universes, and I think this is the thing that does it. The reapers have to find a weak spot first—like the centre of the theatre—but once they do…”

Everyone strained to look at the holographic image hovering above Elias’ wrist.

“Hang on the second where’d you get that?” the human civilian said. “Do you know what that is?”

“Um, again no—that’s just an image extrapolated from the data on the data cube itself. It appears to be reaper technology.”

“This thing…I’ve been seeing it for about five years now. I don’t know what it is, but I’ve been calling it Mimic. Apparently no one else other than me can see it though.”

“Can you see it now?” Elias asked.

The drone, which had stayed close to Elias, hovering silently turned towards the human. Or at least, Elias saw it. Possibly no one else saw it turn its microarray of sensors towards the man. Definitely no one else heard the quiet Scanning, that came into his helmet.

That would make sense, creator Elias. It would appear only synthetics can see the…this mimic. And that man has cybernetic enhancement in the ocular region. Left side.

“And you?”

I should be able to detect it, yes.

“Funny how you weren’t synthesised with everyone else, you know, Pi. Why do you think that is.”

I’m sorry Creator Elias, but there is still no data available.

“Can’t you speculate?”

Speculation requires data upon which to build a theory.

“I’m not saying anything else until I get a bit of freedom around here,“ the human was saying, jingling his cuffs meaningfully. The officers looked at Officer Altus.

“If we get that mimic thing, can you close the breach?” Elias asked Pi quietly.

I should be able to, yes. Pi replied. However, I suspect the other universes will have other breaches in them that require closing as well. I can run a diagnostic to determine their locations once you obtain the mimic.

“Well,” Elias said. “Step one: find this mimic thing. Step two: see if I can use it to close that breach. Step three: sell the movie rights for a lot of money and live off the interest for years to come.”

“This one agrees,” Anar said. “This one has rent due in a week’s time and would like to be there to sort it out. This one would also suggest we move to a more secure location.”

“Good idea,” Elias said. “We should get that disc away from this place until we can locate mimic.”

“We can go to the precinct,” Officer Altus volunteered. “I appear to still have a desk there and we should get statements from the concertgoers.”

Anar walked over to his mech and…hugged it, his tentacles seeking out nooks and crannies in its construction and suddenly it was folding in on itself and folding down until it looked just like an oversized suitcase. Elias wondered where the fast food wrappers ended up being stored. “This one feels a suitcase would be less conspicuous and cause less panic,” he said when the others stared at him.

Elias sighed and started removing his performance outfit, tucking the various bits and pieces into pockets in his suit. “Oh well, I guess I’m back in the military now,” he said. “And here I was wondering what I was going to do after the concert tour ended.

Just then a side door opened and Jamak hurried in, his navy blue suit a little creased and breathing deliberately in the fashion of one trying not to show recent exertion. “Elias! Good to see you’re unhurt! You are unhurt, right?”

Elias nodded. “Yes, Jamak, I’m fine.”

“This wasn’t how we planned your final concert would go. I’ve got reporters out from asking for a statement and our pre-prepared ones won’t cut it under the circumstances.”

“Well, I think we’re back at war now, Jamak,” Elias said, staring down at the dead husks.

“War? We can’t be at war! We don’t have time in your schedule for war. What about your biopic?”

“That’ll have to wait,” Elias said. “Tell you what, I’m about to go save the galaxy. Why don’t you turn that into a reality vid special? I’m going to need funding and it’ll be much more interesting than
a biopic of my past.
The Batarian paused. “I like it!” he said, beaming. “I can see it now: Elias! Music Sensation Turned War Hero! I’ll—we’ll make millions!”
“Absolutely,” Elias said. “But we’ll need sponsorship to make it happen. Possibly a ship. Think you can work your magic on that?”
An almost predatory grin spread out over Jamak’s face. “Elias, baby, have I ever let you down?” Elias laughed, “No, you haven’t.”
Turning smartly, Jamak headed out towards the front of the building, chest puffed up with importance. On the way, he paused to look down at one of the volus husks. “Thank you very much for this opportunity,” he said sincerely before carrying on.
“So…he’s a character,” Officer Altus said.
“You have no idea,” Elias said, his tone carefully blank. “He’s been amazing for far though. Shall we go?”
In a universe slightly off kilter to her own, Turian C-Sec Officer Cicepia Altus starts an investigation she technically has no jurisdiction to finish.

Cicepia Altus half led, half followed the nondescript group of C-sec officers that slipped quietly out of the side door of the building. With Elias’ agent out front all of the reporters had scrambled to get the latest scoop, leaving them with a clear path out of the building. Elias had sent his bodyguards with his agent, and the quarian had done something to his suit that had resulted in the glossy colour draining away, being replaced by a nondescript dull blue that she remembered seeing on some of Elias’ staff. So that’s how he did it, the sneaky man. She wasn’t sure if anyone else had really paid attention to what they’d seen, but she filed that away for later. You never knew when a little knowledge would come in handy. So far, none of the other officers had questioned her orders, although whether that was out of deference to the her that existed here or simply the unprecedented circumstances was unclear. As it was, she slipped into the passenger seat of one of the squad cars, the krogan bundled into the back. Thankfully, it was a short drive to the precinct, and it was exactly where she remembered it being—exactly where it was in her universe.

Once there, she took a deep breath and stepped out of the car, straight into the throng of curious and confused law enforcement officials. First things first—take control.

“All right, get the Krogan and the Human processed and into a holding cell. Take a statement from
the hanar and the quarian’s with me. I want patrol cops taking statements from every concertgoer we can find and a portable—shielded—containment unit on my desk in the next five minutes. Crime scene’s been roped off, but I need a rotating guard on it to make sure no duct rats sneak in on a dare.”

The nearest C-sec officer saluted. “Yes Lieutenant!” and strode off, barking commands and carving some order out of the impending chaos. Lieutenant, huh? She could get get used to that.

Her desk, when she found it, was…neat. The papers were squared away in precise piles, there was a vase of flowers on the desk, deep red blooms with a rich fragrance. There was also a card.

My love,
I hope you have a chance to enjoy these flowers before our big trip. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me and I look forward to spending the rest of my life with you.
Yours always,
Octavius.

Cicepia sat down. “You’re alive…” she mumbled, mostly to herself.
“Ma’am?” a human officer nearby turned to her.
“Just thinking aloud.”
“Yes ma’am. I thought—”
“Yes and I’m back,” Cicepia said hurriedly, closing the card. “It’s been that sort of a day though. You have something to report?”
“Ah, yes ma’am. According to our records, the man who calls himself ‘Sync’ died over five years ago.”
“That’s clearly an error.”
“Yes Ma’am, we’ll fix it,” the officer said. “And we don’t have any record of the krogran Thek Akara. None. It’s like she doesn’t exist.”

Cicepia waved the officer away. “Well sort it out. I’ll want to question her afterward to find out what she was doing with a rifle in the employee only area of the Silver Sun Theatre.”

She was halfway through her second report of the Theatre Incident, and seriously considering setting up a template, when Commander Druin strode in. “Lieutenant Altus! I heard you were back unexpectedly early. Couldn’t stay away, eh?”

He looked the same as in her world. Well, apart from his black eyes now glowing green. She knew that drell eyes actually had an iris and pupil underneath the inky black inner eyelid. The inner lid was just wasn’t typically opened unless the drell was slipping into past memories, but now they looked green. Much like everything else in this universe. Perhaps here he looked less stern, but he was the same lean, fast thinking man she knew from her universe. Her universe. That was an odd phrase to think. She always wondered at his reflexes, which were faster than she’d ever thought possible. Maybe he’d been one of those hanar operatives she’d heard about, but she’d never worked up the courage to ask him. Plastering a smile on her face she answered jovially, “Well, it’s been that sort of a day.”

“What day isn’t around here?” Commander Druin said, clapping her on the shoulder. “I’m glad you’re back though. Now I know it’s only been a short time since your promotion, but you need to clear your desk.”

“Sir?”

“Altus, you need to pick up all your crap and move it into your new office. It’s over there.”

Cicepia looked up. A corner office. With a view out over the ward. They’d given her—or her analogue—a fucking corner office. It was pretty sweet actually, and certainly something she could get used to. Picking up a nearby box, she started picked up her datapads, holopicture frame and the vase of flowers and headed into her new office. Sort of her new office. Setting her things down, she turned to find the quarian singer standing at one of the windows, looking out over the ward.

“You should move your desk against the inside wall,” he said. “That way your back isn’t up against a window.”
“Do you really think I’ll be attacked at the precinct?” Cicepia asked.
Elias shrugged. “Old habits die hard,” he said. “Sometimes I still find myself looking for cover the moment I enter a new environment.”

“You served with the Quarian Marines, didn’t you?” she asked.
He tilted his head towards her in amusement. “I wouldn’t know what the Elias in your universe did. I’m assuming so far that he fought in the Battle of Rannoch and won Citadel’s Got Talent, but I don’t know past that.”

“Right, of course. Come on, I’ll get you set up at a remote monitoring station while I go and question the krogan,” she glanced down at her datapad. Apparently the her in this universe used the same passwords as she did. That was…creepy.

“What do you think she did?” Elias asked.
“Probably nothing in this universe,” Cicepia said. “But a sniper rifle in the rafters at a concert? I’d like to know who she was sent there to take out.”

She saw Elias blink—the light from his eyes vanishing momentarily. “You think she was targeting me?”

“I can’t rule anything out at this point,” she said. “Although if she was, she’d be targeting the you in her universe.”

“That’s…not really comforting.”

“Sorry. I deal in facts, not comfort.”

“You must be fun to have around when talking to families dead people.”

Cicepia shrugged. “Turians understand sacrifice for society. Humans are the ones who go all mushy.”

“What about quarians?”

“I don’t know actually,” Cicepia said after a slightly too long pause. “There aren’t many of you where I’m from.”

“How come?”

Leading the way over to a monitoring station, Cicepia started bringing up screens to allow viewing of the interrogation rooms and cells, thankful that she had an excuse not to look the quarian in the face. “Commander Shepard sided with the geth. Their fleet effectively wiped out the quarian people. Just about every soul who was on the flotilla.”

“But not me?”

“The Ashru made it to the system relay and jumped to safety,” Cicepia said. “Only a dozen or so crews survived and even they took casualties. Everyone just knows about the Ashru because you were on board.”

The quarian took the news more calmly than she would have expected. Genocide tended to have a negative affect on people.

“Here, Shepard and Admiral Zorah convinced the Migrant Fleet to cease firing upon the geth before they attained true self awareness,” Elias said. “Turns out we could have avoided three hundred years of vagrancy if we’d just let them be. You want to know the stupid thing?” he asked, taking a seat at the console and reconfiguring the displays with a deftness Cicepia had only even seen in those who had been using the software for years.

“Sure,” she said.

“We could have gone back to Rannoch at any time if we’d just asked nicely,” he said. “How’s that for hubris?”

“I’ll be back later,” Cicepia said, after a pause that was lengthy enough to be awkward. If she was reading the man correctly, he’d just implied that the quarians in her universe had died for insurmountable pride. It wasn’t something she wanted to think about really. She thought about the data packet she had received this morning from Shias Lazeen, the information broker and Shadow Broker agent she had used to get that list of names. It seemed so long ago—was it even really the same day in this place that both fitted like a glove and felt strangely alien? She’d had to force herself to relax when she’d seen a Destroyer parked at a funfair, its green eye scanning the crowd as children climbed up its legs and squealed with joy when it took delicate steps forward and back. She
wasn’t a bad cop, although the version of her here seemed like she might be better. She just had...debts to repay. It was both the most turian and not turian thing she’d ever done.

“You can keep an eye on our cyborg here,” she said, pressing a button.

As she left the station one of the other officers stopped her. “Um, Lieutenant, who’s the quarian?”

“VI expert and a tech consultant on the case,” Cicepia said. “Also a witness and potential target, so as long as he’s happy to stay of his own free will we want to keep him around.”

The officer glanced up at a screen, which was still running footage of the impromptu press conference outside the Silversun Theatre. “Oh,” he said, his eyes widening.

“You saw nothing and, no, you may not ask for an autograph,” Cicepia said. “Understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” the man said, saluting smartly. “I have to say he doesn’t look like what I expected.”

“He’s wearing an envirosuit, Officer Meeks,” Cicepia said. “What did you expect exactly?”

She walked off before he could answer, and headed into the interrogation room she had the Krogan put into.

“Thek Akara,” she said, walking into the room and sitting down at the table opposite.

“That’s me,” the Krogan said, looming over her. Krogan were good at looming. It came with the size.

“First things first, what were you doing at the concert? You were spotted on the catwalks in the restricted areas.”

Akara folded her arms before her and leaned back into her own seat. “Let’s just say I had a mission from someone important that I was trying to fulfil.”

“No names?”

“No names.”

“And that mission had something to do with the sniper rifle you were carrying?”

“Yeah. I was being paid to take out some of the...seedier elements of the galaxy’s scummy underbelly.”

“Why pick your target off in the middle of a concert?”

“It’s good cover—lights, sound. If you’re going to take one shot and one shot only you’ll be sweet.”

Cicepia sighed. “Listen, you’re obviously a fine upstanding galactic citizen, helping us clean house like that. Don’t you think you can help me help you? We’re both strangers here, and I know both our...universes are different to this one, so I think it’s important that we help each other under the circumstances, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I can agree to that—within reason,” Akara said, uncrossing her arms.

“Good. So why were you at the theatre? You had one target in mind?”

“Yes.”

“You want to give me a name?”

“Sorry, client confidentiality,” Akara said. “I’d never get another job if I welched, now would I?”

“All right, can you give me the name of the person who hired the hit?”

“I was hired by the Shadow Broker—or one of his agents, at least,” the krogan said, leaning forward with soft smile. “If you want his name you’ll have to find someone further up the chain than me.”

For a moment, Cicepia wondered if she should reveal her own information source, then thought better of it. Even on the off chance that Elias hadn’t worked out how to bring up the camera in this room, there was no guarantee that Shias Lazeen was even alive in this universe—or in the same line of work if she was. “All right,” she said. “Play it your way, I think it’ll be safer if I hold you for the forty eight hours the law allows while I get to the bottom of this anyway.”

Standing up, she left the room without a backwards glance. “Put her in with the human,” she said to the officers outside. “Let’s see what they have to say to each other.”

“Are you charging her with anything, ma’am?”

“Not yet,” Cicepia said. “She might not be guilty of anything, but let’s hang on to her just to be safe.”

Back at the monitoring station, she found Elias had indeed tuned into the hallway cameras, and was watching Akara being taken into the human’s cell.
“Any sign of the reaper key?” Cicepia asked quietly.
“Not yet,” Elias said. “Hmm…” he said, flicking the sound on.
“…question you already?” the human was asking the krogan.
“Yeah,” the krogan said, stamping to the other side of the cell and sitting down on the floor.
“I don’t know how much we can trust her. In my universe I saw her kill a man after talking him down. Sure, he had taken a bunch of folk hostage, but he surrendered and then, Bam! Brains all over the floor.”
“Interesting,” Akara said. “Let’s just say that in my universe she’s different according to my sources. Never met her personally, but it’s certainly interesting.”
“Just watch your back. What were you doing up there anyway?”
“I’m a gun for hire,” Akara said with a grin. “I had a hit on a target who was meant to be at the concert.”
“Then I hope you met your mark,” the man her records indicated went by the name ‘Sync’.
“Sadly I didn’t,” Akara said. “Depending on how this turns out, I might get another chance though.”

The two didn’t talk much, and after food was delivered they soon found the bunk—and the human took the top one. “Well that was…less than enlightening,” Elias said, standing. The quarian stretched and she though she heard a crack as he swivelled his head to loosen his neck muscles. “I might head back to…well, my apartment and get some sleep. What are you planning on doing?”
“I’ll stay here,” Cicepia said. “I’m not sure if I…if she lives where I do.”
“You’re sure?” Elias asked.
“I’ll sleep in my—her office,” Cicepia said. “Everyone does it. I’ll be fine.”
For a moment, it looked like Elias might say something, and then he nodded. “It would be less conspicuous than the alternatives.”
“Are all quarians as sneaky as you?” Cicepia asked.
“Only the ones who went through a reality tv show,” said Elias.
“Ah.”
Nodding, Elias turned and walked out of the monitoring cubicle. “Anar,” he said on the way out. The hanar drifted over to her. “Officer Altus, this one would like to know if the disc has yielded any results. It would like to see it returned but…is it definitely reaper technology?”
“As near as we can tell, yes,” Cicepia said. “We have it contained but without the second part of the key, Elias says he can’t get anything further.”
“The key—the human’s mimic has not appeared?”
“Not yet.”
“This one would like to request it be allowed to spend the night in your hanger? This one can stay comfortably inside it’s mech suit.”
“Are you sure? I can probably arrange a better bed for the night.”
“This one feels more at home in its suit than anywhere else.”
“Take a left at the next junction and follow the signs,” Cicepia said. “Stay in the main area though. If you try going into the restricted zones you’ll be shot on sight.”
The hanar stared at her, or at least, its front end stayed pointing in her direction.
“That was a joke,” she said. “Mostly.”
“If you need this one, it will be where your ships stay,” Anar said. “This one thanks you, Officer Altus.”

The next morning, after a cup of coffee that was in every respect just as bad as the swill she had in her universe, Cicepia strolled into the interrogation room to face Sync again.
“Ah, I was wondering when you’d show up.”
“Round two,” Cicepia said brightly.
“It’s so nice meeting you again,” Sync said, his smile fixed. “And in such similar circumstances.”
“I don’t know, I can feel a headache coming on,” Cicepia said. “It’s my very special talking to irritating, lying, and gun thieving cyborgs headache.”
“You’re welcome,” Sync said.
Smiling, Cicepia sat down into the spare chair and crossed one leg over the other. “So it appears that we’re from the same universe.”
“Yeah. Seems like.”
“Well, there doesn’t seem to have been a sniper incident at a bank in this universe. Nor the krogan’s. You were there?”
“Saw the vid,” Sync said, his tone sullen.
“Then you’d have seen me with a pistol on the ground,” Cicepia said. “Taemaus was on roof fifty stories up. There’s no way I could have shot him.”
“You didn’t have to,” Sync said. “Everyone knows you’d have a SWAT team covering the roof.”
“None of whom fired,” Cicepia said. “We checked all their weapons. I don’t know if you’ll believe that but…we believe someone else out there knew Taemaus was going to pull that heist—and wanted to be sure he didn’t get a chance to talk.”
“Time will tell, I guess,” Sync said guardedly.
“Hopefully,” Cicepia agreed. “It’ll be one hell of a cold case if not.”
Sync cracked a smile then, the craggy features of his face almost seeming to shift from one expression to the other without passing through any in-between stages. “You lost someone didn’t you?” he said. “All that honeymoon business.”
“Didn’t happen,” Cicepia said shortly. “Not where…we’re from.”
“Sorry to hear that,” Sync said. “I lost someone too.”
“How many times do you have to say that to people?”
“Too many, these past few years. I suppose under the circumstances we shouldn’t be arguing with each other so much.”
“Suppose not,” Sync said. “Sorry for…assuming the worst.”
Cicepia sighed. “And I’m sorry for coming down more harshly on you than I perhaps needed to when we first met, but well…you lied to me. I couldn’t be sure you weren’t a threat.”
“I’m used to being thought of one without going rounds of twenty questions with cops,” Sync said.
“Everyone seems to want me to not exist.”
“I’ve noticed.”
“So how long do I need to stay here anyway?” Sync asked.
“Let me offer you a deal,” Cicepia said. “You help us get the rest of this device together and I’ll try to help you get back to your universe.”
“Our universe.”
“That’s what I meant,” Cicepia said, pushing all thoughts of bouquets and corner offices out of her mind.
“And what about my good friend, Akara? I think we might need her.”
“Maybe,” Cicepia said, taking a sip of her nearly cold coffee. “But there’s a lot she isn’t telling us.”
“There’s a lot I’m not telling you,” Sync pointed out.
“You bought a ticket and didn’t bring a sniper rifle into an employee only section of the theatre.”
“Which she used to shoot husks,” Sync said. “Look, you called my bluffs, I’m sure you can work out hers.”
“Probably,” Cicepia said. “Or maybe just send her home and let her be someone else’s problem.”
“Or that.”
Sync suddenly stopped and looked past Cicepia’s head. “Where’s that quarian?” he asked.
“Elias, get in here,” Cicepia said, turning to the camera in the corner of the room.
A familiar, if drab, envirosuited alien came into the room at an almost run a few moments later. “Is it here?”
“Sync?” Cicepia asked.
The human was staring at her chest. “Yes, it’s here. Never been able to catch him though.”
“Oh, eyes up here,” Cicepia said, trying to pull the human’s attention away from her torso.
“No, he’s right…inside… You might want to take a step back.”
Frowning, Cicepia took several and Sync lunged at the empty air, an orange net-like projection coming from his omni tool. “Dammit!” he swore and his gaze swept around the room, as if following something, ending up at the open doorway where Elias stood, his own omni-tool at the ready. “He’s going out—”

“Got it,” Elias said, turning and running off down the corridor, Sync in hot pursuit. Cicepia followed after them, faring the worse out of the three. By the time both Elias and Sync had rushed past the confused staff of the precinct were usually moving just a tad too unpredictably for her to push past easily. Still, she managed to keep up as they headed towards the holding cells, picking up the hanar on the way who emerged from the bathroom and floated along beside her.

“Has something happened?” Anar asked.

“It’s in there,” Elias said, pointing at the security door. “Can you get us in Officer—Lieutenant?”

“Of course,” Cicepia said, looking into the retina scanner. The krogan looked up from where she was sat on the floor, a small collection of strangely shaped seeds in her hands. “So…are we having a party in here or something?” she asked.

“Akara, don’t move,” Sync said.

“What’s going on?” the Krogan asked.

“Universe fixing stuff, I think,” Sync said.

“Oh, so the thing is here?”

“Right in front of you.”

“Hang on, hang on,” Elias said, tapping out a sequence on his omni-tool and a small red drone zoomed over, and suddenly there was a holographic projection of what appeared to be a spherical, reptilian harvester, about the size of Cicepia’s head. It floated backwards and forwards as if entranced, nuzzling against Akara’s hands. “It’s incorporeal,” the quarian said. “But I think that’s what it looks like.”

To her credit the Krogan barely blinked. “Ugly thing.”

“Where’d you get those seeds?” Elias asked.

Akara looked down at her hands. “Here and there,” she said. “Really, I just pick them up wherever I go. There’s nothing special about any of them.”

“So that’s the thing that’s caused all this trouble?” Cicepia asked.

“No, that’s a projected image of the thing that’s caused all the trouble. I think you’d have to be synthetic or cybernetically enhanced to actually see it.”

“This one thinks it looks harmless,” Anar said. “Or would if one didn’t know what it is.”

“I’m not sure if it just likes Akara or her seeds,” Elias said.

“Akara, could you pass me a few of those?” Sync asked, edging closer.

The krogan’s eyes narrowed. “Okay, but I want them back,” she said, and handed a few over, including one large red one that looked like it had wings.

Sync backed away, “Look mimic, I’ve got some seeds! Here boy!” Mimic appeared to look at the seeds in Sync’s hands, and then back to the greater number of seeds in Akara’s and nuzzled back against the krogan.

“We need the disc,” Cicepia said.

“This one gave the disc to you, it is still in your possession,” Anar said.

“No, no, we don’t need the disc!” Elias said quickly.

“Yes, let’s not open a portal to a reaper invasion,” Akara agreed.

“Just keep Mimic here long enough for me to complete my analysis,” Elias said.

The five waited while the red drone pulsed gently. “Analysis complete,” Pi said, and this time Cicepia could see the flash of text scrolling up inside Elias’ helmet.

“Well?” she asked.

“We can close them,” Elias said. “With the reality collider and Mimic around we can close the breaches in the universes. Possibly open them too.”

“Why would we want to open them?” Cicepia asked.

“To go home?” Elias suggested. “Also there’s other holes—this isn’t the only one.”

“Where?”
“One is in your universe—on a planet called Invictus, wherever that is. There’s also one on Tuchanka in yours, Akara and Anar,” Elias said. “There’s probably more but those are the most recent ones Mimic made.”

“That is some very powerful diagnostic programming you have, Elias,” Anar said. “This one is very impressed.”

“I’m just accessing Mimic’s memory,” Elias said with a shrug. “It’ll take more time to piece together the others. More time and more study, which means we need those seeds too. Anyway, before we start signing autographs, field trip to see if I can actually close the breach in the Silver Sun Theatre?”

“Worth a shot,” Sync said.

“Then we’re going to be stuck here?” Akara asked.

“No,” Elias said. “We should be able to open a portal again. Only one we control. One universe to one universe, not all four together. But we need to stick those seeds somewhere safe. Without them, we don’t have Mimic and without both Mimic and the disc we don’t have control of the portals.”

“This one thinks the quarian needs better explanations,” Anar said.

“There’s a space in the theatre that’s like a wall dividing the dimensions. Mimic turns the wall into a door. The disc is the key that lets us open the door. With the right programming, we should be able to pick the right wall, open the right door, step through and lock the door behind us.”

“Just us? Against a reaper horde?”

“We’ll need guns,” Akara said.

“How do we know you’re not going to go all trigger happy on us?” Cicepia asked.

“I’m not that kind of Krogan,” Akara said blandly. “I can actually use my head for more than headbutting.”

“How many people do you think you could get through in one go?” Sync asked Elias.

“In theory we could move a small ship through the portal,” Elias replied, his eyes darting across the information screens in his helmet. “We’d just need to be within a few hundred metres of the portal itself.

“If the other portals are in Invictus and Tuchanka, we will need a ship,” Anar said.

“I have one of those,” Sync said. “Or at least I did."


“Yes, in my universe at least.”

“First, we make sure that you can do what you think you can,” Cicepia said firmly. “Otherwise we’re just speculating aimlessly while we wait for more husks—or a small reaper ship or two—to slip through into one of our universes.”

Elias nodded. “Then we’ll need to get Mimic and the reaper object back to the theatre.”

The concert hall was still lit by the house lights, and even without the white outlines where the bodies had fell, Cicepia could see enough blood spatter to know where they had lain. The guards at the police line had given them some glances when they had stepped into the building, and she wondered what would happen if they didn’t actually come back for a few days. She’d read enough of the eyewitness accounts to see that many of them had similar motifs—there was an electric light show that hung in midair above the audience and then people were falling into a hole in the air. All up seven people were unaccounted for. The youngest had been thirteen, just old enough, Cicepia thought, to sit through a concert rated PG. At least, it had been rated PG in Cicepia’s universe. She wasn’t sure if both Eliases had the same musical repertoire.

“Did Mimic follow the seeds?”

Elias punched a few commands into his omni tool and the holographic projection of the strange metal dragon coalesced in the air near Arkara, flitting above her head. “I’d say yes,” he said. The red drone flickered into existence, and floated over to the middle of the room.

“Officer, would you be so kind as to approach the centre of the disturbance?” Elias asked.

As Cicepia approached she felt a tug from the disk, and even with the portable containment device she thought she could feel it pulling like a magnet towards the centre of the room. Willing her fingers not to tremble, she flipped open the door of the container and the crackle of energy started almost
immediately. Up close and without the distraction of civilians, husks and gunfire, the purplish energy radiated out from a central point, some ten feet in the air. It looked for all the world like an electrical storm, but it passed through the air around her in silence, never touching the plates of her face.

“Akara would you please hold the seeds up towards the portal?” Elias asked.

“You’d better be right about this, singer,” Akara grumbled, although she did as she was asked. Out of the corner of her eye, Cicepia saw the holo-form of Mimic still hovering just above the seeds. "I'm right," Elias said smugly as purple lines shot through the air in a crisscross pattern, almost as if space were being stitched together by a giant needle. "That was the easy part. Next question, can we open a portal to just Akara and Anar’s universe."

"You don't know?"

“Never tried it before,” Elias said brightly, and Cicepia thought she heard a tinge of worry and uncertainty in the q

uarian’s tone. “All right Lieutenant are you ready? Portal opening in three…two…one…”

The crackling stopped and the energy flashed blue and then and burst open like an eye showing clear space beyond. It opened around them and then…nothing. Suddenly there were crisscrossing lines of red that looked similar to when Elias had run a program to sew up the portal only…yesterday.

“We’re here?”

“Yeah,” Elias said looking around. “Look, there’s no body outlines. Looks like the attack was only in my universe.”

“So where to now?” Anar asked.

“Ship first,” Cicepia said. “Once we have that we can work out what clearance we need to get out of here. Thankfully I really am C-sec over here.”

“We might need a way to ensure we’re not blasted away by C-Sec when we jump the ship through from here,” Elias said. “I might have something for that on file, but I’m more a programmer than a mechanic.”

“I have one of those,” Sync said. “I’ll get her as soon as we get back to the ship.”

“Well then,” Cicepia said. “Let’s go. What’s the name of the ship anyway?”

Sync smiled—the first smile Cicepia had seen on his face, although it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I call her the Endurance.”
Our heroes settle into their ship, and Cicepia goes to report in to her boss.

The ship was…new. And kind of shiny, with a sleek, dark finish that bore no notable markings. It was modern. Ultra-modern, even…
“She’s a prototype,” Sync said as he ushered them up the central ramp and into the fairly impersonal central area. “Bedrooms aft, pick one just…stay out of the locked one please. Captain’s Quarters on the port side, as well as Chief Engineer’s. Mess on the starboard. Also bathroom block. Conference room to the fore on this level, elevator’s just over there down to the cargo hold. You can either use that or these stairs to get up to the cockpit.”
“Which I’m assuming is where you’ll be flying the ship?” Elias asked.
“Unless you can?” Sync asked.
“Let’s save my piloting for emergencies,” Elias said. “At least until I get more used to your ship. If you don’t mind, I’d like to see what systems you have and what sorts of upgrades would be possible though.”
“Be my guest,” Sync said, indicating the ramp up to the starship’s controls. “Oh, Elias?”
“Yeah?”
“The medbay’s over here,” Sync said, knocking on the window looking into the area just next to the captain’s quarters. “It’s a clean room facility with decontamination protocols on entry so…if you ever need to get out of your suit…”
“Are you volunteering to help me, Captain?”
“Um…er…just…Sync.”
“Well thank you, I appreciate the offer,” Elias said, before he headed up the ramp, and Cicepia was almost certain he was smirking.
“So, um, you and Sync, huh?” Cicepia said later after dropping her few belongings in one of the port
side cabins and climbing up to the cockpit, where the quarian was already using four of the screens on the side wall.

“What?”

Cicepia leant against the wall and folded her arms across her chest. “You, him, the med bay?”

“Oh, no I’m sure he was just trying to be considerate,” Elias said, gazing up at a scan of the ships exterior. “Oh good, cyclonic barrier technology is already built in.”

“So…you weren’t flirting with him?”

“Sure I was,” Elias said. “In a ‘you didn’t actually just say that’ way, but sure. Do you think the GARDIAN ladar module just got left off prototypes because the war is over? I mean really?”

“You flirted with him just to make him blush uncomfortably?”

For the first time since she came up Elias turned away from the screens and looked at her. “Of course not. You saw Pi down there right?”

“Pi?”

“My drone.”

“You named your drone Pi?”

“He’s spherical,” Elias said with a shrug. “Anyway not the point. Pi’s recording video footage for Jamak for the next round of negotiations for our little reality show. That one line and Sync’s blush just added a few zeros to the value of the licensing rights for Sync toys and action figures. It’ll probably shift a few billion units if it goes to air as well.”

“So…you flirted with him for profit?”

“For funding,” Elias said simply. “You think outfitting this gal properly is going to be cheap? But you didn’t come up here to quiz me about my love life unless you’re dabbling in tabloid journalism, Officer Altus.”

“No,” she said, pushing herself away from the wall. “I wanted to ask if you’d be able to do some sleuthing for me?”

“Sleuthing?”

“I’m going to have to spend some time smoothing things over with my boss given my disappearance in the last twenty four hours. Are you able to jump over to the Krogan and Hanar’s universe and do some background checks? I don’t know much about them.”

“Are you asking me to spy on them?”

“Just background information. I don’t…look I’ve tried talking to this Thek Akara, but she’s not saying anything. All I know is that she was a sniper at your concert and had a mission to take out someone. Now either she was after you on behest of a rival or she was after one of your fans. And then she happens to have the things we need to control this ‘mimic’ that allows us passage through the dimensions? That’s a hell of a set of coincidences. I haven’t spoken properly to Anar yet but he seems sketchy. A concertgoer just happens to bring in a mechsuit that transforms into a suitcase and doesn’t trip off our alarms? Not to mention his reaper tech. I imagine with your tech skills you should be able to do some digging.”

“I’ll see what I can find out, but I’m stuck here just like you. Our little jaunt appears to have depleted the power in the reality collider. I’m monitoring it, but at current rates it’ll take at least twenty four hours to recharge. We’re not getting over to their universe on the sly—and I doubt we’ll be able to do it without everyone’s cooperation. I don’t see Arkara giving up custody of her seeds anytime soon and Anar is very attached to that disc.”

“You may be right,” Cicepia said. “Oh well, I guess I’ll see what I can come up with when I’m there and they’re busy with their own lives. Maybe Arkara has a criminal background. That said, if she’s as good a mercenary as I think she is, she won’t have a criminal background.”

“Perhaps,” Elias said. “Although if you want to be ruthless about this we don’t actually need her. Just the seeds.”

“Do you actually intend to go one on one against a Krogan?”

“Of course not,” Elias said. “I just pointed out we need her seeds for this mission. That’s a statement of fact, I don’t currently see any need to take her out.”

“I just want to know what cards people are holding in their hands,” Cicepia said. “If we’re all truly
going to cooperate and get along it would help to not have anything causing trust issues hanging over our heads.”

“Alternatively, you can just try to get all the Aces,” Elias said jovially. “And hope we’re not playing Hearts.”

“Hearts?”

“Human game, you want low cards, and Aces are high.”

There was a squishy knock at the cockpit door and a soft, dopplered “Ow.”

“Hi Anar,” Elias said, looking up. It still fascinated Cicepia that Elias was somehow able to give the hanar a friendly smile despite his facial features being masked. The quarian’s head and upper torso all turned towards the hanar, and there was a subtle relaxation in his biceps and forearms that all worked together to say ‘friendly smile’.

“Sync asked this one to ask you if you would accompany him to the hospital. It appears his crewmate is there for surgery and he does not know why.”

“His crewmate as in he only has one?” Cicepia asked.

“Yes,” Anar said. “Apparently she and Akara are friends. Or are in our universe.”

Elias cocked his head. “You mean your universe.”

“Yes, that’s what this one said.”

“You go,” Cicepia said, looking at Elias. “I need to speak with my Captain. I’ve been gone for a while.”

Elias nodded and passed her a small datadisc. “Evidence,” he said. “If you think you need it.”

This precinct was exactly as she remembered it, which made sense given that it was ‘her’ universe. Cicepia wondered if that sort of thinking would ever come naturally to her. ‘Her’ universe. Elias seemed to have the whole thing down pat, but as she walked up to the front desk, it struck her that Laura, the human who normally manned the front desk for the Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon shift hadn’t been present in the synthesised universe. She didn’t remember seeing her anywhere around the precinct either. Currently she was talking to two quarians—a rather familiar young man and his sister. Grinning, Laura waved her over and both quarians started a bit when they saw her, the young man quickly striding forward.

“It seems our timing is impeccable, Officer Altus,” he said. “I don’t know if you remember us, but you saved my sister from the man at the bank.”

“The turian,” his sister piped up. “He had a pistol and-and…”

“I was just doing my job,” Cicepia said. “I’m glad you both made it out of there.”

“Still, I—we—thank you,” the young man said. “My sister Niloo and I both feel that if you had not been there, we might not be here now.”

“You’re both very welcome,” Cicepia said. “I’m just glad that neither of you were hurt.”

“We are too,” the young man said. “Thank you for speaking with us, officer. We won’t take up any more of your time,” and with that the two left.

With a nod to Laura, Cicepia went straight to find Captain Damien, her immediate superior at the forty fifth Zakera. She found him in his office, for once, the man had a reputation for believing paperwork happened to other people, and once a month he dictated his reports using the perfect recall drell were renown for. Or at least, they were renown for perfect recall within C-Sec. Even during the reaper war, most of the drell specialists had remained elusive shadows on secret missions. Few had ever seen them on the front lines.

“Officer Altus. We were wondering where you’d got to,” he said when she had entered.

“I was following a lead, sir,” Cicepia said. “During the concert I came across someone I thought might be connected to the shooting at the bank.”

“And?”

“Nothing conclusive, I’m afraid. I’m sorry I had to leave the way I did.”

“We were worried,” Captain Damien said bluntly. “You were there one moment and gone the next. It was…unlike you.”

“I’m sorry sir, but there wasn’t time to call it in,” Cicepia said, focusing her gaze at an invisible point
just to the left of the Captain’s head.
He stared at her unblinkingly as only a drell could, but she’d long ago mastered the art of talking to
superior officers. “If you find any other leads in the future, I do expect you to tell at least one of us.
Me specifically if possible.”
“Yessir.”
“That was your ‘talking to annoying superior officers’ voice, Altus.”
“Sorry, Sir,” Cicepia said, forcing herself to relax. “Old habits and all.”
“I’ll let it slide this once, Altus,” Captain Damien said. “Just once.”
“Thank you, Sir,” Cicepia said. “I ah, do need to request some time off, Sir. Personal reasons.”
He almost blinked. Almost. If he had, Cicepia would have been a few thousand credits richer. The
pool had started two years ago, and had only grown since its inception.
“You haven’t taken any personal time since…”
“Yessir.”
“Are you sure want to leave this investigation at this point?”
“No,” Cicepia said immediately. “But I have to.”
She watched as the opportunity to reduce the leave balance on the books warred with a hole in his
investigative unit.
“It’s very short notice,” he said finally. “Normally we ask for a month’s notice, Altus.”
“I know, Sir. I wouldn’t normally ask but it’s important.”
“And you can’t say what this is about?”
Cicepia hesitated. “Not just yet, sir, it’s too… I will though. Soon. If I find anything of note on any
current investigations, I’ll send word.”
“No illegal digging, Altus,” Captain Damien said with a smile.
“Of course not, sir,” Cicepia said blandly. “Just leads passed to the the appropriate people.”
“On that note, we found something you might be interested in,” Captain Damien said. “We were
reviewing surveillance footage of Tameus, the turian at the bank.”
“Yes, I remember him,” Cicepia said. *I remember his brains being blown out as he was
surrendering.*
“We spotted him at the casino the night before the heist, talking to an unknown person. We don’t
know it’s connected, but we don’t know it’s not either.”
“We didn’t get enough footage to identify this person?”
“They wore a hood and managed to move to avoid all the cameras at the Silver Sun. Best we can do
is humanoid, presenting as female with five fingers on each hand.”
“Asari or human then. Not much to go on.”
“And normally not cause for concern,” Captain Damien said. “But she went to great lengths to
conceal her identity and knew where the security cameras were.”
“So she either organised the hit or is the next target.”
“That’s what we thought.”
“If I find anything on her I’ll pass it on.”
“Good,” Captain Damien said. “Now I expect you to let me know how long this vacation of yours is
going to take and while I’m not asking questions now, you can bet your ass there’ll be lots of
questions later and I expect a full and honest report on anything you find out that relates in any way
to police matters. In any way.”
“Yessir.”
“Altus?”
“Sir?”
He stared at her again, but she avoided that by not meeting his gaze, staring firmly out the window
behind him instead.
“Dismissed.”

Before she left the precinct, Cicepia did some background digging to see if Thek Arkara had an
analogue in her universe. There wasn’t one. That’s what Cicepia called a solid alibi.
Gunnedah Hospital was a private hospital in Zakera Ward that had been little more than a human clinic before the war, and had been the recipient of a good portion of charity money raised for the fight against the reapers at that time. Much of the money that had come in after the attack on earth had never been deliverable given the war situation, and worthy, war supporting causes had been sought closer to home. Gunnedah had been one such recipient, and while the Cerberus coup attempt and the destruction of much of the station following the deployment of the Catalyst had meant it too needed rebuilding almost from the ground up, the staff retained a reputation for being their friendly, no-nonsense approach to their patients. Or at least, that’s what the extranet said after a quick search. Walking in the reception foyer was light and spacious, and the air carried just a hint of disinfectant. As Sync went up to the information desk to ask after his shipmate, Elias leaned against a pillar and glanced upwards at the TV, where a reporter was talking about the likelihood of the quarian race surviving. Apparently even with cloning techniques the future looked bleak here. Sighing, he dragged his eyes from the screen, and then hurried to catch up as the rest hurried off after Sync and one of the nurses.

“You arrived sooner than expected, Darl,” the human nurse, who’s name tag read ‘Doreen’ said. “We were considering keeping your friend for a longer convalescence, but they’re doing amazing things with nanosurgery these days. Even what would once have been a rather large invasive procedure can be done relatively quickly—not to mention all the synthskin and muscle-knitting drugs
that we’ve refined in the last few years. I think he’ll be up on his feet again in no time.”

“She,” Sync corrected absently.

Doreen paused. “Of course,” she said after just a fraction of a second past what would have been considered polite. “Now they’re off most of the painkillers, but might still be a bit drowsy,” she said as she opened a door for them. “You’ve got visitors, dear,” she said to the blue skinned man in the bed.

He was wearing a hospital gown, and apparently little else beneath the sheets, the front open enough to show the bandages across his chest. There was some puffiness around the face that made Elias think the asari had some minor surgery there.

“I’m sorry,” Sync said to Doreen. “I don’t think this is the right room.”

The man’s eyes fluttered open. “So you ditch me and then show up before I’m back on my feet and prepared for this conversation? Not cool bro.”

“Mree?” Sync’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Is that really you?”

Catching flies, the memory of Corbin’s voice rang in his head.

“Uh, yeah boss—I mean, Sync. Surprise!” he said as he hit the button on the bed to raise it into a sitting position.

Sync walked over to help his friend sit up. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

The asari looked away. “It’s…complicated. You seemed to be busy with, you know, problems of your own. There wasn’t any reason for me to burden you with…my own issues. I hope you’re not…freaked out.”

Sync shrugged. “Well, I’ve changed myself in some ways, and now you’ve changed yourself in another.”

“I’m still the same person though. I just…now I feel that…I’m the way I should be.”

“Definitely,” Sync said, and wrapped his arms around his friend.

“Careful, fresh sutures,” the asari said, although he made no attempt to pull away. “I’m assuming you have a lot of questions—the doctors said I should be able to head back to the ship today. They wanted to keep me here for longer but well…I don’t have funds to cover the extra night and I’d rather be somewhere familiar. I mean the staff have been mostly great but…”

“But?”

“Nothing. I just want to go back home.”

“Well, okay. We’ll need all the help we can get anyways, Mree,” Sync said.

“Um, would you mind, could you call me Drimi now?” the asari asked. “A-although Ree would work too…”

Sync paused. “How about Dree?” he asked.

The other man smiled. “I think I can live with that.”

“Good,” Sync said. “And I know you’ve got a ton of questions for me, so how about we catch up later when you’re back on your feet. Just you and me?”

“Sure,” Drimi said, and glanced around the room, taking in the others for the first time. “You…brought friends?”

Sync looked back at the others, standing just inside the door. “Acquaintances, at least for now,” he said.

“They must be some acquaintances if they’re willing to come spring me from this joint,” Drimi said. “You don’t owe them money do you?”

“No, it’s a little complicated,” Sync said. “Doreen do you mind giving us some privacy here?”

The nurse smiled. “Not at all Mr. Sync.” She checked the IV line that was still connected to Drimi’s right hand. “Now if you need anything, dear, you just push that call button. And if your friends are taking you home, I can get you a wheelchair but I still think you’re rushing out too soon.” With a look that was both stern and compassionate at the same time, she left the room, shutting the door behind her with a soft click. Then Sync regaled his friend with the story of their meeting so far, helped by the others where necessary, although before too long, Drimi held up his hand.

“Whoa, whoa. You’re telling me that all these people are from a different dimension?”

“Yes I am,” Sync said. “Actually she knows you in her universe. Or the you in her universe,” he
said, pointing towards Arkara. The asari on the bed blinked. “If I didn’t know that you don’t joke, boss, I wouldn’t believe you. You don’t have the brains to think up something this crazy.”

“Thanks,” Sync said flatly. “Do you guys need to do some catching up?” Sync asked. “I don’t really get how this universe stuff things works exactly.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever met here,” Drimi said, eyeing Arkara curiously.

“I doubt it,” Arkara said. “But it would be nice to compare notes.”

“It might help me wrap my head around all this,” Drimi agreed. “So…are all these people staying on the Endurance?” he asked, turning to Sync.

“Ah…yeah,” Sync said. “I—”

“As long as none of them touch my stuff in the cargo hold, we’re fine,” Drimi said, narrowing his eyes.

A dopplered whistle drew Elias’ gaze over to where Anar was staring out the window, all six of his tentacles bundled up under him.

“Really?” Arkara asked.

“This one is going to get a soda. Would anyone else like one? No? This one will see you back on the ship if not before,” Anar said, floating just a little too quickly out of the room.

“What was that all about?” Drimi asked.

“I have no idea,” Sync said.

“Interesting,” Pi murmured inside of Elias’ helmet.

“What makes you say that?” Elias asked.

“I know for a fact that Captain Sync knows exactly why Anar left the room quickly, but there’s almost no inflection an organic would sense to show that he was lying just then.”

“So you’re saying he’s good at poker.”

“Evidence for that hypothesis is inconclusive, but he would probably be very good at poker if he had the mathematical expertise to handle the probabilities involved and…ah. Yes. He is indeed ‘good at poker’,” Pi said after a moment’s pause. “I suspect the fact that seventy one point zero zero six percent of his body is synthetic may have something to do with it.”

“…I do have a surprise for you when we get back onto the ship though,” Sync was saying. “You’ll have to figure it out yourself, but.”

Drimi sighed. “This is payback for me not telling you about my surgery, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” Sync grinned. “I’m not going soft on you just because you’re a boy, you know.”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation.

“Ms…Mr Peshasi, it’s against medical advice, but if you’re certain you want to leave now, we can discharge you,” Nurse Doreen said.

“I’ll go,” Drimi said. “I’ve got my own personal doctor right here.”

Doreen smiled and went over to a nearby wardrobe, bringing out a pair of pants and an earth style leather jacket.

“You just want to wear that, don’t you,” Sync asked. “Without a bra.”

Drimi shrugged. “Like I wore them before.”

“Binder?” Elias asked, speaking aloud for the first time since leaving the ship.

“Yes,” Drimi said. “How’d you know?”

“I’ve heard humans talking about it,” Elias said.

“I see. What’s your name again, sir?” Drimi asked. “I think I met everyone except for you and the hanar.”

“I’m Elias.”


“We’ll give you some privacy,” Elias said, stepping into the hallway.

The reactions to Drimi’s transformation ranged from smiles and curious stares to silences, frowns and pointed avoidance. Mostly from other Asari.

After the second conversation hushed and turned into whispers and furtive glances, Drimi lifted his
chirn and strode past the blue aliens, and Arkara loomed over them, a subtle shift in her muscles promising a very krogan response to any ongoing commentary, and the group very quickly moved off.

“Don’t pay any attention to those punks, man,” Sync muttered. Drimi nodded, but his shoulders grew more and more tense with every Asari they passed.

“What are you looking at?” Sync snapped at a purple scalped woman, dressed in flowing robes and clutching a datapad.

The woman squeaked and hurried away.

Drimi sighed. “They don’t understand. We…they… Asari don’t have a gender. I think the term is ‘monomorphic’, although most people say ‘monogendered’. I’ve never felt right in my own skin and they don’t understand that.”

Sync shrugged. “I can relate in some ways.”

“You’re taking this better than I thought you would, Sync. I wish I’d told you sooner.”

“There’s some stuff I haven’t told you either,” Sync said. “Maybe we can catch up properly later. After I pick up some beer.”

“None of that North American crap,” Drimi said firmly. “I know you like your earth beers, Sync, but those ones are frankly piss.”

Sync rolled his eyes. “So add ryncol.”

“I’m thirsty not suicidal, boss.”

“Then get your own damn beer.”

Cicepia came out of the kitchen when they boarded and her eyes went immediately to the new face.

“So this is your friend?”

The asari walked carefully over to her, and Elias could tell the man was willing his body not to show any sign of his recent surgery. “Drimi,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Cicepia,” she said, taking his hand, her eyes glancing down at his torso, where the white bandages were clearly visible. A shirt had apparently been a bit much.

“I know,” he said. “It’s new to me too.”

“So…what skills do you have?” Cicepia asked.

“I…run this ship,” Drimi said, a little non-plussed by the sudden change in conversation topic. “I’m the official unofficial engineer.”

“And how long have you been officially unofficially on board?”

“About a year. Is there a problem…officer?”

“No, I just like to know who I’m working with. Especially on a mission as big as this one.”

“What exactly is the mission?” Drimi asked. “No-one’s told me anything yet.”

“We’ll fill you in a bit at a time,” Elias said, walking over. “It’s a lot to take in and you’ve had a rough day. Why don’t you meet me in the conference room once you’ve had a chance to settle back in. I’d like your thoughts on the proposed upgrades I’m wanting to give this girl.”

“Upgrades?” Drimi held his left hand up to his torso and his omni tool flickered. “Forget bed rest, I want details.”

“How much painkiller did you just give yourself?” Elias ask.

“It’s non-drowsy,” Drimi said, leading the way into the conference room. “No-one messes with my ship without me knowing about it.”

“So I’ve heard,” Elias said, following him in. “Just give me a moment to put in the new schematics, all right? And I’d appreciate it if you’d reserve judgment until I’ve got them all in.”

Drimi laughed. “All right Elias. It is Elias, right?”

“Yes,” Elias said, sitting in one of the chairs and pulling up a holo of the ship.

“Did you watch Citadel’s Got Talent?”

“I followed the show in my universe, yes.”

“Oh. Right. Universes. Did you have the famous lounge singer Elias in your universe too?”

“Yes,” Elias said, adding in the upgraded LADAR system and increasing the forward capacitor size for the Thanix Cannon.
“That must be wild, having the same name as the guy who won the whole thing.”
“You have no idea.”
“So…have you picked out your room?”
“Yes. I was going to go for the one with the most power outlets, but they were all standard so I just grabbed the last one I checked. Okay, now I don’t have full specs on all of this, but I know where I can get them. Do you think the Endurance will handle this amount of power draw? I mean, the LADAR should be okay, but the GARDIAN anti-ship missiles are a bit of draw unless we can get a new drive core running. Not to mention the space needed for the heat sinks.”
Drimi’s mouth fell open as he stared at the holo that flickered into existence when Elias hit the ‘apply’ button. “These…are very expensive parts. Where are we getting the funding for all of these?”
“Um…contacts?”
“You must have some amazing contacts to be able to get access to these schematics. I’ve been wanting to get my hands on this sort of firepower since we got the old girl but, you know. Sync and I don’t have the finances for the bells and whistles.”
“I may have just sold the idea of turning this mission into a reality extranet show,” Elias said. “You know, epic inter-universe quest to stop the reapers for a second time?”
“You do have some interesting connections,” Drimi said with a grin. “I mean, military spec tech? Entertainment producers…wait…by the Goddess, no way. No Effing Way! You…you can’t…are you? Are you?”
“Alternate universe analogue,” Elias said.
“SYNC!! Get in here!” Drimi shouted.
Sync showed up sooner than he should have carrying two beers and a tumbler of turian brandy. At least, sooner than he should have if he hadn’t been loitering by the door.
“Do you know who he is?” Drimi demanded, pointing at Elias.
“Sure, he’s Elias. He’s a quarian. Really good with tech stuff.”
“No, no, he’s not just Elias. He’s the quarian Elias. The singer!”
“Yeah, the synthesised universe version apparently.”
“Um…uh…even so,” Drimi said. “I don’t think I’d have said half of what I’ve said if I…ah…I’m just glad I voted for you and not the other one. Ah…so…it’s an honour to have you on our ship. Are you sure your quarters are big enough? I’m sure we can bust down a wall or something…the bedroom walls aren’t structural, right boss?”
Elias raised his hands, “Oh no, I’m fine with the rooms, Drimi, really. You forget, I grew up on the Migrant Fleet. Your rooms are massive compared to what I’m used to.”
“But surely while you’ve been touring…”
“I’m still not used the apartment suites.”
“Okay, okay, so…I just need to…”
“Breathe?” Elias suggested.
“It’s the surgery,” Drimi said. “Maybe you’re right and I shouldn’t be overdoing it even with medication. Let me go lie down. I’ll just, ah…yeah…”
Elias watched the asari leave with some bemusement. “So what are your thoughts on the upgrades?” he asked Sync.
“I’m wondering if he’s wishing he’d waited now you’re on board,” the human said, looking with some bemusement after the retreating asari.
“What?”
“Oh, you mean the ship upgrades? They’re great. You really think we can do this?”
“Absolutely,” Elias said. “What upgrades did you think I was referring to?”
“Drimi’s, I believe,” Pi said, as Sync stammered, trying to find an answer. “I thought they were more compatible with you given your history.”
“Pi…”
“That was merely an observation, Creator Elias.”
“Uh huh.”
From Pi there was innocent silence.
“Why the stealth drive?” Sync asked finally. “That is a stealth drive right?”

“You think we’re going to jump unannounced into the airspace of the Citadel in any universe and not be shot at without one?” Elias asked.

“Right. That’s a point. Where did you get the design? I only know of two ships that ever had that, and neither the Alliance nor the turian Hierarchy like sharing.”

Elias shrugged. “Admiral Zorah brought the designs to many of our ships. I acquired a copy of the plans when the Ashru was retrofitted before the battle of Rannoch.”

“Well, if you’re not too busy, I have a favour to ask.”

“What’s that?” Elias asked.

“I need some of your DNA.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I need a sample of your DNA. I was thinking a swab from the inside of your cheek?”

Elias crossed his arms and stared at the android. A million snappy comebacks swirled through his head and caught at the back of his throat, and he eventually settled on a simple, “Why?”

Sync tilted his head and led Elias into the med bay, bringing up a number of visual reports on an impressive number of screens. “My life’s work,” he said simply. “Chasing what already exists in your universe: the perfect melding or organic and synthetic. And the answer to that is locked up in your DNA.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but you can’t have it,” Elias said. “Aside from the fact that it’s mine and worth a fortune in all of our universes, you don’t need it. We’re heading back to my universe to retrofit the Endurance anyway. It’s in every living thing. Go pick a leaf from a plant, buy a fish or space hamster from the gift shop and you’ll have samples. Or you could go to nightclub and get saliva samples from finished drinks or visit a health club and snatch a few used towels…”

“You know, I never thought of that.”

“Just thinking up ways to get into my suit?”

“What? No, I didn’t mean anything by—”

“That was a joke.”

Sync flushed. “I’m sorry, I guess that was a bit personal.”

“A bit?” Elias said, a smile in his voice. “I understand your drive, Sync. But aside from Drimi, you haven’t really spent much time with people recently, have you?”

“Ah…”

Elias clapped the man on the shoulder. “Welcome back to society, Captain.”

“I’m not Captain—”

“Yes you are,” Elias said seriously. “This is your ship. You fly her, you command her and you set her course. If there is an emergency you instruct your crew how to handle it. That makes you Captain.”

“But you’re the one with the mission and the money.”

Elias shrugged. “That gives me a say in the mission at best, not how you fly the ship when you come right down to it.”

“What makes you think I’m cut out for this?” Sync asked.

“What makes any of us?”
Alcohol+Hanar=?

Chapter Summary

Anar opens up a little - with unexpected consequences.

“I hate to advocate drugs, alcohol, violence or insanity to anyone, but they’ve always worked for me.” - Hunter S. Thompson

Art by Annah Lang, eevia.net

Anar took a swig from his fourth beer and wrestled with a chip packet. It was proving surprisingly slippery, or perhaps that was just his tentacles. It wasn’t exactly easy being a sea creature out of water, even with the hover technology that kept him afloat. Alcohol had also been a revelation to the hanar when they’d joined the galactic community. They’d discovered it early on, of course, and had long used it as a cleaning agent. Then they’d been introduced to it with flavours. In things called cocktails. It went straight to their heads. It went straight to their everything, given that hanar were somewhere in the vicinity of ninety percent water.

“Do you need some help?”

Turning, Anar saw the krogan, Thek Arkara leaning against the long island bench that ran the length of the rear of the mess area. Mutely, he held out the chip packet.

“Cheez Puffs?” she said as she ripped the top off with a delicacy that Anar would have found impressive had he been sober enough to be impressed. He didn’t think he’d seen female krogan before. Well, maybe once, but he’d been focused on other things that night.

“You can have some if you would like,” he said. “This one bought enough for everyone.”

“Thank you,” Arkara said. “I think I’ll pass on the cake.”

“There’s cake?” Anar asked, spitting crumbs all over the floor.

Arkara pointed down at the countertop between them, where a charred cake sat with a lone candle set into its top, wax dribbling over to the haphazardly formed letters in white frosting. “Happy Birthday Sync.”
One tiny sliver had been cut but the words were still easy to decipher. Extending, a slightly shaky tentacle, Anar picked up a large chunk of crumbed cake and brought it to his mouth. Then he took a long swig of Ocean Depths, or OD as it was known on Kahje. “This one thinks the Engineer is better suited in the engine rooms than the kitchen.”

Arkara smiled and handed him back the bag of Cheez Puffs. “I don’t even want to try.”

“This one’s face name is Anar.”

“My name is Arkara if you didn’t pick that up already.”

“This one did when you were arrested. What brought you out this way anyway?”

Arkara shrugged. “This and that. You know how it is—you get a mission and then things get in the way.”

Anar flashed blue-white in agreement. “This one understands. It was on a date with its girlfriend when this all started in our universe. You are from this one’s universe, yes?”

Arkara nodded. “I think I’ve seen you around.”

“You have?”

“At that sushi place on the Silver Sun Strip,” Arkara rumbled. “You were in a top hat and a mustache having dinner with a red haired human female and a male krogan.”

“That would have been my girlfriend Tricey and my friend Otto.”

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It had been their anniversary, and Anar had almost forgotten. Almost. He’d had the foresight to book a table at the sushi place Tricey had wanted to go to for ages—largely because she’d asked him to, but still. Now he was hovering at table height, trying not to look down into the new impact resistant fish tank that made up most of the floor for the seating areas. He’d heard rumours that the floor was now shielded by kinetic barriers, half the cost having been crowdsourced in the wake of the attack on Commander Shepard’s life that had occurred back during the war. Looking desperately over the menu, Anar wondered if there’d be anything he’d want to eat here. Tricey was talking, saying something about how much she liked her new job at the Silver Sun Convention Centre, but Anar was only half listening, responding with the appropriate ‘Yes dear’ when the situation demanded.

For right now, he was searching for menu items that didn’t include fish. It was one of those things that had struck at an early age that he’d never really been able to shake. Sure, his people had descended from fingerling jellies in the oceans of Kahje, catching things with their stinging tentacles and eating them, but one day a young Anar had been offered jellyfish. It wasn’t cannibalism. They weren’t even remotely related, but there was enough similarity that he’d refused to eat them or any other seafood again. It had caused his parents some consternation, and he’d been teased by some of the other hanar at school, but even now, some one and a half decades later, it was still a thing.

Thankfully there was egg sushi and vegetable tempura, and there was a beef shabu shabu that looked promising.

“And I got you this,” Tricey said, handing over a blue cardboard box tied with a darker blue ribbon.”

“You shouldn’t have,” Anar said, reaching out three tentacles to take the parcel.

“I know, but it’s our anniversary and I thought…”

“This one did too,” Anar lied quickly. “But your present isn’t quite ready yet.”

“It’s all right, Anar,” Tricey said. “I know we said no gifts.”

Anar opened the box, and found shallow sea blue tissue paper inside, which stuck to his tentacles despite his best efforts to push it delicately to the side. At the bottom he found a framed holo of both of them, sitting by the fishpond at the Krios memorial park in Zakera Ward, their first date, along with two commemorative plascard tickets to Elai’solor nar Ashru’s final night concert of his galaxy wide tour.

“Who’s this?” Anar asked.

“It’s…um…Elias? The quarian? He’s the winner of the Citadel’s Got Talent last year?”

“This one could have sworn the asari won,” Anar said. “But it is sure Elias is good too,” he said quickly.
Tricey leaned in “You don’t think it was rigged do you? There’s been some rumours on the extranet boards.”
“This one couldn’t care less if it was or not,” Anar said, trying to get the damp tissue paper off his tentacles. “If it was they rigged it wrong…but this one would still like to go.”
Eventually Anar managed to get the paper off his tentacles and placed their order with the waiter. In the silence that followed Anar couldn’t help but overhear the conversation from the table next to them, where a krogan couple sat at what appeared to be a first date.
“Apologetically: this is my first time out on the citadel,” the male krogan said in a strangely monotone voice. He was smartly dressed in a crisp suit, but his dinner companion seemed less than impressed.
“Why are you talking so strangely?” she asked, her eyes darting to the chunky watch on her wrist. Not many people used analogue time pieces, indeed they were more a piece of expensive decoration than a functional piece of equipment. Most people just use an omni-tool.
“With slight embarrassment: I am from the planet Dakuna.”
“Oh,” she said. “You’re an orphan then.”
“Factually: Yes,” the male krogan said. “With genuine interest: Is that a problem? I hope this fact does not spoil your evening.”
“Let’s just order,” the female said, snapping open the menu.
Looking up, Anar saw that Tricey was watching the other couple from beneath her eyelashes. It was a look he’d come to recognise.
“With genuine interest: what do you enjoy doing for fun?” the male was asking.
“Shooting things,” the female grunted. “Especially things that annoy me.”
“Truthfully: I enjoy video games. I play Galaxy of Fantasy under the name OttoTomato. Proudly: I have three characters over level 60 there.”
“I need to go to the ladies room,” the female said, getting up and storming out of the restaurant.
“With concern: the bathrooms are in the other…direction,” the male said, half rising out of his seat before slumping back down.
“Would you excuse this one a moment?” Anar said, turning back to his girlfriend.
“Do you know him?” Tricey asked in a low whisper.
“He is my friend,” Anar said simply.
“You know…maybe…do you think the staff might push these tables together if…if we asked?” Anar flashed aquamarine. “You are the most amazing person this one has ever met.”
“I love you too, now go already.”
With the barest adjustment of his antigrav thrusters, Anar propelled himself over to the other table, where it looked like the male krogan was on the verge of tears.
“That thresher maw earlier today was pretty badass,” he said.
“With confusion: Thresher maw?”
“N00bstomper,” Anar said.
The krogan’s eyes widened with recognition “Incredulously: Sixty four?”
“You member that kick ass gun you were given today?”
The krogan nodded.
“Well, that was from someone else. Sorry.” Anar paused for a moment. “Kidding, of course this one is N00bstomper64.”
“With genuine enthusiasm: It is very nice to meet you. I do not have very many friends on the citadel. I only recently arrived from Dakuna.”
Anar lowered himself so that he was level with Otto’s face. “This one knows the feeling.”
“Um, excuse me,” Tricey said from where she was seated. “Otto? That’s your name right? The waiters say they’ll push these tables together if you…if you’d like to join us for dinner?” Otto, “Shyly: Thank you, but I do not wish to impose.”
“Please,” Anar said. “This mustache is more of an imposition than you are,” he said, ripping it off.
“Ow,” he added as the spirit gum pulled at his skin.
“With heartfelt humour: ha ha ha ha.”
“And this one thought he spoke awkwardly,” Anar said as the waitstaff moved in and reset the tables.
Their appetisers arrived shortly after, Tricey ordering fresh sashimi and Otto tucking into a what appeared to be sliced ox tongue, which smelled surprising appetising. Anar was having a steam-grilled miso eggplant, which was crisp, soft and full of salty gooey goodness when a young human woman approached their table, carrying a datapad.

“Excuse me,” she said pushing her green rimmed glasses higher up her nose. “I won’t take up much of your time, but could you please sign this petition?”

Tricey looked over at Anar. “I don’t think you’re allowed to be doing this in a restaurant.”

“I’m sorry, but this is a very important cause. As you know, three years ago Commander Shepard saved us from the Reapers, but in doing so he destroyed all synthetic life in the galaxy. And since then, the council has placed a ban on developing any new synthetic life forms. Anyone caught creating synthetic life would be subject to punitive fines or even have to serve jail time and we feel these measures are extreme and unnecessary. There are rumours of groups in the Terminus systems experimenting with artificial intelligence and if we don’t keep up, who knows what could happen? With the correct safeguards and procedures we can still benefit from synthetic technology without repeating history, and even if we don’t develop it for our own use, we should be prepared in case something goes wrong in the future.”

Anar took a look at the petition, using a tentacle to go over the lines of the petition.

Otto delicately placed a prawn tail down on his place. “With mild curiousity: What organisation are you with, miss?”

“Well, we’re working on that. It’s a working title. Just call us Friends of the Galaxy for now, or FOTG, or fot-ga or… just F.O.T.G. is good.”

“This one thinks you need a better name,” Anar said.

“With amusement,” Otto said. “This one will happily sign if it means you will go away.”

“This one will pass. The last time it signed a petition it received many spam messages about increasing the size of its primary organ which it really doesn’t need.”

“Oh, that’s probably because you selected the ‘please add me to the mailing list’ option,” the human woman said. “You have to remember to uncheck that one.”

“This one has no time for unchecking of boxes,” Anar said.

“And you shouldn’t be checking that option by default anyway,” Tricey said. “That’s a violation of consumer law.”

“Happily: I am choosing to uncheck the box signing me up to all your newsletters,” Otto said.

“Well, thank you for your signature. I’ll pass your feedback on to our organising committee. Friends of the Galaxy thank you,” the woman said hurriedly before beating a hasty retreat.

It had been a good evening.

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Anar stuffed the last of the cheez puffs into his mouth. “Otto’s a war gaming buddy of this one’s. He burped. “Sorry, this one is very hungry.”

Arkara waved a hand. “Don’t worry, I’m from Tuchanka, you’re being exceptionally polite by comparison.”

“This one has always wanted to go to Tuchanka,” Anar said. “It would like to learn from the battlemasters there.”

“There’s nothing to learn there,” Arkara said flatly. “You’re better off elsewhere.”

“Okay,” Anar said, deciding not to bring up the fact that Elias had already mentioned Tuchanka would be one of their destinations. “You look like you can handle yourself.”

“From what I can see you can too,” Arkara said. “And you have a handy mech to run around in.”

“This one finds it a suitable compromise given it cannot wear armour.”

“I like the paint job,” Arkara said. “You choose those colours yourself?

“No, it was designed and built by this one’s best friend,” he said. Turning away, he dropped the
snack packet in the bin. He barely saw Arkara’s answering nod, and missed her answer completely. This one will find you, Chris, he vowed, and tried to ignore how hollow the words sounded, even in the privacy of his own head. “Do you think we’ll be heading to our universe soon?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Arkara said. “Depends on what the others decide. I feel like I’m just along for the ride, really.”

“This one has some business to take care of back home. Not to mention we need weaponry.”

“I’m sure we can pick something up,” Arkara said. “Elias seems to have that covered.”

Anar chuckled. “This one might have some ideas on that front.”

Leaving the mess hall, Anar went down to the cargo bay, where he’d kept his suit. It was big enough for two—or at least, big enough for a hanar and a medium sized human. It also had enough storage for a few personal effects and some snacks—and soda. Tricey always said if he was human he’d have a mouth full of rotten teeth by now, to which Anar happily retorted that it was a good thing he wasn’t.

When the elevator doors opened and he floated out, he found Drimi moving crates and boxes around muttering to himself.

“Who moved the… and where’s my… damn it! This is going to take a day to sort out…”

“Hi,” Anar said floating innocently past the asari. “Sync said it would be fine if this one stayed in the cargo hold.”

“We don’t have any beds down here,” Drimi said, looking up from where he was sorting out a box of junk that Anar had accidentally tipped over in his explorations. Anar wasn’t sure what the criteria for his sorting method was though, as both piles looked identical to him. “Are you sure you’ll be comfortable?”

Anar entered his personal code into his suitcase and stepped back as the it unfolded into his mech, the thick glass blast dome manufacturing itself in a matter of seconds as a final piece. “Yes, this one thinks it will be very comfortable, thank you.”


“It was crafted from a suit of battle armour this one recovered with its friends,” Anar said, climbing into the open mech. 

Walking over, Drimi bent down and picked up a small holo which had fallen to the ground, turning it over he stared at it curiously. “Who’s this?” he asked.

Anar slid his nose out of the top and looked down. “That is someone very important to this one.” “I’m assuming she’s not your sister,” Drimi said with a grin.

“She’s my girlfriend,” Anar said. “She gave that to this one two days ago on our anniversary.”

“Oh,” Drimi said, a slight frown creasing his forehead. “It’s all right,” Anar said. “This one has heard everything that can be said about its situation,” he reached out with two tentacles to take the holo back.

“Just a second,” Drimi said. “May I show this to someone? I’ll bring it right back, but it’s very important.”

Anar paused. “This one will allow it—on the condition that it is returned immediately.”

“Sure thing,” Drimi said, with a nod, and turned on his heel. He headed to the elevator, clutching the holo tightly as though he was worried it might explode.
Sync was in his quarters getting ready for bed when there was a knock on his door. “Who is it?” Sync asked. “It’s me boss—uh, Sync.” Reflexively Sync reached for his shirt, and activated his synthskin holo with a flick of his wrist. “Come in Dri,” he said, pulling his crumpled shirt over his head. Ain’t it a little late for visiting though?” Drimi sighed as he stepped through the door, letting it snick shut behind him. “It is, but I thought you needed to see this,” he said, holding out a small, framed holo. “What is it?” Sync asked, taking the frame. “This is a holo of Anar and your wife.” Sync stared down at the holo, thoughts clamouring in his head. “It is her, isn’t it? That is Beatrice?” Knees suddenly weak, Sync sat back down on the edge of his bed. “This can’t be right. This isn’t possible. She… I mean…” “I didn’t recognise her immediately, but I remembered going through your wedding photos and…I just thought you should know.” The lights in Sync’s cybernetic implants flashed red. “I need to go speak with that hanar,” he said, his knuckles turning white where he gripped the frame. “He doesn’t know, boss,” Drimi pointed out. “You told me he—and she—are from a different universe.” Rising from the bed, Sync stormed out, heading towards the elevator, Drimi hot on his heels. “Boss are you sure you need to—” Drimi stopped when Sync shot him a look. “Okay, okay, just…try to think before you speak, all right?” He found Anar in his mech in the cargo bay, tentacles crossed before him, as if waiting for something. “This is you in this holo?” Sync demanded, holding the frame out towards the hanar. “How do you know this woman?” “Why do you wish to know?” “Just answer the question.” “Very well. That is indeed this one in that holo. You can tell by the scar. The woman is Beatrice, although everyone calls her Tricey, including this one.” Sync let Anar take the holo and then reached forward, grabbing two of his tentacles and all but yanked him out of the mech suit. “Is she happy?” “What?” “Is she happy, damn it?” “This one requests you relax your grip.” “Answer the damn question!” Sync demanded, giving the hanar a shake. “This one has been drinking and would like to not have any accidents—” “I’ll give you accident,” Sync said, pulling back his right arm to give that hanar a solid thumping. Suddenly there was a pistol in his face. “Get off me!” Anar said, his modulated voice strangely placid yet angry at the same time. “Whoa, whoa,” Drimi said, stepping forward and trying to push the two men apart.

“For you shall kneel, and tell me that you love me.
And I shall sleep in peace until you come to me.”
- Danny Boy. Traditional Earth Ballad
“This one apologises,” Anar said in a calmer voice and the pistol lowered. “It does not react well to being grabbed.”
Sync took a deep breath and forced himself to relax his grip. “Please answer the question, Anar. Is she happy?”
“Last time this one checked, yes. She is happy.”
Sync’s cybernetics faded back to their normal pale blue. “Thank you. That’s all I needed to know.”
Then he turned and took the lift back up to the main deck, passing through the common areas where Cicepia and Arkara were both loitering, attempting to look unobtrusive. He walked past both of them, ignoring their furtively curious looks and used his cybernetic eye to stare into the digital lock on the last room, slipping in through the door and letting it lock behind him. Drimi would tell them what they needed to know. He knew that.
The room was as it was when he’d left it. The way he always left it. A double bed was pushed up against the far wall, next to a sealed display case containing a floor length emerald green dress in a classic cut that apparently never went out of fashion. On the port side of the ship was a rack upon rack of computer chips, and on the starboard side was a small desk, a shelf of expensive, leatherbound journals, the kind you had to write in with pen and ink, all full of words he usually couldn’t bring himself to read. There was also a trophy case. He knew without looking what was in there. Accolades for contributions to science. For advancing knowledge for… Beatrice lay on the bed, cold and unmoving.
His omnitool enveloped his hand in a shimmering encasement of kinetic energy as he smashed the case, sending glass fragments and trophies falling to the floor. He stared at them for a moment and then crawled onto the double bed, onto the quilt cover that had lain without crease over the mattress for years. The sheets didn’t even smell like her anymore.

According to his internal clock it was 1000 hours ship time when a knock on the door roused him from a fitful doze.
Stumbling over to the door, he managed to avoid the shards of broken glass and used his omnitool to unlock it, and the door slid open to reveal Cicepia.
“Oh,” he said. “It’s you.”
Sync saw Cicepia’s eyes dart around the room behind him, and he resisted the urge to walk out and close the door behind him.
“We were just deciding where to go next,” Cicepia said. “And we thought the Captain should be involved in that decision.”
Sync opened his mouth to say ‘I’m not the Captain’, but the words stuck in his throat. “Sure,” he said, stepping out and locking the door behind him.
“Hey,” Cicepia called as he strode through the common area. “You can drop the attitude. I get what you’re going through, it messes with your head, but we have a mission and we need to get it done.”
Sync paused. “What do you know about what I’m going through?”
“You lost someone you love,” Cicepia said. “And now you find out they’re alive in a different universe, but they’re not yours? I know how that feels.”
“It’s not the same, C-Sec,” Sync said as he walked off. “Not at all.”
When everyone had gathered in the conference room, Sync motioned to Cicepia to speak since she seemed to have an idea of what was going on.
“We seem to have two courses of action open to us,” she said. “We can jump back to Elias’ universe and retrofit the ship now, or we can jump over to Arkara and Anar’s universe in case there’s any loose ends to tie up there?”
“How long will it take to upgrade the ship?” Sync asked.
“Days,” Drimi said. “At least two or three given the amount of things we want to do.”
“Yes, but we don’t know what sort of reception we’re going to get in Anar and Arkara’s universe,” Elias pointed out. “I’m not really comfortable going there without a stealth drive.”
“We don’t attack people on sight just because Shepard destroyed synthetic life, you know,” Arkara said.
“You might not, but do you think we can just jump an unregistered ship into the Citadel’s space and not be shot to pieces?”
“This one was meant to pay rent yesterday,” Anar said. “It would like to not be evicted from it’s apartment.”
“I probably have enough eezo stashed away to build that drive if I have some help,” Drimi said. Sync looked at Elias. “You have schematics for that?”
“Absolutely,” Elias said, waving a hand over the conference table. “It looks like this,” he said, and a complicated engine sprung up in the centre of the table’s holo projector.
“We can have that done by dinner time if we can minifacture a few key parts,” Drimi said. “I assume you can integrate it into our system though? I can build it, but I’ve no idea what we’ll need to run it. Well, not much of an idea.”
Elias nodded. “I’ve worked on these before so I shouldn’t have any issues.”
“What about the rest of us?” Arkara rumbled.
“Oh don’t worry,” Drimi said. “There’ll be plenty of heavy lifting for everyone.”
“And um…do you think you can sweet talk the right people into giving us flight clearance over the theatre?” Elias asked Cicepia. “We might also need you to do some fast talking when we get to Anar and Arkara’s universe.”
“That could be tricky,” Cicepia said. “Arkara am I even a C-Sec officer where you’re from?”
“I don’t know,” Arkara replied blandly. “I haven’t exactly encountered you in my universe.”
“Well, I guess I’d better go and find out when we get there,” Cicepia said.
Nearly six hours and several solder burns later found Sync at one of the terminals in the engine room, with both Elias and Drimi underneath the eezo core of the engine.
“Okay, boys, do you have it right this time?” he asked.
“Yes, I think so,” Elias said a moment later.
“Think?” Sync said. “Do you remember what happened last time?”
“Hey, I’m a software guy not hardware,” the quarian protested. “I’d like to point out my emergency shutdown worked perfectly.”
“Requiring a manual restart of half of our systems,” Drimi grumped.
“Triple check the wiring?” Elias suggested.
“All right, all right, point the flashlight over here would you?”
Sync drummed his fingers on the edge of the screen as he waited. “Come on guys, less making out and more work please.”
“I’m wearing a helmet,” Elias said.
“Well, safety first. Well done.”
From beneath the engine there was silence.
“Was that a joke?” Drimi asked. “An actual joke? Elias did he just make a joke?”
“I’d say that was a joke, yes,” Elias agreed. “Doesn’t he do that?”
“No.” There was the hum of thrusters and Drimi’s hoverboard pulled out from beneath the engine, followed shortly by Elias. “Wiring’s fine. Now who are you and what did you do with Sync?”
“Don’t listen to him, man, it was a good joke,” Elias said, wiping his hands with a rag. “Now…”
Sync hit the start button and both Elias and Drimi jumped away from the engine with alacrity.
“Goddess, give a guy some warning,” the asari said.
Sync grinned and clapped his hands together. “Look at her boys,” he said. “She’s humming.”
Indeed, the drive lit up like a Christmas tree, gentle white lights playing over the room.
“This calls for a drink,” Drimi said, opening one of the engine cooling thanks and pulling out two bottles of asari honey mead and a Turian Muslam cider for Elias. Taking the bottle, Sync toasted their success as he leaned back against the console, watching the lights play over the metal surfaces of the engine rooms. The mead was sweet on his tongue and the deck thrummed beneath his feet. He closed his eyes and half listened as Drimi and Elias chatted on about music—something about jazz. A warmth washed over him that was only partially due to the alcohol, and he basked in it like a cat when he realised that someone had asked him a question.
“Beg your pardon. I was…miles away.”
“I asked what we do now, Boss,” Drimi asked, draining his beer.
“That depends on whether Cicepia’s got us our flight clearance yet,” Sync said. “Once she gets that, we jump to Arkara and Anar’s universe and get things squared away there before we go hunting reapers.”
Drimi shuddered. “You say that so casually,” he said almost accusingly.
Sync shrugged. “Running around and screaming about it won’t help us none. Besides, we’ve all done it before.”
“I was personally hoping not to have to do it again, myself,” Elias said. Watching the quarian drink wasn’t as interesting as Sync had hoped, as it seemed to involve a straw. He was looking forward to seeing how eating solid food worked.
“I’d drink to that, but no more than one in the engine room,” Drimi said. “How does this universe jumping portal thing work, anyway?”
“We get mimic and the reality collider into the silver sun theatre and use a computer program to activate both,” Elias said. “Then we link the ship to coordinates on the far side of the wormhole and jump through.”
“And the people in the theatre?”
“We’ll literally walk across into a different universe.”
“We?”
“Well, I’m assuming I’m going to be one of them to make sure the portals open and close correctly.”
“And what about getting mimic down there? You know, until you showed up, I honestly thought mimic was a glitch in Sync’s synthetic eye.”
“Oh thank you so much,” Sync said. “Now the truth comes out.”
Drimi grinned. “I didn’t want to bruise your delicate male ego.”
Both Sync and Elias stared at the asari. “What?” Sync asked eloquently.
“What, I can’t say that just because I’m transitioning?”
“I’m going to be flying the ship,” Sync said, carrying on the conversation as if nothing had happened. “How do you plan to get mimic down to the theatre?”
“Oh you know,” Elias said. “The obvious way—I thought I’d bribe it.”

Arkara stood patiently in the carpeted theatre, plush and red underfoot as it had been when they arrived. There were still no body outlines in the holographic chalk C-Sec used these days. Stepping up to the centre of the room, she held up a handful of seeds and forced herself to remain still when a holographic image of mimic nuzzled at her fingers. It looked like a fanged, lizard with a spiky ruff, a bit like a tiny flying thresher maw even. She knew it was a hologram, but the idea that it was there even when the hologram wasn’t present was a thought she tried very hard to forget, especially when she was in the shower. Admittedly, she didn’t take her seeds into the shower, but still.
The strange construct was tame compared to the crackling lightning show that would have made her hair stand on end, had she had any. As it was, it made her teeth itch and crackled across her armour before earthing itself into the ground through her boots. As Elias stepped forward with the reaper artefact, a circular portal opened, edged in red and expanded until she couldn’t see the edges anymore. Following the quarian as he walked forward, she blinked, and there was a holo-chalk outline of a single body. Probably turian. She squinted up at the catwalk where she had been lurking, aiming her sniper riple down at her universe’s version of Officer Altus. Definitely turian.
“Someone got shot here,” Elias said as he turned around, and she saw red lines of energy crisscrossing their way over space like embroidery.
“Only one, and not much blood. Not reapers.”
“Still,” Elias said. “Let’s leave by the stage door to avoid notice by the public—or C-Sec.”
“You know where the—of course you do.”
“Captain, you through?” Elias asked through his helmet comm. “Right. Find a dock and I’ll make my way over. I think Arkara has some things to do?” he turned to her for the last sentence.
Arkara nodded, her omni-tool was already pinging madly with messages
“Okay,” Elias said. “Sync will send you the ship’s docking port once he finds one. I’ll see you back on board.”

He led her out a side door and left without adding ‘and if you don’t come back I’ll track you down and drag you back’, and she found herself blinking in the artificial lights of the Silverlight Strip. Arkara hadn’t met many quarians before, but they were decidedly strange. Trusting. Or possibly he just judged she’d rather not sit by the sidelines as the reapers poured out to complete their grisly harvest of intelligent life. Correctly, if that was the case. Quarians were weird. Which wasn’t the point. The point was that there were at least twenty messages from Mridi—her Mridi—that were fast pinging her inbox.
There was also a sedate message from an unknown number that simply said “Arkara darling, congratulations! Come see me as soon as you can.”

That would be Shias Lazeen. The Salarian had always been good for the odd job here and there, and Arkara was looking forward to the credits. In this case she might well end up spending it all though.
If she was going up against reapers it might finally be time to replace her crappy out of the box omni-tool with something with a bit more grunt. Heading back along the familiar corridors of the wards to her apartment, she called her best friend, who picked up on the second ring.

“Girl! Where the fashkh have you been? I’ve been worried sick for two days. Two whole days! I thought they were going to pull your body from the presidium lakes, or you’d end up in the keeper protein vats or something! I went and filed a missing persons report and everything—not that they’re looking very hard.”

Despite herself, Arkara smiled. “Mridi, I can take care of myself, you know that. I just had some business to take care of and I had to drop out for a bit. You didn’t need to file a report.”

“Well you didn’t reply to my texts, you didn’t answer my calls, what did you expect me to do?”

“I’m sorry, Mridi. I didn’t mean to worry you, but you know what radio silence means.”

“Yeah, but you could have given me some warning first! What was so important that you have to radio silent anyway?”

“That’s…a bit of a story actually. I’m not sure I can talk about it like this—”

“Fine, I’ll be right over,” Mridi said, and Arkara could see her friend’s expressive hands waving through the air in her mind’s eye. “Are you hungry? I was just going to get some food and I know you never have decent food at yours.”

“Um—”

“There’s a new human place that opened up recently—Chinese I think? You love spicy, don’t you.”

“Mridi—”

“Don’t answer that girl, I know you love spicy. I’m just talking to hear myself think you know that.”

“Mridi—”

“Do you have any requests? Anything you really want to eat? Do you know Chinese food at all?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Okay, that’s fine, I’ll figure out something.”

“Mridi?”

“What?”

Arkara sighed. “I’ll see you soon,” she said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Arkara had been home for half an hour before the knock on her door came, and she’d had time to gather a few changes of clothing, her spare weaponry and a few other essentials she’d packed into a footlocker before beginning the transfer of music to her new omni-tool. She’d bought it on credit, but she knew she was getting paid shortly. Besides, if things went badly, she might not even be footing the bill.

Mridi breezed in, all bustle and dramatic hand gestures. “Girl, I am so sorry I’m late. This matriarch in front of me was taking forever to order. I mean, lemon chicken or sweet and sour? What’s the big deal? It’s the same chicken with different sauce right? You could at least go a Gong Bao Ji Ding or a Chicken and Cashew, right? And then she found out that the sizzling platters were only an eat in thing unless you have your own platter at home and I wanted to be here as soon as I could and I completely forgot to get chopsticks. Wait, you don’t use them, so that’s fine. You still have forks right?”

“It’s all right, Mridi,” Arkara said, getting out the plates and cutlery. “You’re not late at all.”

“I have been freaking out so much,” Mridi said, as she sat down and scooped half of a spicy white noodle dish onto Arkara’s plate, a layer of chilli oil and mince pork tumbling out after, coating the noodles with its reddish sheen. “You have a lot of explaining to do. In fact, you are going to sit there, and explain everything to me—and you know why you’re going to explain everything to me? Because we are best friends, and best friends tell each other everything.”

“Fine,” Arkara said. “You won’t believe me though.”

Mridi popped a crispy wonton into her mouth, crunching through the crisp skin with satisfaction. “Try me.”
This chapter has been posted without art as my artist, Mistiannyi is busy with real life. Art will be included as it becomes available.
Nothing takes the taste out of peanut butter quite like unrequited love - Charles M. Schulz

Anar was in the cargo hold, talking to Drimi about invading the asari’s space when Sync’s voice came across the PA system.

“Ladies, Gentlemen and Anar, we have arrived in the universe of Synthetic Destruction,” Sync said. “We really need to start getting better names for these alternative universes. Local time is 10:52 Galactic Standard Time. Ship time remains at 0915 hours. We jump to Elias’ Synthesised universe in 24 hours exactly. Please don’t get yourself arrested in the meantime, thanks.”

“Did the doctor just make a joke at this one’s expense?” Anar asked.

Drimi looked over from where he was stacking crates up against the far wall. “Do you really consider yourself a gentleman?”

“Only on special occasions.”

“Then maybe not,” Drimi said, flashing the hanar a grin. “To be honest I think he’s rediscovering his sense of humour since meeting you guys.”

“This one would be happy to assist. It knows lots of jokes.”

“Really?”

“A human, a turian and a quarian walk into a bar. The volus just walks under it.”

Drimi grinned. “Why don’t asari wear miniskirts?”

Anar paused. “Why don’t asari wear miniskirts?”

“They prefer going commando.”

“Really? This one thought they just had a thing for black leather.”

Drimi blinked. “There’s a difference?”

“This one supposes you have a point. How many asari does it take to screw in a lightbulb?”

“Two,” Drimi said primly. “But how do you fit them inside the lightbulb?”

“You’ve heard that one then.”

“It’s a classic,” Drimi said. “What do you get when you run a hanar through a peanut processing plant?”

“Peanut Butter and Jelly,” Anar said. “If you’re a human from the United North American States. Hey—” his communicator pinged. And kept going. “This one thinks it needs to answer these.”

Drimi’s grin faded a little. “Your girlfriend?”

“Yes.”
Anar sighed as he bolted out the cargo bay doors heading at what would have been a clanking run if he not for the shock absorbers he and Chris had built into the motorised knees of his mech suit.

Anar? Where'd you go?

Someone just got shot and you've disappeared--and your case is gone!!

Is this some sort of joke? I thought we were having a nice night...well, until the shooting anyway

I know Elias might not be your can of soda but I still can't believe you left me there.

I'm going home. Call me when you're done with...whatever's more important than our anniversary

Anar can't you just say something? Where are you? Please let me know you're all right?

I don't know if I should call C-Sec, but I'm going to unless you talk to me, Anar...
Bringing up his comm he forced himself to stop clenching his tentacles and called Cyrus, the call dropping through almost immediately.
“Cyrus, are you there?”
“Loser? You’re calling me? In the morning? This must be important. Heard you vanished after shooting at concert you were taking your girlfriend to. And a turian shot by a sniper rifle, not a weapon used by Loser. Unless—”
“Shut up, Cyrus. This one doesn’t have time for your guessing games. Get enough men to this one’s apartment to get the weapons out of storage. Including the ones behind the wine fridge. The code for the locks is 245 alpha bravo zulu. Get them out, get them on a truck, and get them to commercial docking bay Omega 72. This one will meet you at the apartment. Do not argue with this one. Just do it.”
There was a pause at the other end of the phone line. “Sorry, I was busy calculating cost of programming an explosive nasal passage virus. What did you say?”
“Guns, this one’s place. Get them to docking bay Omega 72. There’s a ship there called the Endurance and they’re all going on board.”
“Sorry, explosive nasal passage virus is proving far too messy—and doesn’t work on hanar. I’m considering an alternative to work with mucus lining on the hanar epidermis. Dehydration is showing as possible side effect. I think that’s acceptable. Far too busy to run around moving guns.”
“Put down the petri dishes and get your ass over to the armoury. This is serious.”
“Serious?” There was a pause. “You’ve never been serious before. Are you feeling unwell?”
“This one will reach down your throat and let you develop an antidote to hanar toxins if you don’t hurry up.”
“I created an antidote years ago. Took about half a day. It tastes of strawberries.”
“You hate strawberries.”
“Hm. Suppose I should help then. Be there soon. I think I also have time to upgrade antidote flavour to chocolate.”

Anar’s apartment was in a rougher area of the wards, where reconstruction had barely begun. After the battle of Earth, most of the galaxy’s resources had gone into rebuilding the Citadel itself, along with the mass relay network. Even now, some three years on, bits of it that hadn’t burnt up upon entry into Earth’s atmosphere were still being washed up on beaches all over that world. Anar had never been to Earth. As he took the slightly rickety, but immaculately finished elevator up to his apartment, he wondered if he’d get there on whatever madcap adventure the quarian lounge singer was taking them on. Stepping out into an airy corridor, he remained amazed at the way the Citadel looked. Always. No matter how poor the neighbourhood, it always looked amazing, thanks to the keepers. Pushing open his apartment door a strange smell filtered in through the mech’s air ducting. Cookies. Tricey never baked. Well, nothing edible anyway.
In the open plan kitchen a large head turned to look at him.
“With surprise: You have returned,” Otto said.
Running feet from the bedroom turned into a running redheaded human woman and suddenly arms were wrapped around his mech.
“Anar! I was so worried about you. I was calling the police, they said they didn’t have any leads, I called all of your friends. Where have you been?”
Opening the blast shield, Anar exited the mech and wordlessly wrapped his tentacles around his girlfriend. The scent of her hair filled the olfactory receptors at the base of his tentacles and he found he was shaking as she tenderly stroked his bell.
“Honey? Are you all right? Are you hurt?” Soft fingers brushed over a long jagged scar on the end he had come to think of as his ‘face’ and—

_The room was burning, and he lay on the floor, his levitation implants sputtering and misfiring. His tentacles writhed helplessly as blood seeped out onto the plascrete floor from a wound on his side. He could dimly see bodies in the wreckage of the furniture. Bodies and body parts and the air was_
thick with smoke and the clashing scents of alien blood mingled with the oppressive heat. Above him a man’s face swam in and out of focus, wild eyes and unkempt hair slicked back with grease and a once fine shirt splattered with stains although whether food, blood, dirt or some other substance Anar never knew.

“I said it, didn’t I? I said you were going to die, jelly.”

“Listen, listen…she’s about to scream. Can you hear her scream? Simon says can you hear her scream?!”

It tore through his body, hot and accusing in its pain and fear. His tentacles clenched and the left rear levitation implants sputtered, pushing him a few inches off the ground.

“Oh no, no, no, that’s not allowed, jelly. We’re playing my game! My rules!”

The barrel of a pistol lowered until it was pointing directly at his flesh. “Simon says die.”

There was a clank in the kitchen, and Anar jumped back, his levitation pack sending him careening into the roof, where he clung to the pendant light for a moment before bringing himself back down to his usual just above head height hover.

In the kitchen, Otto had hit a hot tray against the door of the heating unit.

“Apologetically: I did not wish to intrude but Tricey was upset. And when people are upset I bake.”

“Anar, did you want to lie down?” Tricey asked.

“No, this one…will be fine,” he said. “Several armed men are about to come into this place and remove stores of weaponry. This one will be helping them. You need to stay out of the way—I would prefer you not to get hurt.”

“Honey, I don’t understand…”

“This one knows, but there isn’t time to fully explain,” he said as he went over to a picture of Mount Ahshan on Kahje and pushed it aside, revealing a recessed button in the wall which he struck with a balled tentacle, and the shelves next to the painting moved downward on a perfect cantilever, revealing a flat table with a selection of pistols and his backup assault rifles. A compartment behind the wine fridge held a cache of frag grenades, and a cavity in the wall between the kitchen and the bedroom housed assault rifles, sub machine guns and racks of thermal clips. There were clips in the feature wall behind the bed, along with no less than three heavy pistols within tentacle reach.

“You had grenades under the bed?” Tricey squeaked.

“These are activated by software,” Anar said. “You have always been safe here, Tricey.”

From a hidden compartment in his wardrobe, he withdrew the microfiber harness he used when he wasn’t in the mech, which had a leather look and feel, but none of the animal cruelty associated with it. Four men, or at least, for males entered the apartment without bothering to knock, each carrying a large packing crate. They wore nondescript street clothes just the unacceptable side of shabby and had the gruff machismo that had characterised Anar’s time in the Eclipse mercenary group. What they didn’t look, was C-Sec, and even with his back turned, Anar could see Tricey’s face as she stepped wordlessly into the kitchen where Otto was still standing before the most recent batch of cookies, a red stand mixer still coated in the sheen of butter and flour. An older salarian strolled casually into the apartment, his head turning this way and that, taking in his surroundings as only a blind genius could.

“Ah, female. Human. You must be Tricey. Or Beatrice. Not to fret, we should have everything out of here quickly, including the smelly mercenaries. I told them to shower, but you know vorcha. One day we’ll have vorcha smelling like flowers for a generation. Just for fun.”

The salarian paused and sniffed. “Is that… hint of cocoa, roasted nuts, sucrose, butter…small hint of hydrogenated vegetable oils…am I smelling cookies?”

“Proudly, they are chocolate peanut butter,” Otto said. “Baking is good for the soul.” “Chocolate peanut butter,” the salarian said. “Yes, I can see how that would work. Smoothness of chocolate, richness of butter and crunch with the toastiness of roasted nuts. I’d like that flavour combination,” and he walked over to the kitchen and helped himself to two of the largest cookies on the cooling tray.
“It’s about time you showed up, Cyrus,” Anar said floating into the kitchen.

“Well it’s not as if you provided advanced notice. I got here as soon as I could with maximum discretion under circumstances. Still, men had to leave projects unfinished.” Cyrus sniffed. “Messy.”

“Advanced warning wasn’t possible this time,” Anar said. “This one apologises for that.”

Cyrus waved a hand dismissively. “This is an amazing cookie. Just the right amount of crunch and additional salt crystals sharpen the flavour.”

“Thank you,” Otto intoned in his monotone voice. “It is my dream to open a restaurant someday.”

“We may have to keep you around,” Cyrus said, taking a third cookie. “I think every ship needs a good cook aboard it. It’s good for morale. During the reaper wars, good food had measurable affect on morale even when other variables were taken into account. Up to thirty percent in some cases.”

Anar moved over to Tricey, as the men began to make their way out of the apartment. “This one knows—I know—you have a lot of questions.”

“So…you’re not a C-Sec officer?”

Anar sighed and looked towards the door, where the batarian was hauling the last crate out of the apartment. “Get them to the ship,” he said. “This one will meet you there. Take some more cookies if you need them.”

“We’ll take the long route. No need to around suspicions,” Cyrus said, taking two more. “What is your name, sir?” he asked, turning to the krogan who had just finished wiping down the bench.

“With respect: My name is Otto.”

“Otto. Not a typical Krogan name, but then, you don’t have typical krogan speech patterns. Raised on Dakuna? Orphan? Your adoptive parents must be ver proud. I like him,” Cyrus said, turning back to Anar. “You should keep him around. My lady,” he said to Tricy with a florid bow.

“Circumspectly: I will leave now. I am sure you both have things to say to each other that require privacy,” Otto said.

“Well in that case,” Cyrus said, and reached over to pick up the cooling rack. “I have a proposition for you, Otto. And I think we should discuss it over more cookies.”

“Will you come with this one to the park?” Anar asked when he was alone with Tricey in the apartment. “This one will explain everything. I promise.”

She nodded, but Anar could see the confusion and fear in her eyes. Turning to his mech he jumped into the cockpit, and opened up the hatch at the rear. It wasn’t a big mech. At least, it wasn’t much bigger than a large Krogan, but Anar took up surprisingly little space when his tentacles were coiled around him, and there was easily room for a lithe person like Tricey in the mech. Wordlessly, she climbed inside, and sat on the other side of the oversized seat that Anar had on the inside, and they made their way to the park where they’d had their very first date—the date where the picture on she had given him for their anniversary had been taken, and Anar saw her eyes drift over to it where it sat near the control panel.

When they got to the park they wandered for a while, until their feet took them back to the oak tree they always sat under, by what Tricey had always called a duck pond, only there were never any ducks. Anar still didn’t know what a duck was. Something from earth apparently. They sat down, Tricey leaning up against the tree staring out over the water and Anar on his back with his tentacles on his stomach. It was the only way he could see properly, really.

“This could be the last time time we get to do this,” he said softly.

“What are you saying exactly, Anar?” she asked, not looking at him.

“What are you saying exactly, Anar?” she asked, not looking at him.

“Were you ever married? Before you met this one?”

He saw her frown. “No. I never met the right person. Before…you know.”

“Those men in the apartment. They’re ex-Eclipse mercenaries. They run a small private security company here on the Citadel, not big and not loud, just quiet and efficient. They’re not bad people—they just want a new start. The salarian with the visor is their Commander, and is also ex-Eclipse. As is this one.”

“So…you’ve been lying to me.”

“By omission,” Anar said. “This one never said it was with C-Sec. It just never corrected you. This
one—I was afraid you wouldn’t speak to me if you knew. Do you remember when we met?”
“I try not to.”
“This one was not with C-Sec then. It was not under orders. It was looking for its friend, Chris. But instead it—I—found you. And you are as amazing and strong and resourceful now as you were then. And this one is a criminal. And a murderer. But this one found something worth starting again for. This one found you. This one will find Chris. This one thought that was enough but…things have changed.”

He told her everything then. The device, the concert, the seat beside him suddenly being empty and crackling electrical energy that became a wormhole to another universe where the sodas were fizzier and husks walked amongst the people of the Citadel as equals, or at least, technically as equals. He told her of the reaperised volus shock troops and of meeting the singer Elias, a male asari and a krogan with a pocketful of plant seeds that were irresistibly attractive to a strange, flying, synthetic construct that chewed holes in weak points within the space-time continuum and how that apparently made sense but the enkindlers only knew how that worked. He certainly didn’t. But he could see it in the greenish tint on the quarian’s eyes and the skin of the people who weren’t wearing a dampener, and there were reapers—actual reapers—striding around a Citadel that looked as sleek, beautiful and as thriving as he remembered it being before the war.
“There was destroyer in a fun fair,” he told her. “Children were climbing over it, gripping its legs as it lifted them through the air from one ride to another. Elias says they’ve been helping. Cicepia says they help in her universe as well, and they do seem to, but they glow blue there and apparently Commander Shepard controls all of them. They are bent to his will and guard them as he did. And there aren’t many quarians where she’s from and the krogan are dying out, but…there’s another universe out there, where things are worse—where the reapers won. And it’s tunnelling into all of our universes and threatening to let them through to harvest us—all of us. And here’s the thing—we can stop it. This one and the others can seal the wormholes…and that means that this one has to try.”
A warm hand gripped one of his tentacles. When they’d first started dating, Tricey had asked if he had a dominant tentacle, like the way that she was left handed. It had taken her a while to adjust to his multidextrous nature, but now she just went with it. “Thank you for telling me the truth.”
“There will be no more secrets,” Anar said. “No more lies. This one swears. I swear.”
“All right,” Tricey said. “We’ll talk about it when you come back.”
Anar took a deep breath and rose in the air, although he didn’t let go of her hand. “Time to be a hero then,” he said. “For once. Would you like to come and see the ship?”
Her smile was small, but it was a smile. “I think I’d like that.”
He was in the kitchen, trying not to cringe at the video being displayed on the side of his helmet. “The me in this universe actually did a dance remix of Physical?” he said.


“You do look remarkably alike.”

“Ha, bloody ha ha,” Elias muttered. “Keelah, couldn’t he have chosen a better song?”

“That song filled the number one spot for ten weeks in America in nineteen ninety one,” Pi pointed out.

“I can’t believe he beat Rayne T’kai with that nonsense,” Elias said, as the camera panned to a shot of his constant rival in all three universe’s seasons of Citadel’s Got Talent.

“Punk isn’t for everyone,” Pi said neutrally.

“Electro dance isn’t either,” Elias grumbled.

“I’m sure he’d feel the same way about your rendition of My Favourite Things,” Pi said blandly.

“One day you’re going to have to explain what’s so bad about The Sound of Music.”

“I don’t like puppets. Especially not the ones with strings.”

“You talking to your drone?” Cicepia asked, striding into the room.

“Absolutely,” Elias said, “It helps to talk one’s thoughts out loud sometimes.”

“Does it talk back?”

“Absolutely, Officer Altus,” Pi said, and Elias was glad his face mask hid his smirk.

“I didn’t find anything about Arkara,” Elias said, dropping his voice. “She really doesn’t seem to exist over here. Anar exists and hangs out with shady characters, but he pops out of nowhere a few years back. It’s like he didn’t exist until the war ended.”


“That would do it,” Elias agreed. “What did you find out?”

“That I’m dead in this universe,” Cicepia said, dialing up a cup of tzanga from the beverage dispenser. “Arkara shot me at your concert.”

“Oh…that was her? Right.”

Cicepia turned to stare at him. “You knew?”

“It was in all the news feeds,” Elias said with a shrug. “I just didn’t put it together with her. Do you know why she did it?”

Cicepia sat down at the table, crossing on knee over the other. “The Shadow Broker hired her to,” she said simply “I think the me in this universe was…crooked.”

“Really?”

“From what I can see, yes. I found some hidden files on her computer. It looked like she was trying to find the Shadow Broker’s identity.”

Elias laughed, and then paused. “Wait, seriously?”

“She had a contract for a killing—would have made a lot of creds.”

“Who hired her?”

Cicepia grinned. “You know, I was hoping you’d be curious.”

Wordlessly Cicepia handed over a piece of paper. “Access codes,” she said.

“What if—”

“Never send them digitally,” the turian said with a grim smile.

“You want me to trace the personal details of someone trying to put a hit out on the Shadow Broker?” Elias asked.

“Are you saying you can’t do it?”
Elias grinned behind his mask. “Oh I’m sure I can. Just making sure you’re sure about sending me up against cashed up paranoia. But hey, I don’t really exist in this universe, right?”

“Of course you do, you’re just…doing club remixes from what I’ve heard.”

“Don’t start,” Elias said, pulling out a datapad and getting started. He never used his internal systems for something like this. Too risky. “But I will be using your identity and passwords to access the systems here.”

“No, you’re using hers,” Cicepia said grimly.

In the end, the cybertrail took him through several darknet forums and a private server where he found one name: Diana.

“No last name?” Cicepia had asked.

“We’re lucky to get a first,” Elias replied. “And that’s assuming our billionaire was either dumb enough or arrogant enough to use their real name.”

I’m not entirely sure what she was doing, but a lot of it wasn’t her job,” Cicepia said, taking a sip of the hot beverage. “Frankly, it creeps me out a little.”

“Well you could—” their conversation was interrupted by the sound of footfalls coming up the staircase.

“This is some ship,” an almost familiar voice said. Peering out into the hub of the ship, Elias saw a slender asari in a russet and gold dress walk up the ramp followed by Arkara. He also saw Drimi exit his quarters and turn towards the elevator leading down to the cargo hold.

“You have to get this on vid,” he said, and moved to the doorway to watch.

The new asari—who Elias was certain was Arkara’s friend Mridi—locked eyes with Drimi.

“Oh,” she said.

“My,” he said.

“Goddess,” they finished together.

“And there you go,” Arkara said from behind her friend. “Do you believe me now?”

The two asari stepped towards each other, and then began circling, each appraising the other—her with her slinky dress and heavy bracelets and him in cargo pants and a leather jacket.

“Pick a number,” Mridi said.

“W,” Drimi said with a grin.

“Oh my Goddess.”

“Seriously?”

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking,” they said in unison. “That’s freaky. No, that’s really freaky. Stop that!”

Mridi turned to Arkara, “Girl, I think I need to sit down.”

Drimi shook his head “Boss, got any of that beer left?”

“It’s Bud,” Sync said.

“Whatever. I’ll just have to drink two.”

Drimi hadn’t taken more than two steps towards the kitchen when an unfamiliar redheaded woman walked onto the ship, Anar floating in behind her. Her hair was loose and fell in ringlets over her shoulders and her eyes were green and slightly uncertain. Sync froze when he saw her, his mouth falling open and the lights from his cybernetic implants taking on a purplish tinge.

“Tricey these are the people this one told you about—Everyone, this is Tricey. This one has told her everything,” he added. “But it felt seeing you would provide reassurance that this one has told her the truth. The truth is important. Isn’t that right, Doctor Sync?”

“Uh…” Sync stammered.

“The Captain’s not a man of many words,” Elias said, as Tricey stared at him taking in the light show without comment.

“The doctor recognises you from his universe,” Anar said softly. “It is why…I asked if you’d been married before.”

“Ah,” Tricey said, but her answer seemed reflexive more than anything else. Elias wondered what that was like—to have someone you loved look at you with no memory of you at all.

“The doctor wished to know if you were happy,” Anar said, and Elias noted how one of his tentacles
was wrapped around her hand. “I felt I couldn’t answer on your behalf. He’ll probably wish to speak with you once he recovers.”

“Sure,” Tricey said, letting go of Anar’s tentacle and walking over to Sync. “So…you’re the captain of this ship?”

For a moment Sync’s hand stretched out towards her as if to cup her cheek and then he paused, and lowered his arm. “Yes. Can I…speak to you in private?”

It seemed to take a moment for his words to register, and Elias could see Tricey’s eyes darting over Sync’s features, roving over the man’s face as though searching for something.

“Is there a version of your in this universe?” she asked. “From what Anar’s told me there could be, I think? There’s something…familiar about you.”

Behind them, Anar curled his tentacles around each other, and then stopped, deliberately letting them dangle freely to the floor.

“I…don’t know,” Sync said. “I don’t think I’m alive in this universe, to be honest.”

“Oh. I’m…I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t know me here so… please come this way. There’s something you should see.”

He walked off towards the rear of the ship, where the sleeping quarters were, and Elias knew he was headed for the locked door.

“So,” Drimi said as they all stared after Sync and Tricey. “About that drink.”

With the exception of Anar, they were all in the mess when Tricey came running back down the corridor, and Cicepia was striding forward to intercept her.

“Tricey, is it?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t… I just can’t. I need to get out of here. Anar? Pleaee?”

“This one—I will be right with you,” Anar said, but Cicepia placed a hand on his bell as he moved to go after her.

“Anar you need to get her to see a doctor.”

“This one needs to get her home,” Anar said.

“Sync’s wife died from a terminal illness. Depending on how alike people in these parallel universes are… your Tricey could have the same thing.”

Anar paused and looked at Drimi, “Is that true?”

“It’s true,” Sync said, walking slowly back into the main deck.

Anar paused. “This one can’t tell her now. She’s already dealing with enough as it is. Perhaps you could give me details later, Doctor and I’ll pass them on at a more appropriate time.”

Sync nodded and Anar made his way out of the ship after his girlfriend.

Outside Anar floated over to his girlfriend, who was leaning against his mech, her arms folded across her chest.

“I’m sorry…”

“Why did you bring me here, Anar?”

“This one wanted you to see the truth,” Anar said softly. “It didn’t want it to just be words.” Floating over to her, he wrapped her in a hug. Slowly, her arms came up and embraced him, although it seemed as though her heart wasn’t fully in it.

“Why is this happening?” she asked. “Is it so wrong that I want to go back to when things were just… normal?”

“This one has asked itself the same question. But from what this one has seen, this universe is about to get very dangerous. When this one disappeared from the concert, it was attacked by volus husks. It appears the reapers are not done with their harvest yet.”

“No,” Tricey shook her head. “No, that can’t be true.”

“This one wishes it weren’t.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked, unshed tears shining in her eyes.

“Because this one has to go away, and it doesn’t know for how long. If we don’t act now, it could be too late by the time everyone else notices.”
“But why does it have to be you?” Tricey asked. “Why do you have to go?”

“This one doesn’t have a choice. The disc Chris gave this one before he was...taken, is reaper technology.”

Tricey’s eyes widened and she took a step back from him.

“This one is scared too,” Anar said. “But if it has the ability to stop it from destroying this universe—and others—it will do whatever it can to keep you safe. And if that means this one does not return alive...then it won’t.”

“So, what are you saying about us then?”

Anar reached into the mech and pulled out a little black velvet box, hinged on one side. “This was to be your anniversary present, except this one forgot to bring it.”

“Anar, we said no presents.”

“You bought concert tickets,” Anar pointed out. “This one procured this.”

Slowly, he reached out and placed the box in her unresisting hand. “This one requests you do not open the box until one of two things happens,” he said. “Either when this one returns, or if you feel in your heart that this one has perished.”

Tears were flowing down her face now, and Tricey made no move to wipe them away. She stared first at the small box, then at him, and she nodded, clutching it to her chest. “We’ll talk when you get back.”

“That’s this one’s girl. Come on, This one will take you home.”

Tricey shook her head. “It’s all right. I need the walk.” She looked towards the entrance of the docking bay where an aged salarian was leading a group of men of various species towards them, some guiding crates along on hovertrolleys. “You have work to do.”

Cyrus waved at Anar and ushered the men into the cargo bay doors and they were soon installing weapon racks and unloading Anar’s armoury into the space Drimi had cleared with mercenary efficiency—which is like military efficiency but without the rules and regulations regarding facial hair. He was still in conversation with Otto, but stopped before Anar could hear what he was saying. A flicker of red light told Anar that Cyrus was scanning the ship with his visor.

“Interesting. Design incorporates salarian engineering with human. Also appears you have quarian stealth drive adapted from SSV Normandy design but missing key battle systems. Has potential. If I had studied engineering, I would help.”

“Respectfully: Mr Anar, Doctor Lennox has suggested I apply for the position of cook on your ship. Whom should I speak to in regards to that?”

Anar waved a tentacles. “This one would prefer you to just call it Anar. There are no titles among friends. This one suggests you speak to the Captain inside. His name is Sync.”

“I’ll get the armoury sorted and then investigate your med bay. Hope it’s state of the art,” Cyrus said with a sniff.

“You’re coming with us?” Anar asked.

Cyrus sniffed. “Maybe. I haven’t decided yet. Will let you know in a few minutes.”

“Captain, can I have a word with you? It’s important.”

They were back in the mess, and Cicepia had just returned from what Elias assumed was a grilling of Arkara’s friend Mridi. By the looks of things, nothing had gone well and the asari was now talking to the krogan in a low voice.

Sync looked up, his eyes puffy and red and his hand shaking slightly where he gripped his beer bottle. “Can it wait?”

“I don’t think so,” Cicepia said.

Sync sighed. “All right. I’ll meet you in the conference room.”

“Wow,” Mridi said when the two had left. “Does supercop always have a stick up her ass like that?”

“Pretty much,” Arkara said.

“Huh, takes all kinds I suppose,” she said. “And that man she left with is the captain you say?”

“Oh huh.”
“Well, he’s pretty cute,” Mridi said. “And sensitive too.”
“Mridi. No. Just…no.”
“I’m just saying,” Mridi said, holding up her hands. “So you all are going off to save the universe I hear? Sounds like fun.”
“Universes,” Drimi corrected.
“Whatever,” Mridi said. “When are we leaving?
“I don’t know, that’s up to the Captain,” Arkara said.
“Okay. I’ll go and talk to him then.”
“Uh, wait,” Drimi said. “You’re planning on coming with us?”
“Of course, honey,” Mridi said. “Do you have a weapons and armour specialist on this ship? No? I didn’t think so. Just because you can point a gun at someone doesn’t mean you know how to take care of it.”
Drimi shook his head and picked up another beer.

Shortly afterwards, Cicepia left the conference room and headed aft towards the sleeping quarters, and Mridi rose to her feet, a determined look on her face and a datapad in hand.

“Excuse me, Captain Sync? I’m Mridi. Well, the other Mridi—” the conference room door snicked shut behind her.
“I’ve got some things to take care of,” Elias said. “See you later.”
Drimi waved him away and Arkara merely grunted, and set fire to her drink before gulping it down.

As he headed towards the common lounge, Elias turned on the video feed from the conference room, tuning in just in time to see Mridi bat her eyelashes at Sync.
“…thought I’d slip you my resume,” she said, bringing up a document on one of the many screens in the room.
“Oookay,” Sync said. “So how much of this is fake?” he asked.

Mridi’s eyelids stopped mid flutter. “I beg your pardon?”
“Well—”

“Did you just call me a liar?”
“No, I—”

“No, no, honey. You do not get to call me a liar.”
Sync shrugged. “You’re Arkara’s friend, right?”
“Yes,” Mridi said, coolly. “Her best friend.”

“If she’ll vouch for you, maybe we can see what you’ve got.”
“Well, maybe I don’t want to work on this ship,” Mridi said. “It seems to me that you aren’t very good at treating your employees decently, maybe I should—”

“Whoa, whoa,” Sync said. “Who said anything about employing you? We’re just trying to stop the reapers from killing everything.”

“And? What about payment? Living expenses, parts, tools, wear and tear…”

“Pay? Why don’t you go ask Elias. He’s pulling the finances together for this adventure.”

“Elias? Who’s Elias?”

“You know, Elia’solor nar Ashru? The singer. He was in the mess just now.”

“No! You’re not serious.”

“Very serious.”

There was the swoosh of a door opening and Mridi’s voice echoed down the corridor. “Arkara!” she yelled.

“Yeah?”
“Whoa, whoa,” Sync said. “Who said anything about employing you? We’re just trying to stop the reapers from killing everything.”

“And? What about payment? Living expenses, parts, tools, wear and tear…”

“Pay? Why don’t you go ask Elias. He’s pulling the finances together for this adventure.”

“Elias? Who’s Elias?”

“You know, Elia’solor nar Ashru? The singer. He was in the mess just now.”

“No! You’re not serious.”

“Very serious.”

There was the swoosh of a door opening and Mridi’s voice echoed down the corridor. “Arkara!” she yelled.

“Yeah?”
“This fool man is telling me Elias is funding this mission? Is he for real?”

“Yeah.”
“Girl, you have been holding out on me and that is not cool,” Mridi said. “You and I girl. We’re having a chat after this about sharing.”

“Okay,” Arkara said, pouring herself another drink.

“Well,” Mridi said brightly, turning back to Sync. “I think we’re done here,” she said, and swept out
of the room with a haughty grace that Rayne would have been proud of.
“Creator Elias, the asari’s estimated arrival time is ten seconds,” Pi said inside his helmet.
“Thank you, Pi,” Elias said, killing the video feed and settling down on a coach, pulling out his own datapad of technical specifications just as Cicepia stepped out of Arkara’s room, glancing around furtively. She froze as she saw him and then forced herself to relax, crossing her arms nonchalantly across her chest.
“Pi, do a sweep for new wireless signals will you?” Elias asked. “We might have to crack encryption too.”
He could feel Pi gearing up for an ‘are you sure?’, but Mridi was already sweeping into the lounge area.
“You,” she said, pointing a finger at him. “Are you the Elias? Don’t hold back on me now.”
“He’s an Elias,” Cicepia said, “I don’t know about the Elias.”
“Different universe, similar person. Better music,” Elias said.
Mridi gasped. “That…I mean…”
“I think there’s three of me,” Elias added.
“Oh…three of you?”
“Well, I haven’t met the other two yet, but I think so, yes.”
Her walk reminded him of the femme fatales in the black and white earth movies Corbin liked to watch, her hips swaying as she stalked forward. Keelah it was good to have an envirosuit in awkward situations.
“Anyway, I’ve been a big fan for a long time and I heard you’re the one who’s, ah…sponsoring this trip?”
“In a matter of speaking, yes.”
“First of all, I just want to say I’m very grateful for everything that you’re doing to save the galaxy and all, and I just wanted to show you my resume,” she said, holding out her datapad. “You’re going to need someone who can make sure you’re out in the field with the best weaponry and armour and the best mods available outside of proprietary research labs. Plus I have a degree in fashion, so I can make sure you’re at the cutting edge of style. Can’t save the universe without looking our best, now can we? Best foot forward, as I always say.” Her accompanying giggle was nervous, stopping abruptly as she pulled herself together, and her hands trembled only slightly as she handed over the pad.
A blue light flickered in his helmet. “Creator Elias, her heart rate indicates—”
“Please don’t,” Elias replied softly as he took the datapad and flicked through it.
“Very well her gal—”
“And I don’t want to know about her galvanic skin response either,” he added.
“Creator Elias, you have not been romantically involved with anybody in over eighteen months,” Pi said. “Physical and emotional intimacy is healthy for organics.”
“She doesn’t want romance, Pi,” Elias said. “She wants a fantasy.”
Mridi’s resume was more of a portfolio, with finished products, some technical schematics which included some new alloying techniques he hadn’t come across before. After a moment he was aware that Cicepia had walked over and was reading over his shoulder.
“Very impressive work…Mridi, yes?”
“Yes,” the asari said brightly. “I’m the pretty one.”
“So, I see,” Elias said blandly.
“Um, yes, so…I was wondering what sort of budget we’re talking about for something like this? If I were to sign on as your weapons, armour and modding specialist, what would be the hourly rate?” Elias smiled and handed her his pad, helpfully pre-loaded with the contracts he’d already passed out to the others. It was a modified boilerplate from Jamak, with payment and sponsorship rates that were probably a bit on the low side and included the standard appearance waivers, but it had some beefed up merchandise fees as well as a privacy clause that Elias insisted was included in all of his contracts. That said, his contract also prohibited any footage or images of him outside of his envirosuit being published, but that probably wasn’t going to be an issue for anyone else so far.
“Payment depends entirely on the ratings, my dear,” he said as she took the pad. A slow smile spread across her face. “I like the way you think,” she said. “Ooh, is this whole thing going to be filmed?”

“Yes it is,” Elias said, contriving to relay that confirmation with as much nonchalance as possible. “Do we get to give confessional and everything?” she said. “Because I’ve got some things to say about some people around here,” she said, glancing pointedly away from Cicepia.

“I’m sure that could be arranged,” Elias said, making a note to see if Jamak though that would help or be too cheesy. Then he decided not to mention them at all and hope Mridi forgot about the whole thing.

“Are these actually going to work?” Cicepia asked. “They look so…showy.”

Elias shrugged. “She’s better than me,” he said.

“Really?” Cicepia said, looking Mridi up and down, taking in the iridescent dress and three inch heels. “Well, I’m sure her services will be useful then.”

“Honey, you seem to be doubting my abilities,” Mridi said, placing one hand on her hip as she stared at Cicepia. “Do you have a problem with asari, dear?”

“Not at all,” Cicepia said. “I just didn’t take you for the technical sort, but if Elias thinks you’re as good as you say you are then I’m sure you’ll be an asset to the team.”

Mridi smiled at her, in an ‘aren’t we playing nice’ kind of way. “So these are your rooms, Mr. Elias?” she asked brightly.

“Oh no, this is the common room,” Elias said, making visual copies of the venting work Mridi had done in an attempt to increase thermal clip efficiency. “We’re all in smaller individual rooms leading off from here.”

“Oh. Wait, are they putting you in the same type room as everybody else?” Elias shrugged. “We’re saving the galaxy, Mridi, we all have to make sacrifices.”

She sighed. “You are so noble, Mr. Elias, of course. So…I just sign here?” she asked, pointing towards the bottom of the contract.

“And fill in your contact details,” Elias said. “We’ve had to come up with very rough descriptors for each universe as well. Interdimensional law is a bit tricky, but we’ve already established credit chits cross universes remarkably well. I’ll send you a copy and forward the other to the production company.”

She smiled and handed the tablet back to him. “Well, I’ll just go get my things and be right back. See you soon,” she said as she left the common area, head held high.

“Do you think she saw the ‘not responsible in case of death’ clause?” Cicepia asked after she’d left. “I hope so,” Elias said. “It was highlighted. And in bold.”
“Tuchanka supports life...it’s got critters that’ll rip your guts out,” - Urdnot Wrex

From space, Tuchanka looked red and angry, with swirling storms of dust and sand, some of which were visible to the naked eye. The retrofitting of the Endurance had taken two days, and while Elias, Sync and Drimi had worked on those, Anar had gone with Cicepia to find Officer Shields, hoping they could convince the turian husk to join them on their mission, only to come up on a dead end. Apparently the Cicepia from the synthesised universe—or Green Cicepia, as they’d taken to calling her—had been campaigning to have Shields fired. According to Blue Cicepia, it appeared to be a combination of prejudice against synthesised husks and an attempt to increase her own power within C-Sec by scapegoating another.

“I don’t think I like her much,” Cicepia had said, her voice tight as they’d returned to the ship. They’d asked Elias to try to track him down through C-Sec’s network of surveillance cameras, but Shields had clearly known where they all were—and how to avoid them. More worryingly, all of Shield’s electronic presences, from social media right down to his banking, had been cleaned out, and nearly all traces scrubbed clean from the extranet. It had been a dead end.

Now they were orbiting the krogan homeworld, homing in on coordinates Elias had provided from his analysis of Mimic’s memory cache.

“What’s the error margin on those calculations?” Sync asked as he lowered the Endurance onto a sandstone plateau.

“Twenty three point one four klicks,” Elias said after a moment’s pause.

“Can you narrow it down?”

“Now that we’re here, yes,” the quarian replied. “I can scan the area to locate the portal...just as soon as this sand storm clears up. About the best I can tell you at the moment is that it’s somewhere to the north.”

“In the clan compound?” Sync asked. “I’m reading a fortified settlement up ahead.”

“I don’t know,” Elias replied. “Which clan territory are we in anyway?”

“Thek,” Arkara said bleakly. “I can smell them from here.”

“Really?” Drimi said. “That’s some nose you have there. I can’t smell anything. Hey boss do you think I should check the air filters again?”

“Cool your jets biker dude,” Mridi said. “That was hyperbole.”

“Oh. Right. I knew that.”

“Arkara, if you know the clan, maybe you can talk to them?” Cicepia suggested.

“They want me dead,” Arkara said. “I don’t think I’ll get very far if I go in.”

“More than the turians?” Cicepia asked.

“Oh yes,” Arkara said. “With me it’s personal.”

“It could be worse,” Anar said. “You could be Salarian.”

“True,” Arkara said.

“We could just wait for the storm to clear, bypass the clan entirely and find out where the portal is,” Elias suggested.

“We should still scout ahead,” Arkara said. “Otherwise we’ll find ourselves waist deep in thresher maws and that’s only fun if you’re male. And krogan.” She glanced sideways at Otto, “And not raised on Dakuna.” It was the most words Anar had ever heard her say.

“This one will go,” Anar said firmly. “It is not afraid of thresher maws.”

“Really?” Elias asked.

“Perhaps a fingerling.”

With his blastshields up and helmet on, the sandstorm wasn’t much of a bother for Anar, although he hoped that none of the sand would get into any of the servos that controlled the arms and legs of the suit. The view was both impressive and monotonous. There was sand, stone, rubble, sand, stone and
more sand, and while he caught occasional glimpses of the mountains or cratered landscape, the
storm obscured almost everything. Only the blinking of his compass point told him which way to go.
He pushed along what appeared to be a dirt road—or at least, aflat expanse of baked rock marked
with tonka truck tracks—and soon found himself in the shadow of a walled compound, a lookout on
top pointing a gun at him, a snarling varren pacing at his heels.
“Be careful,” Arkara’s voice sounded inside his mech. “The clan tend to shoot first unless you give
them a strong challenge—or another reason to let you live.”
“You there,” the krogan yelled. “You wear no clan markings. Who are you and what is your
business here?”
Anar had hoped that the walk up to the compound would have helped him work out what to say. It
really hadn’t. Momentary lost for words, he grabbed at the first thing that crossed his mind.
“Survival,” he said, remembering to turn on the krogan voice modulator just in time. Maybe he
should pretend to be a Blood Pack merc.
“So?”
“Here to barter,” Anar said. “You’re looking at the goods,” he said, and tapped his chest.
The krogan pointed his sniper rifle at Anar’s chest. “Why are you really here?” he asked. “Are you
here to steal our females?”
A rumble in the distance saved Anar from having to answer, as a the roar of a powerful and well
maintained engine rang in their ears. The point of the krogan’s rifle moved away from him, and Anar
turned to see what appeared to be a brand new, sporty tonka zip across the landscape, racing through
the sand and pulling up to the wall. By the time it arrived, the wind had fallen somewhat, and when
the door of the truck lifted up like a wing, the human man who stepped out didn’t get an immediate
faceful of stinging sand.
His hair was dark, but bleached in what Anar suspected was a dye job, and his teeth were even and
the white that only came from cosmetic dentistry, according to the magazines that Tricey read. He
wore shades reminiscent of an oil slick and a bright orange suit that would probably have stood out
on any other planet’s surface. He held a small, leather briefcase in his right hand, and as he stood up,
he squared his shoulders and grinned up at the krogan, who was now aiming its sniper rifle at him.
“Friend krogan! I’m here to interview you Clan Leader.”
The krogan cocked his head, and appeared to be talking into a communicator. With the gun off him,
Anar walked closer to the gate, and Liam Vethaniel Music threw a set of keys at him. “You there,
take care of her. She’s barely two months old.”
For a moment, Anar stood still, keys in hand. Then he nodded. “Sure...sir. Absolutely,” Anar
climbed into the truck and lowered the vehicle door just as the gates opened and the reporter was
waved inside, Anar driving in slowly. He pulled into an empty space with other vehicles and stepped
out, heading back to find the reporter. They were nosy bastards and if he was lucky he’d find out
something worth knowing.
“This one has entered the Thek compound,” he said softly into his communicator.
“Thanks,” Liam said, tossing Anar a credit chit. “You want to make some extra creds?”
“Doing what?” Anar asked.
“You any good with a video camera?”
“He doesn’t like the camera drones,” Elias murmured. “Strange he didn’t bring a cameraman along.”
“Maybe he wasn’t allowed to,” Arkara rumbled.
“Th—I am familiar with the technology,” Anar said in response to the reporter’s question.
“Good,” Liam said, and handed him the briefcase before turning and walking towards the largest
building in the compound. “Follow me then.”
Anar always found it took him some time to get used to using two hands rather than six tentacles, but
he managed to juggle both keys and briefcase before trudging after the human, looking carefully
around the compound as he did. The buildings were made of stone, plascrete and sturdy pre-fab
modules. By the looks of it several generations of construction lay one atop the other, and he could
also see scorch marks and the charred remnants of blacked timber on here and there. Some of the
walls were pitted from gunfire, and throughout the streets, young krogan toddlers waddled, crawled
and generally got underfoot. He lost count after he hit thirty something and felt a growing unease settle into his stomach.

“Arkara, were there a lot of children around when you left?” he asked.

“No. Why do you ask?” Arkara replied.

“This one is observing a large number of youngsters in this compound. More than this one thought possible given the genophage. They have stubby fingers. This one finds them mildly disconcerting.”

“That’s weird.”

“The females are also very…docile, if you get what this one means.”

“Now you’ve gone from weird to unsettling,” Arkara said. “See if you can find out more of what’s going on.”

“This one is following the human reporter who hosted Citadel’s Got Talent. This one believes the human is going to speak with the Clan Leader.”

“Liam Musie just walked into the Krogan compound?” Elias asked. “Things must be going downhill if he’s taking jobs roving the galaxy.”

From several metres ahead, the reporter turned around “Come on, keep up, man,” he said.

“Coming sir,” Anar said, and picked up his pace.

The guards let them into the Clan Leader’s compound, where a particularly vicious looking krogan lounged on a rude throne of crumbling stone. Heavy scars were gouged into his head plates and his eyes were highly alert and fast moving, darting in immediately on the newcomers with a mixture of calculating cunning and arrogance. Reaching into a compartment, Anar pulled out a small vial and drank down the mixture inside, shuddering slightly at the taste. He’d seen that look before, and it was not one he had wanted to see again, on any species.

The room was more of a courtyard, or possibly an amphitheatre, ringed by towers in various states of ruin and containing a large statue of the leader himself, which easily rose three stories into the air, and was possibly bigger than the monument on the citadel.

“Thek Targev,” Liam said, and handed over a small piece of cardboard with a flourish. “My card.”

The seated Krogan took the card, glanced at it and threw it into a nearby brazier, where a fire was cheerily burning.

“Let’s get this straight, human,” Targev said, leaning forward on his throne. “I don’t know who you are. I don’t care who you are. You are here at my will, and you will report only what we want you to. If you don’t like that, I’ll deal with you accordingly. And I’m not exactly sure what that will mean. Every other squishy ‘news’ reporter has agreed with my terms. Got it?”

Liam looked up from where he had been inspecting his nails and flashed a charming smile. “Crystal clear. Shall we get started?” he asked. “This is my cameraman,” he said, waving towards Anar.

“And bodyguard,” Anar added, turning up the growl on his modulation software. Opening up the briefcase he pulled out the video camera. Turning it on, he pointed it towards the dais, and turned it on, trying to sync it up to his omni tool feed to the Endurance.

“What’s taking so long?” Targev asked. “Buttons too small for your paws?”

Liam turned and snapped his fingers. “Yo, uh, Charlie, you ready yet?”

“Nearly boss,” Anar said. “And it’s Rana, remember?”

“Sure,” Liam said, and then plastered on his best smile for the camera.

“Good morning galactic citizens! I’m here on Tuchanka reporting on an amazing development. Most of you are aware of the challenges facing the great and powerful krogan people, but it seems that one clan has found a way to beat the odds. I’m here with Clan Leader, Thek Targev of what will surely become the most powerful clan on all of Tuchanka. Tell me, Thek Targev, what exactly are you doing that is so revolutionary?”

“We have found a way to combat the genophage.”

“You mean a cure.”

Targev paused. “Yes.”

“That’s amazing. Are you going to share this cure with all krogan?”

Targev threw his head back and laughed. “Only the strongest krogan are worthy of this cure.”

“So, there’s an…audition process?”
Targev frowned. “The cure only works on females. If any female wishes to join clan Targev she will receive treatment for the genophage—if she passes our tests.”

“And what do these tests involve, exactly?” Liam asked.

“They find out when they arrive,” Targev said, leaning back against the back of his throne. “That is all I will say.”

“Right,” Liam said brightly. “Well you heard it here. Any krogan female willing to take a chance at fertility can come and join the Thek clan. This is Liam Vethaniel Musie reporting from Tuchanka—back to you in the studio, Ed. Got that, Rana?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. That was relatively painless,” Liam said, turning to the clan leader. “Thank you for speaking to me.”

Thek Targev grunted and waved them away.

Anar cut the feed and put the video camera away, following the human out of the compound and back towards the sports truck. “Good show, sir,” he said.

“You too,” Liam replied, handing him another credit chit. “You’re not a local boy, are you?”

“How’d you know?”

“Your armour doesn’t have the Thek clan markings.”

“Oh.”

“Thanks for your help, Rana,” he said as he took the suitcase and got into his car. “Maybe I’ll see you again.”

“Maybe so,” Anar agreed. “So I think we have a way into the compound,” Elias’ voice came through his speakers. “You know, assuming we want to get inside.”

“We do,” Arkara said firmly.

“Well, they say any female is welcome to go in for the cure.”

“They’ll recognise me,” Akara pointed out.

“Not in your armour,” Elias said. “I can also make you some contact lenses to change your eye colour. You can also use a voice modulator to make your voice sound different.”

“We could just head straight for the portal and bypass all of this,” Cicepia suggested.

“No,” Arkara said. “Targev’s doing something to my clan. And I don’t like it.”

“Sure, sure,” Cicepia said. “I was just saying.”

“Bring Otto when you come,” Anar suggested. “You might need him to get past the front gate.”

“Can he fight?” Elias asked.

“Yes,” Anar said. “He can definitely fight.”

“Outside of video games,” Cicepia added.

“He hunts for game,” Anar said, recalling a chat they had had in game during a slow period. “He can shoot.”
The Dormitories

“Hard to see big picture behind pile of corpses,” – Mordin Solus

Getting into the compound had been easier than expected. After cautioning Otto about his speech patterns, they had set out, the storm dying down enough that sand wasn’t an issue. The voice modulator had helped them talk their way through the front gates, but Arkara was surprised the others had gone along so quickly with the gate guards comments.

“And these aliens are your servants?” he’d asked. “You’ll have to chain them.”

“I’ll deal with them once we’re inside,” Elias had said as the krogan threw down some electronic locking collars with long chains.

Sync was visibly suffering in the heat of the afternoon, but had waved off any offers of assistance. The layout inside the compound hadn’t changed, and Arkara didn’t need the map Elias generated from his scans of the area to know that the market was in the south western quadrant near the warehouses and the main living areas were in the east. The large dormitory style buildings to the northeast were new, but they were built of stone as reinforced plascrete just like the older buildings.

Anar’s mech strode towards them as she took in the number of females and children that were evident in the camp, but the women sat quietly or walked with their eyes looking down, shrinking back whenever one of the men walked past.

“This one is glad to see you all again,” Anar said, even as Cicepia yelped.

“Stand still,” Elias muttered. “These locks don’t respond well to wireless commands.”

“They have a wireless interface?” Cicepia asked.

“No, but they have an electromagnetic field,” Elias said. “If I can get the right opposing fields nearby I should be able to trigger them to unlock.”

“Or you could just re-program them,” Sync suggested.

“Not out in the open without being obvious, I can’t.”

“Do it later,” Arkara said. “We need to go speak with her,” she added, and walked up to one of the females, who was seated on a bench rocking an infant in her arms while several youngsters played on an sturdy playground nearby.

“Why her?” Elias asked.

“Because she’s closest and not under armed guard,” Arkara said.

The woman was dressed in civilian clothing, with a structured robe, hat and veil in an off white colour with red embroidery, and cringed away when Arkara tapped her on the shoulder.

“Sorry,” Arkara said. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I just wanted to know what sort of processing you go through for this cure—and what are the tests they put you through first.”

The woman lowered her eyes and clutched her baby to her chest. It was clear that she understood the question, but for some reason was unwilling—or unable—to respond.

“What have they done to you?” Arkara asked, her eyes narrowing.

The woman looked around, glancing sidelong at some of the nearby males, who were regarding her with some interest—and a watchfulness that Arkara could only describe as threatening.

“Otto, come over,” Arkara said through her communicator. “Make it look like you’re asking the questions.”

The cook walked forward, bringing the others along give the leashes weren’t very long.

“With understanding: What can I do to assist?” he asked.

“Just stand there and try to look imposing,” Arkara hissed. “And stand between her and those males to block their view.”

Otto bristled, loomed forward and folded his arms. “With Anger: You must keep your hands to yourself and know who is boss.”

The female stared at him for a moment, uncertain fear warring with amusement on her face.

“It’s okay, he’s with me,” Arkara said. “We just want to know what’s going one here.”
“I’m not allowed to say what happens during processing,” the female said, and Arkara was shocked to hear her own voice being spoken back at her. She heard Sync gasp and stared at the other woman, noticing that she had Arkara’s amber eyes. If not for her helmet, the other woman could well have thought she was looking into her own face.

Arkara took an involuntary step back, nearly bumping into Anar, who was standing just off to her right. “What have they done to you?”

“Find us in the dormitory after sundown,” the female said glancing towards the large, new building complex. “When there are less of them around,” she added meaningfully.

“I’ll need a face veil,” Arkara said. “I don’t normally wear one.”

“The men insist,” the woman said softly, and Arkara didn’t think she’d ever get used to hearing herself. It was bad enough listening to recordings of her own voice. The woman got up and walked over to a building, returning shortly with a pile of cloth that she pushed into Arkara’s hands before walking off towards the playground.

By now, the sun was sinking low on the horizon. “We should find somewhere to sleep for the night,” Arkara said to the others. “I need to find out what’s going on here.”

“Was that…you that we were just talking to?” Sync asked. “It sounded like you.”

“Looked a bit like you too,” Cicepia observed.

“Cloned tissue?” Elias suggested.

“I don’t know,” Arkara said. “And I can’t begin to guess.”

“This might make it easier to blend in though,” Cicepia said.

“Yes.”

They holed up for the night in an empty storage shed, and the cool of the desert night gave them all some respite, especially Sync.

“You need a better cooling system if you’re going to run around with those cybernetics,” Elias said as he popped the lock on Sync’s collar.

“I’ve never been somewhere this hot before,” Sync said. “How do the geth manage heat like this?”

“Venting,” Elias said. “And thermo regulation built into their platforms. It’s not dissimilar to the one I use in my own suit.”

“But I thought your people created the geth before your immune systems weakened—before you needed the suits.”

“Sure, but we still had work suits,” Elias said. “These modern suits are just refinements of the technology we already had.”

Sync nodded, and munched on a muesli bar that Anar had distributed to the levo-protein people from his mech. “I’ll have to look into that once we’re back on the ship.”

Elias nodded and walked over to Arkara, holding out a two clear hemispheres that were as delicate as flower petals. “Here,” he said. “I don’t know if you’ll need them now, but I made you some contact lenses. They might help if you run into someone you know.”

“Like the Clan Chief?” Arkara said, picking them up. They looked tiny in her large hands, and felt strange going into her eyes, but it felt even stranger being out of her armour. She wasn’t used to going without it in enemy territory, and the Thek compound was definitely enemy territory.

“Like the Clan Chief,” Elias agreed, pulling up his omnitool and making a few adjustments to something on her new omni tool. “All right, I’ve linked you up so that you’ll be able to relay video to me and—” Elias stopped as a presence loomed in the doorway—the guard from the gate was staring in at them. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Anar slip into the back hatch of his mech, and was thankful the hanar had parked so that the hatch should have been out of sight from the doorway.

“Has your female presented herself to the Chief yet?” he asked.

“She is resting,” Anar’s augmented voice came. “She will present herself in the morning.”

“Sure,” Anar’s augmented voice came. “She will present herself in the morning.”

“So she is weak?”

“She is to perform the Rite of Purification tonight,” Anar said. “Does Clan Thek take a change of clan fealty so lightly as to forget the rites of all Krogan?”

The guard bristled. “You dare insult clan Thek?”
Otto charged up then, and smashed his forehead into the guard’s helmet, sending the smaller male stumbling backwards. “Do not speak to my lady in such a tone!” he said with a fair approximation of emotion in his voice.

“You dishonour Thek with your presumption,” Anar said. “Tell the Clan Chief our female will present herself in the morning.”

As the guard scrambled away and Anar closed the door, Otto rubbed at his headplate. “Painfully: Ow.”

Arkara laid a hand on his shoulder. “Well done,” she said.

“With slight regret: That was a rash action. I am not sure why I did it.”

“Well it seemed to work,” Arkara said with a smile. “I’d say there’s a fair bit of krogan in you after all.”

“With feelings of turmoil: I am not sure if I have just disappointed my parents or made them proud.”

“I think you made them proud,” Arkara said, and Otto blushed. Then she slipped out the door and headed over to the women’s complex.

As she joined the women as they were herded into the dorms, Arkara noticed that a lot of them had the same eyes as her, although not all of them. Once inside, the women were able to remove their veils, and Arkara found that many of them had her face. Indeed, she could see that there were only about six different faces amongst the twenty or thirty individuals who were tucking in their children. She also noticed that each one had a number tattooed on her right wrist. Looking around, she approached one of them that looked like the woman she’d seen earlier.

“Did I speak to you earlier today?” Arkara asked.

The woman stared at her in confusion. “No,” she replied in Arkara’s voice.

“Show her your hands,” Elias’ suggested quietly. “You don’t have a number.”

“Can I get all of you together please?” Arkara asked. “I need to speak to you—all of you.”

The woman backed away. “Why? What are you planning?”

Arkara held up her hands, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible. “I just want to work out what they’ve done to you all—and why you look and sound like me.”

The woman peered at Arkara’s wrists and her eyes widened. “Are you the original?” she asked.

“What do you mean original?”

“You shouldn’t be here,” the woman said. “If they find out you’re here they’ll kill you.”

“That’s nothing new,” Arkara said with a shrug. “They’ve been hunting me for years.”

“We came—well, some of us came—from you.”

“I left years ago,” Arkara said. “How is this even possible?”

The woman looked down at the floor. “We are not true krogan,” she said, shame dripping from every word. “We were made from you.”

“Made? You mean…created?”

“Yes.”

“How? Why?”

“They wanted more fertile krogan, so they made more.”

“Who did? Who is this ‘they’?”

The woman looked around, almost instinctively it seemed, and then lowered her voice. “Mr. Cyrus,” she said. “He’s a salarian.”

“Anar? Did you know about this?” Arkara asked through her omni-tool.

Through the video link she saw Anar drift into view, stuffing the mouth under his belly with cheez puffs. “About what?”

“Elias, do you have any idea what this means?”

“It sounds like they’re cloning fertile females—including you,” Elias said. “And I suspect these tests are simply a ruse to find more fertile females to clone. But more to the point—Sync can you isolate Dr. Lennox in the med bay?”

“On it,” Arkara could hear the human’s voice even though she couldn’t see him. “Hopefully he’s still in there.”
“Is that what they’re doing?” Arkara asked. “They’re not helping women overcome the genophage?”
The clone shook her head. “I believe they’re only looking for fertile females. But if this is what it
takes to survive, we have to do it.”

“Not this way,” Arkara said. “There has to be a better way.”

“Change of leadership?” Cicepia suggested.

“Cicepia’s right,” Elias said. “The technology itself isn’t bad. Just perhaps the way it’s being used.”

“Do we have the right to impose a leadership change just because we find the customs here
objectionable?” Anar asked.

“To end the enslavement of these women, I’ll act first and debate later, thanks,” Cicepia snapped.

Elias sighed. “We still need more information—and our best source is sitting on board the
Endurance.”

“Are you sure it’s the same Cyrus?” Anar asked. “This one has never heard of Cyrus being familiar
with cloning technology.”

“He’s salarian and a medical doctor,” Elias said. “Chances are good.”

“But he’s on the ship,” Anar protested.

Arkara turned back to her clone, who was staring at the video from Arkara’s omni-tool in

“I don’t know,” the woman said. “I was made years ago.”

“How many years ago?”

“Three years.”

That was two years after Arkara had left Tuchanka, burning down the Thek science facility in the
process. It made her wonder if she missed anything. Through the video screen a stream of chatter
could be heard.

“Drimi, keep Cyrus locked in the med bay,” Sync said.

“Uh, sure thing boss—um, Sync,” Drimi’s voice was softer. “What’s this about?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m isolating the med bay systems so he can’t override the lockdown. Keep an eye
on things up there, okay?”

“As far as this one knows, Cyrus seeks redemption for something that happened during his time with
the Eclipse Mercenary gang,” Anar said. “Both of us did things we aren’t proud of in those days.”

“Then I’d say his past just caught up with him,” Elias said. “Once he’s contained we can ask him
about it.”

“This one would appreciate that,” Anar said. “Cyrus has always been good to this one, although he
does tend to be impolite when directly questioned.”

“With surprise: Doctor Lennox has always been very kind to me,” Otto said.

“You bake.”

“I think we should deal with Cyrus after we’re done here,” Cicepia said. “One problem at a time.”

“But if this is the same Cyrus, he may have information as to what’s been going on here,” Elias
pointed out.

“Assuming he’ll tell us—can we trust him?”

“This one has found him trustworthy in the past,” Anar said.

“Look, we have two options,” Elias said. “Either we get information from Cyrus and possibly find a
back way into this cloning facility, or we go straight through the Clan Chief. We might have to deal
with him anyway, but it could get bloody. I don’t know about you but I’m not keen to go up against
a battline of charging krogan.”

“I want to take out Targev,” Arkara said. “He’s a lousy pyjak just like his brother was. I just don’t
know if we could walk out easily afterward.”

“It’s your call, Arkara,” Sync said. “These are your people.”

“Politely: if the women in that building are clones of you then they are your family,” Otto said.

“They are your sisters. What do you think is best for them?”

“To be free to live their lives,” Arkara said promptly. “To be their own persons. That’s not going to
happen under Targev’s watch.”

“This one believes the Clan Chief will use his numbers to take over Tuchanka once enough krogan
are born,” Anar said. “You are looking at the future of the krogan if we let things be.”
“I don’t know,” Elias said. “That’s a highly limited gene pool. You need more than six females to
repopulate a species even with redundant systems like the krogan have.”
There was a pause as everyone stared at the quarian.
“What? I was looking into livestock farming methods as potential data to bring back to Rannoch.”
“Thoughtfully: I doubt the minds behind this enterprise are thinking scientifically.”
“No,” Elias said. “I’m also wondering whether they built in other traits into the cloning process.”
“Such as?” Arkara asked.
“Um…pliability?” Elias suggested. “None of the women have your feisty nature.”
“Targev probably wanted people easier to control,” Arkara said.
“That trait could get passed on to their children,” Elias pointed out. “Between inbreeding and a
change in temperament, I’m not sure we’re looking at the salvation of the krogan race.”
“There’s something to be said for constantly replenishing numbers though,” Anar said.
“It’s not going to win against reapers,” Elias retorted.
Arkara sighed. “No, it isn’t,” she said. “Let’s talk to Cyrus.”
**Ethics in Science**

*Oh, better to die to a thresher maw,
With shotgun-blasting-roaring-roar,
Than to play ambassadorial games,
with the blood of Shiagur in her veins*

- *Mordin Solus*

“Ah Captain,” Cyrus said when Sync brought him up on his omnitool. “Maybe you can sort this out. I suspect your ship ‘engineer’ may not be worthy of the title. My med bay door has been stuck for two minutes now and I’m fast running out of cookies.”

“This one would like to remind you that there is a rack of cookies in the kitchen,” Anar said. “This one saw them earlier today before leaving the ship.”

“Which would be great, if I could get to the kitchen!” Cyrus snapped.

“Drimi’s working on that,” Sync said.

“In the meantime, perhaps you could help us with a few things,” Cicepia said.

“Yes, perhaps you can,” Anar said. “Otto can you pass the cookies this one asked you to bring along?”

Taking a peanut butter cookie from the krogan, Anar started eating as noisily as possible, and Arkara shook her head.

“You know, Protheans used to eat hanar. Said they were crunchy. I have a recipe here. Always wanted to try it.”

“Before or after your historical course of flies?” Anar asked.

“Ha ha,” Cyrus said. “In all seriousness Captain, I demand you send someone more competent to deal with this situation. The Med Bay is clean room. I would like it to stay that way.”

“Sure,” Sync said. “We’ll get that door open as soon as we get some information from you.”

“Ah,” Cyrus said. “So the door being locked is not a malfunction. I should have guessed. I’m surprised you did not simply ask first.”

“It’s a precaution,” Sync said. “Normally I would, but I love my ship, and I’m not about to set you loose on it after what we’ve just found out.”

“And what’s that?”

“The krogan say you’re the one who gave them the cloning technology they’re using in an attempt to beat the genophage,” Elias said.

“And what if I was? That was shut down a long time ago and—”

“It’s still running,” Elias said.

“What? That’s impossible. I took all machinery and notes when the Chief decided to misuse the technology. He wanted an army, not a cure. No krogan could have started the facility up again.”

“Arkara, would you mind showing Dr. Lennox where you are?” Elias asked. “Do a quick tour of the building.”

“Interesting,” Cyrus said, scratching at his temple as Arkara showed him the ladies with her face.

“Someone has dug up my work. Implications unsettling. The cloning technology was…imprecise.”

“In all seriousness, this one is surprised you tried to help the krogan,” Anar said. “You’ve never mentioned it before.”

“To what point?” Cyrus asked. “I failed. I hoped for a better resolution.”

“When did you do this? This one finds it hard to believe Eclipse authorised this.”

“They didn’t,” Cyrus said. “They just put me in a position where I could steal cloning technology from Cerberus which I used here.”
"We need to get inside and shut down that facility," Anar said.
"And how can I help you with that? I haven’t been back to Tuchanka in years."
"Dig out the facility blueprints," Elias said. "We need to find a way in."
"I can send them over, but this is Tuchanka. Unless there’s a hole in the wall there is only one entrance to facility. No secret doors, no hidden passages. Will send over the file now. I trust that will be sufficient to have my door unlocked. I also want two dozen macaroons. No. Three dozen."
"Proudly: I can make those."
"One other thing," Elias said. "If they are using your technology, what’s the best way to shut it down? You know, aside from a bomb or airstrike."
"Pull the power or destroy the generators," Cyrus said promptly. "Bearing in mind doing so will kill any clones growing in tanks at the time."
"Ah."
"We’ll deal with that when we get there," Arkara said. "Was your facility located in the clan compound?"
"No," Cyrus said. "Given your current coordinates, the facility was off to northeast. I can send you exact location, but there’s no guarantee the krogan would be using the same place." He sniffed, "They’re traditionalists, so it’s entirely possible, but potentially a waste of time."
"We’ll have to deal with the Targev either way," Arkara said. "He’s not going to let us out without a fight."
There was a ping on Anar’s omni tool. “Schematics sent. I recommend caution. I destroyed all local copies of my research and wiped all computers before leaving with the hardware. Only way for facility to be restarted is with Cerberus intel. Many possibilities. Mostly bad.”
“Thanks Cyrus,” Sync said. “I’ll get your door sorted.”
“And there really are more cookies in the kitchen,” Anar said.
“We’ll talk later, Anar,” Cyrus said. “Or not. I might just lace your next meal with something interesting. I have some research on mindfish active compounds that need testing.”

Arkara left the dormitory just after dawn, along with the other women, and met up with the others outside. The temperature was already climbing towards scorching, and even with the cool of the night Sync seemed to be in trouble.
“You need to drink some water,” she told him.
“Ran out,” Sync said, keeping to Anar’s shadow. “Let’s just go, all right?”
“Sure. Where’s Otto?”
“Not here,” Cicepia said.
“We need to find him,” Arkara said, but the turian laid a hand on her arm.
“We don’t have time,” she said. “If we don’t see the Clan Chief now, we’re risking a fight with all the krogan warriors here.”
“I’d like to see them try,” Arkara muttered.
“I wouldn’t,” Elias said.
Arkara grunted. “Where are your guns?”
“This one has them on a rack in its mech,” Anar said, “along with your armour.”
“I don’t think I can put it on now,” Akara said, glancing around at the stares of the male krogan.
“You’ve got my assault rife, Anar?”
“Yes.”
“Then let’s go. You’ll have to do the talking once we’re there.”

Targev’s throne was just as she remembered it—heavy, crumbling and sat on a dais ringed by towers that had probably once been part of the defensive walls of a fortified bunker. Whatever roof had covered the area had been ripped off years ago, and now only protruding lengths of rusted metal suggested that there had once been a structure overhead. The giant statue of himself behind the dais was new, although unsurprising. It was hewn out of rubble, and Arkara fancied she could see the rough, blocky joins where piece had been cobbled together. Shoddy work, even by krogan
standards. Targev himself lazed on his throne, one leg thrown carelessly over an armrest. He was flanked by two bodyguards, and Arkara saw the flash of metal in one of the towers above.

“Two krogan the the towers and two o’clock and ten o’clock,” Elias’ muttered softly as they walked into the centre of the room “Also one behind us at four o’clock.”

“I’ll deal with him,” Cicepia said quietly. “These collars are unlocked, right?”

“Just yank them off whenever.”

“What took you so long?” Targev said impatiently. “You arrived yesterday.”

“She underwent the rite of purification,” Anar said. “Taking a new clan is not something done lightly.”

Targev grunted and turned towards Arkara. “And what’s your name?”

“Our female is mute,” Anar lied quickly. “She does not speak.”

“And how did she become mute?”

“She’s always been mute,” Anar said. “I think it makes her more appealing. You don’t need to speak to have babies.”

Rising from the throne, he strode over towards her, eyeing her as he might eye a prized varren. “She certainly looks strong,” he said. “She seems…familiar somehow. Where is she from?”

“Another tribe.”

Targev turned his glower towards Anar. “Which one?”

“One you don’t know.”

“I know all the tribes, clanless scum,” Targev said and slammed his forehead into Anar’s mech.

Arkara tensed as Anar’s helmet rotated nearly a full one hundred and eighty degrees. A thick oppressive silence descended as everyone stared at the krogan who by rights should have fallen to the ground with a broken neck. Reaching up, Anar twisted his helmet back into its normal position. “This one’s kid hits harder than you,” he said.

Targev roared, and went to headbutt Anar again, when Arkara barreled into him, yanking his shotgun out of his hands and pointing the weapon at him. Behind her, she heard the familiar hum of Cicepia’s biotics and an exclamation from a now airborne krogan. “She looks strong,” he said. “She seems…familiar somehow. Where is she from?”

“Another tribe.”

Targev turned his glower towards Anar. “Which one?”

“Hey turian lady, do more of that!” At the back of her mind, the voice was familiar, but Arkara shoved it aside and fired the shotgun at Targev’s head, only to have him duck out of the way and lash out with his foot, sending her stumbling backwards, right into the sights of one of his bodyguards, who had his rifle trained on her. The guard squeezed the trigger and the thermal clip ejected into his face, a hiss of superheated air blasting outwards. Finding her feet, Arkara glanced over at Elias, who had ducked down behind Anar and was tapping away at his omni tool. He gave her a thumbs up and then grabbed both his sniper rifle and his sub machine gun as Anar’s suit opened up.

More gunfire rang in the air and she felt a shot graze her shoulder, and she roared, more in anger than anything else and rushed forward, using the butt of the shotgun to knock Targev upside the head, and heard shot hit one of the nearby bodyguards, releasing the smell of pepper, chilli and something hotter. The bodyguard sneezed, which was promptly followed up by a second sneeze and a third as more of the spices entered his nasal cavities. As the krogan shook his head to clear his nostrils—or waited for them to shut down—a field of blue energy crackled across Targev’s armour, causing it to buckle. A spray of blood splattered her face as Anar unloaded six shots in rapid succession into Targev’s chest, and the clan leader keeled over, gasping.

Glancing around, Arkara saw only the other of Targev’s bodyguards was still in the fight. The krogan in the tower behind them was still struggling in the grip of Cicepia’s singularity and the third warrior had been pulled helplessly into the air by another biotic field, only to fall to the ground moments later, a bloody hole punched through its helmet.

She felt the cool touch of medigel settle over her shoulder, and looked over to see Sync beside her. “Thanks,” she said.
He nodded woodenly, and she could see his face was flushed and his synthetic implant lights were glowing an ugly maroon. She thought she could just make out a voice repeating the phrase ‘Critical heat levels detected. Engaging survival mode’, but as she raised the shotgun to fire at the still remaining bodyguard, she saw the doctor step forward, his pistol in hand and aiming down at Targev’s skull. It would have been a point blank shot. It would have blown the man’s brains out. Sync moved as a robot, and then he paused, a burst of electricity crackling over his body, and she glanced towards Elias, who had his omni-tool back up again. Then a burst of gunfire sounded and she saw two holes punch their way through Sync’s chest. The human hit the ground like a sack of meat, and while the return fire from Anar brought down the krogan it appeared they were too late. The mopping up was clinical—Elias finished off the floating krogan with a shot from his sniper rifle and Arkara used Thek’s shotgun to down the man’s last remaining bodyguard. As the dust settled, Cicepia was already trying to staunch the blood flowing from the doctor’s wounds.

“How is he?” Elias asked, running up.
“Bad. I think it punctured a lung.
“Is he…”
“No,” the turian said. “But his systems are failing.”
Elias looked around at the people he’d been travelling with. A turian, two krogan and a hanar. Back on the Endurance, there were two asari and a salarian doctor. Which would have been great if the ship wasn’t over an hour’s walk away. And if Sync didn’t look likely to bleed out before they even got there. Applying a coat of medigel onto Sync’s wounds, stopped some of the gushing, but if something had ruptured…

In his visor, Sync’s body became awash with green lines as Pi activated Elias’ omni tool’s diagnostics.

“Creator Elias.”

“Yes?”

“Doctor Sync’s physical upgrades include both arms, one leg, one eye and portions of his torso. While his vital stats are deteriorating, we have a sixty four percent chance of saving him if we get him to a trained medic in the next thirty minutes. Alert: secondary survival subroutines present in the Doctor’s circuitry. Activating now.”

In the background, Elias could hear the footsteps of other krogan, doubtless drawn by the gunfire, and Rayne was pointing a gun at Thek Targev’s head. “He’s not dead yet, but if you get any closer he’s going to be.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Arkara move towards them. “He just got kicked in the quad as he richly deserves.” She was still holding the shotgun. Targev’s shotgun.

“You!” One of the krogan said. “What are you doing here?”

“Finishing what I started,” Arkara said firmly. “It looks like you’ve been busy since I’ve been gone.”

“How did you escape from the lab?”

A female voice which Elias recognised as belong to Tricey—or possibly Beatrice—came out of speakers that appeared to be in the middle of the human’s chest.

“Deactivating Synthskin,” it said as the holographic illusion that Sync used to clothe his augmented body in the illusion of flesh flickered out of view. From his sternum to his belly button was a smooth, diamond shaped metal plate, with a circular piece that sat just underneath where the human’s ribcage would be. From around the edges, angry red light leaked out, and Elias was reminded how Sync’s emotions were often betrayed by the light of his cybernetic implants.


Elias flipped open the lid, looking into the small cavity and finding a bright red button. Heart pounding more than it had during the battle, he pushed it.

Immediately, the covering of the button opened, sections sliding away from the centre to reveal a lens, and a holographic interface appeared, projecting up over Sync’s body.

“Running diagnostics. Organic tissue failure. Heart function at point zero five percent. Recommend mechanical CPR. Yes/No?”

Elias poked his forefinger at ‘Yes’, passing through the hologram in his haste.

“Initiating mechanical CPR.” Sync’s chest began to rise and fall, his chest shuddering unnaturally, and a heartbeat monitor appeared on the holographic display.

“Look,” Rayne was saying. “I don’t care what the politics of the situation are—lower the guns or I’m going to start taking off your chief’s headplates. One by one.”

“I know who you are,” it was a youthful, male voice.

“And I don’t care.”

“You should have won!”
For a fleeting moment, Elias was annoyed, but then, Rayne had been very popular on Tuchanka. Besides, this wasn’t his universe, and given his counterpart’s taste in music, maybe she should have won. A looming shadow interrupted his thoughts and Elias looked up to find Otto standing there, holding a ceramic vessel of water.

“With Regret: I was seeking water to help the Captain. It appears I am too late.”

Cicepia grabbed the water and ripped a piece of fabric from Sync’s shirt. Wetting the rag, she lay it across the man’s forehead, and then levered a crumbling piece of stone from the dias, revealing the cool earth below. “No, you’re not,” she said, pouring the water into the cooler, lower soil and smearing the resulting mud over his extremities. “Help me cool him down.”

“Mechanical CPR failure,” Beatrice said matter of factly. “Suggest endocardial defibrillation. Yes/No?”

Elias slapped both Otto and Cicepia’s hands away from Sync’s body and hit ‘yes’, and the man’s body spasmed as voltage coursed across his heart once, twice, three times. There was a pause and Sync’s body jerked again, and a slow, steady beep on the heart monitor coincided with a shallow breath.

“Heartbeat restored. Running diagnostics.”

“Hey guys,” Rayne said in the background. “I’m going to need an airstrike at these coordinates—”

Elias looked up and the standoff was still going, with Arkara and Anar pointing guns at the three male krogan who had entered the clan leader’s compound.

“Wait, wait,” the young male said. “We don’t need no airstrike.”

“Are you sure?” Rayne asked, her omnitool still orange and glowing on her wrist. “Because you’ve still got guns pointed in my direction and I don’t like being shot. If I’m going to die, I’m at least going to take you with me.”

The younger krogan nudged the warrior next to him with his shoulder. “We pick new clan leader this way,” he said.

“Or you can become krogan barbeque,” Rayne said. “I sort of like that idea…mmm…barbeque.”

“The new chief is the krogan who defeated the old chief,” the older warrior grumbled.

“Ah,” Rayne said brightly. “I think you’re in luck there.”

Beatrice’s voice pulled Elias’ attention back to Sync. “Arterial blood gas collected.”

The holographic screen showed a table, which flickered accusingly at him.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pH</th>
<th>7.28</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PO2</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCO2</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCO3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Displaying suggested treatments.” Three further options appeared on screen: epinephrine, HCO3 and 0.9% Saline, each with an ‘Apply Y/N’ selection toggle next to it.

“What’s that mean?” Cicepia asked.

~*~

“What does all that mean?” Elias asked Corbin as he stared at the datapad by the side of his bed. “You know, I’ve realised that for all that quarians have weak immune systems, we rely a bit too much on pre-programmed diagnostic tools when it comes to our health.”

The human smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he turned the datapad so that Elias could view it more easily. “Those are just your blood gas readings. It tells me whether or not your body is getting enough oxygen to function—see the PO2 reading? That’s a measure of dissolved oxygen in your blood. The PCO2 reading is a measure of the dissolved carbon dioxide in your blood.”

“And what’s the P stand for?”
“Pressure.”
“But the pH is just the…the…acidity measure?”
“Yeah, it is,” Corbin said. “You know, I can’t actually remember what pH stands for.”
“And seven point four two is good?”
“Well, it turns out that humans and quarians have similar biology, leg shape and proteins notwithstanding,” Corbin said. “Normal pH is seven point three five to seven point four five. You should have seen your stats when you first got here though. CO₂ readings were through the roof.”
He paused for a moment. “Actually you probably didn’t want to see that.”
Elias stared down at the small numbers on the datapad. CO₂ was reading thirty seven, which appeared to be good. “So what about medication? Has it been hard getting dextro first aid supplies?”
“Not for this,” Corbin said, tapping the screen with a stylus. “It’s just the proteins in our bodies that are different. Chemistry is chemistry regardless of species and there’s no proteins in medical grade saline solution so that’s useful galaxy wide…well…maybe not on volus on account of pressure, but you’re no trouble at all.” The human smiled, showing even white teeth and Elias couldn’t help but smile back. Not for the first time he hoped he had enough credits to cover his medical bills.

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“His blood has too much carbon dioxide in it and for some reason is too acidic,” Elias said. “The CO₂ probably built up while he wasn’t breathing. Epinephrine. That’s adrenaline, so yes. Saline will help given he’s lost blood and the bicarb should counteract the blood acidity.”
They watched as the numbers flickered and changed, pH creeping higher and CO₂ creeping lower until both flickered into green.

There was a loud crack of bone on bone and Elias looked to see Arkara headbutt the largest of the krogan warriors.
“Gather the clan,” she said. “I want answers.”
She swept out between them, not waiting to see if they followed. After a moment the two larger warriors followed, but the smaller one sidled up to Rayne.
“Can you um, sign my shotgun?” he asked.
With a smile, Rayne pulled out a thick marker and signed over the silver sideplate of the gun, along with a picture of a cat.
“Thank you!” the krogan said as he hurried out after the other two. “I’m going to sell this on the extranet for lots of credits!”
“At least a thousand or you’re being ripped off,” Rayne called after him. “That kitty face is rare!”
“No, she hasn’t.” Pi’s voice sounded softly inside Elias’ helmet.
“Hasn’t what?”
“Undergone synthesis,” Pi said. “This is not the Rayne we know.”
“Mmm,” Elias said non-committally as the asari walked over.
“How is he?” she asked.
“Stable,” Elias said. “But we need to get him back to our ship. He needs medical attention from someone with a better understanding of human medicine than me.”
New Chief; Old Friends

“They have a Krogan, why can't we have a Krogan?” - Cat6 dropout.

There was already a crowd gathered when Arkara strode out into the main compound. There were cries of ‘Where’s the Chief?’ and ‘What happened to the Chief?’ and one of the men behind her pointed towards her and said “She’s what happened to the chief.”

A murmur spread through the crowd and the women gathered around her. Some of the men seemed less than pleased with the turn of events but so far, no one was questioning this turn of events. As Otto stepped up beside her, she felt relieved to have at least one friendly face nearby.

“Last five years,” Arkara said. “What happened after I set fire to this place? And where is the shaman?”

The crowd looked at each other, none seeming to want to speak first, but then the voice of an old krogan rumbled up from somewhere deep within his belly. “Chief Targev took charge of the clan, after the fire, Khel.”

“Why do you call me that?” Arkara asked.

The Krogan looked confused. “Because…you are her? You do not bear the number of a clone, so you are the original.”

Arkara’s jaw tightened, but she let the comment pass. “And where is the Shaman?”

“He is at the cloning lab.”

“Take me there,” Arkara said. “Show me what Targev ‘achieved’.”

The hubbub and murmurs of the crowd rose as they Krogan looked at each other, and then one of the male warriors said “Follow us.”

“What about this trash?” Anar asked, dumping the unconscious form of Targev at Arkara’s feet.

“He may know what’s going on here,” Elias said, resting a hand on Arkara’s arm.

Looking down, she found the muzzle of the shotgun--Targev's shotgun--that she held in her right hand was pointed directly at Targev's head. “I want to see him dead,” she muttered.

“The Chief was saving us,” one of the male Krogan said.

“Through enslavement and cloning?” Arkara snapped.

“We don’t have another way,” one of the females said timidly. “We have a purpose.”

“If these preening pyjaks stopped killing each other—and us women—then we could find a better way, a better purpose.”

“Well, yes,” Rayne said. “What did you think I was doing here?”

“Throwing a concert?” Elias asked. “You always did well in Krogan space…if I recall correctly,” he added hastily. No one else seemed to notice the quarian’s slight slip of tongue.

“Well, yes, but the proceeds have been going towards genophage cure research.”

“And why would an asari help us?” Arkara asked.

Rayne paused. “Because I believe that every race has a right to make their own decisions and to live to their best potential.”

“And what if this is our best potential?” Arkara asked, sweeping her arm wide across the gathered krogan.

“I don’t believe that,” Rayne said. “And I don’t know who you are, but from what you’ve just said, I don’t believe you think that either.”

“So you support this?”

“A cure isn’t worth anything if there’s no Krogan left to give it to!” Rayne snapped.

The silence that followed was broken by a small cough. “There um, might be another option,” Elias said.

Arkara turned towards him. “I’m listening, Elias.”

“There already is a cure somewhere…else,” the quarian said delicately. “We’d just have to go fetch it.”
“You said the cure was distributed,” Cicepia said. “There was only ever the one dose.”
Elias shrugged. “So we find the formula. It would be around somewhere. Failing that a sample of
cured krogan DNA would kickstart research here—it would become a process of replication and
reverse engineering from a known solution.”
“Is that not universe tampering?” Anar asked.
Arkara snorted. “As opposed to everything else we’ve been doing?”
The hanar paused. “This one concedes you have a point.”
“It’s an option,” Elias said. “Or if you’re really worried about meddling we could just go close the
damn portal and leave. Or not. We could just leave and let everyone take their chances with the…”
he glanced around. “You know.”
Rayne stared between them. “I’m going to need the full story on that one. And you’re Elias, as in…”
“Parallel universe,” the quarian said, and his eyes glowed very briefly green before his mask
flickered and the usual white glow Arkara had been used to shone through once more.
“I…see.” Rayne said.
“He’s stopped breathing,” Cicepia said from where she was monitoring Targev’s vitals.
“And Sync?” Arkara asked.
“The Doctor’s life signs are stable, Thek Arkara,” Elias’ drone said. “However I would recommend
he gets medical attention in the next two point seven six hours.”
“Our ship’s too far away,” Cicepia said.
“I have a car,” Rayne said. “But I’d need someone to give me directions.”
“I’ll go,” Cicepia said. “You should go with Arkara,” she added to Elias and Anar.

~*~
The krogan led her and the others towards an irregular line of parked tonkas, Rayne and Cicepia
walked off in a different direction. Sync’s body hovering between them on a biotic field.
The facility was as a squat plascrete bunker, built on the ruins of an old hospital and Arkara noticed
there were both krogan and salarians with guns on the fortified roof. They passed at least three gun
posts that she spotted, carefully camouflaged in rubble, debris and twisted metal, and when they
pulled up to the structure itself, she could still see the scorch marks from the chemical fire that had
raged when she’d set it ablaze half a decade ago. There had been a half hearted attempt to patch
some of the damage up where there had been structural damage, and the new plascrete stuck out like
a sore thumb against the pitted and weatherbeaten fabric of the old building—as did the new second
story that sat atop the building, giving it a commanding view of the ruined city it sat in.
“Killing field,” Elias muttered as they drove up to the entrance. “All the fortifications face outward.”
Arkara grunted. “Looks like the sandstorm’s cleared up,” she said. “Any sign of the reapers?”
“No actual reaper signatures,” Elias said. “The portal’s to the southwest of here, some distance off
the main road. We’ll have to get it on our way back.”
The tonkas drove through heavily guarded vehicular gate, and then they were led down a ramp into
the facility proper. The inside smelt strongly of antiseptic, and there were a large number of
salarians inside, most wearing labcoats. In contrast to the outside, the inside of the facility was clean
and it appeared that a bit more care had been taken in making recent repairs. There even appeared to
have been some attempt at painting, and a natural light well fell upon a rare garden of Tuchanka
native plants. Salarian influence no doubt. The aliens stared at their group with some surprise, and
she could see groups forming as the news sparked from quick thinking brain to quick thinking brain.
There were a number of large, round glass tubes, each surrounded by shiny new machinery and
filled with a bluish liquid. About half of the tubes contained the floating forms of female krogan,
although none appeared to be moving.
A salarian dressed in a black soldier’s uniform approached them, carrying a datapad. “Hello and
welcome. I admit I’m surprised to receive unscheduled visitors—and aliens at that. What brings you
all here? You come with guards, so this can’t be invasion. We have no diplomatic ties to Palavan,
Rannoch or Kahje. You can’t be connected to the Friends of the Galaxy, I would have heard—”
The krogan guards stepped aside and looked towards Arkara and the salarian started.

“Khel? No, you can’t be Khel, I passed Khel in tank just…” he half turned towards one the largest tank at the center of the indoor garden.

“Who are you, and what is going on here?” Arkara asked.

The salarian’s omni tool lit up and he appeared to be scanning something. “Padok Wiks, former STG. I’m with Friends of the Galaxy now, attempting to save the krogan race from extinction. That doesn’t make sense,” he said, staring at his omni tool. “No records of…” he looked up at Arkara.

“You’re the first.”

“The first of what?”

“You’re the first clone of Khel Ghyal.”

“I saved Ghyal,” Arkara burst out. “I burnt this place to the ground to get her away from Targev!”

“I’m sorry,” Padok said. “I don’t have any records of that. I joined this facility two years ago. I would suggest you talk to Shaman, although you would need…permission to visit her from the Chief,” he added, glancing at the guards.

“Targev’s dead,” Arkara said flatly. One of the males nodded confirmation.

“I see. I wondered why you had his shotgun. Very well. Come with me.” The salarian hesitated slightly. “I would like to say I personally disagreed with the…quarters assigned to the shaman. The old Chief insisted. My professional recommendation is that she be removed from facility entirely. The quarters are wholly unsuitable and the precaution of having her here is unnecessary.”

“Take me to her,” Akara rumbled.

“Walk this way please.”

He led them through the garden, past the large tank containing what appeared to be another Arkara. Down a small corridor they came to a locked door. A metal, locked door with heavy bolts and a tiny viewing window, which was shrouded in cloth. On the other side was a room best described as a jail cell. It was small, cramped and although there was some comfortable furniture and pelts on the floor, the walls were rough and there was no natural light. At the far end of the room, an elderly krogan sat on a padded chair, reading a book printed on yellowing paper. A long chain ran from her leg to the wall. Looking up, she stared for a moment, and then pulled out a round spectacle, which hovered over her eye, caught up in a tiny mass effect field that appeared to be generated by the frame itself.

“Is that you, Khel? You are out of your pod. Did they release you? Have they made enough of our people?”

“Shaman? Why are you here? And why are you calling me Khel?”

The shaman squinted at her. “Come closer, child.”

Arkara strode forward, and the shaman looked her up and down. “Arkara? It’s good to see you, but you shouldn’t be here. You must be very confused.”

“What happened here? And why… can someone get her out of that leg cuff? Now!”

“Uh, I’ll get the passcode,” Padok said, just as Elias said, “Done.”

Arkara looked down to see the cuff clink open and fall off the Shaman’s leg, then at the quarian, who was putting away his omni-tool. “What? It’s not like that was an unexpected request.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“You hacked our security systems,” Padok said accusingly.

“You bought commercial software,” Elias said. “And haven’t installed patches for four years. A nine year old could get through your security. I mean, a server administrator username of ‘admin’? Come on.”

Leaving the two to bicker, Arkara turned back to the Shaman. “What’s going on?”

The shaman reached out to cup her face. “How much do you remember from when you left?”

“I remember the fire. You helped me and Khel to the space port. You got me off planet, said you had somewhere to hide Khel.”

“Yes, you helped stem the treachery of Tarak, but after you left his brother Targev led a hunt for you. He didn’t find you, but when he returned he was determined to continue with the research. He wanted to continue Dr. Lennox’s work. Oh. I’m sorry, you probably don’t remember who Dr. Lennox is.”
“Blind salarian. He claims he left and took all of his technology and research when he found Tarak trying to use it to build himself an army, not cure the genophage.”

The shaman sighed. “Ah, then things were worse then we thought. Yes, Dr. Lennox left and took everything, which infuriated Tarak, but I never knew why. You’d already been born at that point though. You were the first clone of Khel Ghyal. You were so close—the best of friends. You talked like each other, thought like each other and…shared some of her memories. You remember her first child, slain by the hand of Thek Tarak?”

“Yes.”

“She was named Arkara,” the shaman said with a smile. “You were named in her memory.”

“Why don’t I remember any of this?” Arkara asked, sitting down on the small cot.

“The salarian’s departure sent Targev into a blood rage. He rampaged through the female compound and…Khel was not battle ready. You were. Normally the one who slays the Chief is the next chief, but…you are a clone. None of the krogan saw you as an equal. Not after that Urdnot got his company killed on Uttuko to save the indoctrinated Rachni. So, you had to leave. I reached out to an old friend, an information broker named Shias Lazeen. She forged you a new identity, but to keep you safe, you asked for one more favour. You asked me to alter your memories so you would only know of yourself as Thek Arkara. You were never a good liar, and in order to keep your new life intact, you had to believe the lie. So I used biotics to imprint the new identity into your mind and you left.”

“So that’s why everyone keeps calling me Khel.”

“Yes, but you are your own person Arkara. You made it so through your own choices.”

“But what about here?” Arkara asked. “What’s happened here? If Cyrus left how is this place still running? Why are the cloned females so…docile.”

“Targev found a way to restart the facility with the help of a group calling themselves Friends of the Galaxy. They came to us, saying they wished to help the krogan. I don’t think they have intentionally sabotaged the cloning process, but well… even their best minds are not a match for Dr. Lennox. I think they’re more interested in being paid for their research. At least…” she paused. “Do not misunderstand me, the scientists here have treated me well and I believe they are genuine in wishing to help the Krogan. I’m not sure about the motives of their leaders—especially the ‘Chen’ human who calls the shots and represents the Friends of the Galaxy.”

“Is he here?”

“Usually. Unless he’s gone on one of his ‘business trips’. Be careful around him,” she said. “He used to be…” the shaman’s voice lowered. “He used to be with Cerberus.”

Arkara nodded and rose to her feet. “I will have to meet this Chen. But why were you chained up here?”

“Thek didn’t trust me,” the shaman said with a grin. “But he knew if he killed me he would have a more difficult time convincing the females to go along with his demands. So he keeps me here, and I am escorted to as I go about the rituals of our people. It is comfortable enough, for a prison, but I am isolated from the clan. I can at least keep conditions here comfortable for the women here. But once outside the compound I have no influence. I can’t say I condone what Targev has done outside these walls, but when the alternative is extinction…”

“Targev’s dead,” Arkara said softly, reaching out to take the shaman’s withered hands into her own.

“Will you help me fix this?”

The shaman stilled and then nodded. “Yes child, I will. I believe it’s time for you to reclaim your clan.”

They sat a while longer, saying nothing. And then it was time to go upstairs.

~*~

Rayne strode through the doors of the med bay, and deposited Sync onto the main operating table.

“Hey doc, we have a patient for you.”

From a nearby desk, Cyrus turned around. “Ah, I see. So you need my help now, do you?”
“Sorry, what? I thought you were the ship’s doctor?” Rayne said.
“I was talking to the other one.”
Cicepia sighed. “We’re dealing with the aftermath of your mess. Now are you going to do your job or not?”
“I’m on it, I’m on it,” Cyrus said, and walked over to the bed, and his visor flickered as it scanned Sync’s body. “I see, severe heat stroke coupled with near failure of cybernetic implants. Really should find fix for temperature extremes. Poor thing. No foresight,” he added, tapping Sync on one of the man’s pallid cheeks. “Seems to have cooled down now. The transport had air conditioning?”
“Yes,” Rayne said.
“Also used mud to absorb heat, I see. Still, I should be able to help.” Pressing a few buttons, Sync’s body was suddenly covered with tiny ice crystals as was Cicepia’s purple hood which she’d kept pressed against the gun would on Sync’s torso. “Bringing core body temperature back to normal parameters. You can release pressure now,” he added. “Cryo-stasis should stop surface bleeding. Will need to suture any major blood vessels though. Looks like shot went straight trough. No shrapnel at least. Less complicated.”
Cicepia stepped back, her hood frozen solid in her hand. She’d have to put it through the wash to get all the blood out.
“Have you found the cloning facility yet?” Cyrus asked as he started surgery. “I’m curious as to how it has held up—and who’s running it.”
“The others are on their way now,” Cicepia said, putting her hood into a plastic bag and going over the sink to wash the blood off her hands.
“Jerks wouldn’t let me in earlier,” Rayne said. “Hopefully I’ll get to go in now.”
“What was it like when you were last here, Cyrus?” Cicopia asked.
“It’s Tuchanka,” Cyrus said. “It’s hardly a five star resort.”
“What were you working on exactly?”
“Cloning,” Cyrus said. Suddenly he turned towards the Asari, who was holding up a tattered photograph. “Put that down, that doesn’t belong to you!”
“Sorry,” Rayne said, replacing the picture, and Cicepia saw it was a yellowing picture of a young human girl. “I guess I’ll go snoop somewhere else since you asked so nicely…jerk.”
“Go find the female asari,” Cyrus said as he turned back to the operating table. “I’m sure you’ll have a lot to talk about.”
“All asari are biologically female,” Rayne said with a frown.
“Oh are they? Of course, I suppose you’d know.”
Cicepia sat down on one of the beds, keeping out of the way as the Salarian moved around the table. Moments later, Rayne stormed back into the bed bay. “What wasn’t I warned about this?” she demanded.
“What?” Cyrus asked, without looking up.
Rayne pointed at Drimi, who was standing uncertainly in the doorway.
“I didn’t think he was an issue,” Cicepia said mildly.
“Not an issue? You do realise he makes Asari inbreeding look tempting right? No one should be allowed to be that hot.”
“Um…thank you?” Drimi said. “I think.”
“Drimi, you might want to come in.”
“No, I’m good here, thanks,” Drimi said, still staring at Rayne.
“Sync’s on the table.”
“What? Boss?” Drimi pushed past Rayne and went straight over to the examination table
“Use the disinfectant first!” Cyrus snapped.
“What happened?” Drimi asked as he washed his hands.
“He overheated,” Cicepia said. “Then he…looked like he was about to go on a murderous rampage and got shot. Badly.”
Drimi’s omni tool glowed as he ran a scan over Sync’s body, and then there was a whirr as he started loosening some tiny screws Cicepia hadn’t even seen when Elias had been looking over Sync’s
medicals back at the Thek compound.
“What are you doing?” Cyrus asked. “I’m trying to work here.”
“You handle the flesh, Cyrus, I need to make sure his implants are still working. If they’re not, nothing you do is really going to help, now is it?”
“Hm. I suppose that makes sense. The blood vessels from the gunshot are sutured or repaired. I’ll pack the wound with medigel to aid healing. I’ll also prescribe some mild antibiotics as a precaution. What’s the status of his technical implants?”
“Some damage to the power circuitry,” Drimi said. “The shielding stopped most of it, but I’ll need to replace some of the neural interfaces. I’m not sure if he’ll be properly registering the implant feedback at the moment.”
Some minutes or hours later Cyrus was wiping down Sync’s skin with a yellowish liquid and applying gauze and bandages to his chest when Drimi put his tools away. “Done.”
“And it looks like pretty boy is waking up,” Cyrus said, and Cicepia saw the man’s good eye flicker.
“Sync,” Drimi said. “Sync, say something!”
“D-drimi? That you?”
“Yeah.”
“Where…am I?”
“You’re on the ship. You gave us a bit of a scare there.”
Sync grimaced, and tried to sit up, but fell back down against the table. “But I was on Tuchanka… it was hot.”
“You overheated,” Cicepia said. “Arkara had taken down the Clan Chief and it was… you walked like mech and looked like you were going to execute him.”
“Did I?”
“No. You froze and one of the bodyguards shot you.”
“I froze?”
“Someone hacked your systems and tried to override your cybernetic automated survival subroutines,” Drimi said. “I don’t think they were fully successful.”
“Elias,” Cicepia said. “I wondered what he was doing with his omni tool.”
“I acted like a mech?” Sync said.
“Yeah.”
“Damn it,” the human swore.
“It’s all right,” Drimi said hurriedly. “Were were able to patch you up and you’ll be as good as new soon.”
Sync nodded and looked up at all of them. “Thank you. All of you.”
“You’re welcome,” Cicepia said.
“Hey, where’s your hood.”
“Got dirty,” Cicepia said with a shrug.
“Right. Where’s everyone else? Was anyone else hurt?”
“Not badly, although I think Anar’s mechsuit will need some fixing. They’ve headed over to the cloning facility.”
“We’re still on Tuchanka? They’re still out there?”
“Yes.”
Sync pushed himself into a sitting position an would have swung his legs over the side of the table if Drimi hadn’t pushed him back down.
“No, you need to rest,” the asari said firmly.
“He’s right,” Cicepia said. “You overheated just being on that planet. You need to stay here.”
“Sedative?” Cyrus suggested.
There was a shriek from the back of the ship.
“What was that?” Sync asked.
“I’ll go check,” Drimi said, leaving the med bay.
“I presume the female asari just met each other.”
“Female asari?” Sync asked. There’s more than one. Wait, I remember…”
“Rayne T’kai,” Cicepia said. “She’s been surprisingly helpful considering.”
“Did she recognise Elias?”
“Yes.”
“That is interesting.”
In the distance they could hear Drimi’s voice raised to a yell. “You can’t have both Elias AND Rayne!”
“They’re a set,” Mridi’s voice came down the corridor.
“That’s not how it works. They were pitted against each other.”
“But they’ve clearly patched things up and now we can all hang out together…like friends.”
“Oh sure, ‘friends’. I’ve seen you staring at Elias’ ass.”
“It’s the suits. I mean, form fitting right?”
“So not the point!”
“Oh and what is the point then, hun?”
There was a smug pause. “I’m hotter than you are. And I don’t need a push up bra.”
“Well, I’m smarter than you and I don’t need to resort to nitpicking over clothing items to win an argument.”
“You? Smarter? Ha! No chance.”
“Really? Well, I guess I’ll just have to prove it then.”
“Okay. How are you going to do that?” Drimi asked.
“We’re going to do a tech off. We’ll both build something set to parameters set by…hmm… your boss when he’s back on his feet. Rayne and Elias can be judges.”
“You’re so on,” Drimi said.
Cicepia sighed. “Well, at least they’re getting along.”
“If you need to get into the facility, I suggest you go now,” Cyrus said. “Sync is stable, but I advise against planetside activity until countermeasures can be taken against extreme heat.” He paused. “I suggest you take one of the wonder twins with you.”
Cicepia sighed. “I’ll go talk to Rayne.”
Padok Wiks led them back through the main garden and up the large, central stairs that Arkara remembered from her last visit. They led up to the...the...how much of her memory was actually hers, she wondered. How much of it was an imprint from the original Khel Ghyal? How much was a fiction seared into her brain with careful manipulation of biotic fields? As the group passed the largest cloning tank she paused and pressed one hand up against the thick glass. Inside an older version of her floated in the bluish liquid, eyes closed and limbs hanging limply by her sides.

“That’s you,” Cicepia’s voice brought her out of her reverie.

Turning, Arkara saw the C-Sec officer standing behind her, the asari Rayne by her side. “No,” Arkara said. “I’m her.”

“No,” You’re both different,” Elias said from where we was standing on the bottom step. “She’s her, you’re you. Similar, but different.”

“How can you be so certain?” Arkara asked.

Elias shrugged. “Have you heard what I sing in this universe?”

“Don’t say that in front of Mridi,” Arkara advised as they started up the stairs.

“Noted.”

“So what’s upstairs?” Cicepia asked.


From the upstairs landing, the salarian led them through a decontamination scanner and into the cloning labs, which were clean, clinical and the delicacy of salarian design seemed slightly at odds with the heavy blockwork of krogan architecture. Two rows of cloning tanks curved around the room, creating a double U shape that Arkara had heard was something like a horse shoe. Not that she had any idea what sort of alien a ‘horse’ was. In any case, the space between the rows housed workstations, monitoring equipment and quiet research areas, and the empty space inside the U held a large conference table, where a dark haired human was sitting, the lines on his face serious and his eyes covered with tinted glasses in the glare of the fluorescent light. Unlike the scientists he wore almost military garb, with army cargo pants and a loose white t-shirt, covered in a heavy jacket with enough pockets and weight that she wondered if it was, in fact, military grade.

“Sir, apologies for intruding, but we have representatives from the Thek clan to see you.”

The human looked up, and the lines on his forehead deepened slightly. “A clone wishes to speak to me?”

“Exactly what it looks like,” he said. “We’re trying to cure the krogan of the genophage.”

“By making us meek?” Arkara asked. “Taking away our fighting spirit?”

“That is a…side effect of the cloning process,” the man said. “It’s something we’re looking into.”

“A convenient one for Targev, then? And you?”

“Is that so?” he said, putting his omni pad away. “What is it you wish to speak to me about my dear? Please make it quick, I’m a very busy man.”

Arkara walked right up to him, until her face was staring down at his own. “Let’s start with what you’re doing here?”

“Is that so?” he said. “The original clone,” he said, placing a slight emphasis on the word ‘original’.

“I only speak of clan business with the Chief,” the man said. “Where is he?”

“You’re looking at her,” Arkara said.

The human stared at her, his face impassive. “I’m sorry?”

“Thek Targev has been succeeded,” Padok said. “New Chief.”

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“The old Chief wasn’t overly concerned by it,” the man conceded. “I don’t have a strong feeling on the matter one way or another. If you are angry about their treatment by the clan then it would seem
you’ve claimed your revenge for their plight already. Our contract with the clan is simple: we provide them with clones and they pay us for our services. We do not meddle in the affairs of the krogan themselves. We are, after all the Friends of the Galaxy, not its dictators.”

“And you’ve been doing this for how long?” Arkara asked.

“Three years.”

“So your only interest here is credits?”

“Hardly. Friends of the Galaxy aims to make the Galaxy better as a whole. To help those who’ve been treated unfairly by fate or circumstance. Or other people. Like the krogan,” he said, waving his hand at the tanks. “I’m sure you can relate.”

“Why do you care about the krogan?”

“Why shouldn’t we? The rest of the galaxy may be keen to sweep the krogan under the rug until there’s another war, but we wish to provide them with the tools to save their people. How you use those tools is up to you.”

“You’re saving them by making their entire species meek and docile?” Elias asked.

“That was an unintended side effect—”

“That will be passed down through the generations from your clones,” the quarian continued.

“And they would prefer extinction?” the man asked. “The temperament of the clones is no different to that of the average human. Significantly different to the typical krogan baseline, I’ll grant you, but in my view that’s still survival of the species.

“And what is Cerberus’ interest in this?” Arkara asked.

A hush fell over the room as the scientists gave up even the pretence of work, and Book Chen was suddenly the focus of every ear in the room. “Where did you get that idea?”

“I have my sources.”

“Cerberus no longer exists,” he said, folding his arms. “Even if your allegations are true, why would it matter if I had ties with them in the past?”

“Because their ideals of human supremacy might be affecting your work,” Arkara said sharply.

“Those side effects still not addressed for three years?”

“You’re starting to try my patience, Chief. Do you wish us to stop? Would you like to condemn your race to the ignominy of the genophage once more?”

“Oh, I intend to pull the plug as you say,” Arkara replied. “But I have other ways of fighting the genophage.”

“You want to close the facility?” Padok said, surprise evident in his voice. “We are not too far away from reaching minimum number of clones for species viability, even factoring in normal krogan aggression and mortality rates.”

“Very well,” the man said. “What do you wish to do, chief?”

“Take care of those in the tanks, but no new clones.”

“We have a contractual obligation to continue until we reach species viability,” Chen said.

“Is anyone good with contracts?” Arkara asked, turning to the group behind her.

“Absolutely,” Elias said.

“I’d like to take a look as well,” Rayne said. Rayne and Elias withdrew to the far side of the conference table and started peering closely at the contract, and there was a flurry of whispered conversation that Arkara couldn’t catch. When the two returned, Rayne was smiling.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well, you’re wrong on two counts,” Rayne said.

“How so?”

“She can tell you to stop cloning,” the asari said. “Your contract stipulates you need to create as many viable females needed for species viability, yes. It doesn’t state you must use cloning technology to do it. But because your contract was made directly with Thek Targev and not with Thek Arakara—”

“She’s not bound by it,” Elias said simply. “She doesn’t have to pay you single cred, no matter what you do.”
The human pulled out his omni-tool and stared carefully at the text on a display. “Fair enough,” he said. “What do you propose then?” he asked, turning back towards Arkara.

Arkara’s earpiece bleeped as Elias’ voice filled her helmet. “You could kick them out and void the contract entirely, or renegotiate better terms—the contract is weighted heavily in favour of the FoTG,” he said. “As for actually curing the genophage…that’s up to you.”

“I’m not honouring that contract,” Arkara said bluntly. “If your scientists would like more work, I’d want the current clones cared for until they’re ready to be released and then…Elias, you had an idea?”

“I may be able to obtain samples of genophage resistant krogan tissue,” Elias said. “I believe a cure could be reverse-engineered from that, yes?”

Book Chen turned to the salarian. “Padok?”

“Um, yes. Mr Chen. With correct samples, cure synthesis is quite possible. I would be curious as to your source, however?”

“I’m sure,” Elias said. “But that’s confidential. I can guarantee it will be from a willing volunteer and not obtained through coercion.”

“Very well,” Book Chen said. “If you provide a sample of tissue, we’ll work on a cure for you. Consider it a done deal.”

“After a new contract is drawn up with some more…balanced safeguards and assurances,” Elias said. “I’m happy to provide a template.”

“Ah…of course.”

“One more thing, Mr. Chen,” Cicepia said.

“Yes? Who are you?”

“Cicepia Altus. Are you familiar with the name Octavius Altus?”

“Sounds a bit familiar, why do you ask?”

“Just answer the question!”

Book Chen looked around at the rest of the people and then stepped back, thinking. “If memory serves that sounds like the name of a turian military operative responsible for killing a large number of Cerberus soldiers.”

“What happened to him? Did you cross paths with him? Is he alive?”

“He murdered my daughter. And no, he is not alive.”

“She was probably a Cerberus agent,” Cicepia said.

“And that matters why?”

“Did you kill him?” Cicepia asked, her hands wreathed in dark energy.

“We were at war,” Book Chen said. “If it makes you happier to think I killed him, then yes. I killed him.”

“Cicepia,” Elias said. “Wrong Octavius.”

“He still killed him.”

“And the you here was pretty dodgy too. Should we be imprisoning you for what she was attempting to do?”

“As far as I’m concerned, we’re even,” Book Chen said levelly.

“How dare you…”

Cicepia’s arm raised, but Rayne grabbed her wrist, and the air around them distorted and bulged and then stabilised. Book Chen pulled out a pistol. “Chief, is this really how you intend to start negotiations?”

“No, Arkara said, walking between Cicepia and her target. “It is not.”

“Then please keep your people under control.”

“But he killed Octavius.”

“Wrong one, if I’m understanding this correctly,” Rayne said. “And if you want revenge for that you can sit and stew on that for twenty years and come back to dish it out but I will not let you drag the Krogan down with you on it. I’ve invested too much here on Tuchanka to let that happen. Understood?”

Cicepia stared at the asari, then at Arkara and finally at the guns pointed in her direction. “Fine. Can I
get out of here? I need some air."

“There is a balcony overlooking the courtyard garden back through decontamination.” Padok Wiks said, hostering his pistol. “I would be happy to show you the way. Incidentally, regardless of what you think of Mr. Chen or Friends of the Galaxy, I personally am committed to seeing the survival of the krogan people. The genophage effects are ghastly; a blight on galactic history and needs to be fixed. I don’t know how to demonstrate this to you other than vocally.”

“Thank you,” Arkara said, as Padok showed the biotics out of the room.

“In light of these events I feel I would prefer not to write up the contract until the samples of tissue are provided,” Book Chen said once the three had left.

“Elias?”

The quarian shrugged. “The genophage cure work would need to be contingent on the samples being delivered anyway. Are you sure you don’t want a contract for the care of the remaining clones? Without that there’s no guarantee of payment.”

Chen nodded slowly. “I’m happy to do that. I don’t believe that will take more than six months though.”

“There is still a portal to deal with,” Anar said. “Unless we do something all of this is will not matter.”

“This won’t take a moment,” Elias sending something over on his omnitool to both Arkara and Chen. “Acceptable?” the quarian asked.

“Fourteen day cooling off period?” Chen asked looking up from the scrolling text.

“You both might find something in the contract you decide you don’t like,” Elias said. “Basically, agreed rate of pay continues until delivery of the final clones on the standard growth timeline.”

After the contracts had been signed, Arkara nodded towards both of them. “All right. I have to take care of some clan business. We’ll go to the portal once I settle things with the shaman?”

Elias nodded. “We’ll be downstairs.”

In the end it was a relatively simple thing to get the Shaman installed as Chief in power if not in title. “We’ll be wakening Khel Ghyal from stasis soon,” she said. “They won’t be able to make any more clones from her after that I don’t think. It will take a while, but perhaps if you choose to return you’ll be able to speak with her.”

“I’ll be back, Arkara promised.

And that had been that. Rayne had stayed behind to talk to the scientists, although not before giving her contact details to Elias and offering further assistance if needed. “It sounds like you’re into something big,” she had said.

“Thank you,” Elias had said, taking the number. “We’ll certainly let you know if we pass through again.”

“That wasn’t very enthusiastic,” Mridi had noted later.

“I’m not sure I trust her,” Elias said with a shrug. “Something was off there. I can’t put my finger on it, but something was off.”

The portal itself had been in the middle of a ruined wasteland, prowled by varren and the occasional klixen.

“No reapers?” Arkara said as they exited the tomkah truck they’d commandeered for the journey. “This one was looking forward to some carnage,” Anar’s voice said from within his mech.

“It does seem too easy,” Elias agreed, even as the glowing blue thread faded from view. “Not that I’m complaining but…it does seem rather anti-climactic after everything we just went through.”

“With apprehension: I do not feel we should jinx our good luck,” Otto said. “Especially given that we almost lost the Captain.”

The roar of engines overhead made them all look up as the shadow of the Endurance drifted over them. “Speaking of which,” Elias said, “time to go to Invictus…blue universe this time, right?”
Leaving Tuchanka

“01001000 01000101 01001100 01010000,” - Hannibal, Rogue VI on Luna, 2183 CE.

After being decommissioned, Hannibal went on to become the core intelligence behind the Enhanced Defense Intelligence, now known as EDI.

They were sitting in the lounge, Elias with a small robotic spider on his hand and Arkara with a bottle of beer.

“Want to talk about it?” Elias asked as he looked at the data feeds scrolling through his visor.

“I’m a clone,” Arkara grunted. “And not really.”

“You could have been Chief,” Elias said.

“I’d be a terrible Chief,” Arkara said. “Leaving the Shaman in charge was the right thing to do. What’s that?”

“A gift from Rayne,” Elias said. “Tiny spider spy cam. I killed its feed and took control of it. Not that it would be much use now we’ve jumped universes, but still.”

“Is that what she left in your room?”

“No, she left a stack of music chits for me. I found this in the cargo bay. Judging by the capacitor wiring it’s quarian made. Don’t see that configuration outside our envirosuits much.”

“What did she want?”

“No idea,” Elias said, putting the spider into an equally tiny compartment inside his suit. “I’m glad she was around to get Sync back though. And talk Cicepia down.”

Arkara glanced towards the Turian’s room, where she’d retreated once they’d boarded the ship. Occasionally there’d been the sound of a biotic field hitting the wall. The krogan shrugged and took another gulp of beer.

“If he’ll help my people, I’d prefer that Chen human alive.”

“That’s a pretty big if.”

Arkara shrugged again and drained her beer. “You certain you get sample of genophage cured krogan tissue to Rayne?”

“Sure,” Elias said. “I’ll pay someone if I can’t find a willing volunteer.”

“Okay,” Arkara said, belching loudly and clambering to her feet. “I need more beer.”

“Do I want to know how many you’ve had?”

The krogan shook her head. “Not enough. There’s a line of bottles in the kitchen to keep score…”

“Knock yourself out,” Elias said. “Maybe not literally. I’m going to check in on Sync.”

“Creator Elias, if Thek Arkara is typical of her species, it would take at least fifty standard drinks to incapacitate her, assuming fully formed secondary organs.”

Elias blinked. “Thanks Pi, I’ll keep that in mind if I ever decide to get into a drinking contest with her.”

“With a full supply of tox filters, and if you didn’t actually drink all the alcohol piped into your suit, you should be able to go for at least sixty standard drinks, Creator Elias.”

Elias paused at the door of the med bay. “Pi are you suggesting I should cheat in a drinking contest?”

“Of course not, Creator Elias,” Pi said. “I merely suggested a method by which you could win should you so desire.”

“Sure, just lay all the moral decisions onto the organic.”

“You are not fully organic anymore, Creator Elias.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“I know.”

The med bay had two sets of doors, and a short corridor with discreet decontamination. It was one of the things that kept a clean room clean, although the med bay had windows and speakers that helped it sound like it was easily down the hallway from the rest of the ship, rather than being it’s own sealed environment. That feature could, of course, be turned off, but Elias quite liked the noise. He
was used to the way human, turian and asari spacecraft didn’t get have the thrumming, squeaking and chatter of the migrant fleet, although the fleet itself was but a memory now. He wasn’t, however, used to the near silence of sealed rooms. When on the Citadel, he’d found himself turning on the television just for noise, or turning off the sound dampeners on the windows to hear the buzz of skycars flying past. Sync was sitting up on one of the beds, propped up against a pile of pillows. A datapad lay unnoticed in his lap as he stared off into the distance somewhere on the other side of the far wall.

“You look a bit better than dead,” Elias said.

“Hey,” Sync said, turning to look at him. “Thanks for saving me back down there. Cicepia said you did a lot of the work.”

Elias shrugged “I’m just glad I remembered enough human medicine to know what to do,” he said. “I didn’t realise you kept medicine on you.”

“With my immune system? Please I always have something,” Elias said. “But your medical system seemed to have pretty much everything diagnosed. I just had to remember what the treatments were.”

Sync’s bionic eye stared accusingly at him. “Wait, what? You…hacked into my systems to medicate me?”

“No, your survival subroutines kicked in. Popped up with a holoscreen display and voice interface. Sounded a lot like Tricey actually—um, Beatrice.”

“What?”

The two men looked at each other for a moment.

“You…didn’t know you had that?” Elias asked finally.

“Can you keep a secret?” Sync asked.

“Well, yes, but it’s probably a little late now.”

Wordlessly, Sync pressed a corner of his metal chest piece, and a small section opened, from which he extracted a small data cube, which he handed to Elias.

“Scanning,” Pi said.

An image of the chip’s internal data started scrolling up on Elias’ helmet display. “Sync this isn’t a VI chip…”

“I call it OI,” Sync said. “It’s Original Intelligence.”

“Sorry?”

“That’s my wife.”

“Yes, okay, but is it an imprint of her consciousness, a reconstruction based on observed traits—”

“That is her consciousness.”

“Wait, you created a synthetic clone of Beatrice including her mind?”

Sync shrugged. “Long story short, a friend and I were working on different aspects of the same research—he found a way to turn human DNA into binary code. I came up with a way to incorporate binary body parts into human flesh. I guess we were both working towards what you already have: synthesis. I used the machine to save a copy of my wife. I hoped I’d be able to… with synthesis I can bring her back.”

“So you can reverse engineer her DNA from this,” Elias said, staring down at the chip. “No, no, that wouldn’t work. DNA doesn’t contain her mind. It would just be her clone.”

“That’s what I’ve been working on,” Sync said. “How to bring her back—my Beatrice, not just a clone. She’s never activated in my systems before—she just…the lights are from her,” he said.

“If this is her,” Elias said. “Including all of her memories and her mind—if she’s sentient inside of your systems to a degree…do you not want to…activate her?”

“I do and I don’t.”

“She’s activated once on her own.”

“Not like that,” Sync said. “I tried to activate her once. Properly.”

“And?”

“It brings back bad memories.”

“For you,” Elias said. “She’s the one having her consciousness turned off.”

Sync stared at him for a long time, and Elias thought he saw fear, longing and loneliness warring on
the man’s features. “Maybe another time,” Sync said finally. “It’s been a hell of day and I don’t know if I’m up to it, if you understand?”

“I understand where you’re coming from,” Elia said, holding the electronic chip up to the medbay lights. “But if this is your wife, if this is really the consciousness of your wife—don’t you think she deserves to be…well…conscious?”

Sync’s fingers smoothed the bedsheets over his thighs. “I never thought of it that way,” he said finally. “What would you suggest?”

“I can build an isolated AI platform for her. Basic optics and speech, no networking capabilities or visibility of ship systems and modular, portable storage. I think I saw some old blue boxes in Drimi’s stash and I suppose now I know why. Build one, plug her in and see what she wants to do.”

“Okay,” Sync said. “I think she’d appreciate that. I do too.”

“Do you want to be around for it?” Elias asked.

“Not at first,” Sync said. “If it doesn’t go well, I don’t think I could…you know…”

Elias nodded. “Sure. I’ll set up an area in the conference centre and I’ll let you know if it works. I’ll need to hang on to this though.”

“I know.”

“Okay then. Glad to see you’re conscious again, Captain.”

Sync gave him a half smile. “Thanks for saving my life back there.”

As the outer door of the medbay snicked open, Elias nearly ran into Cicepia, who looked poised to enter the doorway.

“How is he?” Cicepia asked.

“Physically, he’s fine,” Elias said. “How are you?”

The turian shrugged. “Stewing.”

“It shows,” Elias said. “You know your get a dark energy flicker around your headcrest when you’re mad?”

“Just listening to him… no remorse. I know it wasn’t my Octavius, but—”

“Octavius killed his daughter,” Elias pointed out. “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“She was probably Cerberus too,” Cicepia fumed, pacing up and down the corridor.

“And if Octavius had been working for an organisation like Cerberus would you suddenly not love him as much?” Elias asked. “Does that mean Book Chen couldn’t love his daughter?”

Cicepia sighed. “Turians aren’t good at moral dilemmas, Elias,” she said. “It one of the things that make us turian. I just… after how I reacted down there? I wonder if I’m really all that different from my selves in the other universes.”

“Are you planning on assassinating the Shadow Broker?” Elias asked. “Or backstabbing your fellow cops to get a promotion?”

“Um, no…”

“Then I’d say you’re doing better than them.”

Cicepia chuckled. “I’m going to go say hi to the Captain,” she said.

“Sure,” Elias said. “Take care of yourself.”

“You too.”
Chapter 22: McTurian’s

“DexToC,
It’s easy as 1-2-3,
As simple as do re mi,
DexToC, 1-2-3
Food for you and me, yeah.” - Elia’Solar vas Rannoch (Blue Universe)

Invictus was dry—at least, it was dry in the capital city Shastinasio, which was located in the drier north of the planet, far away from the infamous jungle. Or at least, infamous throughout the hierarchy, as Cicepia explained—a Tribute to Turian stubbornness.

“And I used to live there,” she said with a sigh. “I…lost my husband there.”

“Octavius.” Elias leaned forward so his arms were resting on the table of the conference room.

“Yes. Octavius. There were sightings of Cerberus ships in the area and he volunteered to go after them. I…saw his ship after it crashed to the surface. There was…nothing left.”

“Did you want to look into—” Sync started.

“No really,” Cicepia said. “There’s nothing left but bad memories on the planet for me now.”

“Anything we should be concerned about?” Elias asked.

Cicepia shook her head. “Not that I can think of. The pirates mostly keep to the jungles.”

Sync nodded and stood up. “I’ll go guide us in,” he said. “Elias, coming to scan for reaper signatures?”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

On the bridge, Elias slipped into the padded leather seat before the sensor console. “All right Pi,” he muttered inside his helmet. “Let’s find this reaper portal—have you found any other locations in Mimic’s data core?”

“No, Creator Elias. This appears to be the last one.”

Elias frowned, even as he set the ships sensors to scan for the familiar signatures of unsynthesised husks. It was strange and slightly troubling the way his fingers flew over the holokeys, muscle memory already drilled by endless repetition from the war. He could almost hear the foghorn like sound of a giant energy beam charging. “That’s way too easy, Pi,” he said. “Way too easy. Why are there only three? If this was the start of an invasion, there’d be more portals in many more places—more strategic places than Invictus. Why not Palavan? Or Earth for that matter?”

“I can run the analysis again, but I have been unable to locate any other tears in the entire milky way galaxy.”

“And how many other galaxies are out there again?”

“Current estimates suggest—”

“That was rhetorical, Pi.”

“I know.”

“Smart ass.”

“I do not, in fact, have an ass, Creator Elias. You on the other hand—”

“Pi…”

From the synthetic there was only a smug silence.

It took a while to get permission to dock at the Shastinasio Space port, and Elias felt the heat of the desert sun though the material of his envirosuit. The inhabitants of Invictus appeared to be living with deliberately low tech cooling solutions of passive cooling towers, canopied sails covering walkways and hardy green roofs topping their buildings. Fountains were everywhere, and he wondered what it would be like to take off his helmet and let the water droplets fly into his face. Rain. He’d never experienced rain. Not fully.

The turians here dressed the same as everywhere in the Hierarchy, probably with something denoting
their rank in society. Elias had never asked about that. He could also see Batarians and quite a few Drell, who probably came in search of a drier climate. The Batarians had adopted loose flowing white robes as their outer wear. With the collapse of the Hegemony in every universe they’d visited so far, Elias had noticed the Batarians had been fastest to break away from pre-war stereotypes and embrace new ideas, cultures and people. It was almost human the way they were adapting. Human.

Huh. Across a bustling bazaar he could see the toothy grin and red eyes of a Vorcha. Well, no one adapted like a Vorcha.

One thing he couldn’t help noting was the Turians on Invictus were noticeably rounder than any he’d ever seen. As they swept through the streets scanning for reaper signals, they passed a pair of golden arches in the shape of a big M that Elias was familiar with, but had never visited. There was a queue out the door, and many Turians were leaving with brown paper bags printed with red and yellow. A large poster in the window read: “Our burgers are 100% Levo Protein Earth Beef!”. Another featured an animated video of a coy female biting into a burger. “Mmm, So that’s what chicken tastes like,” she said amongst obvious sounds of gastronomic enjoyment.

“McTurian’s,” Cicepia said, glancing up at the sign. “What’s that?”
“Tasty Garbage,” Sync said. “That you should never eat, but…”
Cicepia turned to look at him. “But?”
Sync shrugged. “It’s cheap, fast, tasty and addictive.”
“Addictive?”
“Even after all their changes, it’s still high in sugar and they add lots of cheese,” he explained. “It’s addictive.”
“This one thinks its gorgeous.”
Turning, Elias saw Anar stuffing fries into his cloaca. “How did you get those so quickly?”
For a floating jelly creature with six tentacles, Anar managed to give a very believable shrug. “The small child only wanted the toy in the SmileyMeal,” he said. “She was happy to give her fries to this one. She called it Mickey T’s.”
Sync’s expression froze for a moment, and his good eye blinked. “Of course she did,” he said blandly.
“How is that even—”
Wordlessly, Cicepia pointed towards a giant billboard nearby which had been playing an advertisement. It was monochrome and made of very simple line drawings showing a scene of domestic bliss.
“Ice cream!” the little Turian child was crying, her big eyes shining with joy.
“That’s right dear, made with milk from real levo-protein cows. Have you had your DexToC today?”
Inside his suit, Elias’ jaw dropped as his own voice started single a jingle, which he recognised as an earth classic from the Jackson Five.
“Well, I guess we know what my sellout alter ego has been doing,” he said, just loud enough for everyone to hear.
“DexToC?” Arkara grunted.
“This one believes it is a poorly made up brand name.”
“Diet supplement. Allows Dextro-based life to digest Levo-based proteins?” Elias said as several screens of information popped up in his helmet display. “I’m not sure if it provides extra enzymes or actually reconfigures amino acids or…hmm…”
“What?”
“There are three different conspiracy theories about how it’s being used to mind-control the Turian population.”
“What about the Quarians?” Anar asked.
Cicepia shook her head. “What Quarians? Most of them died in the battle for Rannoch.”
“Oh, right. This one forgot that happened here.”
“Brought to you by the FOTG,” Elias said. “Wait a minute, FOTG? Friends of the Galaxy? Again?”
“Why not?” Cicepia asked.
Elias shrugged. “I just find it strange that there’s two groups in both red and blue universes with the same name that sprung up around the same time given how different the universes actually are.”
“This one thinks you should remember you won Citadel’s Got Talent in three different universes that we know of,” Anar said.
Elias grimaced at the advertisement. “With advertorials like that I’m not sure how.”
“They look so happy.” Cicepia’s voice was neutral and her stance relaxed, but Elias thought he could see a tightness in her jaw that hadn’t been there before.
“They’ll have type two diabetes in no time,” he said cheerfully.
“Or they may invent types three and four,” Anar added.
Cicepia turned her back on the billboard, the tiniest flicker of dark energy shrouding her fists. “Have you found the portal?”
Tapping on his omni-tool’s holopad, Elias cleared the extranet windows and went back to his datasweep. “It seems to be south of us.”
“Let’s go there then.” Without waiting to see what the rest of them were doing, Cicepia turned and marched down the footpath, nearly knocking down a few teenagers who failed to scramble out of the way in time.
“Good idea?” Sync suggested looking after the Turian.
Hurrying after Cicepia, they found her standing still in front of a small child, who was clutching a Hanar plush toy and looking up at her with large eyes. “Mama?” The toy fell to the ground.
“Talia? Wh-what are you doing here? Are your grandparents here?”
“They’re inside.” The child looked up at the McTurian’s Fast Food Restaurant nearby.
Cicepia knelt down and Elias could see her reaching out almost unconsciously towards her daughter.
“You’ve grown so big now. Still have that Blasto toy?”
“Uh huh,” Talia grabbed the toy, and held it out to Cicepia. Somewhere from within its fuzzy centre, a squeak emerged that reminded Elias of Anar in his more hyper moments. “Why are you here, mama?”
“Ah…” The seconds stretched for eternity and Elias could almost see Cicepia struggling for an answer.
“Talia? Talia? Where did you run off to this time?” The glass doors of McTurian’s slid open and an older Turian couple walked out. Turian civilians. Elias was always intrigued by Turian civilians. If nothing else, there were nearly as mythical as the earth unicorn, with the military hierarchy spreading into all facets of their life. The couple had matching facepaint, and were wearing what Elias had come to think of as Turian jumpsuits - quasi-military outfits in one size fits anybody—although that philosophy appeared to be getting tested by the new portly builds the population of Invictus was showing.
“Talia, you shouldn’t run off on your own like that,” the woman said with a smile. “I’m sorry she—oh.” Her eyes met Cicepia’s and her demeanor changed. Her smile remained, but the rest of her face backed away from it slightly.
“Cicepia,” the man said neutrally. “What are you doing back?”
“I’m here on business,” Cicepia said, in what Elias had come to think of as her ‘C-Sec’ voice. “I see.” The man’s unblinking gaze didn’t waver. “Come along Horoponia,” he said eventually.
“But, mama,” Talia said, pulling back as the woman—Horoponia—attempted to steer her into the restaurant. “Can’t you stay for dinner?”
“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Horoponia said.
“Why not?”
“We’ve discussed this dear. Your mother’s trying to…get better and needs us to leave her alone right now.”
“Are you still sick, mama?”
“I’m getting much better,” Cicepia said with a smile that was almost as fraudulent as the one on Horoponia’s face. “I hope you’ve been getting all the messages I’ve been sending you.”
Talia’s tiny brow furrowed. “Messages?”
Horoponia scooped Talia up in her arms. “All right Talia, we need to go now,” she said as she rushed into the restaurant.

“Mama? Mama!”

“It’s okay sweetie. I’ll see you again. I promise!”

When the doors snicked shut behind them, the man remained, his arms folded across his chest.

“Cicepia, we agreed you shouldn’t be seeing her.”

“I didn’t know you’d be here, Lucidis. Why aren’t you on Palavan?”

“I changed jobs to support my family.”

For a moment they stood and stared at each other before Cicepia sighed. “And that involves letting her eat this junk?” she asked gesturing towards the restaurant.

“This is a treat,” Lucidis replied. “She had a small test today and did very well, so Horoponia and I decided to take her out for ice cream. What business brings you back here?”

“Special galactic security mission,” Cicepia said with a shrug. “Top secret. I’m afraid I can’t go into detail.” Cicepia blinked and took a deep, steadying breath. “And you are taking care of her?”

“As best we can. We are her grandparents, after all.

“And you’ve been giving her my messages?” The edge was back in her voice.

Lucidis coughed. “We…didn’t think it would be best—”

“For her to know her mother still loves her?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Not to my face.”

“For her own good we needed to keep her and you separate. It doesn’t do her any good to be wondering where you are and what you’re doing.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? You’d like to banish me out of her life just like that,” Cicepia snapped her fingers.

“Well you banished our son from our lives,” Lucidis snapped, his voice rising.

“You’re not going to do us any good if your head isn’t on the mission,” Sync said. “It’s almost as bad as having overheating cybernetics.”

“Is that your official diagnosis, Doctor?”

Sync grinned roguishly. “Absolutely.”

Over the top of them, the DexToC jingle started again. “Did you want me to swan in and try to find out how she’s really doing?” Elias asked. “The other version of me is recording another…jingle…on Omega so it shouldn’t be too hard to pull off.”

“You’d do that for me?” Cicepia asked.
Elias shrugged. “I can try.”
“Okay, um. Thanks. I appreciate that.”
“Arkara, you up for playing bodyguard?”
“Hmmm?”
“Elia’solor nar Ashru doesn’t go anywhere without security,” Elias said seriously. “In any universe.”
The Krogan grinned slowly. “Sure. I can do that.”

~*~

Five minutes, one costume change, and an armoured krogan helmet later, Elia’solor vas Rannoch nar Ashru strode out from the Chandris Hotel and walked across the plaza and into McTurian’s. Almost immediately there were screams and he was nearly mobbed by Turians with acne. Acne. Not something he’d previously associated with Turians given their face plates, but apparently it was a thing. With Arkara’s assistance he pushed his way into the restaurant, where he was soon signing everything from napkins to Smiley Meal boxes. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Talia, sitting in the far corner with Lucidis and Horoponia, the older Turian shaking his head. Somewhere between the McNugget box and the McBeast paper tray liner, Lucidis got a call on his omni-tool and rushed out of the building.

“Lucidis is leaving by the back exit,” Elias murmured into his comm. “Trail him if you want. Horoponia and Talia are still in the building.”

“On it,” Sync said.

Looking up from where she was playing with her ice cream, Talia’s expression changed from one of glumness into an excited smile as she pointed at him, tugging on her grandmother’s sleeve.

“Pi, any idea what she’s saying?”
“Creator Elias, I’m unable to pick up anything on your audio sensors with the volume of the crowd. Talia is also facing the wrong way for lipreading software.”
“How about Horoponia?”
“I believe she said ‘that’s nice dear, eat your ice cream’.”
“Arkara, let’s work our way over there,” Elias said flicking to the secondary comm channel.
“Yes sir, Mr. Elias sir.”
“Really?”
“Sir?”
“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”
“Yes, sir.”

It took about five minutes of small talk to get around to the other side of the restaurant, although thankfully that didn’t involve undergarments. Actually, he didn’t think Turians wore undergarments. They didn’t go as far as Quarians did with their envirosuits, but playing Turian and Volus space had always been less…embarrassing in terms of leaving stacks of clothing behind. Clothing. Straightening his performance jacket, he again marvelled at how easy it was to change identity just by wearing something over his envirosuit.

“Negative on Lucidis,” Sync said. “He flew off in a skycar. Cicepia doesn’t know where he lives or works.”

“Okay,” Elias said just as he made it to the corner table where Talia and her grandmother was sitting. When the little girl noticed he was there her eyes grew wide and she gasped, her spoon tumbling from her fingers to hit the table with a clatter. “Hi, what’s your name?” he asked, squatting down so that his face was level with hers.

“Talia,” she said.

“Are you enjoying your ice cream?”
“Uh huh.”

“Can we help you dear?” Horoponia asked. “You’re causing quite a ruckus.”
Elias smiled. “I know. I can’t really help that, it seems to follow me around.”
That got him a smile in return. “I understand, dear. Talia, it’s not polite to stare.
“But he’s Elias,” Talia said as if that was a winning argument right there. “Are you going to sing?”
“Oh…maybe, I’m not sure if they’d let me here.”
“Talia we shouldn’t take up too much of Mr. Elias’ time. I’m sure he just came in to get something to
eat.”
“Oh.” Talia picked her spoon of the table, dipped it into her ice cream and held it out to him. “You
can have some of my ice cream.”
“That’s okay, I don’t want to take your ice cream. Tell you what though—how about I give you a
little sneak peak of something that hasn’t been released anywhere yet?”
The spoon hit the table again, ice cream and all as Talia’s hands clapped together excitedly. “Oh yes,
please!”
“I guess that would be all right,” Horoponia said. Elias grinned. He knew the Turian grandmother
was well aware saying ‘no’ wasn’t really an option at this point.
“Great!” he said, handing over a small data cube, complete with artwork for his version of So Long
and Thanks for All the Fish. “What are you going to do later today?”
“We’re going to watch Blasto!” Talia said excitedly.
“Blasto?” Elias’ gaze flicked to Horoponia.
“She means the cartoon. It’s her favourite show.”
“I have a secret to give to you too!” Talia said.
“Now Talia, I don’t think that’s a good idea—” Horoponia started.
“I’m very good at keeping secrets,” Elias said quickly.
“This is less of a secret and more of a…vibrant imagination,” Horoponia said clicking her tongue.
Elias turned his head and cupped his hand to his suit’s audio receptors. “You can whisper it,” he said
using stage whisper himself.
“That’s enough, Tal—”

He was sitting in front of himself. And he was short. The plastic seat was hard beneath his thighs and
the air was cool against his skin. He could feel the weight of the soft toy in his lap and the taste of ice
cream in his mouth. Her mouth. A flash of memory filled his mind. He could see Talia as a little girl,
running around a park with red grass and autumnal leaves heaped in piles that Talia was jumping
into, keeping just ahead of Cicepia’s hands. Then a male Turian picked Talia up and swung her
around in the air. ‘Papa’, the memory insisted. The memory faded and Elias could see himself in the
restaurant, head turned to one side and just starting to fall backwards towards the floor. Then he was
back in his own body, catching himself against the table edge with Arkara helping him to his feet.
Rising to her feet, Horoponia wedged herself between them, “All right Talia, we need to go or we’ll
miss Blasto!” she said brightly. Grabbing the hanar plushie in one hand and Talia’s hand in the other,
she all but dragged the little girl out of the restaurant, Talia hanging on to the single in her free hand,
and glancing back over her shoulder towards him.
“Are you okay, sir?” Arkara asked.
“Yeah, I’m fine,” Elias said. “Let’s go, I think I need some air.”
Pushing ahead, Arkara cleared a path through the crowd and they crossed the plaza to the hotel,
where one quick change later, Elias slipped out the back entrance leaving the hordes of fans out
front.
“Well?” Cicepia asked when he and Arkara finally caught up with the rest of them.
“One moment,” Elias said. “Pi, please activate the tracker in that data cube.”
“Of course. Tracking now.”
“They’re heading northwest,” Elias said. “I’ll have an address once they stop.”
Overhead the screen that had been showing the DexToC commercial switched to a news sting, and
then the smiling face of Liam Vethanil Musie filled the screen, all white teeth and orange suit.
“Breaking news—there has been a sighting of singing sensation Elia’solor vas Rannoch on the
planet of Invictus. This amateur footage shows the singer’s fans rushing into the Centenniary Plaza
Micky T’s restaurant to catch a glimpse—or an autograph—from the winner of last year’s Citadel’s
Got Talent.” Suddenly Liam’s smile wavered. “And in more breaking news, there are reports of
explosions and an attack at the DexToC factory in the south of Shastinasio, Invictus’ capital city. Several employees have been reported missing and there has been this unverified image of what appears to be a reaper husk from what is supposedly the factory security cameras. Company officials and Invictus security have declined to comment. We’ll bring you more as this story develops.”

“Which direction did Lucidis head in when he left McTurian’s?” Elias asked.

“South,” Sync said. “Why?”

“I think I know where the portal is.”
To Elias, factories looked the same the universe over. There was something about factories that made all races tend towards the utilitarian. Actually, to be honest he’d only ever seen about four of the galactic races’ industrial architecture, and he wondered if the Asari tried to make their factories beautiful. They made everything else look amazingly sleek, so maybe one day he’d find out. Turian factories had the strong, clean lines and angular facades of the rest of their buildings, just with the pipework and hum of ventilation ducts that screamed industry throughout the multiverse. The giant plume of purplish-black smoke wasn’t something that was typical of modern industry though—at least not on major council worlds. It was both worrying, and strangely expected.

As they piled out of the skycar, they found themselves at a police line, with local security standing guard—although whether they were guarding against people going in or something coming out was unclear, possibly even to them.

“In there?” Cicepia asked staring at the darkened windows of the structure before them.
Elias nodded. “Yes. Think you can talk your way in?”
The turian stared at him. “I don’t have jurisdiction here, Elias.”
“Well, no, but you talk cop, right?” he said with a grin and gave her a push towards a likely looking officer.

It took barely a minute for Cicepia to find the officer in charge, and picked her way over to his mobile command centre.

“C-Sec?” the burly turian said, his brow ridges rising as he squinted at Cicepia’s badge. “What are you doing all the way out here?”

“Council investigation,” Cicepia lied glibly. “We’re tracking a fugitive and think he might be hiding out Pietas in the Fortis system. We’re actually just staying here a few nights for some R&R before going back to work and thought we’d lend a hand if you’d like.”

“I won’t turn down help if you’re offering. I’m Sergeant Accius. Let me give you a run down on the situation. We’ve had reports of missing employees who worked late shift—and in some cases we’ve found body parts in later days.”

“Any suspects?”

“Initially industrial espionage,” Sergeant Accius said. “But the company’s had no data breaches, no suspicious individuals reported by staff or security or even in the general area. We then started investigating the possibility of an inside job—and then that happened,” he said, gesturing towards the smoke. “I sent in two tactical teams and they were wiped out by…something. Right now my orders are to hold the perimeter, but I know there’s people in there.”

“When you say you found body parts, did you find their heads?” Elias asked.

“Many, yes.”

“Are you suggesting what this one thinks you’re suggesting?” Anar asked.
Elias held up a hand. “The staff is all Turian?”

“Mostly,” Sergeant Accius said. “There’s a few quarians who’ve been working to ensure the drug works on them as well, but we checked them all out first.”

“And this image?” Cicepia asked, bringing up a shot of the news broadcast they had seen earlier.

“That’s one of the reasons I’m being told to form a perimeter.”

“You are going to suggest we go inside and investigate, aren’t you?” Anar asked, with what Elias had come to think of as his front end pointing towards Cicepia.

The turian smiled grimly. “You know me too well. Sergeant, permission to investigate?”
Sergeant Accius shook his head. “If you want to go in, you’re welcome to. I don’t have to stop you since you’re not civilians—technically. Here’s a map of the facility,” he said, bringing up a holo with
his omni-tool. Our teams were gunned down in the lobby. No one survived—or if they did, they’re not able to report back.”

“Elias?”

Copying the image, Elias zoomed in to the main production line. “There,” he said. “The strange signals are coming from that room. I’ll bet that’s where we’ll find whatever’s causing this.”

“Signals?” Sergeant Accius asked.

“I did a scan for reaper technology. It led us here.”

“But the reapers are all controlled!”

“We have a working theory that some may have evaded the crucible,” Elias said. “Or that some rogue scientists may be attempting to duplicate the husk process.”

“Spirits preserve us. I heard rumours of that back during the war but I didn’t think anyone would be crazy enough to attempt that.”

“Cerberus was,” Cicepia said tersely. “Who’s to say someone else isn’t? Anything else you can tell us about the facility?”

“When our teams went in I heard what sounded like cannon fire. Not hand cannons—heavy weapon cannons. Like missile launchers but less explosive.”

Just then a uniformed officer approached. “Sarge there’s an, um… male asari here? Says he’s with these people?”

“That’s Drimi,” Sync said. “I figured if we’re going into a factory we should take someone who knows machinery. No offense, Elias.”

“None taken. I’m a software guy, remember? Not hardware.”

The asari walked in with a confident swagger and a suit of combat armour that was reminiscent of his black leather jacket. Slung over one shoulder was a large sledgehammer, and Elias fancied he could see some capacitors connected to the head, as well as some crackling lightning jars that caused the electricity to spark intermittently between some of the wiring and the business end of the weapon.

“Where’d you get that getup?” Sync asked, clapping his friend on the shoulder.

Drimi’s answering grin was just a little bashful. “Just something I’ve been working on for a while,” he said. “I’m glad I can fit into it now. So…I take it we’re going in there?”

“Yes, we are,” Cicepia said, rotating her own 3D map on her omni-tool. “There’s a network of ventilation shafts that could get a small team onto the factory floor.”

“Actually that looks like a floor control station,” Elias said. “Drimi and I should get up there.”

“Not without backup,” Cicepia said. “If there’s resistance there you’re toast.”

“Well I can’t fit through the ducts,” Arkara rumbled.

“This one can,” Anar said. “It won’t even touch the sides.”

“All right. You three do that and the rest of us will go in the front and take that elevator up to the conveyor belt systems.”

“This one trusts you will stay on the platforms,” Anar said. “The drop appears to be of a fatal distance for all except this one.”

“You’d think they’d be mixing in smaller vats,” Elias said with a frown. “Oh well, let’s just…not die. I like the idea of not dying.”

Arkara cocked her head to one side. “Is that an order?”

“If you like.”

Some time later, Elias found himself in a confined space that felt strangely familiar, although duct repair hadn’t been part of his universe since leaving the flotilla. “Well?” he hissed.

Anar floated up from where he had lowered his body down through the now open grate in the ventilation system. “This one is saddened to report there are new husks below.”

The benefit of Anar’s prehensile, gelatinous tentacles had been immediately apparent in tight spaces, as was the hover technology that had him moving through the air ducts like a spirit, towing his case up behind him. When the found their exit point, the hanar had snaked out two tentacles to grip the grate and snuck a third through it while Elias had cut through the bolts that kept it secured to the duct itself. In other circumstances, they would have fallen to the ground and clattered on the plascrete
floor. This time, they were whisked back through the grate by tentacle and the entire grate soon followed suit. Then, gripping the sides, Anar lowered his body down and had a good look around. “Anything that explains the bodies the others found with giants holes through their chest cavities?” Elias asked.

“This one suspects these husks are Elcor with human corpse cannons like the…this one believes the term was ‘scion’ officially. This one had other names for them it will not repeat.”

“How many?” Drimi asked.

“There are two below us, and perhaps three or four on the conveyor belts. This one thinks it saw Cicepia’s father in law struggling with one of them.”

A crackle over their comm interrupted their hushed conversation. “We’re in the lift, heading up,” Sync said. “Arriving at floor, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen and…here.” Even from their hiding point Elias could hear the ding of the lift echo through the processing plant.

“That would be this one’s cue,” Anar said, dropping his case to the floor below and dropping down after it, darting through the air the way Bevan pushed through the water after seeing a particularly interesting mollusc to snack on.

Drimi dropped down after him, and used his hammer to flip some of the heavy steel tables into makeshift barricades. Staring down at the drop, Elias felt the familiar surge of adrenaline in his veins and the jumble of nerves in his stomach tightened into a fierce resolve. Dropping from the air duct into a combat roll, Elia’solor nar Ashru stepped out onto the stage and faced his audience. With the flick of a wrist he and Pi sent a combat drone spinning off towards one of the hulking creatures. It had taken Elias a while to work out that despite the way they presented, the Elcor were really bipeds who had adopted a quadrupedal gait out of necessity due to their high gravity world. They walked cautiously along on feet and knuckles, but if the situation called for it, they could stand up, lean back, and put on clothing, carry loads, drive carefully reinforced skyscars, or strap heavy weaponry onto their shoulders. The reapers had clearly loved the idea, and the almost shaggy looking elcor husks sported giant glowing blue sacs on their backs and a giant bony cannon ran from it’s back to where it was welded onto the husk’s head, effectively aiming the cannon at whatever the husk was looking at. The mouth—if it could be called that—was a mass of chitinous growths that reminded him of earth spider legs. Peeking out from his impromptu barricade, Elias could see one in front of the tables, and a second on the far side of a still upright table, crouched over the mangled body of a turian worker. Glancing to his right he could see a maze of vats and conveyor belts and the crackle of purplish electricity that indicated a weak point in the fabric of the multiverse. Heavy shambling shapes could be seen amongst the machinery and he could see them turning towards either the elevator, or towards them, heavy weapons pointing towards the probably untempered glass that separated the control room from the factory proper.

“We need to get those belts moving,” he said as he locked the scope of his sniper rifle into place. Drimi grunted and swung his hammer in an ascending arc, catching the far table by the legs and flipping it onto its side. “Keep those things off me,” he muttered, and dashed for a console by the window. Electricity crackled behind them as the drone sent a pulse of energy towards the nearest elcor husk, and there was a thud of something heavy hitting the floor.

“Target incapacitated,” Pi’s voice came calmly into Elias’ helmet.

“That’s a start,” Elias said.
The problem with Elcor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So the good news: I know where your daughter is, Cicepia. The bad news is I think your father in law just rushed into a factory full of reapers.”
“T’im sorry, I heard good news and then I heard good news.”
- Cicepia Altus speaking to Elia’solor nar Ashru on Invictus.

Before the final push to take back earth, the quarian military had used some of the Cerberus reaper nanite research to build a signaling software into their combat drones. It attracted all reaper aggression in the nearby area, and had proved invaluable in protecting the lightly armoured quarian marines. Pi activated it now as the spherical, slightly translucent drone form rose above the battlefield, blasting out the recently composed Salarian tune Rise of the Kakliosaurs. One heavy gun barrel swung towards the drone, and a slow whine of a charging energy weapon built in pitch. Elias scrambled for the far end of the impromptu barricades, trying not to think how close he was to the fourteen story drop down to the factory floor. The room was still dark, the factory only running on auxiliary power, but the floodlights on Anar’s suit cast areas of sharp brightness and deep shadow, and there was a reaper-blue glow coming from the blue sacs that sat between the elcor’s shoulders.

Anar was right, they looked just like the weapons used by the reaper scions. Elias took aim at the sac and pulled the trigger on his sniper rifle. Hopefully they’d explode like scions too.

The shot missed the glowing blue sac as the husk recoiled from Anar’s onslaught, although it still hit deep into the creature’s shoulder. The sound of bullets hitting organic plating rang in his ears and his suit sensors picked up a flare of dark energy as a singularity field flared into existence somewhere on the conveyor belts below.

“Security system online,” a female turian voice came through the speakers, and a number of drones dropped from the ceiling, each projecting a mass effect field onto the husks, which seemed to impede their movement, and over his his HUD indicated the singularity field had collapsed. Risking a glance over his shoulder, he saw Cicepia was dropping a husk down to the floor after having yanked it off the unmoving conveyor belts with a singularity. Its legs flailed in the air as it fell, back first, and dropped out of view in mere seconds. The following explosion rocked the entire factory, and sent Elias tumbling to the floor as two heavy cannon shots rung out.

“Was that a joke?” Elias asked as he rolled onto his stomach and crawled to the end of the barricade.
“You respond well to positive reinforcement Creator Elias.”
“Shut up and drive the drone.”
Sync’s voice cut through the internal chatter. “Go for the backpack, it’s their weak point.”
“No shit,” Arkara replied. “Stay off the catwalks. It’s a long way down.”
Anar’s mech shrugged. “I can float,” the mercenary said, and took a much more graceful running leap over the husk than any krogan would have been capable of, ending up behind it and all but overloading his thermal clip as he emptied three bursts into the glowing, bulbous, organic capacitor. The clear, shell like container was visibly cracked and the blue-white energy within pulsed and swirled with increasing speed and instability, and Elias scrambled away to the far side of Drimi’s Terminal, where he took aim at the elcor husk that was just coming around from the electrical jolts from his combat drone. He got one shot off, striking the organic capacitor square in the back before the second husk exploded, sending Drimi’s impromptu barricade flying towards the console. The asari looked up as the table spun towards him, surface warped by the blast and raised a barrier of biotic energy, wincing slightly as the metal hit and glanced upwards, through the glass walls that overlooked the factory floor and then fell down into the darkness below amidst a rain of sharp glass slivers. Turning back to the console, he entered a few more commands.
“Activating DexToC conveyor belts”, the automated voice said.
“Neat trick,” Elias said as he rolled into a twisted around to view the rest of the battlefield, watching the first elcor husk out of the corner of his eye and using his omni-tool to track the two crouching out on the factory proper, arms and legs tensing as the heavy duty conveyor belts cranked into motion, thankfully pushing the one grasping Lucidus away from the yellow portal.
“It’s just computer systems,” Drimi said, not taking his eyes off the monitor.
“I meant the shield,” Elias grunted.
Drimi grinned and entered a few more commands into the console.
“Security drones activated,” the female turian voice said, its tone calm and matter-of-fact.
Small blue-white drones that Elias had seen at C-Sec materialised from areas in the ceiling, floating towards the husks, and pulling at them with a mass effect field in an attempt to immobilise. Elias wasn’t sure if they were strong enough to overpower a reaper, but it as a shot punched though the plasteel table Cicepia was hiding behind, barely missing her, he figured every little bit helped.
Heavy, clanking footfalls signalled the arrival of Anar’s mech, but the gait was uncertain, and Elias wondered how much damage the construct had taken from the explosion. He saw two assault rifles rise, slightly unsteady, before the mech’s grip tightened on the guns and the barrels found their mark, unloading six precise shots - three into the creature’s left elbow, causing it to slump down on one side, and three more into the capacitor on it’s back, shattering the clear, organic carapace that covered whatever implant was being used to power the giant cannon.
Elias threw himself to the ground as the elcor started to shake, even as Anar’s mech dropped its guns and rolled defensively into a dome, with a flat bottom and smooth sides. As the Elcor exploded, Drimi threw up a biotic shield without even thinking, and Elias got a up close and personal view of reaperised elcor guts as tubes both organic and synthetic splattered against the biotic barrier inches before his face falling at his feet as Drimi let the shield fall, turning back to the console.
A garbled cry came from the throats of the elcor below, a strange, strangled hooting cry that sank into the primeval section of his brain and threatened to paralyse him with fear.
“The Elcor says: Charging,” Pi reported.
“No way was that Elcor,” Elias muttered.
“No, Creator Elias, it is reaper signal. We have learnt much since Synthesis.”
“Wonderful,” Elias grunted as he took aim at a husk on the catwalks as Arkara set her shoulder against her combat shield and ran, using the momentum of the moving conveyor belts to propel her forward and slam into one of the elcor, knocking it off its feet and firing several rounds into it’s head. He couldn’t see Sync, but his battlefield tracking told him Sync had taken to a higher catwalk, probably with the aid of his new grappling hook.
“Cicepia, do you want to save that guy or what?” Sync’s voice came over their comm.
“He’s Talia’s grandfather,” Cicepia said grimly.
“He’s getting away,” Arakara grunted, slamming her shield down on the head of the Elcor before her and pushing past it, only to have one meaty hand reach out and grab her by the ankle. Ahead of her, the elcor dragging Lucidis moved closer to the portal, slowed by the conveyor belt, but not enough to overcome its reaperised swiftness.
Breathing out, Elias pulled the trigger of his Raptor sniper rifle, and the shot took the Elcor’s hand off, allowing Arakara to move forward again. Just before the elcor would have hit the edge of the flickering portal, Sync dropped from the catwalks above, leather coat billowing in the air as he dropped to its head, one hand outstretched and connecting squarely with the elcor’s cranium. A crackle of electrical energy arced between his fingers and the elcor stumbled, empty eyes glazing over as the stun took effect, even as the conveyor belts drew it slowly away from the portal once more.
Unfortunately, the husk wasn’t stunned for long, lurching to its feet and lurched like a drunken krogan, throwing Sync wide and off the edge of the factory system. The security drones swooped after him, even as an orange, omni-gel grappling hook grabbed fragile purchase on the side of a chemical tank. Then Anar was there, his mech coated in the black blood that half the reaper husks seemed to have regardless of what their actual blood colour had been in their organic life. He had
retrieved his guns, and stepped up towards the edge of the control platform. The mech was unsteady on its feet, the hands twitching, but the hanar’s aim was true and a for almost thirty seconds the sound of assault rifles on full automatic drowned out the soft clank of conveyor belts. The elcor husk’s body jerked with each impact, and it slowly collapsed down onto the struggling turian, the blue glow fading from its eyes and the capacitor on its back. And then the slow sctick-schick-schick of the conveyor belts reclaimed the air.

“Um, a little help here please,” Sync said.

With the flick of her wrist, Cicepia pulled Sync up to the level of the catwalks with a biotic field as she walked forward, almost stumbling when Drimi turned off the belts. Arkara joined Cicepia in pulling the elcor corpse off Lucidis, and Elias turned to see Anar’s mech topple over backward, assault rifles falling to the floor and the hanar inside slumped against his seat like a blob of jelly.

“Get him out of the suit,” Elias said to Drimi. “I need to close that portal.”

“He’s got broken ribs and a punctured lung,” Sync was saying as Elias walked down the stairs and over to the the flickering yellow portal. Yellow. That was new. “He has minutes.” “He’s lucky he’s got those minutes,” Cicepia said, but she was soon on her commlink to Sergeant Accius. “Elias hurry up with closing that thing, we’ll have cops on our asses any moment. It’ll take as long as it takes,” Elias said, and then opened his private channel with Pi. “You can do this without me, right?”

“Yes, Creator Elias. As long as you remain within the broadcast distance of the drone. The white drone flickered into existence and yellow lines started drawing across the shimmering space that hung in the air above the central conveyor belt. Moving over to a nearby console, Elias flicked through the factory data and programs, his research bots quickly sifting through information and copying crucial files.

“The drug appears to be legitimate, Creator Elias,” Pi said.

“Yes, it does,” Elias agreed. “Remind me to take a sample on the way out.” “Steal a sample, Creator Elias.” Pi corrected. “You’re stealing a sample.”

“We just saved the city,” Elias said. “And it’s not like I’m making a rival product in this universe.” “Just ours?”

“Exactly.”

Thankfully, the yellow portal winked out of existence just before the cops and paramedics arrived, and with Sync’s expertise and the liberal application of medigel, they were able to get Lucidis stable and onto a stretcher.

“Any other survivors?” one of the medics asked.

“No,” Drimi said, appearing with Anar’s mech-suitcase in one hand and the hanar thrown over his left shoulder. “They weren’t so fortunate.”

“Why’d they spare you?” Cicepia asked, looking down at Lucidis.

“I have no idea why they were keeping me alive.” Lucidis said, pushing the oxygen mask from his face. “They overpowered me and that one looked like it wanted to take me back to wherever they came from.” His eyes flickered over to the corpse that until recently had held him in a crushing grip. “Wherever that yellow…glow thing—” his voice broke off as he coughed, spitting up blood.

“Yellow glow thing?” Sergeant Accius asked, his omni tool recording everything at the scene. “I don’t know,” Elias said from the console. “I didn’t see any yellow glowing thing.” “You shouldn’t be speaking, you’ll aggravate your injuries,” Sync said. “Especially when the adrenaline wears off.” “Yes, Sergeant you’ll be able to question him at the hospital. Believe me, he won’t be going anywhere.”

A look of annoyance crossed the sergeant’s face but he nodded. “Vitus, get a guard on the hospital. And I can’t believe I’m saying this, but watch out for reapers. They’re to call in at the first sign of trouble.” “Yes, Sir,” the Turian saluted and marched off.
“How about your friend?” the second medic said, looking at the comatose hanar.
“He’s still breathing,” Drimi said. “Just unconscious.”
“We’ll take him back to the hospital and check him over there if you’d like?” the turian offered.
Drimi and Sync exchanged glances. “We’ll go with him,” Sync said. “Meet back on the Endurance?”
“Wait, shouldn’t we go with you?” Elias asked.
“Someone needs to talk to the cops,” Sync said with a smile. “And I’m not really good at that.”

Chapter End Notes

People who have watched AngelArt’s Mass Effect Collision YouTube series will recall that the portal in the factory was listed as orange. It should not have been orange, for a variety of reasons, and the colour has been modified accordingly.
“In a universe made out of energy, everything is entangled; everything is one” - Bruce Lipton

She was standing in a house at the top of carpeted stairs, the top of the open banister just at eye level. “Grandma… Grandma where are you?” It was Talia’s voice, and it was coming from her. Talia looked down as she carefully climbed down the steps, stepping down with one foot, then the other onto each step before moving on to the next, and Cecepia saw the same white shoes on her daughter’s feet that she’d been wearing at McTurians earlier that day. That day. Had it really been less than a day since they’d landed on Invictus? The prolapsed squeaker in Talia’s not-Blasto-at-all toy squaked sadly as Talia tightened her grip on it, and Cecepia could feel its soft felt under her right arm. Under Talia’s right arm. Somewhere behind her, she could hear a Blasto cartoon.

“What are you going to do, mohawked human lover of anachronistic music, cry on this one?”

As Talia reached the bottom of the stairs, the carpet gave way to smooth plascrete, and her footsteps led into a kitchen. Talia’s footfalls turned from a thud to a squelch as she stepped in something slick but viscous and sticky…and dark blue.

“Turn around,” Cicepia screamed. “Turn around and run!” but the connection appeared to be one way. She could feel Talia’s curiosity. She could feel that her daughter no didn’t connect the puddle of sticky blue liquid to the blood that oozed from the scrape on her knee when she’d fallen in the playground three years ago.

The kitchen was cold, and a wild haired human man stepped out from around the counter. He was tall, although anyone would look tall to Talia, and he wore a green jacket and a long scar running across his face.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, it’s okay.”

“Where’s grandma?”

“She’s fine. We were just playing a game. She just forgot to say ‘Simon Says’."

~*~

“Cicepia? Cicepia!”

Cicepia stumbled forward, and found herself half leaning against a squad car and half supported by Elias.

“Talia…I have to find Talia.”

“Are you okay?”

“I had a vision. There was blood. A lot of blood a their house and a man. A human.”

“Whose house?” Elias asked sharply.

“I think it was Horoponia’s - Talia’s grandparents house. Talia…I was seeing through her eyes and feeling what the felt and smelling what she smelled—”

Elias nodded. “She did that to me in McTurians.” He brought up his omni tool and something flashed across the inside of his faceplate. “They’re about 20 miles away,” he said. “1768 Cassia Street.”

“How are you tracking her?”

“I gave her a music cube,” Elias said with a shrug. “It has a tracker built into it. I don’t know if she’s still there, but that’s where the cube ended up.”

Cicepia nodded, took a deep breath and strode over to Sergeant Accius.

“Sergeant I need to command a squad car. It’s an emergency.”

“Emergency? What kind of an emergency?”

“And attack and possible kidnapping in Creza Ward.”

“How do you know this?”
The sergeant looked around where his squad were busy taking statements and securing the area. “What’s the address? We’ll send a force once we’re done here.”

“Let me go ahead,” Cicepia said evenly. “If this turns into a kidnapping case the first hours are crucial.”

“With all due respect officer, I don’t believe you have jurisdiction here.”

“She’s my daughter,” Cicepia said evenly. “I’m going one way or the other unless you’d like to detain me for some reason. Let’s just make it official.”

Sergeant Accius hesitated, and nodded. “Go on then,” he said.

“1758 Cassia Street,” Elias said. “We’ll report in if you give me the channel.”

Above them the grey clouds that had been gathering all evening opened up and drops of rain pelted the windscreen of the squadcar as Elias drove them through the skylanes towards their destination.

“Are you all right?” Arkara asked her.

“No,” Cicepia said tightly. “I’m not.”

“She’ll be fine.”

“We don’t know that,” Cicepia said.

As the glow of the city lights faded the medium rise buildings eventually gave way to large houses on generous blocks of land, each with landscaped lawns that probably needed daily tending given the speed at which plants grew on this jungle planet. It was a comfortable home, and even within the regimentation with which Turian life played out it was tastefully decorated and there were displays of subtle wealth that set it apart from its neighbours.

“Not a lot of security,” Elias noted as they parked the car.

“The system wouldn’t be on if Horoponia was home,” Cicepia said, pulling her jacket closer around her body as they stepped up onto the footpath and headed in towards the porch, the rain getting heavier as they walked up towards the house.

“Lights are on,” Arkara rumbled, her soft voice barely registering above the roll of thunder overhead.

“I don’t think she’s there, Cicepia,” Elias said. “The tracker’s still in there, but there’s no heat signatures that would indicate people that I can pick up.”

“You can just do that through a standard omni-tool?” Arkara asked.

“Well…yeah, if you have the mods and software and overclock your multi-scanner—”

“That’s not standard, Elias,” Cicepia said as she peered in through one of the front windows. “We should check it out anyway. Maybe we can find something that indicates where he took her.”

“He?”

“He was blond, wild hair—wilder eyes. He said something about ‘Simon says’.”

Elias looked at Arkara, who shrugged. “I’m not from this universe either,” she said.

Seeing nothing in the front room, Cicepia tried the door, which was securely locked.

“Got a key?” Elias asked.

“I’ll break a window,” Cicepia said bleakly, gathering her will.

“Hey!” Elias put a hand on her shoulder. “Let me take a look at it.”

Cicepia forced herself to relax as the quarian hunkered down by the front door, the orange of his omni-tool shining brightly in the darkness. Somehow, it was hard to think of him as ‘Elias the Singer’ anymore. He was…just Elias.

“There,” he said, as the door’s bolts whirred and the lock clicked open. “And I deactivated the automatic alarm that kicks in if the door is hacked. You’d think Lucidis would upgrade his firmware for the door locks.”

“Not everyone is as paranoid as you are, Elias,” Arkara said as she lifted her assault rifle and headed inside. She’d left her shield in the car in favour of a bigger gun this time around.

“Everyone should be,” Elias muttered as he gestured for Cicepia to go first.

The inside was a grand entryway of plascrete. Even in luxury homes, the turian military aesthetic remained strong. A faint sulfurous tang filled her nostrils along with the scent of verrum, a spice often used in the baking of cookies. Or at least, if they were chocolate cookies for Talia. The hallway was
dark, but a flickering light shone from the back where the kitchen would have been. Above them, the Elias sung jingle for DexToC filtered down the stairs, and Cicepia’s eyes flicked to the wall clock - 1807 hours. The Blasto cartoon would have ended a short while ago. Waving her hand over a nearby wall panel, Cicepia turned on the hall lights, revealing a staircase up to the right, and small drops of blue blood leading from the door into the house.

“They go that way,” Arkara said, pointing into the house. “You can tell by the splatter pattern.” Cicepia nodded tightly and headed towards the kitchen, following the steps Talia had taken barely ten minutes ago. The house had an open plan living/kitchen area, separated from the hallway by an internal wall, in keeping with the Turian desires for defensive fortifications and grand entrances. Heading once through the doors into the open area, Cicepia could see the kitchen island, upon which stood a metal mixing bowl, and a plastic container of flour. A bottle of verrum lay on its side next to the bowl, a small amount of the spice having spilled into the hard surface. The blood led further in, although it was a mess before the island, where some small footprints—Talia’s certainly—had stepped into it and tracked it across the floor for a few steps. In the kitchen proper, staring up at the ceiling with lifeless eyes was Horoponia, lying in a large pool of dark blue blood. Her chest had been slashed a number of times with a sharp blade, making out a crude ‘S’. Her throat had also been cut. Cicepia felt herself go into case mode. Talia wasn’t here. Horoponia was…family, of sorts, estranged, certainly, but right now, Horoponia had gone to be with the spirits and Cicepia needed to find out why. A flick of her wrist brought the familiar sensation of omni-gel gloves covering her hands as they were minifactured around her flesh. Best sterilising money could buy, really—single use recycled gloves purged of all organic impurities upon disassembly.

“Her throat was cut first,” Cicepia said. “And cut here. You can see the gush of blood from her throat on the base cabinets. But she was stabbed in the chest first—that’s where the blood train comes from. It looks like she grabbed a knife to defend herself with.”

“She didn’t have military training? I thought all Turians did military service,” Elias asked as Arkara carefully prowled the ground floor with military precision.

“She did, but she didn’t carry a gun. She never liked them.”

“Have you seen that ‘S’ before on another case?” Elias asked.

“No,” Cicepia said. “But I can tell you it was cut after she was dead. The wounds barely bled.”

“Hmm,” Elias said, and his faceplate flickered with data, which Cicepia was coming to know as a sign of Elias doing an extranet search. “There’s news of a serial killer working mostly in council space. He—or she—leaves a mark like this on their victims.”

“Any connections between the victims?”

“No, nothing,” Elias said. “But they do all seem to have had family ties to a biotic child. Fairly powerful biotic children.”

“And the children?”

“Mostly teenagers. There’s no sign that he’s ever killed any of them during the initial attack, but they’re all still missing. No bodies have turned up yet. And these cases go back just over four galactic years.”

“Frequency?”

“Eight standard galactic months, at first, dropping to seven, and this would be five if it’s the same person.”

“He’s escalating then.”

“He?”

“Well, I…Talia saw a man.”

“Right. And…escalating?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.”

“The upstairs is clear,” Arkara said, coming into the kitchen. “Looks like a mess up there. Not sure if it’s the lived in kind or the other kind. You might want to have a look. I’ll keep watch down here.”

“Did you see Talia?”

“No, sorry.”

Swallowing hard, Cicepia headed upstairs, Elias following behind her. There were photos on the
upper landing, family photos of Talia and her grandparents, and one of a very young Talia with Cicepia and a man she’d tried her best to forget. Octavious. The upper landing led into what had once been a sitting area, but was now a playroom. Toys were scattered across the floor, and on the far side of the room, the television was playing the Humblebees music as the next cartoon went to an ad break. Turning left into Talia’s room, Cicepia found the place in more disarray than she’d ever have thought Horoponia would tolerate. Clothes were strewn everywhere, but cataloging the items against her internal list, she could see that there were a few key things missing. Entering the bathroom, she saw a pink toothbrush holder, but no toothbrush to be seen, and the bathroom itself had been rummaged through. As she walked through it something crinkled underfoot and she looked down to see a cigarette wrapper for those smokers who still liked to roll their own. No one in the household smoked as far as she knew, and reaching down she also found a stray strand of dried tobacco, which her omni tool scanner confirmed to be levo protein tobacco. A human. Behind her, she heard Elias clear his throat. “Yes?” she asked.

“She didn’t take the tracker,” Elias said, holding up a small data cube. “So I don’t know where she is.”

“He took her,” Cicepia said. “He took her rainbow Humblebee bag, Blasto toy, some clothes, and some toiletries and he took her.”

“She’s alive then,” Elias said. “He wouldn’t take toiletries if he wasn’t going to keep her alive.”

Cicepia nodded. “Let me see if I can find her.”

“How?”

Cicepia shrugged and closed her eyes. “She reached out to me with her mind. Maybe I can reach hers.”

Leaning against the counter for support, Cicepia focused on the feelings she remembered from when her daughter’s mind had touched hers. The way she saw everything from a shorter viewpoint. The careful way Talia moved down stairs, each step deliberate and supported with one hand on the banister. The way her daughter’s mind had felt and processed information. There was a connection there. A memory that was a sense that was a—a—

A flicker.

A flicker of an image and the softness of the Blasto toy clutched against her chest. A wave of confusion washed over her. She didn’t know where she was going, but she was in a car, a large car, and it was raining. The man from the kitchen was there, sitting ahead of her in the front seat of the car. The Humblebee theme song played through the car’s speakers. Through the rain she could also make out the tall buildings of the city out the window to Talia’s right. And—

That was all.

“Well?” Elias asked.

“They’re heading out of the city. West.”

“West, okay. Anything else?”

“They’re in a vehicle of some description.”

Elias nodded. “On it...Sergeant Accius? Yes, we’re here. It’s become a kidnapping. Best suspect is a human male, heading west with a female Turian child in a small skycar. They could have up to a fifteen minute head start on us. Do you have traffic cameras we can use to track them with? Uh huh. Uh huh. With all due respect, Sergeant the girl’s grandmother has been killed and it appears to be the work of the Sorro Killer. The girl is the daughter of a C-Sec officer and this is a galactic case now. Uh huh. Of course. I look forward to speaking with you in person.”

The quarian looked back up at her. “You’re going to have to pull rank on this one. This is your jurisdiction. Not theirs.”

Cicepia nodded, and placed both the cigarette and tobacco in a hastily minifactured evidence bag.

“All right. Let’s go downstairs and meet them when they arrive.”

A few minutes later, three squad cars with lights flashing and sirens blaring pulled up at the house, and Cicepia saw shapes in the windows of the houses nearby as neighbours looked out to see what the fuss was. Let them look. They’d stared for years. Holding her head high she waited for the police to approach, and was only slightly surprised to see Sergeant Accius himself step into the hallway.
“Officer Altus. I’m informed this is a kidnapping and you’re closely related to the victims, you have my condolences. I assure you we’ll do everything we can to find your daughter.”

“Please spare me the pleasantries Sergeant, you and I both know the first hour is critical in a kidnapping case. This ‘Sorro killer’ has taken Talia’s favourite bag, favourite toy, some clothing and toiletries. I need you to give my technician access to the city traffic and security camera feeds.”

“That’s highly irregular Officer Altus, and you and I both know that as someone with close ties to the victims, you shouldn’t be on this case.”

“It’ll take days to get C-Sec or a Spectre out here Sergeant, if the citadel even sends one. We don’t have that time. If you’re going to do everything you can to help, then let me bring my team in. They’ll tell me if I’m overreacting.”

For a moment the words hung in the air between them, only to be broken by a discrete cough.

“Yes Constable Tullius?”

“I have a copy of the C-Sec case files you requested, Sergeant.”

Sergeant Accius brought up his omni tool. “Excellent, please send it to me.”

“Of course.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Cicepia thought she saw Elias tap a few commands on his omni tool and saw his faceplate flicker with information before it cleared back to its usual white-blue glow, but she kept her eyes on the Sergeant, who was scrolling through the files on the virtual display.

“Well, it is a galactic case,” he said eventually. “It’s against my better judgement but I’ll let you bring your team in on this.”

“Thank you,” Cicepia said. “Can you get us information from the city cameras?”

“Better yet, can you get me access to the camera systems?” Elias asked.

“And who are you?” Sergeant Accius asked.

“He’s my hacker,” Cicepia said. “Best white hat I know.”

“I see. So you’re the tech and she’s the muscle?” Sergeant Accius asked Elias, tilting his head towards Arkara.

“Pretty much,” Elias said blandly.

“Ah, we spoke earlier, I recognise your voice. Here. I’ll send you the feed.”

Elias did a strange half bow in response, but Cicepia could see his helmet light up with streams of video footage, moving rapidly and switching camera views so quickly she was sure he couldn’t possibly be watching all of them.

“Well?” she asked.

“Cataloguing and winding back 20 minutes to see if I can find the van,” Elias said.

“How long is that going to take?”

“Oh I’ve found it, it’s dark blue. Trying to get a license plate, but tracking it is hard. I only have so much processing power in my suit, you know.”

“Back to the ship then?” Cicepia asked.

“That would be useful, yes.”

Cicepia nodded. “Thank you Sergeant, I’ll keep you informed.”

Sergeant Accius nodded. “Call for backup when you need it, Officer Altus,” he said. “Preferably before you need it if you’re heading out of the city.”

“We will.”
“Reality is just a crutch for those who can’t deal with drugs,” - Robin Williams

“What happened to Anar?” Sync asked as the unmarked white van pulled away. It wasn’t exactly an ambulance, but it was an unmarked police van with a medical kit and basic supplies. He’d never been in a Turian squad car before, but this one seemed to be something like a drunk tank—kitted out both to restrain and to treat if necessary. It might have been worth having the doctors come with them, but Sync had acted without thinking, and taken the vehicle that was offered by the Sergeant as the medics fussied around Cicepia’s father in law, Lucidis. It was something of a bad habit really.

“I don’t know, boss, I didn’t really see it,” Drimi said. “He just…toppled backwards and hit the ground hard. Or his mech did, anyway. I was too busy trying to stop the conveyor belts from dumping everyone into vats of whatever it is they were coating those pills with and trying to stop you from falling to your death. You’re welcome by the way.”

Sync smiled. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it, boss.”

“Let’s get this jellyfish to a hospital,” Sync said, changing the subject. “I need to get some scans done—and find a someone specialising in xenomedicine.”

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“Are you sure we shouldn’t just go back to the ship?” Drimi suggested. “Cyrus knows hanar medicine specifically and has already treated him.”

“And the med bay is pretty much state of the art,” Sync agreed. “Or was when…I got it.”

Reaching into the his medical supplies, Sync pulled out a small syringe of epinephrine and stared down at Anar’s semi-translucent form. “Here goes nothing,” he muttered as he picked a spot on the hanar’s bell at random and stuck in the needle.

The effect was immediate, and Anar shot off the bed screaming, his levitation pack sending him rocketing to the ceiling where he collided and spread out like a tentacled ooze.

“Make it stop, make it stop!” he yelled, tentacles flailing wildly.

“Anar, calm down, it’s okay,” Sync said, reaching forward as he attempted to guide Anar back down towards the floor. “You’re okay.”

Two tentacles twined around his left hand and another two wrapped around his neck like a python.

“Make it stop! Make it stop!”

“Is everything okay back there?” Drimi’s voice came from the front of the van, where a small grille allowed for limited vision and speech through to the back.

“No! Get me to Lennox! Get me to fucking Lennox!”

“Tides, okay, I’m on it,” the asari said, changing the direction of the skycar to head back to the skyport.

Sync grabbed at the tentacles that were threatening to cut off his airway. As he fumbled for a sedative, the van lurched throwing both him and Anar towards the left wall, where they hit with a clang of flesh and metal on more metal. The sedative syringe fell from his hand and landed somewhere in on the floor. As the tentacles tightened around his throat, Sync gave up on medicine and reached out towards Anar’s form, fingers outstretched. Electricity once again sparked between his fingers and he hoped the amount of voltage he was channelling would be enough to stun, but not kill. Anar’s body flashed swiftly through spirals of red and white before the hanar puddled on the floor of the van, his flesh an opaque white.

Sync gasped for breath as Anar’s tentacles loosened, and he scurried for the syringe and tugged the cap off, all but jamming it into Anar’s flesh. As the usual translucent pink of hanar skin started to slowly spread across Anar’s body, Anar raise tentacle and weakly grasped Sync’s wrist. “I’m…sorry…” Anar managed.

“It’s okay, I’ve been through worse,” Sync said. “Try to get some rest, we’ll get you back to Cyrus.”

“Sync, what’s going on back there?” Drimi asked.
“Bad reaction to adrenaline,” Sync said, collapsing onto one of the bench-like seats on the edge of the van. “We’re fine.”
“I’m…so…sorry,” Anar mumbled, and then lay still, although Sync’s scans showed his vitals remained strong. That was something at least.

“What happened to him?” Cyrus asked when Sync and Drimi deposit Anar on a bed in the medbay. “He passed out in the last fight, I’m not sure why,” Sync said. “I gave him some epinephrine to wake him up, but we came out raging and tried to strangle me, so I sedated him.”
“More than sedated. Scrambled his brains with a neural shock, didn’t you? Good move. It probably saved your life.”
“He kept asking for you, so we brought him in.”
“What exactly was he saying?” Cyrus asked.
“I couldn’t really make it out other than your name,” Sync said. “It was mostly loud and hysterical.”
“Sounds like him even when he is awake. Typical.”
“Has he done this before? Can I help with anything?”
“Yes. No. I have this under control.” Moving quickly, the salarian walked over to a nearby drawer, taking out a clean syringe which he filled with medicine from an brown bottle with nothing more than a date written on it, before injecting Anar with the clear liquid. “Let him sleep off the sedative,” Cyrus advised. “We’ll all be better for it.”

Sync was pacing around the conference room when Cicepia, Elias and Arkara returned.
“Welcome back, any leads?”
“You could say that,” Arkara said as Elias walked straight over to the nearby terminal and created a link to a road camera feed that immediately covered one wall of monitors with traffic feeds. “Elias is working on a lead to see who kidnapped my daughter,” Cicepia said. “How’s Anar?”
“Kidnapped? Cicepia I’m so sorry.”
Cicepia smiled grimly. “We can be sorry after we get her back, Captain. How’s Anar?”
“In the med bay. Cyrus was able to calm him down.”
“Calm him down?” Elias asked from where he was staring at the wall of video. “He was out cold, isn’t that calm enough?”
“I gave him a shot of epinephrine as I wasn’t sure what was wrong,” Sync said, rubbing at the bruises on his neck. “He went from comatose to raging and tried to strangle me.”
“You’re lucky you weren’t poisoned,” Cicepia said evenly. “We had a few cases of hanar poisoning on the Citadel a while back. Took a while to trace it because no one thought to look at sentient races as possible sources at first. He’ll be up and about later though?”
“He should be,” Sync said. “If we need him up we can probably give him something to counteract the sedative.”
“Good,” Cicepia said. “We might need him if Elias manages to track down the killer we’re looking for.”
“Killer? I thought your daughter was kidnapped?”
“She was. By someone C-Sec are referring to as ‘the Sorro Killer’. I think it’s a play on ‘sorrow’ and the human story of ‘Zorro’. He kidnaps biotic teens and kills whatever family gets in his way.”
“I thought your daughter was six or seven?”
“Six. So we’ve either got a copycat or he’s evolving.”
“Evolving?”
“Or devolving. It’s hard to say without access to the case files.”
“I feel like I understand the words you’re saying, but not the meaning. Maybe my translator software is acting up.”
“It’s cop talk about serial killer behaviour,” Cicepia said. “Mainly the question is whether our killer—if he’s the same one—is changing his tactics because he’s more confident and making more effective choices, or is losing his mind and starting to rely more on instinct than higher level thought.”
“Which one’s better?”
“Neither, necessarily,” Cicepia said. “It would just tell me how to deal with him if I knew which way he was going.”
“We have to find him first,” Arkara said. “I’ll go check on Anar.”
“I’ll come with you,” Cicepia said. “We should wake him up and fill him in.”
“Don’t let him grapple you,” Sync warned. “I know hanar toxin is worse for dextro species like you.”
Cicepia nodded curtly and walked out of the room, followed by Arkara.
“She’s really taking this hard, ain’t she?” Sync asked Elias.
“Her kid’s been taken from her,” Elias said with a shrug. “She’ll hold it together long enough to get Talia back or die trying.”
“I guess.”
“You ever thought about having kids?”
“I can’t,” Sync said with a shrug. “This…cybernetics. It’s made me infertile.”
“Talk to Arkara’s friends in her universe,” Elias said with a chuckle. “They’ll have little cloned Synes running around quicker than you can blink.”
“Now that’s a scary thought.”
“Sure, but—wait, found it.”
“You did? Where?”
“Run down blue skyvan, no plates. Last camera has it heading west into the canyons past…Ulubra, whatever’s in that suburb.”
Sync nodded. “I’ll start the engines, send me the coordinates, and tell Cicepia.”
The Canyon

“We’ve all got the power in our hands to kill, but most people are afraid to use it. The ones who aren’t afraid, control life itself.” – Richard Ramirez, AKA The Night Stalker. Human serial killer.

“Are you sure this is okay? We can’t be seen?” Cicepia asked nervously as she stared at the small display in the Endurance’s cockpit.

“Only if they look up and can see through clouds,” Elias said. “Or if they’re actively scanning using something old school, like radar, but we’d be able to detect that.”

“And how are we supposed to find them through all this?” Cicepia asked. “Normally we’d be using a ground search or cameras, but they’re not feasible here. And this area is a known hideout for all sorts of criminals fleeing the law.”

“Well, it is a dark and stormy night,” Elias said far too brightly. “Hopefully they’ll all either be laying low or out doing their criminal crimes somewhere that isn’t here.”

“Criminal crimes?” Sync asked.

“Okay, it’s a tautology, I still like the way it sounds,” Elias said. “Maybe I’ll use it as an album title one day.”

Sync shook his head and refocused on flying the ship through the storm, or rather, above the storm clouds. Beneath them, Cicepia could see a sea of roiling black cloud, with the occasional flicker of lightning arcing across from one area of cloud to another. “Cicepia, Elias said you had a vision?”

“Something like that,” Cicepia said. “Talia seems to have the ability to share what she’s perceiving with someone else. She did it with Elias back at McTurians and she’s shared some of what’s been happening with me. I don’t know if she knows she’s doing it though.”

“She did at the restaurant,” Elias said. “Horoponia scolded her for it. She couldn’t get Talia out of the restaurant fast enough after that.”

“And you saw a man come and take Talia?” Sync asked.

“I’m pretty sure it must have been the same man. They were in the kitchen, the blood was already there. And he said something about them playing a game. Him and Horoponia. But… the only problem is she forgot to say ‘Simon Says’”

“Simon Says, eh?” Elias said. “Sounds like an old earth game.”

“Yeah, I played that as a kid.”

“I can add it to my search filters, but I don’t know if that’ll turn up anything,” Elias said.

“Sure I—”

The world flickered. She was cold, and the van had come to rest in the middle of a dark place with high stone walls. The man left the car and came around to her side of the vehicle, opening an umbrella to shield her from the rain. He was tall. Maybe not as tall as mother, but taller than grandma.

“It’s all right,” he said. “It’s all right little one. I’ll get you something to eat and I’ll read you a story before bedtime.”

The man’s omnitool cast a dim light before them, and what Cicepia first took for a large rock turned out to be the side of an old ship, battered and not well maintained. She wasn’t even sure if it was spaceworthy. The man walked up to a panel, and his fingers went to punch in a code on the numberpad. She strained to see the numbers but the light was bad and Talia looked away into the darkness behind her.

No Talia, look at the panel, the panel—

The world flickered.

“It happened again, didn’t it?” Elias asked.

Cicepia nodded. “She’s still with him. He’s right near some run down ship. I don’t know if it’ll fly.
I’m hoping it’s as much of a junker as it looks.”
Elias hit one of the comm buttons. “Hey Drimi, are you any good with the sensor array on this
thing?”
“Sensors, yeah, I know a thing or two about them. Why?”
“We need to find an old junker hidden somewhere in this network of caverns. Can you help with
that?”
“I’ll see what I can do. Any idea what class or ship type it is?”
Cicepia pushed forward. “It’s an Athabasca class freighter. Old.”
“Sure… give me a sec.”
From the other end of the comm link Cicepia could hear the rustle of fabric as Drimi worked away
on his virtual console. “I think I’ve got something – there’s a metal mass that could be an Athabasca
class freighter less than 3 clicks from our ground position. I’ll send you a nav point.”
“Thanks Dree,” Sync said.
“Anytime, bossman. Hey, if this is the ship you’re looking for, we might want to approach discreetly,
you know?”
“Noted,” Sync said. “We’ll land back from its position and approach on foot.”
“I’ll suit up.”
“What?”
“I’m coming with you, Sync. From what I’ve heard, you’re walking into an unknown ship with a
bunch of potentially deranged biotics. I’m good on both counts.”
“Okay man, it’s your funeral.”
“Hey, you don’t get the monopoly on pulling dangerous shit, boss.”
Sync laughed. “Noted. Just be careful.”
“Same to you.”

Five minutes later, they assembled by the personnel ramp, everyone nervously fiddling with their
gear.
“Does anyone else find this ship design strange?” Cicepia asked. “There isn’t an armoury and you’d
think the exit would be in the cargo hold.”
“This one thinks this ship was built for civilian use.”
“Technically I am a civilian,” Elias said. “Drimi did you get anything on the scanners?”
“About eight humanoid lifesigns on board. Mostly up the front end or near the centre of the ship.”
“Everyone stay sharp,” Cicepia said. “He could be pushing drugs onto these kids and if he’s got hold
of some Minogen X we could be in trouble.”
“Minogen X?” Elias asked.
“A biotic booster, but it’s easy to overdose—and overdoses are usually fatal. It can also induce
hallucinations. We had an issue a while back with a ring smuggling it in from Omega.”
“Right, note to self, avoid Minogen X.”
“Good plan,” Cicepia said. “Based on how this man was talking to Talia, I’d suspect he’s building
himself a cabal of pliable biotics. I don’t know if he sells them or is creating a replacement family
though. If he’s been keeping them around for a while, they may be indoctrin—brainwashed.”
“If they’re lucky,” Sync said. “Brainwashing is often reversible.”
“So, um… anyone have a way of blocking biotics? You know, preventing them from being used?”
Drimi nodded. “I can create opposing fields to damp their use of biotics. I showed Sync how to do it
too.”
“I’m not great at it but I’ll try my best,” Sync said.
“I suggest killing them dead,” Arkara said. “It’s the best way I know.”
“Which way are we going in?” Anar asked, his mech creaking as he walked towards the ship exit.
“The Athabasca typically has three. Passenger entry, cargo and emergency side port.”
“Did anyone buy that Cison Pro Mark Four toothbrush?” Elias asked brightly. “No? Well, guess the
emergency side port is out.”
“Well, if the life signs are up front, it makes sense to sneak in the cargo hold.”
“Going in guns blazing worked well at the factory,” Sync said.
“This madman isn’t a reaper though, and he has my kid.”
“Fair call. What do you want to do?”
“We should go in as stealthily as possible.”
“This one is very stealthy. Especially if this one floats up towards the ceiling.”
“I just got my tactical cloak working again,” Elias said. “I haven’t had time to test it, but that’ll help keep me out of sight, at least.”
“These are kids we’re dealing with,” Cicepia said. “I’d like to avoid bloodshed if possible.”
“Except for the one who took Talia,” Arkara rumbled.
“Except for him, yes.”
“So, cargo hold then?” Elias asked.
“Unless…can you hack into their systems to open the doors and prevent any alarms going off?”
“Well, you’d have to be on the other side of the doors for that typically,” Elias said. “Unless they have really insecure wifi.”
“They might, the ship is really run down,” Cicepia said.
“Or it might just looks run down,” Anar said. “When this one did mercenary work, we liked ships that appeared to be old and battered. It made them less noticeable.”
“I was thinking that too,” Sync agreed.
“Well, we won’t know until we get there,” Cicepia said. “Let’s move out.”

The outside of the ship was exactly as Cicepia had seen—as Talia had seen. It was battered with streaks of rust and chipped paint, and there were no external lights on at all. There had been some attempt at disguising the craft with netting, branches and painted canvas, and to the casual observer, it probably would have been enough to disguise the craft, lying as it was in the shadow of a canyon wall. The cargo doors were large, heavy and set to open outward, providing both a ramp in and cover from the elements. As Elias pushed ahead towards the door, his armour flickered and shifted into the grey-blue patterns of urban camouflage. For a moment, he crouched by the door, and then padded over the left and side of the doors. A flash of lighting cast him in stark relief, almost washing out the glow of his omni-tool as his fingers flickered over the virtual display before the doors opened smoothly on well oiled hinges and swung open, the gloom inside the ship only being different from the gloom outside in that it was drier.
The room inside was dusty, and it tickled the back of her throat, making her want to cough. Then the doors closed up behind them, plunging them all into complete darkness.
“Anar, any time you want to start glowing that would be great,” Cicepia said. “Actually, your mech has floodlights, right? You can maybe get in your mech and turn on the floodlights?”
There was no answer. Taking a step forward she heard her footstep echo around the room. No other footfalls fell to greet hers.
“Guys?”
“The law is only a defense against those who agree to be bound by it.” - Thane Krios


Somewhere in the distance, liquid was falling off something and hitting the ground. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. It was a regularly irregular sound that came from somewhere up ahead in the emptiness of the cargo hold.

“I wish I’d bought that new omni-tool now,” she muttered, as she pulled out her gun. Not that it would do her much good. She was a decent shot. She could hit a target in the firing range just fine. But out in the field she relied upon her voice and her biotics more than she relied on her gun. When she’d been working with partners, or a squad, her lack of expert marksmanship hasn’t been an issue. Now, as she stepped towards the source of the sound, it suddenly was one. Beneath her, the floor was slick with something that puddled underfoot, and she nearly slid off her feet. Squatting down she ran her gloved hand through the liquid, and found it damp, warm, and sticky, with a salty tang in the air that registered immediately in her nostrils. Blood.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. It was louder now, and suddenly there was more dripping, beating an irregular staccato onto the floor. First it was two drips, then three, then more than she could make out individually until it sounded as though something was being poured onto the floor and splatter, and the blood was rising, now around her ankles as she slogged through it, trying to find the far end of the cargo bay walls. She needed light.

Holstering her gun, he pulled out a flare and lit the end, and found herself nose to nose with… herself.

“Boo!” the other Cicepia said with a toothy grin.

Cicepia nearly dropped the flare, but instead stepped back, pulling out her gun instead. Her doppleganger wore a red dress. It wasn’t as revealing as the clothes the Asari often wore, or as full as some of the human styles she’d seen, but it was a design that took the best of that silhouette and made it into something that screamed ‘Turian’. Absently, she noted the angular panels and stitching. You’d never be able to find that in the shops.

“Who-” she started.

“I’m you. Sort of.”

“What did you find there Cicepia?” Another voice asked. It sounded like she did when she played back her interrogation tapes. You always sounded different when recorded as opposed to in your own head. Moving so that she could see both figures without having to turn her back on them, Cicepia saw another doppleganger, dressed in a dazzling emerald green dress of a similar cut to the first, and with glowing green eyes.

“What is the meaning of this?” Cicepia asked.

“You tell us,” Green Cicepia said. “You’re the one who brought us here.”

“I did no such thing. Why do you look like me.”

“Because we are you, silly,” Red Cicepia said.

“Quit pulling this shit. What’s going on?”

Red Cicepia cocked her head to one side. “Oh, Cicepia, Cicepia,” she said. “If only you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“The truth about Octavius of course.”

“What makes you think you know any more than I do?”

“We know plenty. Plenty,” Green Cicepia said, walking forward, seemingly unconcerned her shins were pushing through the blue-black pool of blood they were standing in. “But it seems like you
know a bit about us as well. Been busy doing some snooping. Or at least, getting someone else to do your snooping for you. Smart, Cicepia, well, almost.”
“No it is smart,” Red Cicepia agreed. “Just not as smart as us.”
As the doppelganger in read turned her head, Cicepia saw a familiar bullet wound in the head. She’d snagged a copy of the autopsy reports. Her autopsy reports. It seemed like so long ago now.
“At least I’m not dead.”
Both of her other selves grinned. “Some things are worse than death, dear.” Green Cicepia said.
“Why am I here?”
“Because you need to learn when to leave things the fuck alone,” Red Cicepia said. “I should have. But at least I didn’t abandon my daughter.”
“That was all you,” Green Cicepia said, nodding. “You foisted her off your your grandparents years ago. No wonder she’s gone.”
“You’re a failure, Cicepia,” her dead red self said. “A failure as a mother, a failure as a C-Sec Officer, and all this snooping and half truthed lies? You’re a failure as a Turian. You can fool everyone else, but you can’t fool us.”
“No, you can never fool us.”
“Does it help you fall asleep at night? Telling yourself it’s all for a good cause? That the ends justify the means?”
“That’s what Cerberus told itself.”
“Himself.”
“Herself.”
“Whatever.”
“Shut up both of you!” Cicepia snapped. “I’m here for Talia. And you’re in my way. Or I’m in my way. I’m not really sure, but here’s the thing: I don’t care who or what gets in my way, I’ll get it out of my way if I have to. And that includes myself.”
“Are you sure that’s what’s best for her?” Green Cicepia asked. “A washed out deadbeat mother like you?”
“And aren’t you on some dangerous mission to regain some sense of pride and possibly fucking die in the process? You’ll let her risk all of that?” Red Cicepia said.
“Sounds like someone’s nominating herself for mother of the year there.”
“Move,” Cicepia said. “Or I’ll move you.”
Both Cicepias grinned, and biotics flared around them. “Fucking dare you,” Red Cicepia said. Cicepia felt the blood pound in her head and she flicked her hand forward, and the dark energy swirled down the familiar neural pathways as a mass effect field sprung into existence, pulling both other Cicepias into the air.
“No problem.”
“Cicepia, put me down this instant!” Red Cicepia snapped.
“I don’t care if you are me, I’m going to find my daughter!”
“Cicepia, this is Elias. You’ve got me in a singularity. Now put me down.”
“What?”

~*~

Elias jumped when he heard the cargo bay doors shut behind them, and then he flicked on his night vision. It hadn’t exactly been standard issue, but it had been the one thing he’d recovered from his father’s suit back when... Well. Back then. In the greenish monochrome of night vision, the cargo bay looked smaller than he thought it would, a narrow, room empty of anything—including his companions.
“Pi, where’d everyone go?” he asked.
“Crea—or —lias ias ias -a-wry tet tet ette…” Pi’s voice glitched out into static.
“Pi, are you all right?”
“Ssom— ng oong ge ge ger tet tet why ne ne…”
Elias hurriedly checked his suit, clamping down on all the seals and switching the suit into a sealed, envirosuit mode. There didn’t seem to be any mechanical or software malfunctions.

“Pi, this really isn’t the time.”

“I’m sorry, Pi is unavailable right now.” The voice was still male, but it was…chirpy. Pi never did chirpy.

“Who am I talking to then?”

“I’m sorry, Pi is unavailable right now. I’m sorry, Pi is unavailable right now.” The voice changed in pitch and speed, distorting through the vowels and sentences, like Jamak when he overdid it with that vintage record player Elias had got him once upon a time. “I’m sorry, Pi is unavailable right now. I’m sorry, Pi is unavailable right now. Pi is unavailable right now. Pi is unavailable right now, r-r-right now…”

Sighing, Elias gave up and looked around, and saw his name on the walls. Or two of them, anyway. It was as if his vision was a spotlight, picking up words written in blacklight pen. Only his vision wasn’t a spotlight and night vision typically relied on the infra-red spectrum, not the UV spectrum. On the right hand wall, he could see his name written out in smooth, cursive script with lovehearts and other whimsical doodles. On the left, the writing was angry jagged, and contained words like “sucks” and “die”. It was like fan mail. On walls, with weird hallucinatory visual tricks.

On a hunch, Elias tried calling the Endurance.

“Greetings, this is the Ashru. Please state your name.”

Elias paused. The Ashru had been decommissioned and was now the centre of a thriving town on Rannoch. They were mining bauxite and studying plant symbiosis as well as cashing in on tourists looking to see the Ashru after he’d made it on Citadel’s Got Talent.

“Elia’solor nar Ashru,” he said eventually.

“Elia’solor. You’re returned to the fleet.”

“…sure. Why not. Let’s go with that.”

“And what knowledge have you brought back that will better the lives of the Quarian people?” Elias shut his jaw with a click. No-one ever went back to the same ship upon completion of their pilgrimage. That was the whole point of the pilgrimage. Rite of passage, useful salvage and genetic diversity. “A chemical compound that allows dextro-protein based lifeforms to safely consume and derive nutrition from levo-protein food sources.”

“That sounds very useful indeed. Welcome back to the fleet, Elia’solor.” The hatch he—they—had entered through opened into the stark light of a Quarian liveship.

“Thank you,” Elias said. “Keelah Selai,” and he ran in the opposite direction.

Of course, as fate would have it, he ran straight into a mass effect field and found himself being pulled up into the air.

Surely hallucinations didn’t do that too.

Twisting around in the field he saw Rayne, her arm outstretched and a look of determination on her face.

“You…cheated!” she snarled, her face contorting in rage.

“You know I know that you can’t actually do that, right?” Elias said. “You mentioned it in your interview about military service and how you never learnt how to do that.”

The image before him flowed and morphed, flowing in a strangely organic fashion between Rayne’s form and that of Cicepia. What the hell was in that dust?

Thanking the ancestors for developing the in-suit neuro control interface, Elias brought up the commands for the ventilation system and turned on the cargo bay extractor fans. Stealth was compromised at this point, and as if to emphasise the point a burst of automatic gunfire rang in his ears. Blinking, he tried to focus on where the shots had come from, but he couldn’t see anyone. It was probably Anar or Arkara.

He hoped it was Anar or Arkara.
The room was dark, and Anar could feel the dusty air of the Cargo hold clinging to his skin. “Someone really needs to clean up in here,” he muttered. “Did this one mention it doesn’t do well in dry conditions? This one always finds it needs far too much moisturiser after desert missions.”

The door clanked shut behind him, sudden enough to push air currents into the room, causing the dust to swirl in eddies that he could feel around his tentacles. “Solid waste excretions, Elias, you could have provided this one with some warning,” Anar said. From the quarian there was no reply.

“Elias?”

Rising up towards the ceiling, Anar turned started to glow. Or sing. Colour, pattern and intensity were simply ways to communicate complex ideas at speeds far beyond that of vertebrate speech. A conversation with an alien took almost a hundred times more slowly than between hanar, and it was almost a relief to shout at the speed of normal speech after spending years without contact with other hanar. As his form flickered through white-blue and a pattern of bright yellow green, he lit up the rows of military green crates below. And no one else. But they were just there. He heard thunder rumble somewhere outside, the sound muffled by the ship’s hull, but he couldn’t see any footprints. Arkara would have left footprints in the dust. The perfect rows of crates gave him the shivers. They were very much perfect, aligned to the millimetre it seemed. Despite the ground being covered by a thick layer of dust the crates were pristine, sitting perfectly on the dusty floor as though they’d been placed but a minute ago. By flying people.

As he floated over the rows he heard a boom, as if something had slammed into one of the crates. Floating closer, he found one that was just slightly out of line with the others, but there was no indication of anything hitting it from the outside. “This one’s hallucinations are getting out of hand,” he muttered. “This one needs to speak with Doctor Lennox about tampering with this one’s serum.

As he picked up his song again, he started hearing a similar song—an echo in a different voice, humming along with him. Stopping, he let the song and light fade, and the echo stilled, picking up again only when he did.

Behind him another booming sound drew his attention to a different crate, now out of line with the rest of its precise row. Clutching his rifle he floated down to the crate, aimed his gun at the lid, and used two free tentacles to throw the lid open, aiming the barrel of his gun at the inside of the crate. The crate lid fell to the ground, raising a cloud of fine, grey dust. The crate was empty. The humming continued, but was now overlain by another sound—a sobbing. Probably humanoid, and probably male. Floating back up to the ceiling, Anar followed the sound. The room ended, and narrowed to a corridor. In the doorway was a humanoid figure, humanoid in shape with purplish blue skin.

Another hallucination?

“Chris?”

The sobbing stopped, and the man turned towards Anar, shielding his face from the glow of Anar’s bioluminescence with a three fingered hand. “Anar?” the figure said. “What are you doing here?” For a moment, Anar simply stared at his friend, taking in Chris’ sunken eyes and gaunt frame. “Is it really you this time?” he asked.

“Is it really you this time?” Chris asked, his lower lip trembling.

Anar lowered his gun. “Of course, numbnuts.”

A semblance of a smile crossed Chris’ features. “It is you. Anar, we have to get out of here. I’ve been searching for an exit for ages and…I don’t know where I am.”

“What happened to you?” Anar asked. “This one has been searching for you…everywhere.”

“I don’t know,” Chris said. “I don’t…the last thing I really remember is the merc job, and then…I was here. And I don’t know where ‘here’ is, or how to get out. It all looks the same.”

Anar glanced around for chains or restraints, but found none. Starting forward he paused. “How did you get here?” he asked.

“I told you I don’t know! I don’t remember!”

“This one knows that feeling.”
Chris reached out and grabbed Anar’s tentacles. “You’re not going to leave me, right? Please don’t leave me. I don’t know how to get out and I want to go home. I want to go back to our game and back to the way things were!”

“There is no going back, Chris. Not for this one, anyway.”

“No…” Chris said. “Don’t say that, please don’t say that, I thought you were real. You always say that!” Turning, Chris bolted away up the dark corridor.

“Okay,” Anar said. “This isn’t the normal hallucination.”

Around him a rumble built, low and slowly crescendoing. It was a familiar laugh, a familiar, maniacal laugh.

“Let this one out!” Anar yelled, pounding the wall with two fisted tentacles. “Let this one out!”

Bringing his tentacles to his bell, his skin flushing crimson red as he tensed, grabbing his gun and firing at the ceiling. Bullets were good. Bullets were good. Bullets shot things. Shooting this was good. Shooting him was good.

Above him the ceiling cracked and buckled, and a body fell from the ceiling—a human woman, with red hair and a redder dress, soaked in blood.

Anar stared, dropped his gun and sank to the ground, his tentacles going out to cradle the limp form, her body still warm to the touch. “Fuck you Simon!” he swore through his sobs. “This one will end you it swears!”

He should put her down. He knew she should put her down, pick up his assault rifle and go and find Simon. But he couldn’t. Running footsteps from the corridor made him look up. Maybe Chris was coming back. Out from the darkness, he saw a humanoid figure, but as it came closer into the light of his bioluminescence, he saw a familiar blond man in a green jacket, face contorted in crazed glee.

Letting go of his fallen love, Anar tilted his thrusters and flew directly at the madman, tentacles outstretched to strangle.

“Run, run, run, as fast as you can.” Simon cackled. “You can’t catch me.” Simon’s footfalls where heavier than Anar would have thought, and the man bowled him over, rolling into a predatory crouch as he rounded on Anar. “I’m the gingerbread man.”

“When did you become a wall exactly?” Anar grunted as he righted himself in the air. Simon just grinned, watching, and Anar drew himself into a defensive posture. “Make your move.”

“Make my move? My move? What are you on about this time?”

Anar started to circle, using his anti-grav thrusters to keep a wary eye on his adversary.

“This one isn’t very good at fighting walls—but even walls make mistakes eventually. So make your move.”

“Anar, I’m not wall. I’m a krogan. You should know this.”

Anar paused, and the form before him flickered and suddenly Arkara was standing in front of him, in full battle armour. “Oh,” he said. “You’re a lot harder than this one remembers.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading so far. I am trying to post more consistently and get ahead on the writing. If you’d like to support me as an author, I have a new novel coming out soon. It’s fantasy, gay and rather fantastic, if I do say so myself. As of the time of writing this, it’s available for pre-order at DSP Publications, and is titled Dragonslayer. It’s available in print as well as in ebook format, and all proceeds go towards me being able to eat and continue to write.

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