Semper Fi
by Hittosama

Summary

2192 CE. Garrus Vakarian is nominated Spectre by the Council a few months after the attack on the Citadel, in which he proved to be an excellent element. Still, he will be under Commander Shepard's supervision for a year. First human Spectre, she is mostly known to be the Alliance's poster-girl but also a ruthless soldier. (AU, all genres from the games plus lots of cultural HC.)

Also published on Fanfiction.net but this version on AO3 contains smut.
Disclaimer: the Mass Effect trilogy is the property of Bioware.
Rating: M
Genre: AU, action/adventure and probably all you can find in the original games (romance, politics, etc).
Betareader: Talimancer on Fanfiction.net
A/N: English is not my mother tongue so you'll find some strange sentences here and there.
Talimancer is currently going through the chapters to correct them, I'll edit them when they're ready.

Semper Fi
Chapter 1
Garrus - 1

Garrus would never have imagined the docks could be so crowded so early in the morning. He never came to this part of the Citadel because he never had to. He arrived on the station four years ago and never left since, not even once for new year's celebrations on Palaven. His job didn't offer him the opportunity to come here either. As an officer with an engineer's degree like his, his job consisted of tracking down bad guys through their bank accounts, most of the time. Sometimes, his boss asked him to assist gathering intel on a suspect but his superior didn't like it. Executor Pallin had his own guys for that, a whole division of Salarians to be precise. He didn't like to give their job to someone else. Everybody had a defined place and a role to keep straight with Pallin, much like with his predecessor. Garrus didn't care much for those rules. He did his job at full capacity, regardless of who gave the order. It was the turian way of doing things after all. He may not have been a good Turian but he took his job seriously and did everything he could to do it, even if that meant crossing the line here and there.

His liberal understanding of the rules surely drove him to this point of his life, in those overcrowded spacedocks during rush hour. Garrus hadn't decided yet if it was a good or a bad thing. He still barely believed it and thought someone would come any minute now to tell him they had made a mistake somewhere and that he had to report to Chellick at C-Sec like every other day. Spectre. The Council had made him a Spectre. If anybody wanted a proof of drug use within the Council members, that was it. Nobody sober, or sane, would have given him this job. The Special Tactics and Reconnaissance forces – Spectres in short – were agents of the Council, an elite group selected within the best of what each species could produce, exceptional soldiers with extraordinary authority. They were not trained, Councilor Valern had said, but chosen, individuals forged in the fire of service and battle, those whose actions elevated them above the rank and file. Garrus had barely listened to the Salarian, more intrigued by the presence of Admiral Anderson of the Alliance Navy and Ambassador Udina, of Earth. Like every Turian, Garrus was not at ease around Humans. He didn't personally know many of them, even if some worked at C-Sec, so he liked to keep an eye on them. They were loud, bold and cocky most of the time despite their recent arrival into galactic society. Plus there was the whole Relay 314 incident, that didn't help either.

It took eight standard minutes for Councilor Valern and Councilor Tevos to describe how important his new job was, eight minutes Garrus mostly spent looking at all the serious faces giving themselves some sort of importance. The turian ambassador was also there but Garrus couldn't recall her full name – she was a Noramus, he could tell by her tattoos, but her first name was a mystery. She stood between the Earth ambassador and the turian Councilor, Sparatus, at parade rest to not let anything show. Sparatus was much easier to read. He was uneasy and
reluctant to be there. Tevos had to give him a cold look to make him talk. Sparatus cleared his throats and declared that, as a new Spectre, Garrus had to spend a year under the supervision of an experienced mentor. Garrus understood what it meant before Sparatus explained the presence of the Humans: his mentor would be the only Spectre from Earth, Commander Jane Shepard of the Alliance Navy, hero of Torfan, poster-girl for all the greatness of her species since her nomination five years ago. By the time Garrus had arrived on the Citadel, the press division of the Earth embassy had stopped to put her face on every holoscreen possible but he knew who she was nonetheless. The news never gave up the opportunity to talk about how extraordinary Commander Shepard was. She always looked dead serious and haughty, her chin up and her eyes looking down at the mortal reporters gathered around her in awe and admiration. She was Earth's best poster-girl alright, exactly how any Turian would describe a Human, minus the bloodthirsty look and the weird dead-animal-like hair on top of it.

So Spectre Shepard was going to be his mentor for a year, an act that would surely improve the friendship between Turians and Humans – Garrus almost grinned when Sparatus said that. The Earth ambassador was very proud of himself, no doubt it has been his idea. If Admiral Anderson was annoyed by Udina, it didn't show. The man stood straight and tall, strength personified despite the loose skin on his face and neck – a sign of old age in Humans, if Garrus remembered correctly. When came his turn to speak, he informed Garrus that he was here to represent Shepard, as she wasn't on the Citadel yet. She would arrive the next day but he had nothing to worry about. Shepard's mentor had been a Turian, Nihlus Kryik, so she already knew a lot about turian culture. Knowing her as Anderson did, integration should work smoothly if Garrus gave his best, and he believed Turians didn't do otherwise. Shepard didn't care about species as long as her people were competent. Garrus had nodded – there wasn't much he could have done or said at that moment anyway.

Few Spectres had their own spaceship and Shepard was one of them. That meant Garrus wouldn't be alone with her, he was to join the Normandy's crew, live and work with them. He had thought about it later in the evening after his nomination, sipping a beer in a bar he visited regularly, one of those where he would never meet one of his C-Sec colleagues. He had served on a spaceship like everybody, but on a turian one. Shepard was from the Alliance, which meant her ship surely ran under Alliance rules. Garrus had no idea what those were. Humans were less likely to spar, that he knew. What about the food? Levo amino food was toxic to Turians. Garrus may have been the lucky bastard out of one hundred millions who wouldn't die immediately if he ate levo food but still. He wasn't eager to survive on ration bars only for the next year, nor to be surrounded by death threats everywhere – heck, technically Humans were toxic to him. And what about individual liberties? Humans were a lot less permissive than the Hierarchy.

Garrus hadn't slept very well, to be honest. He hadn't been this anxious since his common alien cultures exam in seventh year – the class never really interested him to begin with and he was buried under maths and programming homework that year; who cared about elcor literature anyway? – and he wasn't one to be anxious in general. Worried, yes, it happened, but not anxious. Garrus had left his small apartment with his weapons suitcase and another set of armor, not even looking behind him – the ambassador had assured him that she would take care of it for him. He had arrived at the docks just before rush hour and had stood there since then, at parade rest, looking right in front of him when he wasn't distracted by the crowd, waiting for the Normandy. He had been told the ship would arrive at the Alliance's docks but he had preferred not to enter that part of the spaceport yet. Garrus could have used his new extraordinary authority to pass customs and wait there but he wasn't eager to force anything on Alliance goons. Humans were not easy to deal with when authority was forced upon them, especially if a Turian was involved – Garrus had learned that the hard way in C-Sec. Instead of doing something stupid, he had informed the Alliance soldiers in customs that he was to board the Normandy when the ship would arrive later,
they could check with Admiral Anderson or Ambassador Udina if they wanted, then he waited outside, not caring about the looks he got from civilians. If they never had seen a Turian in medium armor, that wasn't his problem.

Rush hour picked up, people came and went like waves on a shore, released on the Citadel by commercial flights from all around the galaxy. It took two days through the relay network to reach the Citadel from Parnita or Pranas, three from Trebia, a little more from Sol. When you could make it to the other side of the galaxy in under fifteen days, working in another system was something that was possible. A lot of Turians worked in C-Sec for ten weeks in a row and went back to Palaven for two standard weeks of rest. Garrus probably would have done the same if he had been a good son. But he wasn't. He didn't even send mail to his father to tell him he had made it to Spectre – though his old man would have taken it as a personal offense, no doubt about it. Garrus didn't have to, anyway. His father still had a lot of friends on the Citadel, some of them pretty high ranked. He probably knew by now. Garrus checked the time on his omnitool. Yep, still night time in Cipritine. With a bit of luck, Garrus would be out of reach if his father tried to call him in the morning.

A Human whistled near him, looking at the vessels arriving at the Alliance's docks. He was tall – not as tall as any Turian though – with broad shoulders and a neck as wide as his muscular arms. He kept his hair very short and tattoos were visible above his shirt. Garrus noticed the Alliance uniform, the dogtags, his bags and the absence of a weapon at his hip before giving a look at the ship arriving. He blinked, dazzled for a second by a reflexion on the painted metal of the Normandy SR-2. The vessel was a beauty alright, something really similar in design to turian frigates. She was slender but powerful, made for speed, for striking like lightning. Garrus caught himself holding his breath as the Normandy docked with precision, her thrusters roaring in the resonance cage that were the quays, making the ground shake slightly.

"Quite a view, huh?" the Alliance soldier told him, grinning. Garrus straightened his back and locked his eyes in the cluster's bright clouds. He nodded sharply. The soldier grinned even more. "I better move, I'm part of the crew of this beauty now," he said, visibly proud of himself. Garrus nodded again, as if listening to a kid bragging about his oh so formidable skills. "Not jealous?" the soldier added as he lifted his bags. "You Turians are kind of suckers for ships like that, right?"

"I'm boarding the Normandy too, actually", Garrus said flatly but he couldn't wait to hear the Human's reaction. "I am to be Spectre Shepard's protegee from today."

"Wow, that's awesome man!" the private yelled. Garrus frowned. The Human wasn't pissed at all, nor jealous. He seemed impressed, definitely, and in awe. That wasn't expected. "I didn't know I'd be able to see not just one, but two Spectres in action! That's so cool!"

"Well, I'm new at this," Garrus admitted, backing off a little, "I doubt I'll be of any help to your, huh, interest."

"'C'mon! 'Spectres are not trained' and all that shit, y'know? You must be pretty badass to have made it to Spectre, and that's something to say of a Turian! You guys are like Terminators, I heard, right?"

"Like what?" Garrus asked but the soldier didn't answer and took his hand to shake it with force, staring at him straight in the eyes.

"I'm James Vega, by the way, nice to meet you!"

"Garrus Vakarian," Garrus replied, trying to get his hand back. Fortunately, the Normandy's cargo bay started to open and Vega's attention was drawn away. Garrus' hand hurt a little, to be honest.
"We better get our asses down," Vega said, rearranging his bags on his shoulder. "I heard the Commander is one hell of a woman and her XO is even worse." He patted Garrus on the shoulder, almost throwing him against the guide-bar. "You coming, Garrus?"

"I'd prefer 'Vakarian', mister Vega," Garrus informed, checking his suitcases. Vega laughed, a bright laugh without anything hidden behind it.

"Alright Vakarian. Let's get this show on the road, eh?"

"Go ahead, I have a few things to check with customs first," Garrus lied. Vega didn't detect his bullshit, patted him once more and left him where he was. Humans, Garrus thought, looking at this specimen walking away. There was no in between with them: too friendly or blatantly hostile. Either way, they were a bunch of crazies.

Garrus made a great deal of checking his suitcases to give Vega enough time to present himself at the cargo bay's door. He then passed customs without even looking at the guards and took the stairs to get down to the docking bay assigned to the Normandy. As soon as he stepped on the metal floor, Garrus felt more than he saw the agitation all around. The ship was being refilled, crates coming up and down the cargo bay's ramp with a precision and a rapidity any captain would be envious of. It was like a well written symphony without any dissonance – so not turian music, obviously. Orders were shouted from within the ship but it didn't seem necessary. Everybody worked like a well oiled machine, in proper order and without haste. Garrus took a minute to admire the work, having some trouble believing Alliance goons could be so efficient.

His inspection was cut short by a little woman coming straight for him. She had dark skin and black hair and Garrus hoped she had some sort of importance on the Normandy – he somehow had less trouble remembering dark skinned Humans than the others. He would make a good impression if he didn't mix the names of the crew members up. "Spectre Vakarian?" she asked, saluting him the Alliance way. Garrus nodded. Her accent was very exotic to say the least, very different from what Garrus had heard so far from Humans. "Samantha Traynor, communication Specialist of the Normandy SR-2. Commander Shepard asked me to welcome you on board and to give you a tour of the ship."

"Oh," Garrus said, a little disappointed maybe. Of course, his mentor was certainly busy but he would have liked to meet her as soon as possible. "Very well."

Traynor smiled tentatively. "My apologies, Spectre Vakarian. We make a great deal of leaving the Citadel as soon as possible. The ship wasn't even docked and secured properly and Commander Shepard was already out."

"Why the rush?" Garrus asked. As a Spectre, Shepard certainly didn't pay any docking fee on the Citadel. The Normandy could have stayed days or weeks there and it wouldn't have cost Shepard a credit – even for refueling, he'd bet.

"We have a refilling record to beat down," Traynor said, her smile more like a grin now. Garrus couldn't tell if it was a lie or the truth, but it certainly was a stupid reason – a very unprofessional reason. "Commander Shepard also has an appointment with the Council in ten minutes and she has to go to the Spectres Bureau after. You'll meet her as soon as she comes back. Shall we?"

Garrus nodded once more and followed the little woman into the cargo bay, taking his suitcases with him. The smell was foreign, full of metal, oil and human sweat, something quite acid and bitter. There was enough space to fit a shuttle or two into the hangar, and crates were already piling up to the ceiling. The armory was also located there – good to know. It seemed properly provisioned. One thing Garrus was eager to put his hands on was regular Alliance weapons.
Humans sure were good at warfare. The hangar should also be big enough to practice sparring, if it was allowed, but for now it was difficult to tell because of all the people working on restocking the ship. Traynor called for an elevator – an elevator! That was stupid – and smiled again to Garrus. "I'll take you first to deck two to meet our Executive Officer. We call deck two CIC for Combat Information Center, that's where the bridge is located. You'll meet our pilot too." The elevator arrived and they entered it. Traynor continued: "You'll also find the communication room in the CIC. It's only accessible through the labs, one on both side of the ship."

"Labs?" Garrus repeated. Why would a war frigate have laboratories?

"Yes sir. Lab 1 is dedicated to our research on Protheans and Geth, as Commander Shepard's mission is to keep an eye on both. Lab 2 is currently not used." The elevator stopped and opened onto the CIC. Garrus faced a holographic map of the ship in the middle of some sort of huge triangular desk with work stations all around. A few crewmen were at work but they barely looked at him. "You can leave your suitcases here," Traynor informed him, "nobody will touch them. Follow me, please."

Garrus obliged and let the Specialist take him to the bridge. A strange alien was standing there, presenting him their back. They were wearing red armor definitely from another age, their head was large and with some sort of plates on top of it, and their skin was greenish, or blueish, it was difficult to tell. The alien was barely as tall as Traynor but they were wider and their posture indicated strength, the merciless kind of strength. When they turned their head to look over their shoulder, Garrus met a pair of yellow eyes, a big and a small, both cold as ice. Now he was sure of it: he didn't know this species of alien.

"Spectre Vakarian, this is our Executive Officer, Javik," Traynor said with reverence in her voice. The alien turned fully and looked at Garrus as if he was but a child, chin up, their unsettling eyes low. A shiver ran up Garrus' back as the alien detailed him. "Javik, this is Commander Shepard's protegee, Garrus Vakarian."

"A Turian," the Executive Officer noticed, his voice low and definitely male, the word rolling on his tongue as he tasted it with caution. "I don't like Turians." Garrus frowned and opened his mouth to reply but a laugh from the cockpit interrupted him.

"Don't mind the old man," a human male offered. His chair spun to give him a view of the galley. He wore some sort of hat and the Alliance's uniform, and his face had hairs on it – a beard, if Garrus remembered correctly, perfect, that would help him get a name on beard-face. His eyes were bright like his smile. "The only person he tolerates in the whole universe is Shepard so don't take it as a personal offense, buddy."

"Spectre Vakarian," Traynor intervened before Garrus could remind the man such familiarities were not welcome, "this is our Flight Lieutenant, Jeff Moreau."

"But everybody calls me Joker," Moreau added. "I also answer to 'Handsome', 'Genius' and 'God'." Garrus frowned even more while Javik looked at the ceiling, his lips a thin line. Traynor just smiled, maybe to apologize. She noticed something over Garrus' shoulder – which wasn't easy considering how tiny she was compared to him – and excused herself for a minute, walking past him. Joker stared a few seconds at Garrus before pointing at him with a finger. "So, Turian, heh? I thought you guys couldn't live if you ever had a scar, question of dishonor or something."

Garrus' hand automatically reached for his face, touching his damaged jaw minima. Reconstructing it hadn't been easy, or so the doctors had said at the time but Garrus barely remembered his days at the hospital after the Cerberus attack on the Citadel, three months ago. Painkillers had that kind of side effect at high dose. Garrus scratched his scar a little and noticed the disdained look the
Executive Officer was giving him. "Yeah, well, we're not big fans because the scar tissue lacks the proper quantity of metal that ensures we don't burn under Palaven's sun," Garrus explained matter-of-factly.

Traynor coming back forced him to keep his next sarcastic remark to himself. She was followed by Vega, who winked at Garrus while pointing at the Specialist' derriere. Garrus frowned, irritated by such behavior. Humans and their sexism... Garrus couldn't count how many times he had had to listen to his human colleagues about the women they courted, or just met in the street. Sexism was the norm for most known species so Turians were sort of the exception but that didn't mean they just had to stand there and bear something so disrespectful. Garrus was about to say something when a green glow surrounded Vega and lifted him above ground. Biotics. All senses in high alert, Garrus looked around him quickly and reached to his hip to find his gun. His eyes fell on Javik, his fist at shoulder level, glowing green, holding the soldier up in the air – and suffocating him.

"This is a warning, Human," Javik said, his voice roaring like thunder, while Vega was trying to get free. "Next time you disrespectful a female member of this crew, I'll throw you out the airlock. Understood?" Vega nodded vigorously and Javik released him. The alien then turned to Garrus, who still had a hand on his gun. "The same applies to you, Turian." They kept their eyes locked during the few seconds it took Garrus to remember this guy was technically his superior. The Executive Officer was in charge of the ship when the Commanding Officer was out – Shepard was a Commander alright, but a frigate normally fell under a Captain's authority; was there any Captain on this ship? Garrus lowered his stand and took a step back, implicitly acknowledging Javik's authority. Vega made a big deal of breathing heavily, even if he hadn't been deprived of air for more than twenty seconds.

"Yeah that's right!" Joker suddenly shouted, arms in the air, forcing a ghetto accent. "You don't mess with Shepard's crew, bitch!"

"Your language, Lieutenant Moreau," Javik grumbled. "I believe you had a tour to give to the Turian, Specialist Traynor. I'll deal with this... Human."

"Yes sir," the woman snapped with a salute. "This way, Spectre Vakarian." Garrus nodded and followed the Specialist back to the heart of the CIC, still wary of the XO at his back, just in case. They entered Lab 1 on their right. It was a long room with a view of the exterior and the reactor – kind of a design flaw if he'd been asked. Several tables and workbenches were used to display disassembled weapons, alien tech, bits of strange armors, parchments, floating orbs, and whatnot. A door on their left opened to a small traversal corridor, leading to Lab 2 ahead and to the communication room on the right. This room was packed with computers floor to ceiling and, as the Specialist explained with awe and admiration, contained a newly developed and still experimental quantum entanglement communication device. Garrus never heard of this but he was familiar with quantum theories – which was exactly his problem regarding social interactions if he was to believe his C-Sec colleagues. If this device were to function accordingly to theory for a price inferior to a small armada each time it was used, it would resolve the delicate problem of communications while a ship was trapped in the relay network and its bizarre physical consequences on matter and energy – which were two sides of the same coin, everybody knew that.

They finished the tour of the CIC in Lab 2, which was mostly empty but definitely dedicated to biology, and its storeroom. Garrus took back his suitcases and they went down to the third deck, or Crew deck. He was able to leave his baggage in the crew's quarters, a small and gray room with lots of bunk-beds which reminded him a lot of his time on a turian spaceship, then followed Traynor through the medical bay, the ship's VI core, the mess hall, the main battery – ah, something interesting! –, Doctor T'Soni's office, whoever that was, the bathrooms, two observation
decks, one looking more like a bar than anything else, and life support. Fourth deck had a wonderful view on the cargo bay and again Garrus wondered why the ship had so many internal windows. Two cargo rooms were located on Engineering deck but inaccessible due to their role as private quarters, one of them for the Executive Officer. Garrus had the pleasure of seeing the drive core of the ship and talking a bit with an Alliance engineer called Adams. He seemed like a simple and good man, but his assistants, Donnelly and Daniels, weren't as friendly with the new Turian on board.

Another elevator lift took him down to the cargo bay again. Traynor detailed the armory in length and Garrus listened politely, his hands behind his back. The weapons looked well cleaned and cared for, that was a good thing. He would ask nonetheless to keep his in his locker. The day a Turian would let someone else touch his weapons was not there yet. Garrus easily admitted he wasn't a good Turian but not bad to that point.

Something big and red moved in the corner of his vision field and Garrus automatically recognized a Krogan in armor walking through the cargo bay. He had shopping bags in his hands and was talking with a frail lady Quarian in black and purple. They were too far for Garrus's translator to pick up what they were saying but he understood just by looking at the Krogan's face they weren't having a nice conversation. Another oddity on this ship, Garrus thought as the strange couple approached. Krogans weren't known for their patience and their tolerance for authority. It was strange to see such a big specimen get scowled by an alien a fifth of his weight. He could smash her into a red pulp without even realizing it.

The Krogan smelled the air and turned to stare at Garrus, his red eyes detailing him with a deadly precision. Garrus knew the Krogan's first strike would be to his left side, just under the ribs, where the armor was thinner to allow more flexibility. Then, his leg, either the knee or the lug. Once Garrus bent over, the Krogan would grab his fringes and tear them off his skull. The pain would be so intense that the final blow on his now-exposed neck would only bring relief. Garrus, on his hand, knew he had but one shot with a Krogan: one bullet in each shoulder, then in the knees, get close, stick the gun in an eye socket while the alien was incapacitated and unload all remaining rounds. That should do it.

But, instead of drawing their guns and shooting at each other, they simply nodded their respect, knowing perfectly well that the other had also listed the best ways to kill their opponent. Garrus then turned his attention back to Traynor and followed her to the Kodiak shuttle. She barely introduced him to Lieutenant Steve Cortez when a slender and tall human woman of a certain age came to them. She was wearing a different kind of uniform, the medic standard one with its white highlight on the left shoulder.

"Good morning," she said and presented her hand. Garrus took it to shake it lightly. He had to salute the crew members the human way, probably.

"Spectre Vakarian, this is our medic on board, Doctor Karin Chakwas," Traynor explained.

"Nice to meet you, Doctor," Garrus felt obligated to say. "But, please, 'Vakarian' is enough."

"Ah, not used to the title yet?" Chakwas smiled. "Our Commander still has trouble with it too. May I borrow mister Vakarian for a moment, Samantha? I'd like to check up on him before we go."

"Good idea, Doctor," Traynor nodded. She then turned to Garrus: "If you have any question, please feel free to ask me. If you need something for your personal comfort, you'll have to talk to Javik before we leave the Citadel, he's in charge of the refilling. And don't worry about dextro supplies, we already took care of it."
Garrus nodded his thanks and followed the doctor up to third deck. She asked him to sit on an exam table while she scanned him, then proceeded to check on his blood pressure, oxygen level and so on. "Alright, mister Vakarian, you seem to be in excellent condition."

"Did the embassy forget to send you my dossier?" Garrus asked as he got back on his feet. That wasn't like them at all.

"Don't worry mister Vakarian, your people did an excellent job, as always. No, I just like to perform a check on the crew members myself. I have to inform you that the atmosphere within the ship conforms to Alliance regulation and is comparable to Earth's: seven point eight parts nitrogen, two oxygen, zero point zero four carbon dioxide and the rest is mostly water vapor. You may feel a bit dizzy for the first few days so, please, feel free to come to me anytime." Garrus nodded. "I ordered packets of turian blood as soon as I received your dossier, real blood, not the synthetic kind, and it should arrive soon. And I have everything necessary in case of an allergic reaction. Do you have any questions?"

"Do you have any experience with turian physiology?" Garrus asked bluntly. Chakwas was Human after all. Turians and Humans were two very different species.

"I studied your kind like any other Alliance doctor," Chakwas nodded, "and I also had many opportunities to practice. Spectre Kryik has a tendency to get severely injured every time he works with Commander Shepard. It's all or nothing with him," she smiled. Her eyes locked on his scars and Garrus felt his jaw itch a little.

"We Turians do that, yeah..." Garrus admitted, turning his head the other way to hide his scars.

"And Commander Shepard doesn't know how to work otherwise," Chakwas chuckled. "I feel like you two will give me a lot of work this year." She seemed relaxed and joking, her eyes sparkling. "Not that I'm complaining. The daily life on board can be pretty boring." Garrus doubted that. With all the different species on board, there must be some kind of frictions within the crew, leading to injuries. Heck, the Krogan could probably kill everyone on board just because his breakfast wasn't tasty enough. "Before I release you, mister Vakarian, may I ask you for a little help?" Garrus straightened his back, telling himself to be nice to the crew. He hadn't been on board for more than an hour yet and he miraculously didn't screw everything up already. Garrus intended to keep it that way so he nodded. "Could you lift those supplies to this cabinet?" the doctor asked, pointing to a storage space above her desk. "You're tall enough to not have to humiliate yourself by standing on a spinning chair to reach it."

Garrus snorted – damn! First mistake. But the doctor smiled, not offended at all. He still felt like he had to redeem himself. "Of course, Doctor. Anytime."

The job took him only a few minutes and by the time he was done, the Executive Officer called for him on the CIC. Garrus excused himself and took the elevator – which was pretty stupid because a bunch of stairs would prove to be faster than an elevator ride, plus it was always good to have a little exercise. Javik was waiting for him in front of the door, hands behind his back. "The Asari is stuck in customs. Go help them," he said, then pointed to the airlock near the cockpit. Garrus wanted to ask who Javik was talking about but the alien didn't leave him the opportunity of opening his mouth. "Why are you standing there, Turian?" he asked, his eyes throwing daggers. "Are you deaf? I gave you an order."

Garrus didn't say anything, didn't even frown because it was useless. He snapped a sharp salute and walked straight out of the Normandy. Once on the Alliance docks, he dared to think he'd have to talk to his mentor about the behavior of her Executive Officer. Garrus wasn't a snitch and he wouldn't dare to question his mentor's decisions but he wanted to clarify the extent of Javik's
authority. And what the heck was he anyway?

Well, at least his strange appearance explained why Javik didn't go out of the ship to take care of "the Asari" – he would probably provoke a small panic within the mindless inhabitants of the Citadel. Now, Garrus thought, the question was: of whom was Javik talking about? He stood on tip-toes to look around. An Asari in the middle of the overcrowded docks of the Citadel would surely prove difficult to find. Garrus had no difficulties recognizing an Asari from the other because of their facial markings, very similar to turian's tattoos, but Javik didn't provide him with a description of "the Asari". He had said that they were stuck in customs, though. A blue alien in the middle of Humans was a start. Garrus made his way through Alliance goons and noticed an Asari arguing with some soldiers at the entrance, carton boxes at their feet. He checked they were the only one around, then walked to them. Garrus saluted the three aliens, not sure of how he had to introduce himself.

"Spectre Vakarian," he said but his voice lacked determination. "The Executive Officer of the Normandy SR-2 sent me to retrieve a fellow crew member." The two soldiers exchange a strange look. Maybe they didn't have enough information but Garrus didn't have much to offer to begin with. He gave a quick look to the Asari in a blink of an eye and it was enough to confirm they were the right one – thanks Spirits, it would have been very embarrassing to interrupt totally unrelated business. "What's the problem?" Garrus insisted.

"The Asari is carrying too much alcohol," one of the soldiers answered.

Said Asari started to protest but Garrus interrupted them: "I believe the Asari has a name and I recommend you use it respectfully." Frankly, he was annoyed by how the Humans had talked about them. He was annoyed each time Humans were talking about other species anyway.

"Huh," the soldier hesitated.

"Doctor Liara T'Soni," the Asari grumbled. Ah, that was a name Garrus had heard earlier. "I told you at least twice."

"Are all those supplies necessary, Doctor T'Soni?" Garrus asked, bending a little to show a little proximity – they were supposed to be comrades, after all.

"I don't know if they are but I have my orders," they said, frowning a little. "I told those gentlemen I'm under Commander Shepard's protection, Council Spectre, therefore I benefit from partial immunity. I can carry whatever I want through customs as long as I have been ordered to."

"And I told you by Alliance law you can't take more than ten liters of exotic alcohol with you through customs," the soldier insisted. Garrus sighed discreetly. A conflict of authority. Classic. He straightened his back to focus the soldiers' attention on him and put his hands behind his back. It was futile to use brute force with this kind of goons.

"I'm afraid they are right, Doctor T'Soni. Your status as a Spectre's protegee doesn't allow you everything," Garrus started and he immediately saw the Asari react but he cut them short, before the soldiers could celebrate their victory. "But, I am a Spectre, therefore I'm above Alliance restrictions. Please, hand me the boxes." T'Soni obliged and loaded Garrus arms with two heavy boxes, keeping two others for her, bottles clinging joyfully. He nodded to the Humans.

"Gentlemen."

They were halfway across the docks when the Asari dared to breathe again. "Thank you," they said. "Without you, I would have been stuck there until Commander Shepard came back." Their voice was soft and well balanced, their accent not difficult to follow. Garrus nodded, more to
himself than anything else. "So, Spectre Vakarian, not on board for a day and already used by Javik. How does it feel?" they joked.

"Like he threw me in the middle of an arena without armor, guns or intel," Garrus replied frankly. The good Doctor gave the impression he could say whatever he liked around them. They were relaxing, somehow. Maybe it was because Garrus was used to dealing with Asaris on a daily basis – some of his colleagues at C-Sec were Asaris.

They chuckled. "Well, you did a good job. May I ask you your full name?"

"Garrus Vakarian. Vakarian is fine."

"All right. Everybody calls me Liara." Garrus felt uneasy about it and T'Soni noticed it. "But there is no obligation. That can wait until we know each other a little better. Although, I have to tell you we don't use ranks and family names often on board, and I doubt most of the crew knows about Turian's... fixation for last names."

Garrus snorted. It was a fixation alright. "I suppose it's a cultural thing."

"It is, indeed." T'Soni walked first through the airlock and talked for a few seconds with the pilot. Garrus followed them down the galley to the elevator, then to Port Observation where a small bar had been installed. Garrus put the boxes on top of it. "Thanks for your help."

"No worries." Garrus looked at T'Soni, his jaw fluttering a little. He wasn't particularly tall for a Turian but he was now surrounded by midgets – the Krogan was taller than him but only because of his hump. "Need a hand with those bottles?" he asked, pointing to the wall behind the bar where the alcohol was stocked.

T'Soni turned a little then smiled to him. "That would be appreciated."

Garrus nodded once more and started unpacking the alcohol in a comfortable silence barely disrupted by the quiet hum of the reactor. He could work with that, he thought, and he wished his mentor would be as easy to stick around as T'Soni. But, deep down, he could feel his impatience growing, slowly turning into anxiety. Commander Shepard, Council Spectre, his mentor, was still ashore.

TBC

Corrected on August 13th, 2015
"Well, that was a waste of time," Shepard declared once in the elevator. She leaned against the left wall, folding her arms, watching Anderson hit the button for the station. He gave her his usual calm look with a small crooked smile. He looked tired and old, more than a few months ago. His recent nomination to Rear Admiral would have been fine if it hadn't been doubled with the job of military adviser to Earth Ambassador, Donel Udina. Shepard was ready to bet a lot that working with Udina caused most of the exhaustion Anderson allowed to show on his face – and he was certainly hiding a lot more.

"A meeting with the Council is always a good thing," Anderson replied, falling at parade rest as the elevator started to move. "It insures they don't forget you."

"Oh they can't," Shepard laughed dryly. "Goyle made sure of that and Udina is following her steps. Still, I received my orders as soon as we hit the relay, there was no need for them to tell me in person that I was now the happy mentor of a grumpy Turian."

"He's not..."

"All Turians are grumpy at first," Shepard interrupted. "Believe me, I've met enough to know they are true to the cliches. I'll bet you whatever you want Zakarian won't look me in the eyes for the first week."

"It's Vakarian," Anderson corrected. Shepard shrugged, making the old man smile a little. "Come on, Commander, we all know you are secretly relieved you have to mentor a Turian."

"Whatever." Shepard rolled her eyes but Anderson was right. Turians were major pain in the ass but at least they knew how to fold in order. An Asari protegee would have proven difficult to befriend because most Commandos were uptight bitches so proud of their biotics they forgot their guns and brains. And a Salarian one would have stared at her with those enormous empty eyes all day long, secretly judging her inferior intellect. No, really, a Turian wasn't so bad. She had had time to read his dossier before they had reached the Citadel and that one, Vakarian, was one Hell of a psycho. Shepard had had access to his files from his years in the military, which were normally sealed for everybody but high ranked Turians, so she knew Vakarian aced his classes during all his scholarship. But the guy hadn't been promoted despite his abilities, which meant he had troubles with authority or something like that. Someone like him should have been a Major or a Commander, maybe a Captain with the proper people skills. But Vakarian was a simple officer in C-Sec. Another misfit on the Normandy's crew, Shepard thought and it made her smile. She collected them like spaceship models, it seemed.

"And it's a good thing for the friendship between Humans and Turians," Anderson added, checking absentmindedly his cufflinks.

"Yeah, about that," Shepard grunted, "I'm not so sure it'll help, you know? I mean, Turians see us as anarchists, our societal organization makes absolutely no sense to them and frankly they see the Alliance as a joke. How come placing one in my hands, one who's already unstable by their standards, could be seen as a good thing from their point of view?" She didn't let Anderson answer. "You know what I think? They're tossing Humanity a bone to make us shut up, but not the big juicy
bull femur we wanted, they tossed us a dry chicken bone they don't give a crap about. It's politics and I don't like politics, Anderson."

Anderson looked straight at her for a few seconds before nodding, his fatigue more apparent. "I know," he sighed.

"Turians are not ready to be our friends yet, Anderson, and you know it," Shepard continued. "They chose Nihlus to be my mentor. Sure, he's a great Spectre, very efficient, very diligent in his work, always sharp and devoted to the cause but he's looked down by the Hierarchy because he was born on a secessionist colony. Nihlus may be a fantastic soldier but he doesn't fit in turian society, he's not good enough for them, that's why they put him in charge of me."

"Would have you been more pleased to have Saren Arterius as your mentor?" Anderson asked jokingly.

"Hell no," Shepard laughed. "He would have tried to kill me each occasion he had and you know that. But he's respected among Turians. If Saren had been my mentor, the Hierarchy would have really done something for turio-human friendship."

"And your death would have been an unfortunate accident."

"A very unfortunate accident, yes" Shepard confirmed, laughing anew.

The elevator stopped to open on the quay of a station of the circular "underground" rail system of the Presidium. Public transports were flooded by thousands of visitors just released from customs so it was a little difficult to access the train but they managed before the doors closed. Shepard found herself pressed against an Asari in a white dress and the window. On her left, Anderson didn't have so much chance as he was almost in the arms of a Krogan in armor, probably a mercenary if his gear was of any indication. Shepard smiled to the Admiral and brushed a finger against the hand of the Asari, pushing a little of her own biotics to electrify her blue skin. Anderson rolled his eyes as the Asari turned to Shepard, probably irritated by her confidence.

"Sorry," Shepard smiled to apologize. "I'm still figuring out how it works."

"Like this," the Asari said and she sent a discharge in Shepard's nerves, making her jump of surprise – and of a little bit of dolor too. Shepard forced a laugh while shaking her hand.

"Ow, miss, you're a pro, no doubt. Maybe you could teach me some tricks?" The Asari shook her head but she was now amused by Shepard's boldness, it showed. One thing Shepard had learned about Asaris: sex between biotics was awesome. Their lack of dick was largely compensated by all the crazy things they were able to do with their powers. And flirting with them usually involved to get hurt in the process. Shepard didn't mind. It was worth it.

They got out of the train fifteen stations later and still had to walk for a few minutes before reaching the Alliance's docks. Shepard took a moment to admire her ship from above, a smile on her face as she looked at the curves of her beautiful Normandy. The artificial lights reflected a bright white shine on her paint, almost creating a halo around her. From where she was, Shepard could see her crew working on refilling the ship by the cargo bay, thirty meters down or so. A flash caught her attention and she turned to see Joker waving at her by one of the windows of the cockpit. Shepard smiled and followed Anderson through the docks.

"Commander Shepard on board," Joker announced by the radio through the ship, "XO stands relieved." Shepard snorted. The day Javik were relieved would be the day of his death. "Oh we have a visitor," Joker added. "Welcome on board, Admiral."
"Lieutenant Moreau," Anderson saluted. "Good to see you."

Joker smiled. He was fond of the old man. "Good to see you too, Sir. Your baby-Spectre is on board, Commander. Should I summon him to CIC now?"

"Baby-Spectre?" Shepard repeated, intrigued.

"What? He's new at this and he still has milk behind the ears, I tell you!"

"That saying would have been more appropriate if Turians actually breastfed their young or had ears but whatever," Shepard shrugged. " Summon him, yes, but don't call him like that. We're supposed to help friendship between Turians and Humans here, Joker."

"Breastfeeding would help." The pilot wiggled his eyebrows and Shepard couldn't help but laugh. He was damn lucky Javik wasn't around. Otherwise, crippled or not, the Prothean would have kicked Joker's ass out of his leather-covered chair. "Spectre Vakarian to report to CIC ASAP," Joker said over radio. A beep caught the pilot's attention for a second. "Javik will be there in a few minutes too, Commander."

"Thanks, Joker." Shepard went down the alley to CIC, followed by Anderson. She leaned against the workstation at the opposite of the elevator, the door in sight behind the hologram of the ship. She wanted to have a look at her protege as he approached. She always had sharp intuitions and she knew her first impression would tell her more than a thousand words.

"How is Javik doing?" Anderson asked. He was also keeping an eye on the elevator but Shepard knew he already had an opinion on the Turian. They had met yesterday during his nomination. Anderson hadn't say a word about his impression though.

"Great, great," Shepard answered mindlessly, attention focused on the door. "He's doing his job thoroughly and everybody is now used to his temper."

"His nomination as your second in command didn't please the big dogs."

"I would have nominated Tali if Javik weren't around, not an Alliance officer," Shepard shrugged. "They are both equally capable, they know the job but Javik has a lot more experience at commanding than Tali. He was a Commander once, did I tell you that?"

"It was another life," Anderson reminded her.

"He knows that, believe me." Anderson didn't spend countless nights keeping the souvenirs of a dead empire alive in a small cargo bay converted into a Spartan room devoted of any comfort. Shepard did. She had listened to Javik's tells of wonders and conquests, of legends and the daily life of his people, the historic moments and the trivial little things like the smile of a child. They'd shared fruit juice because Javik never drank alcohol and talked most of the night. More than once, Shepard had fallen asleep, sitting on a crate, rocked by the deep voice of the Prothean. It didn't get him mad though. To fall asleep in his company was an honor of some sort, it meant she trusted him with her life because she showed him her most vulnerable side. Of course Shepard trusted Javik but she preferred to prove it on a battlefield.

The elevator opened and Shepard's eyes jumped automatically to the source of movement, catching the silhouette of a tall Turian in a blue and gray medium armor. Vakarian scanned the CIC as he started walking toward them, then locked eyes with Shepard. She felt pinned to the ground as he inspected her, his visor certainly giving him a lot of information at the same time. She grinned. Turians loved this kind of tech gadgets.
Shepard stood on both feet and straightened her back as Vakarian stopped at a reasonable distance. He saluted them turian style, left hand on the middle of the chest, elbow at shoulder's level, head's up and eyes straight – blue ones, pretty common for a light gray skinned Turian like him. The scar on the right of his face was nothing but impressive and it had damaged his facial tattoo. Vakarian stood above two meters tall like most Turians – small ones were a rarity – and he would have met her eyes if she had been Turian herself. Shepard knew Vakarian was conflicted. Proper protocol told him to look at his mentor straight in the eyes but looking down at a superior was a terrible mistake. "Garrus Vakarian to report, Commander," he said, his mandibles flickering. "Admiral," he added. Anderson nodded to answer to his salute.

"At ease, Vakarian," Shepard ordered. She was amused by his display of good manners. He was trying to do things by the book, to not shame his people. Too bad for him, Shepard knew he had gone into a methodical killing spree during the Cerberus attack on the Citadel three months earlier. The guy had fought forty-two hours straight, icing five hundred and eighty-nine Cerberus agents in total, most of them with perfect headshots. That was one target down every four minutes in average, and that while alone, without a team to back him up. A sniper was as good as dead without a team, that was what books taught every army goon in the galaxy. No wonders Vakarian had had the visit of a dozen shrinks during his recovery. "You'll have to look at me at some point," she added, trying to sound casual. "Don't worry, I won't take it as an offense." Vakarian visibly gritted his teeth, mandibles flickering again, but lowered his eyes nonetheless to meet Shepard's. "My mentor, Spectre Kryik, was a Turian, so I know a lot on how to behave correctly in society. Just remember we're on a human ship so rules are a lot more flexible here." Vakarian nodded sharply once and his eyes automatically went back up. Shepard kept going to not lose his attention: "But feel free to remind me the basics if I forget them. I know it's not easy to jump on a new ship and interact with people who don't share the same standards."


"No need to call me 'Commander' all the time, Vakarian." She presented him her wrist – Turians grabbed wrists instead of shaking hands. Vakarian stared at it for a second then took it firmly. "'Shepard' is fine." Vakarian nodded. "Not a big talker, huh?" she asked with a smile, releasing him.

"I'll be happy to answer any of your questions," Vakarian replied automatically, falling at parade rest, his eyes focused on the elevator far away. Don't make it too easy, big guy, Shepard thought as she heard the door open. She looked above her shoulder to see Javik arriving with the new Alliance recruit. Not the best of timing. She didn't want to dismiss Vakarian now, they had to talk, but having him around while dealing with Alliance business wasn't the idea of the year. Shepard gave a quick look at Vakarian, tall and still like a statue. What the Hell, if he was going to play the good Turian all the way, she might as well use it.

"Commander," Javik greeted her then nodded to Anderson, "this is the new Human." He pointed to a soldier with arms as big as Shepard's thighs. He had tanned skin covered with tattoos, regular short hair and he reeked of youth. Said new Human saluted his superiors but didn't wait for an order to stand at parade rest.

"Lieutenant James Vega, ma'am," he said but corrected: "Commander. Sir." Shepard smiled a little. "You look kind of blue, soldier. Did Javik put you in the freezers?"

"Yes ma'am. I mean, Commander." Javik had a thing for discipline, threats and punishments. Changing shifts to put someone on cleaning or storing duty in the freezers was one of his joys in
life. Shepard didn't mind, to be honest. She didn't have a single disciplinary problem since Javik was her XO – even Wrex watched his language around the Prothean. Shepard turned to Javik to get an explanation.

"He disrespected the Specialist Traynor." Bad move, kid, Shepard thought. Samantha was one of the rare persons in the galaxy Javik actually cared about. If she had been interested in men, he might even have tried his chance with her, Shepard believed.

"In this case, Vega," she said, "consider yourself lucky. If Traynor had caught you, you'd be crying the loss of your balls in the medbay." The Lieutenant's eyes widened a little. Play time was over. "So, Anderson asked me to see what you've got. He thinks you're N7 material but nobody wants to recommend you because of your bad attitude. Is that correct, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Commander," Vega answered. "Though I don't agree on the definition of 'bad attitude', Sir. I just don't like to be serious all the time and cracking a joke here and there is my way of dealing with heavy stuff."

Shepard folded her arms. She totally understood that. "Your dossier mentions sexual harassment complaints from several of your female ex-teammates."

"Simple misunderstanding, Commander." Shepard arched an eyebrow. She saw Vakarian judging Vega really hard on her left. At least she wouldn't have problem on the subject with him but she didn't like to see him already thinking so little of a new teammate. "I like to flirt," Vega tried to defend himself, "and I guess I can be a little too straightforward with the ladies."

"Will it be a problem, Lieutenant?" Shepard asked, looking at him straight in the eyes. He maintained contact a few seconds only.

"No, Commander," Vega replied, falling in line.

"Good. Go set up in the crew's quarters, I'll call you to introduce you to the team later. Dismiss, Lieutenant."

Vega saluted and walked away. Javik didn't wait to present her a datapad with information on the advancement of the refilling. "We'll be ready to leave in thirty-three minutes, Commander."

"Thanks, Jakiv," Shepard said with a relaxed smile as she took the datapad. "Convoke everybody in deck three when it's done and tell Joker to prepare for launching in forty-five." That should be enough to introduce Vakarian and Vega, considering the first was not a big talker. Joker would rant because it always took him forever to get down to third deck but she wanted him there too. He tended to isolate himself enough as it was. Jakiv nodded and walked to the elevator. Vega tried to make the door close faster to avoid the XO but it didn't work and they had to share the ride. "Still sure about this, Admiral?" Shepard asked, leaving the datapad on the work station – she trusted Javik to have taken everything in consideration, she didn't need to check on him.

"Absolutely," Anderson replied. "You read his dossier and you know what happened on Fehl Prime. He's a good soldier despite his attitude and he can be much more than that if somebody gives him a chance."

"Why don't you give him said chance, then?"

"He can't prove himself securing the daily boring life of an old man sitting behind a desk all day," Anderson snorted.

"I don't know," Shepard smirked, "I heard the Citadel is a pretty dangerous place this days." She
caught Vakarian's mandibles flickering in an attempt to hide a smile. He wasn't a cyborg after all. Good to know.

"Vega needs to see the galaxy and realize Fehl Prime was just a tough decision to make like many others in a soldier's life," Anderson added more seriously.

"He needs to grow up," Shepard resumed. Great. She hated babysitting.

"I knew a promising young woman just like him back in the days," Anderson smiled.

"Oh yeah?" Shepard asked, playful. "Does she have bigger guns than me?"

"The biggest," Anderson laughed.

"That bitch."

"Anyway, I should get going," the Admiral said. "Take good care of Vega, would you?"

"Sir, yes Sir," Shepard mocked with a very lousy salute. Anderson patted her on the shoulder, wished good luck to Vakarian and took the direction of the airlock. It was pretty clear Vakarian was thinking he didn't need luck. "So," Shepard added, making him almost jump as he kept an eye on the Admiral leaving, "I believe you witnessed an 'Alliance interference', if Turians still call it like that." It was a joke between those tall motherfuckers. The Alliance kept an eye on every military placed on the galaxy, even in C-Sec. It was not spying per se but they made sure their investments were not wasted. Eventually, any soldier had to do a favor to the Alliance. Shepard was no exception but maybe on the number of favors she had made over the years to Goyle, Udina, Anderson or Hackett. She didn't mind the last two but she made sure to remind the first two they had to repay their debts at some point. "Anyway, we have to talk but not here. Follow me, please." Vakarian nodded.

Shepard took him to the first deck, which was entirely reserved to her. Her cabin was big enough to fit thirty Quarians if she was to believe Tali. It was too big for Shepard's tastes and the aquariums were kind of ridiculous, but she enjoyed having her own bathroom very much. Vakarian was very reluctant to enter her private quarters so she didn't make him sit on the couch in the lower, more 'private' part. She presented him her desk chair instead and she leaned against the cool glass of the aquariums, at a respectful distance to try to make him more comfortable. He kept standing at parade rest. Shepard let him, it wasn't important.

"So, you're a Spectre now," she said seriously, "but that doesn't mean you can do whatever you want and my role as your mentor is to teach you where the limit is. Not all new Spectres get a mentor. I had one, a Turian named Nihlus Kryik, because I was the first Human to make it to Spectre and the Council wanted to make sure I understood clearly what it meant to work for them. You got one because your behavior during the attack on the Citadel was worrying. At best."

Vakarian nodded. She wasn't telling him anything new.

"Our limits are more of a morale code, really, and not two Spectres have the same one. Some will accept bribes. Some will kill anyone, even civilians, to get the job done. Some won't hesitate to use force to obtain information. My code won't necessary be yours in the end but it will as long as you work under my command. You might have heard I'm kind of ruthless and it's not just a rumor. I get the job done and I expect the same from you. If I command you to steal a lollipop from a baby, you'll do it. If I order you to shoot that baby after your shameful act, you'll do it too. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander. If I may ask, what's a lollipop?"
Shepard had troubles fighting her smile. Turians weren't fond of sweets in general – exception made of Nihlus who could have killed that baby to get the lollipop and made up an excuse about a certain threat to the galaxy afterward without sweating – so it wasn't a surprise that Vakarian didn't know about it. Him asking about a candy instead of inquiring to what extends Shepard's ruthless went was more worrying. She left the glass wall of the aquarium to walk to her desk. There, she opened a sealed drawer and took an apple flavored lollipop in the middle of all her junk. "Catch," she said, throwing the candy at Vakarian. By his look, it might as well have been a grenade but he caught it nonetheless and froze, probably expecting something really bad to happen. Shepard leaned on the desk and folded her arms, a smug smile on her face. "Relax, it's just a candy." Vakarian almost gave her a death glare as he started to breeze again. Almost. He studied the wrapped candy on a stick with all his turian seriousness. "Though it might kill you."

"I'm not allergic to levo food," Vakarian replied, now not knowing what to do with Death wrapped in green plastic.

"Good to know but we're used to take precautions regarding food poisoning anyway. We have a Quarian on board." That, and Nihlus took her for his personal chauffeur once in a while. When he presented her the lollipop, she shrugged. "Keep it, I have plenty." Vakarian hesitated a second but put the candy in a pocket nonetheless. "Back to the moral code and my rules. Like I said, I'm not the kind to save a few civilians if they get in my way. I wasn't before and my nomination to Spectre didn't change me. We're not heroes, Vakarian, we are special agents sent on crucial missions. We can't stop and pick a nice bouquet of flowers on our way nor rescue a kitten in a tree during a mission. We get the job done, period. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander," Vakarian affirmed, falling again at parade rest.

"Time will come when we'll disagree on how to deal with a mission, I can guarantee you that. I don't want to hear you on the subject during the mission. I give the orders and you follow them, that's it. Debriefing is made to discuss and that's your only chance to voice your opinion. I recommend you to talk during debrief because it does no good to hold a grudge for days. It's better to get it out and over with than to let it stew inside, mostly because we live on a relatively small ship and we'll be together pretty much all the time. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes, Commander."

Shepard gave him a serious look to let what she just had explained sink in his thick turian skull but he was again staring straight, above her head. She hoped those piercing blue eyes wouldn't damage her spaceship collection. "Speaking of small ship, let's talk about living arrangements." She relaxed a little, she didn't need to be a serious badass anymore. "I lived 24/7 with Nihlus from day one and he drove me crazy – and his couch destroyed my back. I knew nothing of Turians at the time and he taught me the hard way. I lived 24/7 with Nihlus from day one and he drove me crazy – and his couch destroyed my back. I knew nothing of Turians at the time and he taught me the hard way. I don't intend to repeat that experiment with you though. The Normandy is small enough for us to always be in contact so you can settle down wherever you want that has not already been claimed by someone else. The life support room is still free if you want some privacy. It's warmer than the rest of the ship, and a little dryer too." Could be a good place for a loner like you, she wanted to add but it wasn't a smart move. "My quarters are off limit to all non-invited crew, exception made of Javik, and you, now, I guess. Just call me by radio first if you don't want to have a gun in your face as soon as you walk in. I hate surprise guests."

"Duly noted."

Ah, finally some progress. "The Normandy runs under Alliance regulation. I'm the commanding officer on board, Javik is the executive officer. If both of us fail to command, Doctor Chakwas is next in line as she has the rank of Major. And after her, it's Lieutenant Commander Kaidan Alenko."
That's the theory anyway. Usually, if Javik and I are out on a mission, Tali has the ship. She's young but she's also a Quarian, she spent most of her life under a strict military discipline and she knows what to do. When it comes to you, well, you have to respond to me and the Council, not the Alliance. I expect you to follow the rules like anybody else nonetheless because, once again, it's a small ship with very few people on board and we all have to compromise at some point, but you're out of the chain of command. If Admiral Anderson were to walk in at this moment and to ask you to leave, what would you do?"

"Wait for your order, Commander," he answered without hesitation.

Shepard smiled. "You're a smart guy, Vakarian. I like smart guys." The word of encouragement didn't move him. Shepard continued: "I've read in your dossier you speak fluently the three major turian languages and the standard galactic, plus a few asari and salarian languages, is that correct?"

"Yes, Commander. I've also picked up a bit of human standard English at C-Sec."

"Good, because you'll have to learn English. We mostly use it on board and I don't want any problem during a mission because of a fucked up translator. It happened to me once with Nihlus and I was glad he forced me to learn Etherian that day. Specialist Traynor is sort of our language nerd on board and she'll gladly help you. Tali and Wrex love to share swear words from their own languages and Javik is prone to help anyone willing to learn Prothean if you're interested."

Realization hit Vakarian. "Yes, Javik is a Prothean," Shepard added, "the only one left in the galaxy so far. Part of my job as a Spectre is to be a watchman of Prothean tech and artifacts. We found him on Eden Prime in a cryogenic stasis a year and a half ago. I also have to keep an eye on the Geths so you'll have the pleasure to snip some on a regular basis. You know what Geths are, right?"

"Artificial intelligences created by the Quarians. They rebelled three centuries ago and exiled the Quarians from their homeworld, Rannoch, forcing them to live on spaceships."

"More or less, yes. They're not hard to kill once you know a few tricks." Shepard gave a quick look at the clock on her bedside table. It was almost time to introduce Vakarian to the crew. "We'll head to third deck in a minute," she told him. "Any question?"

"Doctor Chakwas told me about the atmosphere of the ship but what other regulations do you follow?" he asked.

"You mean like time, gravity and all of that?" Vakarian nodded. "If you want the detailed version, you'll have to ask EDI, but the short version is that our days on board are the galactic standard you have on the Citadel, even if the human part of the crew, me included, tends to refers to our Gregorian calendar. Gravity is similar to Earth's so about twenty percent weaker than on Palaven."

"I lived on the Citadel for the past four years," he reminded her.

"Right," Shepard said. The Citadel's gravity was practically the same as Earth's. "And I suppose you trained in various environments during your military life so you're used to sudden gravity changes and all of that."

"Yes, Commander."

"Very well. We keep a nice twenty-four degrees Celsius on board but it might be a bit cold for you. Though I doubt we'll see you butt naked around. Just make sure your armor has enough battery when we go on a mission, and always pack enough food, water and ammo for the duration of the mission plus three days."
"Understood, Commander."

"Anyway," she said, leaving the desk, "we'll have plenty of time to talk about that in the next few
days because we have to pick up someone on the other side of the galaxy. And we should get
going as soon as possible so let's introduce you to the crew and leave the Citadel." Vakarian
nodded and followed her to third deck in silence, falling to parade rest any chance he had. It was
kind of strange to have someone so serious with her. Her crew wasn't exactly a gang of goofballs
but they knew where were her limits, what she would tolerate or not, and they didn't hesitate to
rack a joke or mock her authority if they had the occasion. But Vakarian was not used to her yet
and he was a Turian. That didn't help. It had taken a few weeks before Nihlus and her could talk
like normal persons and not like cyborgs in front of each other. A really difficult mission where
their lives had been in danger helped greatly. Maybe she should ask the Council for something like
that to accelerate the process with Vakarian.

All the crew was on third deck, Shepard could tell by the satisfied look Javik gave her as soon as
the elevator opened. He walked at her right to the long table where they usually ate, then took a
few more steps to stand near Traynor. Shepard scanned the familiar faces all looking at the new
member of the team, plus Vega who was still shivering and pale. Vakarian had stopped a few steps
behind her, his hand ready to grab his gun at his hip. He was staring at Legion. She should have
told him they had a Geth on board.

"Stand down, Vakarian," Shepard commanded and the Turian obeyed but it was obvious he was
ready for action if needed. "This is Legion and yes, he's a Geth, a very special one. Legion is out of
the geth Consensus. You can say he has a mind of his own. He's on our side, understood?"

"Yes, Commander," Vakarian replied reluctantly. He kept staring at Legion and also noticed EDI –
for once she had clothes on.

"Lieutenant Vega, come here," Shepard ordered and the kid came to stand on her left.

"I believe you both met Javik, Traynor, Joker and Chakwas. Here we have Lieutenant Greg Adams,
Kenneth Donnelly, Gabriella Daniels, all of them in charge of the drive core and engineering in
general. Standing awesomely in the corner, Lieutenant Commander Kaidan Alenko. I honestly
don't know what he does all day besides looking good."

"Very funny, Commander," Alenko replied, blushing a little.

"Lieutenant Steve Cortez," Shepard continued, "who's in charge of the armory and the shuttle.
Private Bethany Westmoreland, Private Sarah Campbell, who second Traynor in CIC, and Sergeant
Rupert Gardner. He was supposed to be in charge of the Normandy's firepower but he met his true
love, the kitchen, and since then we dine like kings everyday. He's also our electrician and our
plumber on board due to drastic budget cuts."

"I like to think I take care of everybody on board, Commander," the Sergeant said with philosophy.

"Right. They are all Alliance soldiers. Ashley Williams we have here is ex-Alliance. She had the
rank of Gunnery Chief so now she's in charge of non-Alliance's personnel's weapons. On her left,
Doctor Liara T'Soni, our Prothean specialist, originally an archaeologist if I remember correctly,"
Liara nodded. "The ugly Krogan is Urdnot Wrex." He snorted. Shepard smiled at him. "On his
right, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy. She loves big ships and big guns and she knows how to use both
so don't mess with the lady. The android behind Joker is our ship's AI, EDI." Vakarian's mandibles
flickered a little. Another information not welcomed. He'd have time to deal with it later. Shepard
unfolded her arms to stand at parade rest. "Crew, this is Spectre Garrus Vakarian, my protegee by
Council order. He'll be with us for a year and respond to my commands. Our usual three men
commandos will be greatly affected because Vakarian will be with me most of the time. Plus I have to evaluate Vega, if he doesn't die in the freezers next time, which means less fun for you guys."

"Fucking Turians," Wrex grunted but he wasn't serious. Vakarian didn't understand it that way though.

"He's joking," Shepard said for her protegee. "Wrex loves Turians."

"Sure," the Krogan replied, easing himself in his chair, "I love them on their knees, swallowing my jizz and begging for their live." Shepard gave him a sharp look to shut him up. That was enough. Wrex rolled his eyes but didn't insist.

"As you can see," Shepard continued, turning a little toward Vakarian, "the crew is very limited in number so everybody has to work to maintain the ship. Lucky for you, the original Normandy was a turio-human creation so her technology will be familiar to you. We'll find you something to do during our long days of traveling between the relays. Any questions?"

"Yes, Commander." Shepard nodded to encourage him to talk. "I'd like to take care of my weapons by myself if you agree with it." Ashley snorted but Vakarian didn't even look at her. He was focused on something on the opposite wall.

"Ah, the turian's carefulness." Shepard sighed a great deal to ease the situation. Ashley didn't like Turians at all, it was better to play it cool. "Sure, go ahead, but you should give a try to Williams. She does good job, otherwise she wouldn't be here."

"Yes, Commander," he replied but it was clear Ash wouldn't be seen near his weapons any time soon.

"And the blue man on my left is not the first Asari male ever but Lieutenant James Vega." The kid saluted Alliance style but quickly folded again his arms to keep his hands under his armpits. "Admiral Anderson placed him under my command so he'll follow the Alliance chain of command. Cortez, what do you think about having a big buff guy like him to second you?"

"I think I don't mind, Commander," Cortez answered. They exchanged a smile and neither of them was innocent. Cortez liked to joke about his sexuality and he didn't miss a chance to make people uncomfortable if he had the opportunity. For sure he'd have a good time with Vega and maybe the kid would realize being hit on by someone you were not interested in was more uncomfortable than flattering.

"Good," Shepard continued. "We'll have time to know each other during our trip to the other side of the galaxy. Joker, set route to Omega."

"Aye aye, Commander," the pilot replied with a lousy salute. "But add ten minutes to your original plan because I have to go back to my beloved leather-sit."

"I took that into consideration," Shepard shrugged. Joker gave her a crooked smile and started to stand. EDI came to help him. "Dismiss." All her people started to leave the mess.

"Commander Shepard," she heard Vakarian calling. She turned to face him. He looked concerned. "Did you say Omega?"

"Yes, I did, why?"

"It's out of Council space."
"Yeah, and?"

"Spectres don't have jurisdiction in the Terminus Systems," Vakarian insisted.

Shepard folded her arms and fell into a hip. She gave him a smart little smile. "And you think that'll stop us?"

"Two Spectres in the Terminus Systems could be seen as a diplomatic incident. Surely the Council wouldn't risk it."

"And who do you think sends us to Omega, Vakarian?" Shepard asked. Realization hit the kid once more. "Yep, the Council. Well, more or less, it's part of one of my long-run missions. We're going to Omega to try to convince Professor Mordin Solus to work on a top secret operation for the Council." She let her smile fade. "We don't work for saints, Vakarian. The Council is like any other government, pretending to care about their people but secretly plotting to get nominated again next time. What changes for us Spectres is that our bosses are just the most powerful people in the galaxy." She let that sink a second. "If you have any problem with that, you can still grab your things and get back on the Citadel to give them your middle finger. Heck, I'd even wait for you to give you a ride to Omega after! But you're goddamn naive if you think you'll do any good in this galaxy like that, kiddo. Sometimes you have to sit on your noble principles to make any difference in this fucked up universe. So I'll ask you only once, Vakarian: are you ready to do whatever it takes to do good?"

His eyes fell to the floor as he was thinking and Shepard took the opportunity to look at him straight in the eyes when he lifted his head. He was conflicted, it showed on his face, but he eventually came to a decision.

"I am, Commander."

Shepard smiled. She lifted her fist to his chest and poked his armor gently, a familiar gesture Nihlus had made countless times toward her. At first she had thought he was only trying to touch her boobs but it was a sign of affection between a mentor and a protegee in his culture. It was a mark of trust, respect and intimacy. "So welcome on board, Garrus Vakarian."

TBC
Garrus didn't really know what to do. It was four in the morning, too early to get out of bed but too late to try to sleep a little more. He didn't know if he was allowed to go to the cargo bay for a little exercise so early in the morning, he had forgotten to ask and asking now would not help his case. The Commander was not the kind of woman to like to be disturbed in the middle of the night for something so meaningless, he had figured that out easily. She had impressed him greatly, so much he hadn't dared to speak much during his first day on the Normandy.

After leaving the Citadel, they had reached the relay within an hour, not caring much for speed regulation in a so crowded space. Shepard had used this time to give him a second, more detailed tour of the ship. Chief Engineer Adams and the Quarian went with them to explain to Garrus how things worked. Being himself an engineer, though more versed into weaponry and computers, Garrus didn't have any particular problem following their explanations – even if the Quarian's accent was terrible. Shepard surprised him during the tour. He had thought she was a soldier head to toes but she knew a lot about her ship. She was no engineer for sure but she seemed to like to understand how everything worked on board. She had asked more questions than Garrus and the Quarian answered each time carefully, as if passing a test. Maybe it had been a test. Maybe Garrus should make sure to be able to answer any question from the Commander.

Lunch wasn't a big deal on the Normandy. Everybody grabbed something Sergeant Garden had prepared in the morning and went back to work after a short break. Garrus relied on military rations. Shepard told him the sergeant knew how to cook dextro food, to which Garrus replied he may try later but he was good for now. He never ate much at lunch anyway. Shepard gave him one of her piercing green look that indicated she didn't buy his bullshit but didn't say anything on the subject. She just reminded him they had limited resources on board and wasting food was not a smart move.

The afternoon was dedicated to weapons of all sort. Garrus spent practically all his time in the cargo bay with Shepard, Lieutenant Cortez and Williams. They reviewed the armory, made sure he knew everything he had to know, counted ammo and thermo clips and all. Garrus had to show his equipment to Shepard at some point. She didn't say anything about how little he had in firepower – courtesy of C-Sec – but it was clear she wanted him to upgrade his artillery. For that, he'd have to do a little shopping on Omega. She'd come with him, she knew where to find "good stuff". She couldn't land him anything for now as the crew had cleared the stocks on the Citadel – all material ceased during missions were to be taken to the authorities. Plus Spectres had to buy their weapons themselves. Garrus didn't mind. His new status allowed him to carry even illegal weapons. Omega was the perfect place to start a collection of highly interesting artillery.

Shepard released him an hour before dinner and Garrus found himself not knowing what to do. He transferred his things to Life Support but the room was mostly empty. He didn't want to bother the Commander with simple questions like "can I borrow a chair and a desk?" and he supposed Javik wouldn't answer him either so he turned to Specialist Traynor. She took him to an intermediary deck between engineering and the cargo bay where they kept spare furniture under red lights. The Geth was there, a human hard-cover book in hand, sitting very straight on a chair in the middle of the small space, as if it needed to sit. It waved its facial plates a few times as it looked to Garrus but didn't move otherwise. Garrus felt uneasy while he and Traynor took what he needed. He could
deal with a Krogan and a Quarian but a Geth, a *Geth*! What the heck was he supposed to do around a Geth? Shepard had told him this "Legion" was part of the crew, a special machine, independent from his kind, but that didn't help at all. What good was a rebellious AI from an openly hostile synthetic race? This thing just had to have access to the ship's systems to kill them all in a matter of seconds. Of course, there was the *other* AI on board, EDI, but Garrus didn't trust it either. AI were forbidden by Council laws for a good reason.

But, it wasn't Garrus' place to say anything about his Commander's motives and reasons. If she wanted to have a Geth and that ridiculously curvy android on board, he just had to be prepared to shoot both of them in case something went wrong.

Traynor helped him settle down in Life Support but it didn't take long. She was intrigued by his arrangements and he had to explain to her Turians didn't sleep on their backs like Humans or Asaris. They slept in a sitting position because of their fringes and back where were located their lungs. Laying down was for young children or generally considered a really bad sign in sick people. They usually said a Turian on his back was already dead. Traynor found it interesting and asked a few more questions about Turians, mostly about their habits and behavior. Turians weren't fond of curiosity toward their culture but Garrus answered her nonetheless. The specialist wasn't indiscreet, she just wanted to make sure she wouldn't say or do something offensive for a Turian. She admitted she only had met Shepard's mentor and he was a pretty laid-back Turian from what she had deduced. That didn't surprise Garrus at all. If Kryik had insisted that Shepard learned Etherian, that meant it probably was his mother tongue. It was the most common language in secessionist colonies. That plus his last name gave Garrus a pretty good idea of Shepard's mentor's origins. No wonder he was laid-back.

Traynor then remembered they hadn't created his intranet login yet so they went to CIC. It took a minute to secure everything and link his omnitool to the ship's network. Though, Traynor said, Shepard didn't like her crew using what she considered a weapon for personal use, so Garrus would need a terminal in his quarters for connections to the intranet or, when possible, to the extranet. As long as his omnitool was used for communications, it was sort of okay but he had to be careful to keep it professional. The ship loaded automatically updates from secured servers when possible so Garrus wouldn't have to hit refresh like crazy between two relays but use of the extranet was very limited during their trips. Shepard liked it that way anyway. She preferred her crew talking to one another instead of staying on their terminal all day. And it limited the visits to porn websites.

Contrary to lunch, dinner was a big deal on the Normandy. It marked the end of the day shift and Shepard had made it a rule for her crew to change and forget their uniforms until the morning. Even the Krogan wore a comfortable set of clothes instead of his heavy armor and Garrus felt out of place. He hadn't packed any civilian clothes. Shepard arrived in the mess in black sport wear with white and red stripes on her right arm and gave his armor a hard look. She didn't say anything but it was pretty clear he had to do more than weapon shopping on Omega.

Everybody sat at the large table in the mess but ranks weren't quite forgotten. The atmosphere was pretty relaxed nonetheless and the members of the crew talked casually, some more than others. Javik was silent but to ask for water and Garrus imitated him. Vega was the center of attention anyway, giving the crew a few stories of his relatively short military time. When Top Model tried to make Garrus talk, the new Spectre replied he hadn't do much in his life and C-Sec investigations were boring anyway. Shepard didn't talk much either. She listened, she looked and smiled but she mostly stayed quiet in her corner, not eating much. Food seemed to be good though, at least the levo one. It smelled good, even for a Turian like him. His plate was more or less okay. Gardner had made a Quarian dish, sort of a stew overcooked and over-sterilized which didn't have anything special. It tasted as it looked: beige. Garrus didn't know why but it described the stew perfectly. He hoped Gardner would cook something else the next day though, but it seemed the sergeant wanted
to learn a little more about turian cuisine. He didn't like to see Garrus ignore his lunch and had
taken it as a personal offense or something like that.

The crew was free to relax after dinner. Shepard made herself a cup of hot beverage, made a
comment about a hard boring day waiting for them the next day and went to her quarters. Javik
reminded some of their duty and left too. It took Garrus a minute and a clear shift of attitude from
some crew members to understand the Commander and her Executive Officer were in fact giving
space to the ship's personnel. He was tempted to do the same but the pilot, Beard-Face, asked him
of his opinion so far. All attention focused on him, Garrus felt uneasy, at best. He felt like it was
some sort of a test. Should he criticize the Commander and her crew, life could get complicated.
He could always joke but that would damage his Perfect Turian behavior. If he were to follow the
book, he had to tell the truth. Then again, it wasn't necessary a smart move. Not that he thought so
little of the crew but he had some remarks regarding some members. Garrus chose to give them
half of the truth and said something about all the incoherent windows giving on the drive core. The
Quarian approved and Beard-Face laughed.

Retreating to his quarters didn't take him long, even if the crew was much more interested in him
now. Garrus just said he had to finish cleaning a gun before bed time and left. Traynor knew he was
lying but she didn't say anything – she was too busy talking with one of the engineers, probably
Daniels. Garrus didn't lock the door behind him when he entered what would be his quarters for a
year, even if he wanted to. It was stupid anyway. The Geth or the AI could hack their way in, the
Quarian too, and the Krogan would just headbutt the door until it broke. Garrus sat and cleaned all
his guns, just in case someone wanted the check the next day, then shut the lights off and tried to
sleep. The hum of the drive core was soothing, he had to admit that, but the idea of sleeping so
close to a ticking bomb was not helping. He stared at the ceiling, where blue ribbons of light from
the core created an underwater impression. Garrus fell asleep at some point, watching the waves.

He was staring again at the ceiling now, fully awaken. He tended to wake up early, like any Turian
born and raised on Palaven. The day could be pretty hot so the people enjoyed the early and late
hours, when the temperature was manageable, and usually took a nap during the warmest hours.
Life on the Citadel was nothing alike because every parameter possible was controlled but Garrus
had kept the habit of waking up early. Still, he would have liked to sleep another couple of hours.

It was useless to just sit in the dark and wait so Garrus took his kit and used the men's bathroom.
He didn't dare to go in there around dinner last night. He knew what a human man looked like
naked but he didn't want to be face to face with one – and let's not talk about the Krogan. Cleaning
himself didn't take long. As he exited the bathroom, Garrus noticed activity in one of the
observation deck, the one without the bar. Curious, and cautious, he walked to the door and put his
head against the cold metal, trying to hear what was going on inside. He was right, there were
voices inside and it wasn't difficult to know which ones: the Geth's and the AI's. They weren't
plotting for the destruction of the organics, though, even if it was hard to tell – the door was really
thick.

"Can I help you, Spectre Vakarian?" the AI's voice asked through Garrus' radio. He jumped in the
air and retreated a few steps back from the door. Of course, there must have been cameras on the
ship, probably everywhere. It meant the AI, and the Geth, was aware of everything, at any given
time. It had known Garrus was awake even before he did.

Garrus cleared his throat. "No, I'm fine."

"If you want to keep playing the ghost with more efficiency," the AI continued, "I recommend you
to avoid being in the mess in the following minutes. Commander Shepard has just called the
elevator."
Shit, Garrus thought. He turned heels to go back to his quarters – did the AI just give him attitude? – when he realized it was pretty stupid. He had to see his mentor at some point but he would have preferred that to happen on her terms. She was to decide when they meet and talk, those were her privileges as his mentor and superior. But she was Human and maybe Humans didn't see things that way – they certainly didn't, actually. He had to ask her. No doubt she'd give him that piercing green look. It was unsettling. Garrus knew exactly why: his father had the same look, intensity and color-wise. Argoth was a specialist when it came to pin down someone just with a look and he could let you cook under it for minutes without a word. Garrus always hated that habit of his father. His mother didn't mind, she even had fallen for those piercing green eyes and she had regretted to not see the same color transmitted to her children. Well Garrus was glad he had greyish blue eyes. He looked like his father too much for his tastes as it was already.

The elevator made a soft noise announcing the door was going to open. Without thinking, Garrus jumped to the front and saluted as it started to open. "Comman..." he said but he never finished his sentence. A warm burst of energy caught him just under the ribs and threw him against the wall with enough force to blow the wind out of his lungs – thanks the Spirits he was wearing his armor, otherwise that attack would have broken more than a few ribs. Garrus put his hand at his hip by reflex but didn't find his gun. It was kind of useless anyway. A gun against biotics in close quarters couldn't help him.

Wait, biotics?

"Oh shit!" he heard the Commander shoot. "What the Hell, Vakarian! I told you I hated surprises!" Garrus stood against the wall, head spinning a little and breathing hard, doubled with a burning pain in the chest. His armor's shields were completely down and some of the compensators were fried. The in-suit computer told him he had received a punch of a thousand and two hundreds Newtons. He knew some Humans had developed biotics but he had never heard of individuals so powerful. Shepard came closer but didn't touch him. "You okay, Vakarian? Do you need Chakwas? I'll wake her up."

"I'm okay," Garrus replied, waving a hand while the other checked his armor. "I'm okay, Commander," he repeated, trying to straighten his back. Damn, that hurt. For sure he had something broken. It took him a few seconds to stand and breath normally, the pain irradiating his system with each intake of air. A few light painkillers would help until the doctor woke up. Garrus would have to tell the Commander he was injured at some point but he wanted to know exactly to what extend. One thing was sure: his training year started just fucking fine.

Shepard took a step back and folded her arms, frowning. "What did you have in mind exactly, Vakarian?" she asked, chin up. "I don't hug guys who ambush me, I kill 'em."

Yeah, I realized that much, Garrus thought but he didn't dare to tell it. "My apologizes, Commander," he said instead, "it won't happen again."

Shepard seemed to realize she was unfair to him and part of her annoyance backfired at her. "No, I have to apologize," she admitted. "I shouldn't have..."

"It's alright, Commander," Garrus interrupted her. A superior didn't have to explain themselves or to apologize. He straightened his back, cringing his teeth, and placed his arms behind him. "I should have been more careful. It won't happen again."

"Oh cut the bullshit, Vakarian," Shepard rolled her eyes. Garrus felt his mouth open a little under the surprise but he couldn't say anything. "Go to the medbay," Shepard continued, "I'll wake up Chakwas."
"I'm fine," Garrus repeated, concentrating on something far, far away to keep the pain at bay. He vaguely saw the movement but he wasn't focused at all on the Commander. He received her punch in the ribs, just where her biotics had hit him a minute ago, and Garrus couldn't do anything about it. His chest burned as the air escaped him again, and this time he had to plow and put a hand on the wall to not fall on the ground.

"Yeah, obviously", Shepard snorted. "Medbay, now," she added as she walked to the crew's quarters.

Garrus nodded, incapable of saying anything until some air decided to recolonize his lungs. And he wasn't sure he wouldn't barf if he opened his mouth anyway. Plowed in half, he walked to the medbay, an arm under his ribcage, another against the wall, just in case. He was just sitting on a bed when the door opened again, on a furious doctor wearing her pajamas and a gray sweatshirt with something written on it in blue. Shepard followed, vaguely annoyed. The Commander leaned against a far wall, arms folded, while Chakwas prepared a syringe full of painkillers, Garrus hoped. He wasn't wrong. The blissful chemicals washed off all pain of his system within a second, transporting him to a very well known level of happiness. He had had a lot of painkillers during his time at the hospital after the attack on the Citadel so he had a pretty good idea of what was the good stuff. He totally understood why drug addicts were capable of the worst to get those products. Some part of his brain still alerted him. It reminded him he was walking on the edge of a cliff.

"I cannot auscultate you with your armor on, Mister Vakarian," the good doctor said. Garrus registered it but didn't quite understand the meaning until Chakwas started to undo the seals of his armor. He tried to resist but she moved his hands away. His eyes caught Shepard's anyway and he plunged into those green pools of steal while Chakwas finished removing his upper-body armor. Garrus barely noticed the cool air on his exposed skin and completely forgot he hated to show his body. His scars on his face were impressive already but what he hid under his armor was worse. The missile he deviated with his jaw didn't explode but threw him on the ground nonetheless. Meanwhile, an inferno ammo caught itself in his armor. Again, he was lucky enough for the bullet to fail its jobs. Instead of exploding, it was stopped between two heavy plates and it leaked its inflammable gel, a highly toxic chemical which burned most of Garrus' chest down to the waist during the remaining hours of the attack. He didn't notice, his armor flooding his system with medigel and painkillers, but he would forever remember the long strings of bloody skin and flesh melted to his armor as the doctors removed it hours later. It was impossible to forget.

A sudden pain in his back reminded Garrus where he was. He caught Shepard's green eyes again and stayed focused on them this time. Fuck it if he was disrespectful. He needed an anchor to forget the pain and his own flesh being striped apart.

"Nothing broken," Chakwas announced, coming back in front of him, "but you have three damaged ribs. Well done, Commander." Shepard grunted, looking away. Chakwas took a box of sticky hot compresses in a cabinet and put two on both sides of Garrus. The warmness immediately eased his pain – they must have contained some medigel or something but he couldn't care less at the moment. She prepared another shot but Garrus stopped her, his mind suddenly cleared by a sudden burst of adrenaline.

"Please, no more," he said, his throat tight. Chakwas looked at him for a second and understood, nodding slightly. Those products were highly addictive and they didn't want a junky on board.

"I would recommend a few days of rest," Chakwas continued like nothing had happened, throwing away the syringe in a special container. "Repairing his ribs with bone reconstructing gel wouldn't do much and the process didn't show much benefits on Turians. So he has to rest, until we reach Omega would be the best."
"Duly noted, Doctor," Shepard grunted.

"As for you, Commander," Chakwas said, slightly amused, and Garrus saw his mentor straighten her back as if the Supreme Ruler of the Galaxy suddenly spoke to her, "I'd recommend not to use your biotics into the ship, especially on your own crew and protegee."

"I told you he was standing in front of the elevator and scared the shit out of me!" Shepard said on a tired tone that indicated it wasn't the first time she explained herself.

"The second hit wasn't necessary," Garrus mumbled before he could realize it. He closed his eyes hard, knowing fully he had made a mistake. Damn. He was too used to bitch about everything and had hidden it so far just because he had been really careful. But the drugs eased his mouth and he was now facing a really pissed off Shepard.

"You hit him on purpose?" Chakwas asked, not amused by the situation anymore. "Why on Earth..."

"I just poked him!" Shepard defended herself, throwing her arms in the air. "And he's wearing his armor and he's fine so let's just forget about it, okay? I freaked out, big deal! I'm sor..."

"You don't have to apologize, Commander", Garrus interrupted her. She gave him a mistrusting look as he left the bed to stand on both feet. Breathing hard, he straightened his back and stood at parade rest, eyes somewhere above her head. "The fault was mine, I..."

"Oh for the love of God!" Chakwas sighted, exasperated. "You're idiots, both of you! Cut the turian act, Vakarian, and you, Commander, chill out once in a while! Not everybody in this galaxy wants you dead." She walked straight for the door. Shepard didn't stay in her way and kept an eye on her, like a terrified prey. "I'm going back to bed. Don't wake me up unless someone is really dying this time!"

Silence fell on the medbay after the door closed. Garrus barely breathed, his chest hurting each time his muscles moved. He was keeping his eyes on the wall but he still saw Shepard being uneasy in his field of vision. She shifted from one foot to another, her fingers moving a little. He noticed she was wearing her sport wear again. Maybe she had been on her way for training before the incident. Garrus was silently waiting for her to leave. He didn't want her to witness him gritting his teeth at each movement needed to put his armor on again. Her head turned to his direction and she gave a little nod with her chin.

"What happened?"

"Commander?"

"Your chest," she insisted, annoyed, "what happened?"

"Leaking inferno ammo," he answered, his voice as nonchalant as if he was giving her the latest news about the weather.

"I see." Silence took control of the room once again. Please go, Garrus thought. He was starting to notice the cool temperature and a Turian with goosebumps was not a pretty tableau. "I should have told you," Shepard continued, "about my biotics."

Aliens thought Turians hated biotics but it wasn't exactly the case. They were just very cautious with their own biotics. They ostracized those gifted with powers, but it was because people thought biotics weren't trustworthy. Most of them either hid their powers, which was a terrible mistake within a society who made a big deal out of honesty and truth, or accepted their fate and became
highly trained assassins in a millennial sect, the Cabal. A few went offworld to become mercenaries but were outcasts nonetheless. Though Turians didn't care much for biotics from other species. What aliens did with their gifted wasn't the Turians' problem.

Maybe Shepard was concerned because her mentor had been very reluctant about her powers. Maybe he didn't trust her, which was a pretty terrible thing to do as a mentor. Garrus shifted slightly his weight, more out of anxiety than anything. He had to choose his words carefully. "I have worked with a few Asaris during my time at C-Sec, Commander, which is far more than most Turians will ever experience. I understand fully the benefits of biotic powers and I do not believe in the tales my people carry. Please, be assured of that."

Shepard seemed to relax ever so slightly. "Good, good," she mumbled. "I know you think your superior doesn't have to apologize ever but I'm sorry," she said really fast to not be interrupted. "I'm not used to wanderers in the mess at four thirty. Legion and EDI know I don't want to be disturbed before the beginning of the day shift so I don't usually see them around, unless there is an emergency." She gave him a quick look. "You okay, Vakarian?"

"Yes, Commander," Garrus answered but something bothered him. The ship's AI, EDI, had known he was in the corridor in front of the elevator, it even alerted him Shepard was coming. Why didn't it notice Shepard of Garrus' presence then?

The medbay door opened on Javik out of his armor, wearing what looked like human sport wear, revealing a lot of skin and toned muscles. He gave a look around, his eyes staying a little longer on Garrus' chest than anything else, but he then turned to face Shepard. "Everything alright, Commander?"

"Peachy," Shepard answered to avoid further questions. "I'm late for training, am I?" Javik simply nodded. "Give me a sec, I'll grab something to eat and I'll be in the cargo bay before you know it." Shepard looked at Garrus and gave him a nod before leaving the medbay. Garrus didn't relax nonetheless, as the room's wide windows gave on the mess.

"Did she hurt you?" Javik asked, his deep grumbling voice surprising Garrus. He didn't expect the Executive Officer to worry about him.

"I'm fit for duty, Sir," Garrus replied automatically. Javik's sets of eyes fell on Shepard, on the right, taking a few energy bars out of a box in a cabinet over the sink. Those eyes carried a lot of thoughts, heavy ones.

"Like Hell you are, Turian," Javik replied, suddenly harsh. "Don't make me regret to have kept you on board and never forget: the airlock is always a deck away."

Garrus gave a salute Javik didn't see because he turned heels immediately after his warning, walking away. He saw Shepard jogging to her XO, a half-wrapped bar of food in her mouth already. Garrus relaxed once he was sure he was alone, but his ribs didn't appreciate the movement. He took his upper-body armor with him and went back to his quarters, slowly.

He noticed activity on crew deck from six but breakfast really started at seven. It gave Garrus a chance to repair his armor but there was definitively a bump on it and the compensators were still damaged. He would need to ask Cortez for spare parts today. Garrus hoped the Lieutenant wouldn't ask him any question.

He made sure his movements were fluids before coming out of Life Support and acted as if nothing had happened. Chakwas wasn't up yet, contrary to most of the crew. Shepard was already sipping a cup of hot beverage at what must have been her usual corner of the table, Javik on her
right, both in uniform. Garrus nodded his salutes to them and tried to be civil with Gardner, in hope he wouldn't cook a quarian dish tonight. The Sergeant was pleased and asked him what he usually ate in the morning. But Garrus would have to go with quarian food for now – Gardner had some of what Garrus required in the freezers though, it would be ready the next day. Garrus went to sit at the table with a plate of vegetables with some sort of slimy gray noodles made out of protein past, a small bowl of spicy soup in which something definitively floated, fresh fruits and a cup of the quarian morning beverage, a hot red steaming liquid smelling both spicy and sweet. A human cup.

"Don't be an ass, Sergeant," Shepard shouted as soon as she saw the look on Garrus' face, "and give Vakarian a straw or something." She added for him as Gardner mumbled in his corner: "Sorry, I honestly didn't expect to have a Turian on board for a while and I kinda like to see Nihlus struggle with human tableware."

"Yeah, that's always fun to see Mister Badassest of the Badasses split his coffee all over the table," Beard-Face said from the other side of the table. "Teach him some humility." Garrus frowned a little. That was kind of racist.

"Nihlus doesn't like my choice of career," Shepard explained. "For him, a Spectre should work alone, or with another Spectre, not on board a ship with a crew."

"Doesn't stop him to take the Normandy for a cab," the Krogan snorted. "I bet he'll call you soon to check on your baby-Spectre."

Baby-Spectre? It took Garrus a lot of self-control to not give a cold look to the Krogan. He stared straight in front of him instead, which probably frightened a little the male engineer. Shepard turned to Joker, dead serious.

"Yes, I may have referred to our newest family member as 'baby-Spectre' after dinner", the pilot admitted, hands up in the air, "guilty as charged, Commander, but you have to admit it's catchy, right?"

Shepard then turned to Garrus. "You have my permission to give him a stupid nickname."

"Already done, Commander," Garrus replied, still focusing on Donnelly. A genuine sparkle of interest lightened Shepard's eyes behind her cup. Garrus obliged. "It's Beard-Face." Shepard laughed, splitting her beverage on the table, and Traynor approximately had the same reaction. That meant she probably spoke Kaladran, what other species referred as common turian. The English word beard was similar in pronunciation as the name of an ugly, furry and stinky little animal on Palaven, an inoffensive scavenger which liked to eat until it passed out, its belly full of rotting meat. Beardred was also slang for someone with bad hygiene and manners.

"What?" the pilot asked. He turned around as Garrus started to eat his breakfast, struggling to keep his face straight. "I don't get it. Why is it funny? Is it because beards are hilarious for Turians?" The Quarian shrugged. Shepard had troubles stopping to laugh, her cheeks a bright red and her eyes all wet with tears. Garrus felt pretty good about himself. Gardner finally arrived with the straw. Garrus extended his arm to take it, his injury forgotten, and the movement provoked a burst of pain in his chest. It was noticed by the rest of the crew. Beard-Face jumped on the occasion. "Not a day on board and already injured, Vakarian?" he said with a smirk. "I thought all Turians were tough guys impermeable to pain." Garrus frowned.

"Enough with that," Shepard interrupted, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. "I wanted to see what he was made of so we had a few rounds earlier. Can't say it was a piece of cake to get him to open his guard but you know me, I don't go easy on people." Most of the crew nodded thoroughly, apparently knowing very well what Shepard was capable of. Garrus looked at her. She
had lied without a second thought, either to not admit her mistake, or to protect him. Either way, he
didn't like it. He nodded to her nonetheless because she probably wanted him to look grateful for
the explanation. Shepard gave him a little smile behind her cup. She finished it in two gulps, chin
up, and put the cup back on the table. "You heard the doc, Vakarian. Take it easy until we reach
Omega. Use that time to catch up with my current long-term missions, alright? Liara, Tali, Traynor,
EDI and Legion, I count on you to help him on that." She stood up. "Oh and learn English while
you're at it."

"I thought he was a Spectre," Williams snorted, "not a bookworm."

"Thank you for volunteering for giving Vakarian English lessons, Williams," Shepard replied. The
ex-soldier grunted. "Just don't bore him to death with your poetry."

"Aye aye, Commander."

"I'll be around if you need me."

"Catching up with old reports to write, Commander?" Beard-Face asked with a smirk as Shepard
walked to the elevator.

"You want to keep your leather chair, Joker?" she shouted back over her shoulder. The pilot pouted.

"I can help you with English," Lieutenant Top Model told Garrus while Javik was leaving the table
too.

"Oh please, Alenko," Williams snorted.

"What?"

"You're Canadian," she replied, easing herself on her chair. She had a wicked little smile on her full
lips. There was something between them, Garrus could tell – though he had no idea what a
Canadian was but her tone was clearly sorry.

"Kenneth should teach him," the female engineer intervened. "If Vakarian can understand his
accent, he'll have no trouble at all with any other Human ever."

"Very funny," Donnelly replied, forcing his accent. "I'm second place in this contest anyway." He
pointed the Quarian with his chin, smiling at her. Her purple mask certainly diminished the cold
look she gave him back.

"At least I speak more than one language," she said, her steamy cup with a straw in hand. She
shared an understanding look with the non-human crew members around the table while the others
protested. She included Garrus. It was odd to be acknowledged by a Quarian considering the way
Turians tended to treat them. Maybe it didn't have any kind of importance on board of the
Normandy. Garrus hid his smile with a fork full of noodles. It was odd but it felt good.

TBC
Someone knocked on the door just when Shepard finished adjusting her sport bra. She took a white tank top off the chair next to her bed as she gave permission to enter, then walked bare feet to her desk, only wearing her reinforced leggings on her bottom. Tali entered first, conquering as always, followed by Liara, more reserved, both towered by Vakarian who ignored her semi-nakedness with perfection. He stood at parade rest whereas the two girls were more at ease. Shepard hid her smirk by putting on her tank top, then fell on her chair at her desk more than she sat.

"So, we'll be docking on Omega in twenty minutes," she said but they knew that already. "I wanted to review some stuff with you, Vakarian."

"Yes, Commander," he replied. Shepard smiled. Ten days and the guy was still giving her some 'Commander this', 'Commander that'. It was expected of the Alliance part of the crew but not from him. Though she didn't spend a lot of time with him during the trip to Omega. Vakarian had been with the two girls in Lab 1 for the better part of his time, and the rest of it studying with Traynor. Shepard had used this opportunity to keep an eye on Vega. They had trained, talked, reviewed what he knew, all of that crap. She was glad they finally had reached Omega. Vega wasn't a bad guy but she wasn't a big fan of his winning personality. He wanted to impress her. She hated show-offs. They were nothing but trouble.

"Liara and Tali told me you did a great job with your catching up this week," Shepard continued, picking up a little piece of plastic on her desk. She had finished a ship model late last night and cleaned after but it was nearly impossible to recover all the little chips. She threw it in the dustbin. "Traynor also told me she rarely saw someone learn a language so fast. Tell me, Vakarian, did you sleep at all, this week?"

Vakarian's mandibles tightened slightly. Bingo. "I'm fit for duty, Commander," he said, staring at the wall in front of him. Of course you are, big guy, Shepard thought, but there was a difference between being fit for duty and having slept enough. She knew it all too well.

"You better be," she still warned him, taking a serious look. "You screw up a mission and off to the brig you go. I can't let Javik throw you by the airlock because you're technically the Council's property but I'll make sure you won't screw up again, believe me. If you're not one hundred percent with me, I don't want you watching my back, understood? It's better to tell me you're not ready than to get everybody killed."

"I am ready, Commander," he replied, his voice confident and his brow slightly furrowed.

"Didn't you say your new pup would always be with you on missions?" Tali asked. Shepard smirked. Tali, with her sharp tongue and her big brain, was playful, she could tell by the tone of her voice. Tali's mask didn't help to read the Quarian but Shepard had known her for a long time.

"Pup?" she repeated as Vakarian seriously frowned this time. "He's twice your age, Tali."

"He's still a rookie," the Quarian insisted, folding her arms. "I don't like rookies." Shepard fought her own smile and only managed to grimace. If Vakarian was a rookie with his fifteen years in the most powerful army of the galaxy, she wondered what Tali could be. Sure, the Quarians also had a
military discipline on their flotilla and the young had to serve for some years but it was nothing compared to the Turians. Though Shepard knew what her friend had in mind. There was a big difference between the army and their line of work.

"Ah," Shepard sighed, "Wrex has a terrible influence on you, seriously."

"And you are avoiding my question, Commander."

Shepard forced a smile. "Yeah, well, in theory Vakarian has to come with me on all official Council missions but this one is not really official. And I'd rather have him wait in the ship than fuck everything up because he studied so much he forgot to sleep." She tried to catch his gaze but Vakarian stared at the models with a rare intensity. He had something to say but wouldn't dare open his mouth without Shepard's approbation. This was getting old. She hoped he would yell something if she had a red dot on the back of her head someday. "Speak up your mind, Vakarian," she commanded.

"You told me the Council sent you to Omega, Commander."

"Two out of three Councilmen, to be precise," she shrugged. "That's enough for me."

"I'd like to have more details about this mission before giving you my answer, Commander," Vakarian said and it really surprised Shepard. It also gave her a bolt of happiness. She liked when Vakarian was more himself than a robot around her.

"Well," Shepard started but Vakarian gave a quick look to Tali and Liara, as if they shouldn't know about that. Shepard trusted her people. She didn't tell them everything, true enough, but Tali and Liara already knew about this one. "They know," Shepard waved it off. She straightened her back in her chair. "I told you we're looking for a Salarian, Professor Mordin Solus, right?" Vakarian nodded. "The guy is a doctor with a thing for genetic. Ex-STG, he worked on a modified version of the genophage more than a decade ago. The Krogans were starting to be resilient, you see? Their organisms were adapting to the genophage, so the Salarians decided to create a new version and spread it in the population. They did so without the Council's permission. But someone tipped off Tevos, the Asari Councilor, and she and Sparatus worked together on the genophage case. They actually started plotting a few years ago because they had to negotiate with the Krogans. Since I worked hard for this, I can tell you we have a deal with the most influential krogan warlords on Tuchanka: they unite their people, create a government and keep it stable for a decade or so and we give them a cure to the genophage."

Shepard let Vakarian integrate this information for a second. It was pretty big news. Turians helped taking care of the Krogans after their rebellion and they had spread the genophage themselves, dooming the population. Well, really it was the Salarians' fault at the origin from Shepard's point of view. They uplifted the Krogans to use them in their war against the Rachnis and the Krogans weren't ready for that. The high infantile death rate before uplifting had stabilized their population growth. With proper medical care, food in profusion and more welcoming worlds for them, they became a problem, to which the Salarians had found a solution: the genophage. But it was a long time ago and now the Krogans were a dying species. Most of the warlords weren't stupid, they knew they had to compromise to save their people. It wouldn't be easy but they would reach the peace the Council was expecting of them. Krogans survived, that was what they did best.

"It's an on-going process," Shepard continued. "The Krogans are doing their part, we have to do ours. Here enters Mordin Solus. He's the best we have to work in secret on a cure."

"He's a Salarian," Vakarian pointed out. "Ex-STG."
"That won't be a problem," Shepard replied, leaning in her chair. "I did my homework, Vakarian, I know Solus is our guy. He won't rat us out to Valern or any Dalatrass. If we're lucky, the Salaritans won't know anything until the Krogans are on the good path. I bet they already noticed some changes," she shrugged, "but they still have no idea of what we are plotting. Is that enough for you, Vakarian?"

It took a few seconds for him to answer: "Yes, Commander."

"Are you with me on this?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Good. Tali, you'll be our third man."

"Of course, Commander," Tali replied, mocking the Turian's attitude. Liara looked confused. Shepard arched an eyebrow in her direction.

"Why did you summon me then?" the Asari asked. Shepard usually went to Omega either with Liara, Wrex or Alenko to have another biotic with her. Choosing Tali, who was a tech-girl head to toe, was a curious choice, Shepard was fully aware of that. She had two reasons to do so: first, she didn't expect trouble on Omega, well not more than the usual because there always was some sort of trouble on Omega; secondly, Tali was a dextro, like Vakarian, and she knew good dextro markets on the station. Shepard was actually killing two birds with one stone. With Tali in her team, she would go talk to Solus then head to the markets without going back to the ship to pick the girl up.

"I want you to go shopping for me and use that time to give a tour of Omega to Vega," Shepard explained. She turned to a drawer and took two stickers in it. "Show him around, make sure he understands how dangerous this place can be for a cocky Alliance goon like him. Take Wrex with you, in case the kid does something stupid. No uniform and put that on him." She threw one sticker to Liara and the other to Vakarian. He caught it easily. "Put that on your right shoulder, Vakarian."

"What is it?" he asked as he put the white and red stripped sticker on his armor.

"My banner, if you want," Shepard shrugged. "It's the N7 program's, really, but people in the Terminus Systems associate it with me. That means you're part of my crew and nobody fucks with Commander Shepard's crew, at least on Omega. It's not a free-pass though so watch yourself or we'll be in trouble, understood?"

"Yes, Commander," Vakarian replied, straight and all military again.

"Good," Shepard smirked. "I like you, Vakarian. You have a massive stick up your butt but you're not a pain in the ass like some people I know." Vakarian frowned a little but it was nothing compared to Tali's shake of the head. Shepard was pretty sure her Quarian friend rolled her eyes under her mask. "Alright people," she said as she stood up, "we ain't got all day. Vakarian, grab all your weapons and meet us in the shuttle bay."

"Yes, Commander." He didn't even ask why. Shepard smiled as she gave a short list to Liara on paper then walked past him, the girls following her. Vakarian and Liara exited the elevator on crew deck while Shepard and Tali continued to the cargo bay. Steve had already prepared her armor. He knew her so well he had picked up just the perfect parts for Omega – extra ammo and shields boosts. By the time she was done putting on her fifteen kilograms of reinforced metallic trams and plates of ultra-condensed ceramic, Vakarian had joined them. His artillery was outdated and Shepard intended to take him for weapon shopping later but Solus had the priority. Tali chose her
beloved shotgun and a heavy pistol. Shepard went for her favorite Carniflex and a Mantis with extra ammo clips. She was a biotic alright but shooting bad guys from a distance to clear their ranks never was a bad idea.

Liara arrived a minute later with Wrex and Vega, wearing old jeans and a tight Tshirt with the logo of some football team on it. He had the sticker on his enormous biceps. None of the men looked happy and Shepard knew she had to say something before the Krogan started ranting. "I count on you to take our ladies home safe, Wrex." The Krogan barked more than he laughed. Ranting aborted. Liara frowned a little.

"I know how to defend myself, Shepard," she reminded her.

"I do remember a force field incident..." Shepard teased. Liara blushed, her cheeks getting of a dark blue.

"I was ages ago!"

"For a Human like me, maybe, but for an Asari..." Liara pouted and walked straight for Ashley to collect her guns. Wrex walked past Shepard, patting her on the shoulder at the same time. She tried to stand strong but she had to step on the side to catch her equilibrium again.

"I know how to defend myself too, you know," Vega mumbled.

"Well, I know you know how to hit the ground," Shepard shrugged, "at least there is that." Vega frowned. He wasn't bad in hand to hand combat but a good aim was more important in their work. The cargo bay was big enough to run combat simulations with drones and paint guns, so of course Shepard had tested the kid. It wasn't a real situation alright but it was good enough to judge someone's reaction time and their aim. She wouldn't let him shoot at long range, that's for sure. 
"Take a heavy gun with you Vega, no more, no less," Shepard commanded, leaving the smile and the friendliness behind her. "You come from Earth, right? California?" Vega nodded. "You think it's a bad neighborhood but Omega is worse. Show weakness and it will chew you off. But don't act like you own the place either kiddo, because you don't. Nobody does but Aria T'Loak. Don't be an idiot and don't flirt with anybody. Wrex and Liara will be there to save your ass if necessary but it would be better if they don't have to do that, mostly because it'll piss me off and you don't want me to be pissed off, understood?"

"Yes, Commander," Vega replied with a perfect salute. Vakarian frowned again in the corner of Shepard's eyes. She'd have to tell him to seriously chill out. If they had had more time, she would have taken the kid to a bar to try to get him drunk and make him speak. He needed it.

"Alright. EDI?" Shepard called.

"ETA five minutes, Commander," the AI answered through the speakers disseminated in the cargo bay.

"Thanks." Shepard checked her armor one last time by habit. Thanks God for the lighter gravity on Omega. "If the others have to do some shopping, eat an ice cream or whatever, I give them one hour but they don't get out of the ship alone, alright? And no Alliance uniform." She really didn't want that incident to happen again.

"I'll inform the crew, Shepard," EDI confirmed.

"Hey Commander," Joker interrupted before Shepard could thank EDI again, "buy me some lecture while you're out, would you? And not 'pony club magazine' this time."
"I'm not buying you porn, Joker," Shepard replied, replacing her sniper rifle a little on her back. She was more used to have her Black Widow there than a Mantis but her favorite sniper rifle was too uncommon to parade with it on Omega.

"C'mooooon!" the pilot whined.

"I'll do it," Wrex offered. Shepard shook her head as Joker thanked a Krogan very pleased of himself. She waited until the communication was off to speak again.

"Find him something really disgusting, would you? Like Elcor on Hanar porn or whatever." Wrex laughed out loud and Shepard had a genuine smile. She'll have to ask the recordings to EDI later.

Bray was waiting for them on the docks when they exited the Normandy – Liara, Wrex and Vega went their separate way without wasting time. Strange man, that Bray. Right hand of Aria, he was pretty chill for a Batarian. Shepard supposed he hadn't been raised on Khar'shan, otherwise he would have been a lot less friendly towards Humans in general. Though he treated her differently. Bray had had a thing for Shepard ever since they had known each other, he told her himself. He liked her attitude, her strong will, her combat skills and her red hair. Batarians liked red hair, or fur in their case. "People from the fire" were fierce warriors in their culture, from what Shepard had learned. She fitted the description pretty well.

"Shepard!" Bray greeted her with open arms. "My favorite Human!"

"Hi Bray!" Shepard replied with a genuine smile. She liked the guy. He was a devoted badass, very efficient and competent. The galaxy needed more men like Bray. "Spying on me for Aria already?"

"Someone had to volunteer," he smiled. "Better be me than some assholes who won't recognize beauty when they see it." Tali snorted behind Shepard. Bray gave the girl a cold look then turned to the tall Turian in blue armor. The white and red sticker caught his attention. "Who's the ugly one?" Bray asked on a colder tone.

"My protegee," Shepard shrugged.

"Your protegee?" Bray repeated mockingly. "I didn't know you were the kind to babysit, Shepard. How much did his mommy pay you? I can probably double that."

"People with my skills don't come cheap," Shepard replied with a smart smile, "and the Council pays more than you ever could."

"Too bad," the Batarian said, taking his cigarettes from a pocket. "You'd be the richest mercenary of the galaxy, you know that?"

"Oh I know," Shepard assured. She watched him light his cigarette and inhale the thick smoke. Human made, she could tell by the smell. The smell! She didn't have a cigarette in years but it still was very tempting. She could almost taste the bitterness on her lips. Shepard folded her arms, as if it could protect her from temptation. "Anyway, I'm here for business, not to enjoy your company."

"That hurts, Shep," Bray laughed, the smoke swirling in the air around him like a jealous dragon. Shepard held her breath. "What brings you to Omega then?"

"Mordin Solus. You know him?"

"Who doesn't on this rock?" Bray replied. He opened an arm to show them the way. Shepard followed him, zigzagging a little to evade the smell of the cigarette. Where was the disgusting and famous Omega fragrance when she needed it? It had given her headaches and nausea sometimes
but it seemed to have been replaced by the delicious and pernicious odor of the tobacco. "He has a clinic in some shitty district but you'll have to talk to Aria if you want to see the guy."

"She protects him?" Shepard asked.

"She wants him dead," Bray told her, "but he managed to stay alive so far. Dangerous man we have there, I tell you." Shepard nodded. That was unpleasant news. Aria was not the kind of ruler to keep a potential threat around if she could make it disappear one way or another. Solus' dossier clearly stated to not mess with him, but, if he was on Aria's personal list of people to keep alive because she couldn't kill them, that meant Shepard had underestimated the guy. Prudence was required.

The docking bay where the Normandy had been authorized to land was the biggest one and had direct access to the heart of Omega. The door opened on a vast place surrounded by shops, restaurants, bars and other businesses dedicated to release stress in various ways, most of them between the legs of a woman. There were lights, noises and smells everywhere, a blur of information making it difficult to focus on anything in particular, people above all. There were too many anyway, from all around the galaxy, even some specimen of rare species, sometimes unknown ones.

Shepard had been amazed by the station the first time she had walked there. People lived and died in the mines. The little money they made each day was spent in the evening in alcohol or amusements. Gangs didn't hide their businesses and paraded in the streets. Hookers from all known species waited, aligned against the metal walls. Children of ten looked used and fatigued like adults. It was exactly the same as on Earth. Omega was on the other side of the galaxy and populated mostly by aliens but the exact same shit she always had known was happening here. Shepard had found it fascinating, a confirmation Humans were not worst than any other species, something hard to remember sometimes.

Bray led them to the Afterlife, the biggest nightclub on Omega and the blue queen's den – by far Shepard's favorite place on the station. The loud techno music resonated through her body and she couldn't help but feel sorry for Vakarian. Turians didn't have ears or ear canals; their whole skull acted like a receptor, their fringes and thick skin conducting the sounds to their nervous system. They hated loud sounds like those and were very sensitive to low vibrations. Nihlus always cringed when he came here. A quick look to Vakarian told Shepard she'd have to hurry.

People let them pass easily – it helped to wear a heavy armor and to have with her a very displeased Turian giving death glares around. Shepard accelerated slightly. She knew Aria's throne room or whatever she called that balcony was quieter than the rest of the club. She trotted up the stairs, passing by Bray with an apologetic smile. The Batarian wouldn't mind, he liked to see her butt, as he claimed it numerous times. Shepard stepped on the balcony, where Aria's usual ass-lickers waited for her to notice them, poor mortals. The Asari was busy sipping a drink on her sofa, magnificently ignoring the people around. Shepard couldn't hide her smile.

"What's up, gurl?" she said on the most vulgar tone she could. The crowd of devoted admirers stared at her like she was nothing but a bug addressing a Goddess. It amused Shepard greatly.

Aria finished her drink and licked her delicate lips with more sensuality and technique than a pro in front of a camera. Shepard was a bit jealous of the Asari's skills but Aria had eight hundred years to practice. They weren't playing in the same category.

"Shepard", Aria greeted her with a smile. She gave her glass to an assistant, then patted the sofa on her left. Shepard went up the few stairs to sit next to Omega's queen. Aria put her cold hand on Shepard's glove. Asaris strangely had a very low body temperature, even if their homeworld was hot. It was one of the so many oddities of this galaxy. "It's been three months, more or less."
"I was busy taking down Cerberus cells," Shepard shrugged. "Sides, I knew you'd be fine."

Aria forced her smile and sent a little bolt of her biotics through her touch. Shepard felt it through the thick fabric of her glove but didn't show it. "Of course," the queen replied with confidence, leaning in her sofa, releasing Shepard's hand. "Who's the Turian?" she asked more seriously.

"My protegee," Shepard repeated.

"Your protegee," Aria mocked. That must have been a trend Shepard didn't know about. Though Aria studied Vakarian carefully for long seconds. Said Turian didn't let her impress him and he gave her back the same cold and calculating stare. Apparently he didn't receive the notice about not being too cocky on Omega. "Garrus Vakarian, is that right?" Aria asked. Shepard nodded. Of course Aria knew. She wasn't in the information business but she had a very extended web of informers through the galaxy. Vakarian's actions during the attack on the Citadel were unknown of the public but Aria was something else, really. She probably already knew a lot about him, from his Spectre nomination to his favorite brand of underwear. Aria turned to Shepard. "You really have a thing for Turians, don't you?"

"You know me," Shepard teased, "the bigger, the better." Aria had a genuine smile but returned to her business face fast.

"What brings you to Omega, Shepard? You can't be here with your charming little pest and your new boy toy armed like that just to enjoy my company."

"I'm here for Mordin Solus and Bray told me you wanted him dead."

"If you have to kill him, please, go ahead."

"I'll make him disappear alright," Shepard smirked, "but I need him alive."

"Of course you do," Aria frowned, "but I can't let this asshole leave Omega."

"He'll walk out of this Hell hole unharmed with me, whether it pleases you or not," Shepard warned.

"It cannot be done," Aria insisted. Shepard opened her mouth to continue the argument but Aria shut her up with a cold look. "The decision is not up to me. Solus has to stay on Omega." Shepard frowned. Did that mean the Salarians knew about the cure? Did they persuade Aria to keep Solus on Omega one way or another? In any case, Shepard couldn't let that happen.


"No you don't," Aria snorted. Shepard stood. If she couldn't help, the Salarians were not involved. "Don't do anything stupid, Shepard," Aria warned and her men around tensed, ready to take their guns. Vakarian was already evaluating in which order he would take them down, while Tali almost had the hand on her shotgun. "You can't win every time."

"I need Solus."

"Me too."

"It's..."

"If you weren't my friend, you'd be dead by now, Shepard," Aria interrupted. "Now go, have fun with your new Turian, drinks on me."
There was nothing Shepard could do for now so she followed Aria's advice, minus the drinks and the fun with the very tensed Vakarian. Once outside of the club, Shepard took a deep breath. A look around told her Bray hadn't followed her but Aria had eyes everywhere. "EDI," Shepard called by radio, "find me Mordin Solus."

"I took the liberty to locate his clinic after your meeting with Aria T'Loak and uploaded the information on your omnitool," the AI replied instantaneously.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love you, EDI?" Shepard asked jokingly, consulting the map.

"Numerous times, Shepard. May I increment the counter with this new occurrence?"

"Yep. Got him, thanks EDI."

"Always a pleasure, Commander."

"Now, let's go shopping," Shepard declared. She took the direction of the markets, keeping an eye on the people around. She made sure to stay in sight for a few minutes, checking stands and talking like nothing had happened with Tali. The Quarian had already an idea of the plan but Vakarian had no clue at all. He kept being all tall and tensed, ready to shoot anyone coming too close. It became necessary to disappear quickly. Shepard found some elevators and called one. She made sure they were the only ones to enter it. Tali hacked the poor rusty thing within ten seconds and blocked it between two floors. "Good thing you're here, Vakarian," Shepard smirked as realization hit the Turian. He complied nonetheless, first helping Shepard to get on the roof, then lifting Tali. It didn't take him any effort to follow them and they jumped in the elevator shaft.

It took them thirty minutes to crawl through Omega to reach the district where Solus' clinic was. Shepard made sure to keep a low profile while they walked in the streets even if it was stupid. Aria knew she would come around and the queen's men were probably waiting for them already, maybe with guns. And she didn't have her assault rifle. This thing was damn useful in this kind of close range combat. Vakarian had his but he'd need it. She could always grab his shotgun or submachine gun if needed. She just hoped he was the kind to share his toys – which was doubtful considering he was a Turian.

"Commander Shepard," a salarian voice called. Shepard took her gun and pointed it to the dark alley where the voice came from. Vakarian and Tali had the same reflex.

"Who is this?" Shepard asked playfully but it was to hide her tension.

"Were searching for me," the Salarian replied. "Quick, this way."

"Professor Solus?" Shepard insisted, though she had no time to wait for an answer. The Salarian, a shadow within the shadows, turned over and started walking fast. Shepard gave a look around and followed him, ready to shoot anything. Vakarian automatically took the rear guard. Thanks God and the Spirits for military training.

They followed the supposed Solus for five minutes or so, catching glimpses of his silhouette. Light skin color, right horn missing, pretty tall and slender for a Salarian, wearing a lab coat, moving with assurance but not as swiftly as he used to. By the time the Salarian stopped under a bright green neon sign for a massage salon, Shepard knew she had the right guy in front of her. The green light made his reddish skin darker, enhancing his skin patterns.

"Wanted to see me?" Solus asked.

"Yes Sir," Shepard replied but she didn't quite put her gun away. Tali relaxed a little. Vakarian
stayed on his guard, though he traded his gun for his assault rifle and pointed it in the direction they came from. "Is it safe to talk here?"

"As safe as possible considering location," Solus shrugged. "Heard you were looking for me, knew Aria wouldn't permit it so took the necessary dispositions."

"Thanks," Shepard said, frowning a little. Strange language pattern. Maybe her translator needed an update on his dialect or something. "I'm here to ask your help on a secret project the Council is working on."

"Secret project," Solus repeated, scrutinizing Shepard's face to detect any sign of lie or any clue. Salarians had a thing for details. They could overview a crowd in a blink of an eye and analyze everybody's behavior the next. That was one of the reasons Shepard always felt uneasy around Salarians. She felt naked in front of them. Not that she had a lot to hide, she was pretty straightforward, but that didn't mean she liked piercing-armor vision either. "Shepard, first Human Spectre, been for five years," Solus started, stroking his chin, "protegee of Nihlus Kryik, turian Spectre, himself protegee of illustrious Saren Arterius. Vastly known by masses, result of ambassador Goyle's promotion of human interests. Earth-born, orphan..."

"Yes," Shepard interrupted, "everybody knows that."

"Impetuous," Solus continued, "ruthless but efficient, the best if were to believe rumors." Tali snorted.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Shepard mumbled.


"And you're wasting it," Tali remarked, folding her arms. Solus barely noticed her, continuing with his mumbling. Shepard gave a serious look to Tali. She liked the kid but the Quarian could be too reckless sometimes. Wrex really did have a bad influence on her. Shepard would have to talk to them. Great. She swore half of her job as the commanding officer of the Normandy was to talk to people. She never signed up for that.

The Salarian was still talking, searching for the reason she could be interested in him. They didn't have all day, dammit. "We need you regarding the..."

"Genophage!" Solus interrupted, suddenly looking up, index pointed in the air.

"Yes," Shepard confirmed. "The Council is making a deal with the Krogans. Peace for a cure, basically."

"Yes," Solus nodded, "logical. Worked on genophage modifications but too old. Didn't take time factor into consideration."

"We did," Shepard replied. "Half the work is already done." Solus did something she hadn't expected: he laughed. It wasn't a joyful laugh but a mean, mocking one. Salarians rarely were condescending with other species. They could because they were smarter than anyone else in the galaxy but it was a waste of time from their point of view, time they could use to work. It was surprising to see one actually laughing at them. But Shepard wasn't upset. She had an as up her sleeve. "It's your ex-assistant's work, Maelon's." Solus stopped laughing.
"Maelon, alive?" he asked, concerned. "But disappeared, hid his traces, though sources sure of destination, Tuchanka."

"I don't know if he's still alive," Shepard shrugged. "I arrested him in 87 and his work was kept secret by the Council until they were sure the Krogans would cooperate. You're the best in your field, Professor Solus," Shepard insisted, "we need you."

"87," Solus repeated – he liked to do that apparently. "First year as Spectre, under Kryik's supervision."

"That's right."

"Not Kryik," the Salarian pointed, staring at Vakarian. The Turian gave a quick look over his shoulder, not a nice one. Shepard nodded slightly. It was taking them too long, she knew it. "Own protegee?" Salarians and their damn curiosity! Well, she had had him with it to begin with but now it was getting annoying.

"Yep. My mentor doesn't have the proper resources to help you if you decide to work for the Council," Shepard explained. "But I have a ship, the best in the galaxy when it comes to stealth and discretion. Officially, I'll hire you to study the potential of multispecies crews like mine. Unofficially, you'll work on the genophage."

"Current salarian Councilor agreed?" Solus asked, really surprised.

"No, of course not," Shepard smirked. "Though he did sign for the study." Solus had the most vicious smile Shepard ever saw on a Salarian.

"Never liked Valern. Brother of Dalatrass Elerin." Shepard nodded. Elerin had taken control of the second biggest duchy on Sur'Kesh three years ago after the mysterious death of her predecessor, Miohaeru. A Solus. Aged of six at the time, Miohaeru didn't leave any daughter to keep her bloodline running and Elerin had inherited of the throne, despite the existence of numerous sisters, aunts, nieces and cousins. Shepard didn't understand all the details because salarian politic was a nightmare but she knew Elerin wasn't considered as a rightful Dalatrass. The nomination of one of her brothers as Councilor years prior to that didn't help her either. Rumors said he had helped her to gain control of the duchy. Shepard didn't know if it was true but it helped her case in any case. The professor had lost his allegiance to his Dalatrass with the death of his great-great-great-niece or something and probably wouldn't cooperate with Valern. He was virtually free to do whatever he wanted, like coming on Omega and threatening Aria or working on a cure for the genophage.

"Are you interested in my offer, Professor?" Shepard asked. "We can talk numbers and advantages later on the Normandy, that would be wiser, but I can assure you the Council is ready to be very generous."

"Money not of importance," Solus shrugged, "already exceeded normal salarian lifespan and no project in the near future. Foresee a problem nonetheless." Of course there was a problem, Shepard thought. She never met someone and offered them a place on her ship without a problem suddenly coming up. There always was a catch. She just arched an eyebrow and waited. Which didn't take long because Solus didn't seem to need air to talk. "My clinic," he said. "Did a good work so far, gained trust, build something solid. Planed retirement on Omega."

"I can think of better places for retirement," Tali commented. Shepard gave her a cold look this time. The Quarian got the message and straightened her back.

"Do you need time to find a successor or something?" Shepard asked patiently. They didn't have
much time, as Solus had pointed out numerous times. He was old for a Salarian and he could die on her any minute. Sparatus and Tevos knew it but they had decided to take the risk nonetheless. Solus would be able to do a lot of work by himself even with the little time he had.

"Already have one, my assistant, Daniel Abrams, Human, a doctor by your standards."


"Sent him this morning to Blue Suns territory. Didn't return. Can't leave Omega if Abrams dead."

"Alright, we'll get him," Shepard grunted. "How long will it take you to pack your things and put everything in order?"

"Will be ready by noon."

"Good." That'd leave Shepard three hours to find the assistant and go shopping. It seemed reasonable. "Contact the Normandy and see the rest with my executive officer then, that's his job. He has a line of credits ready for you. Feel free to buy whatever you need, supplies, machines, all you deem necessary, that'll be on the Council's tab anyway."

"Understood," Solus nodded. Shepard didn't have to turn her head to know Vakarian was looking at her. Damn Turians and their piercing eyes. He'd dig a hole in her skull before soon.

"Yes, Vakarian?" she asked. Tali turned to look at him but Shepard didn't.

"What about Aria T'Loak?" he said. "Didn't she say she wouldn't let the Professor go?"

"Aria not a problem," Solus answered before Shepard could reply she didn't give a damn about Aria. She looked at the Salarian who gave her a strange smile in return.

"You sure about that?" Shepard had a bad feeling about this.

"Not a problem," Solus assured. He keyed with his omnitool a second. "Here, coordinates of Abrams."

"Alright," Shepard sighed, receiving the data. She transferred it to Tali and Vakarian, under the cold eyes of the Salarian. She really didn't like his smile. "Let's go say hello to the Blue Suns."

TBC
New additions to the crew always were a little unsettling.

Tali had known Shepard for a long time now, she was used to work with her, Wrex, Liara, Kaidan and Ashley. They were "the old team", as they sometimes called themselves, but teams had to evolve. Legion had been the first to join them after a year and a half of roaming the galaxy for the Council. Tali had wanted to destroy the Geth as soon as she laid eyes on it but Shepard saw an opportunity more than a threat in the machine. She had welcomed it on board of the Normandy SR1 and together they had pursued their hunt of the Geths.

Javik had been the next to join them. The angry Prothean didn't want to follow Shepard at first, he even tried to take over the Normandy to escape and search for others of his kind, but he eventually calmed down and realized he really was the last of his people. Tali would forever remember Javik on his knees, arms low and head down, in front of that cliff on Eden Prime. The sky was red and thunder lightened heavy clouds in the distance. The ever so green grass danced with the wind. Air was filled with thick clouds of pollens from a field nearby. Her filters were almost worn out so the sweet perfume of the flowers had invaded her mask, giving her a lightheaded feeling. A tiny blinking light rose high in the sky – a spaceship leaving Eden Prime.

If Shepard hadn't offered Javik a place on her ship, he would have jumped.

EDI had been the last to join them, only three months ago, after their raid on Cerberus' headquarters. Tali had come around Legion but the second AI on board was very different. EDI had been designed by Humans and it showed. Its "mind" was something completely unique, learning of each interaction with the crew, curious on its own and prone to rewrite its own source code at will. EDI had developed preferences within the crew – she liked Joker the most – and a terrible sense of humor thanks to Shepard. It was part of the crew now, nobody could doubt it, not even Tali.

And then Vakarian and Vega arrived. The Human had proven to be of no interest whatsoever. Kaidan insisted Vega was not a bad guy and they had to give him a chance, but Tali couldn't resolve herself to talk to him. What would they talk about anyway? They had nothing in common – the guy didn't even know how to set up his own computer! But Shepard had asked the crew to be nice so Tali just ignored him most of the time.

Vakarian was another problem. It was obvious he was a very competent soldier and it made everybody uneasy on board. Vakarian had killed nearly six hundred Cerberus agents by himself during the attack on the Citadel a few months ago. Tali had done the maths: that was approximately 1.2 percent of all Cerberus troupes sent on the Citadel taken down by a single C-Sec agent. That was insane, not even Shepard-level insane, and the woman liked to take down whole gangs of mercenaries just with a team of three.

His attitude was also a problem. Turians always were cold and dismissive to Quarians, like most of the species in the galaxy, but Vakarian had made an art of it. They had spent the trip to Omega in Lab 1 and he had barely opened his mouth but to ask very specific questions. Otherwise, he had been reading in silence in a corner, not even stretching once in a while. Tali had suspected him to be a robot. Liara had laughed and assured her Vakarian was one hundred percent organic, minus
the surgical implants. She actually had talked to him a few times – he seemed more at ease around
the Asari than any other crewmate, but maybe Doctor Chakwas. It wasn't shyness though.
Vakarian was just the model for all turian assholes in the known universe, apparently.

He infuriated Tali, to be honest. He had done nothing, he had proven nothing, but Shepard already
liked him. Sure, the woman had a thing for Turians, but that didn't explain everything. They barely
talked to each other and Vakarian's vocabulary was limited to "Yes Commander" and some
variations. How could she tolerate his behavior? How could she trust him already? Omega wasn't
the place to test a new recruit. It was too dangerous, had too many unknown parameters. Shepard
surely had more intel on Vakarian than Tali or any other crew member but she was still taking a big
risk by leading them to the Blue Suns territory with the Turian as the third man of the team. If only
Wrex had been there instead of the Turian!

"Shepard, I need to talk to you," Tali said as they were finding their way through the crowd in a
narrow street.

"What is it, Tali?" Shepard asked without looking at her. Shepard always took point. And the first
bullet.

"I think this team is not adequate for our assault on the Blue Suns."

"I never said we were going to shoot everybody," Shepard laughed. "I'd rather take that Abrams
back without having to use my gun, to be honest."

"Yes, it would be wiser," Tali nodded. "The Turian is an unknown quantity and..."

"Oh he'll be fine," Shepard said over her shoulder. "Right, Vakarian?"

"Yes, Commander," he replied from Tali's back. She gave him a quick, cold look, but he was too
freaking tall and focused on their surrounding to notice.

"He..."

"That's not him I'm concerned about," Shepard interrupted her. "Solus was up to something, I'd bet
the Normandy on it."

"If I may, Commander?" the Turian asked.

"You may, Spectre," Shepard mocked.

"Professor Solus' behavior was strange during your conversation. I think he sent us to the Blue
Suns territory to buy some time."

"How so?" Shepard asked, turning around to walk backward and watch both of them. She didn't
care for the people in the street but her armor and weapons made way for her. People on Omega
had very good instincts: never mess with someone in armor and with guns.

"He said it was safe to talk in that back allay and that he had taken care of Aria T'Loak's
surveillance," Vakarian explained, eyes scanning the crowd. "And he's clearly not afraid of her.
Though he is a problem to her but she can't get rid of him. It means there is a third person in this
equation, someone that connects them."

"Good thinking, Vakarian," Shepard smiled. "I thought about that too. Any idea on who's the third
party?"
Vakarian kept his eyes for a second on a Krogan walking past them, too close for his tastes apparently. "My guest would be someone capable of threatening Aria T'Loak."

"That doesn't leave us with many options, does it?" Shepard joked. She turned around and kept on walking, aiming for a street on their right across a market in open air. Tali noticed a few Quarians selling bits and parts. Her chest felt heavy. "I thought it was some Dalatrass or someone like that," Shepard continued, ignoring the people around her, "but Salarians are not crazy enough to threaten Omega."


"It could be the Council," she said, defiant.

"Unlikely," Vakarian replied while Shepard looked at her over her shoulder, clearly asking what she was doing. Tali asked herself the same question. "It makes no sense for the Council to send us on Omega to get Professor Solus and to threaten Aria T'Loak at the same time to keep him here."

"Unless the Salarian Councilor knows about the plan," Tali insisted.

"It's a theory," Vakarian conceded. Tali stopped in the middle of the way and turned to face the spiky giant. He took a step back.

"A theory?" she repeated. "Oh because of course the Quarian can't be right!" Tali felt a hand on her shoulder and the next second she was spinning on her heels, forced by a very displeased Shepard.

"I need to talk to Tali," the Commander said, pinning Tali down right where she was with her green eyes. Tali felt her heart jump in her chest. Vakarian answered with his usual 'Yes Commander' and left them in the middle of the market. "What is wrong with you, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy?"

Shepard asked. Tali didn't have time to find a descent excuse. "I hope for you it's some sort of quarian PMS because nothing else would excuse your attitude right now. We're on a mission, dammit, now's not the time to bicker with the new guy. I took you with me because I know I can count on you but your little tantrum makes me regret my decision. Take a grip or go back to the Normandy, that's an order."

"Yes, Commander," Tali stammered. It was suddenly too hot in her suit and her stomachs were doing knots. Going back to the ship was very tempting but Shepard would be disappointed. She counted on her. Tali had made a fool of herself over a stupid Turian. So what if she was jealous of him? Ten days on the Normandy and Shepard already listened to him? Shepard never listened to anyone during a mission, her words were final, so why did she give him so much importance? He was nothing more than a crazy killing machine. Even Legion had more emotions than this guy!

"So, what will it be?" Shepard asked. "You coming or you go back?"

"I'm staying, Commander," Tali answered but she wasn't able to look at Shepard in the eyes yet.

"Look," Shepard sighed and she folded her arms, "I told you guys there would be a difference between Vakarian and the rest of the crew. He's a Spectre, my protegee, I have to listen to him because some day he'll be alone in those same streets on his own goddamn mission. I have to make sure he's smart and capable of getting the job done, alright? That means I'll be a lot with him but you know I don't play favorite, Tali. I just have to do it, it's my job right now. Understood?"

Tali nodded, feeling more ashamed than anything else now. Shepard and her universal understanding be damned! That woman was a psychic, there was no other explanation.

"I know it hasn't been easy lately," Shepard continued on a softer voice. "We lost a lot of good
people." Tali's throat tightened and she couldn't help but twiddle her fingers, bad habit of hers when she was nervous. She didn't want to hear about the dead. "Vakarian and Vega will never be replacements because we lost comrades and friends, but they might become new ones given the chance."

"Vega is rude," Tali mumbled. "And he sweats a lot." Shepard laughed.

"Yeah, I noticed, but Ash seems to like it. And I'm sure Vakarian is a good fellow. Not as good looking as Bellicus, that's for sure," Shepard teased, wiggling her eyebrows, "but we have Alenko for that."

Tali smiled at the Fleet and Flotilla reference – and also because she knew Kaidan would blush if he were here. She insisted to watch the movie once in a while with the crew despite the obvious lack of action. The actor playing Bellicus, Theantera Amnomis, had been elected "every girl's dirty fantasy" five years in a row after that movie. Vakarian could not compete with Amnomis in that field and that made Tali grin for good. Perfect Turian, her ass!

"All good now?" Shepard asked, more serious but still out of her Commander persona. "We're supposed to do some stuff."

Tali hesitated but finally said: "I'm sorry, Shepard. I'll keep my big mouth shut."

"I bet Wrex would disagree on that," Shepard smirked as she waved for Vakarian to come back. Tali blushed so hard she had to change the inner temperature of her suit.

Like often, everything turned to Hell in the blink of an eye. Tali heard shields being taken down – not hers, Shepard's – and she then was pushed on the ground by a hundred kilograms of Turian in blue armor. He took her to cover while unsheathing his gun and started shooting, a hand still on Tali's arm. She tried to catch her breath and desperately searched for Shepard but people were running and screaming everywhere. Keelah! Her shields were down and it took three seconds being cover to regenerate, a Hell of a long time during a fight.

"Fuck!" Shepard shouted. Tali could breath again. "Son of a bitch!"

Tali located her behind crates but a bullet swooshed just near her head and she had to duck into cover. Next thing she knew, Vakarian was giving her his gun.

"Cover me," he said and he didn't wait for Tali to be ready. He sprinted to Shepard, using the panicked crowd to elude their attackers. Tali launched a combat drone before risking taking a look at the situation. Half a second out of cover was enough to know the Blue Suns had attacked them, ten of them at least, and more would be coming. They always called for reinforcement.

Tali didn't waste time. She hacked the Blue Suns communications and shut them down – they only had time to call another ten mercs. A flash of light on her omnitool told her her drone had been destroyed. She replaced it immediately by a second one. She needed a few seconds to map the area and determine who she had to take down first. There, high electronic signature, probably an engineer with his drones. The Asari with her barrier up and her rocket launcher was a more urgent matter. Tali redirected her drone to the Asari but her target disappeared from her omnitool as a formidable bang made her jump. Another one immediately followed, and another one a fraction of second later. Sniper rifles. A quick look to Shepard's direction confirmed Tali's intuition. Vakarian had ran to another cover and they were both taking down the Blue Suns with their favorite rifles. A rhythm emerged from the chaos, bam, bam, one shooting while the other reloaded.

The fight was over in less than two minutes despite the little reinforcement. They waited in an
approximate silence for thirty more seconds before calling for clear. Shepard emerged from behind her crates.

"You okay, Tali?"

Tali nodded. Truth to be told, the adrenaline rush was still making her shake a little but she was completely unharmed. Vakarian stood up, assault rifle already in hand, and walked swiftly to the other side of the market to check the dead. Shepard came to Tali to help her get up.

"Let some alive," the Commander shouted over her shoulder as Vakarian finished a wounded merc. "I've got questions to ask." Shepard patted Tali's arm to remove the dust. "Seems like you have a breech in your suit."

Tali checked it immediately but was reassured to see only the outer layer was damaged. "That's okay," she answered. Shepard nodded once then walked to Vakarian, Tali following her on shaky legs. The Turian had spared one of his own for questioning. The wounded had a hole in his shoulder so big Tali could have put her fist in it. He was bleeding blue and had troubles breathing – or just staying alive. Shepard stopped near the dying Turian and pointed her gun at him.

"Where is the Human Daniel Abrams?" she asked, her voice calm and steady.

"Fuck you," the Turian replied before coughing blood.

"Where is the Human Daniel Abrams?" Shepard repeated. This time, her tone was a lot less patient. The Turian seemed to realize it would be a bad idea to not cooperate.

"Who the fuck are you talking about?" he asked. "I know no Human of that name."

Shepard exchanged a quick look with Vakarian. "He's a doctor, Mordin Solus' assistant."

The Turian had an ironic laugh which transformed itself into a vicious cough. Tali could see bubbles forming in the hole in his shoulder. "We've been played, lady," he whispered.

"How so?"

"Solus called us twenty minutes ago," the Turian said, out of breath, "to tell us Commander Shepard was on her way to kill us all." He coughed again. "Asshole."

"Yep," Shepard grunted. She put her gun back on her hip. "Come on, we have a Salarian to find and beat the shit out of." She turned heels and Vakarian followed but the other Turian grabbed his leg.

"Don't let me die like..."

Vakarian shot the merc in the head before he could finish his sentence. The sound made Tali jump, the bang resonating in her whole body. Little pieces and drops of blood rained on her legs.

"Are you done with that, Tali'Zorah?" Vakarian asked, pointing the gun Tali still had in hand. She raised her eyes to his, so high, and shivered. Tali nodded as she gave it to him and he started walking.

"Come on, Tali," Shepard said on a soft tone. She pressed her hand on the small of Tali's back and pushed her away from the cadaver. Her stomachs were upset and her head was spinning. That wasn't the first time she had seen a dead man up close – heck, she killed people herself on a regular basis – but this cold murder gave her nausea. That was barbaric and disrespectful. Inhuman, for lack of a better word.
As they walked past a dead civilian drowning in her own blood, the smell hit Tali hard. She quickly removed her mask and crouched to vomit. This was stupid, she thought as she pushed her thin plait out of the way, the product of her own imagination. Her suit filtered practically all smells possible. Omega was no different from the Normandy or the Citadel for her, but the souvenir of blood, piss and death had taken advantage of her current shaky state of mind.

A soft pat on her shoulder informed her Shepard was trying to comfort her – impossible to take her for someone else due to her odd five fingers. Tali stood slowly, her mask still in hand. She'd probably be sick for a week but that was still better than to barf in her suit.

The Turian was looking at her. Tali felt both embarrassed and angry. Showing their face was a very important moment for a Quarian. It was reserved to family, trusted friends and lovers because it meant something deep and intimate. Removing their mask was a sign of trust, a risk worth taking. Vakarian had no right to see her as she was. He should have looked elsewhere, like he knew how to do all so well, instead of staring like the idiot he was. Tali snorted. She let him stare at her for a long ten seconds, chin up, eyes defiant, before putting her mask on. He could stare all he wanted, that meant nothing to Tali. This had the importance she would give it and she was determined to give it none. She walked past him, taking point, ignoring the dead and the wounded around.

They went straight for Solus' clinic this time, keeping an eye on every suspect movement around. They weren't in Blue Suns territory anymore but that didn't mean the mercenaries wouldn't attack them out of revenge or something less logical. When they arrived at the door, Shepard took point and tension filled the air as a discreet blue shimmer surrounded her. A barrier. This time she wouldn't be caught off guard.

The door opened on a Krogan in heavy armor, shotgun in hand. He had the universal red and white logo of all medical support on his chest, probably just a bodyguard though. He was taller than Vakarian with his hump but that didn't impress Shepard at all.

"What do you want?" the Krogan asked with his low rumbling voice.

"Mordin Solus," Shepard answered.

"He's busy. I can't let you in."

A blue flair lifted the Krogan to the ceiling in a sudden burst of biotic powers and he stayed there, hanging like a puppet, waist down in the metal – or waist up, Tali wasn't sure.

"I didn't ask for your fucking permission," Shepard said as she walked past the legs. Tali looked at the Krogan long enough for Vakarian to press her to go. He didn't touch her but his presence sufficed to make her walk. "Your Krogan needs help," Shepard added as she passed by a human nurse behind a counter.

The clinic was full of activity and Tali shivered. She hated hospitals and such. All those sick people around made her uneasy at best. Quarians' immune system was so weak, even levo-based organic life was a threat to them. It didn't make them sick per se but it upset their organism nonetheless – more like allergies, really. But there were some Turians around and they were dextro-based life forms. Turians from Palaven and other confederated colonies usually were pretty resilient to illness due to the attention the Hierarchy had for all its soldiers, but those on Omega were a whole different story. Most of the miners didn't have enough money to be up to date on their vaccines or to go to the doctor, and the mercenary life wasn't much easier. Still, Turians were rarely sick but the bigger problem with them was their tendency to be sane carriers. They could carry a virus all their life with them and not be affected by it but weaker people, like Quarians, would catch it if they weren't careful.
That's why Tali stayed close to Shepard to avoid any physical contact possible with sick people. She was already in for a week of fever because she had removed her mask, it wasn't necessary to tempt the Devil. They didn't search for Solus long. Shepard went straight for the back of the clinic – people they were looking for always were in the last possible room. The Salarian was talking with a Human in white and red.

"Ah, Commander!" Solus smiled innocently as he turned to face them. "Assistant came back on his own. Couldn't contact you. Unfortunate."

"Is that so?" Shepard replied, all conversational, folding her arms and falling to a hip. Tali took a step back. She knew when Shepard was pissed off. "You couldn't contact me but you called the Blue Suns to tell them I was coming to kill them all. Strange, huh?"

"Normal assumption based on your methods and had correct contact info."

Shepard looked at the Salarian straight in the eyes, not buying his bullshit. Solus could be right, though. Tali knew for sure Shepard wasn't the kind to use the diplomatic method at first but her line of work kind of excluded that option anyway. It was hard to convince mercenaries or Geths to surrender without heavy weapons. Even so, it rarely worked. That didn't mean Shepard didn't know how to do it, she could be very patient and diplomatic when the situation required it, but that wasn't her favorite method.

"You warned them nonetheless," Shepard continued, "and you jeopardized what should have been a rescue mission, putting your assistant's life in danger."

"Like he doesn't do that on a daily basis," the Human grumbled. "Look, everybody is alive so let's forget about it and focus on..."

Shepard was on him in two steps and lifted him by the collar. "Forget about it?" she repeated, her voice angry. "Twenty Blue Suns died and at least as many civilians for nothing. So, no, I won't forget about it." She pushed the man back and turned to Solus. "Way to start our collaboration, Professor. Be ready to leave at noon or go to Hell, I don't care."

"Council needs me," Solus dared to remind her.

"The Council can go fuck themselves," Shepard replied as she turned heels. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"I don't get it," Vakarian said a good ten minutes later as they were walking to the lower levels of Omega. Shepard was still upset, Tali could tell, but the sudden liberty of speech of her protegee made her forget for a second her state of mind. "It took us what, fifty minutes goings and comings, firefight included?"

"Where are you going with that, Vakarian?" Shepard asked over her shoulder.

"We supposed Solus was buying some time but what could have he done in fifty minutes? Omega is a big place, as big as the Citadel, and the transportation system seems to be way worse."

"Maybe he had something to do in his clinic," Shepard shrugged. "I can easily imagine him erasing sensitive information or viruses he was baking in his oven."

Vakarian snorted. "Maybe." He stayed silent for a minute or so. "Can it be related to the third person?"

"Are you basing that on your intuition or facts, Vakarian?"
"It's more an intuition, Commander," he admitted, embarrassed by himself.

"That's alright, intuition can save your ass in many situations," Shepard reassured him. "So?"

"I feel like it's personal."

"Oh?"

"Tali'Zorah was right," Vakarian said and Tali felt her heart jump in her chest, "there are better places to retire in the galaxy. Why choose Omega? Solus doesn't look like the type of man to open a clinic out of generosity. I think he did it to pass the time."

"So this personal third person threatening Aria would be the reason of his presence here?"

"I think so, Commander."

"Interesting," Shepard said but they stopped talking. Tali didn't care much for the reason behind Solus' behavior. She had made up her mind: she didn't like him and would stay as far as possible from him on the Normandy. "That's our next stop," Shepard pointed out. Tali took a look at the shop they were in front of, Magos Armory. She knew that store, Shepard often came here when they stopped by Omega. Magos was an ex-military, ex-con and ex-mercenary. From what Tali knew, the Turian had lost a leg and had it replaced by a prosthesis, which had ended his career. He was now selling weaponry, a common profession on Omega but his reputation and his care for his merchandize assured him a lot of clients, mostly big shots who meant business.

For now his assistant was behind the counter, a young human girl with blond hair in a bum. It was the first time Tali saw her.

"Hi there," Shepard started. "Is Magos around?"

"Who's asking?" the blond snorted, haughtily.

"None of your fucking business, sweetheart," Shepard replied with a predatory smile. "Get me Magos before I put you on my laps to slap your cute little butt." The girl grumbled something but went in the back of the store nonetheless. Shepard turned to them and arched an eyebrow to Vakarian. "What? I don't tolerate attitude from some stupid teenager." Vakarian straightened his back and stood at parade rest, obviously not saying what he had in mind. Shepard gave him a smirk. "Or from a Turian with a stick up his ass."

"From any Turian then," Magos replied as he came to the front shop, wiping his bare hands on an old rag. Tali tried to have a look at his robotic leg but it was hidden under his ample pants. He had a limp though. Magos had a dark skin with a lighter ton on his face and the interior of his arms and hands. He had scars on every visible bit of skin. The worst were on his face, where his tattoos should have been. Tali had asked Nihlus once about Magos and he had told her court-martialed Turians had their clan markings removed with acid. It was a euphemism to say Magos wasn't a pretty Turian. "Shepard!" he greeted her with his arms wide open. "You look like you could use a little relaxation right now."

Tali rolled her eyes. Sex was not a taboo for Turians, they talked about it like it was nothing private or personal. They used intimacy to relax or just to bond with their friends – not fucked up at all. And they also flirted a lot when they were in the mood. Tali had learned from Nihlus that turian men who had tasted human flesh rarely went back to something else. His explanations had made her blush and she had erased it from her memory.

"What about your new girl?" Shepard snorted.
"Her?" Magos asked, throwing his rag on the blond girl. She caught it with her face. "Nah, just a kid who stole from me. I beat the shit out of her to teach her a lesson and, since I needed an assistant, I figured she could repay her debt to society by working for me."

"Is that legal?" Shepard inquired, folding her arms.

"In most of the galaxy, no," Magos shrugged, "but we're on Omega here. Besides, I'm giving her a place to stay, food, a job and knowledge. Slavers would have sold her to the first perv who liked to make pretty girls scream. I'm not that kind of monster."

"Yeah, your noble soul shows all over your face," Shepard joked. Magos grinned, the dim light of the markets caught in his red eyes. Tali shivered. "Anyway," Shepard continued, "see that Turian behind me? He needs the good stuff, and I don't mean your dick."

Magos laughed. He pointed the end of the counter to invite them in the back of his store. "You're lucky kiddo, got new toys recently." Tali would have preferred to stay where she was, mostly because people always accused Quarians of stealing, but Shepard and Vakarian had decided otherwise. It made her a little angry. She wasn't a damsel in distress, not at all. She could take care of herself.

She didn't regret to enter the back of the store the second she stepped in it. The room was three times the size of the front, at least, and it was filled with weapons, armors, tech and crates to the ceiling. Tali watched in awe Magos' stock.

"You should see your face, you two," Shepard mocked, and Tali turned to see Vakarian in the turian version of admiration.

"So," Magos started, "what are you looking for?" Vakarian hesitated a little, gave a quick look to Shepard but she didn't help him out.

"I'm a decent sniper," Vakarian said. Shepard snorted.

"A decent good or a decent bad?" Magos asked.

"He took down ten Blue Suns with perfect headshots in two minutes an hour ago without even breaking a sweat," Shepard intervened. "He's more than good."

"Actually, Commander," Vakarian corrected, his back as straight as possible and eyes on the wall, "I took thirteen out of our twenty targets."

"Oh if you want to count, we'll count," Shepard assured him, a little upset maybe. Magos laughed.

"How did you end up with this one?" the merchant asked. "He reeks of the Hierarchy."

"My crew wouldn't have been complete without a Turian," Shepard shrugged. "Now, could you actually sell him some stuff? I ain't got all day."

"Alright, alright," Magos tempered with a smile. "Come on kiddo, I think I have the perfect sniper rifle for you."

The Turians went to a shelf in a corner on the right and Tali sighed. She had all the weapons she could dream of already and she doubted Magos would have any Geth tech around. It wasn't common to find pieces of their robotic bodies, even in the Terminus Systems. If you wanted some, you had to hunt them down, literally.
"Can you take us to the Gardens after?" Shepard asked in a low voice. "I'd like to buy fresh food for you two."

"Sure," Tali replied. "Wait, is that why you took me with you?"

"Yep."

"Thanks, Shepard," Tali mumbled. "At least you gave me the opportunity to look like a total idiot in front of the new guy."

"It's not a competition, Tali," Shepard reminded her. Tali shrugged and focused on a thermal scope, ignoring the Commander for a while. It took less than ten minutes for the two geeks to come back. Shepard whistled, a sign of admiration for Humans if Tali had understood correctly. "N7 Valiant, good stuff you got there indeed, Magos. But I'm curious, where did you get it?"

"Some Human sold it to me a week ago," Magos replied, carrying the rifle, followed by a Vakarian with sparkles in his eyes. He seemed in love already with his new toy.

"What Human?" Shepard asked, her tone definitively serious. It took a second to Tali to understand why. N7 was the name of an Alliance military program. Words said it was similar to the turian Spectre training program, which was known in all the galaxy for its difficulty and high death rate. Few Humans had the honor of wearing the N7 logo on their chest. Shepard was the only woman to ever had graduated from this training. "Not everybody can have this kind of weapon," she insisted.

"What do I know?" Magos shrugged. "You all look the same to me anyway." Shepard frowned and the merchant stopped avoiding the question. "Might have been a tall man with dark skin and long, messy and thick stuff on the head."

"Dread locks?"

"It looked dirty," Magos insisted, "that's all I know. You know him?"

"Might, but you described a quarter of Earth population," Shepard shrugged. "I guess the serial number has been erased?"

"Yeah but it won't be a problem for a Spectre and her team, you can carry whatever weapon you want in Council space."

"N7 weapons are registered to a single user," Shepard explained. "Anyway, that's a problem for another time. How much for the toy?"

"Fifteen thousands," Tali saw Vakarian's mandible open wide in surprise and shock. It probably was half the annual salary of a C-Sec officer like him.

"Come on," Shepard smiled, "make him a better offer than that. I bet you didn't even pay five thousands for this rifle anyway."

"How much I paid the seller is none of your business," Magos replied. "Fourteen thousands."

"Well," Vakarian intervened, scratching his scar, "my Mantis is still in very good shape so...

"We're not leaving without that rifle, Vakarian," Shepard told him. "Keep your gun and give the rest to Magos in exchange for the Valiant."

"What will I do with C-Sec standard artillery?" Magos asked. "It's crap not even good for Asaris."
"Sell it to wannabes," Shepard shrugged. "I don't know, not my problem." Magos sighed and turned to Vakarian.

"You're lucky I owe the lady a lot, kiddo. Give me your crap."

"I'd rather keep my Mantis," Vakarian said. Shepard and Magos both frowned. "It's a very good rifle," Vakarian insisted, "and I customized this one for years. It's more efficient than any other Mantis I've had my hand on." Shepard and Magos exchanged a look.

"Sentimental value," they said in unison. If Turians could have blushed, Vakarian would have turned blue head to toe.

"Alright," Magos mumbled. "But that'll be five thousands and that's my final offer."

"Huh," Vakarian hesitated.

"Fine!" Shepard surrendered, hands up in the air. "I'll pay! But you owe me five Ks and an open tab during the next shore leave, Vakarian." He nodded vigorously, grateful. Poor guy, Tali thought. He obviously didn't know Shepard could drink as much as a Krogan.

They were waving goodbye to Magos a few minutes later, the Valiant already on Vakarian's back. The Turian looked strange with his two sniper rifles and his gun but he didn't seem to care. If Tali hadn't known better, she'd have said he was happy. A good day for him, even if he had killed thirteen guys not two hours ago – he was definitely a psycho.

Shepard made them stop in a clothing shop on their way to the Gardens. Vakarian bought a few civvies without arguing. He did so mechanically, barely checking the size or the price. He spent a little more than a hundred, which represented a big part of his savings apparently, but he didn't complain nor say a word about it. Once the clothes obtained, Tali took the lead and they went down to the Ishkithor district of Omega, where most of the Quarians of the station lived – that didn't make a lot of people but it kind of was a big quarian cluster nonetheless. Most of them were on their pilgrimage, working in the Gardens to make money for a ticket to somewhere more welcoming than Omega, but some had decided to actually stay and live on the station. The banished weren't welcome in the community though. They never would.

The Gardens were exactly what their name supposed they would be: gardens, immense and full of life, with fresh air, bright light, and water running in irrigation canals between the cultures. Quarians had put money aside for decades to buy this place and their collective effort didn't stop there. Each member of the community had to bring a new species of comestible plant to the Gardens to be welcome. Most of the flora was from the Flotilla, so originally from Rannoch, but you could also find indigenous plants from Palaven and other turian colonies. The Gardens were the vastest collection of edible dextro plants in the Terminus Systems. Tali loved this place, it reminded her of home. And by the look on Vakarian's, he surely would come to appreciate it.

"Close your mouth, Vakarian," Shepard teased. The Turian looked embarrassed for a second before returning back to his frigid self. "My God, it's like you never saw a kitchen garden of all your life."

"It's, huh, the case, Commander," Vakarian admitted, shifting his weight from one foot to another. "I lived in Cipritine before boot camp and my academic records oriented me to engineering so..."

"Never learned how to recognize edible plants?" Shepard asked. Vakarian's mandibles tightened. "Isn't it mandatory for Turians?" she insisted, clearly playful.

"I was eight," he defended himself, "and I never had to use it ever since."
"Wow," Shepard laughed, "just, wow. I'm glad I won't have to count on you to find me food in a
desperate situation." Vakarian frowned. Shepard laughed even more, then poked him with her fist
on his chest. "Come on, let's get you something nice. Mama's buying."

Tali snorted as Vakarian frowned even more. At least he was entertaining when he defrosted a
little, there was that. He might not even be a desperate case, Tali thought as she lead the way
through the alleys of the Gardens.

TBC
Shepard put all the groceries she was carrying on the counter of the small kitchen. Gardner looked at her, Tali and Vakarian, as loaded as she had been, with a little despair in his eyes.

"That's a lot of stuff I don't know how to cook," the Sergeant admitted.

"I'm sure Tali and Vakarian will give you some tips," Shepard said with a mocking smile for the Turian. "You know how to cook, right?"

"I survived on my own for four years," he replied with a look that clearly indicated surviving had proven to be difficult. Shepard forced a little on her laugh. It seemed she had found the right buttons to make him talk and act like a normal person: firefights and a bit of provocation. It didn't last long though. Gardner looked at Vakarian as if he was a completely different Turian and Vakarian lost the beginning of his newly acquired confidence to speak with more liberty. Shepard saw all her efforts go to waste. He became again the textbook Turian soldier he used as a shield, straightening his back so much Shepard was sure it hurt. "Where will the debrief take place, Commander?"

"I wasn't planing on having one for today." Shepard shrugged. "But if you insist: Solus fucked us good, we were unprepared and everything went to Hell, but you did good, Vakarian. I was pretty impressed by your efficiency and your care for your team. That, that really surprised me considering your behavior during the attack on the Citadel. Good job and dismiss." She waved him to go away. Vakarian hesitated for a second. "Anything on your mind?"

"No, Commander." He saluted her the turian way and headed for the elevator. Shepard sighed. One step forward, two steps back. She will eventually be tired of this little tango of theirs. She had to find a way to relax the guy.

"You just didn't want him to hear what you're going to tell me, didn't you?" Tali asked, a bit of anxiety and remorse spicing her voice. Shepard gave a look to Gardner already busy sorting the food and decided it was better to talk to Tali in private. She didn't have much to tell her though, she already told her a lot earlier.

"Not here," Shepard approved. They walked to the elevator and caught up on Vakarian. Turians didn't make any difference between men and women, therefore chivalry wasn't part of their habits. He entered the elevator first and asked then where they were going. "Fourth deck, please," Shepard asked him as Tali was staring at Vakarian. To the contrary, Quarians had a very gendered society and men were supposed to care for the women, who had the upper hand in everything. Most men on the Normandy were nice enough to give Tali little attentions, like letting her walk first in the elevator, even if they weren't necessarily aware of quarian societal rules. No wonder she had been upset by Vakarian from the moment he had stepped in the ship.

Shepard and Tali were walking to the Quarian's quarters on fourth deck a couple of seconds later. Shepard didn't want to enter, not still in armor and before a very long and meticulous shower, so she stopped before the door. Tali twiddled her fingers.

"I'll tell you exactly what I told Vakarian when he joined us," Shepard started, folding her arms.
"The Normandy is a small ship with a very small crew and we don't have the luxury to get on each other's nerves so I highly recommend you to find a way to not jump at his throat every time you think he said something offensive." Tali wanted to defend herself but Shepard didn't let her interrupt her. "Keep in mind Bakarian barely interacted with Quarians, even on the Citadel, and he probably knows nothing of your culture. So talk to him, explain him what he can or cannot do around you if you think it's necessary. But remember about his own culture and way of seeing the world. It's important too."

"You say that because you..." Tali stopped, probably biting her tongue and regretting to have spoken so fast.

"Because I?" Shepard asked, arching an eyebrow. She knew where this was going but she wanted Tali to take responsibility for her words.

"You always root for the Turians," Tali mumbled, eyes low.

"Call me a Commie but I happen to like their society," Shepard replied, repositioning her breastplate. Damn that thing was heavy. "Well, most of it." Their attitude towards biotics, for example. Or Humans. "I'm not saying they are right and Quarians are wrong, Tali. Both systems are valid. They may seem really different but there's gotta be a way to make both work here."

"Tell him that," Tali snorted.

"I will and I want you both to make efforts." Tali turned her head a little. Shepard frowned. "I'm asking nicely now, I might not be so sympathetic in the future. Keep that in mind, Tali'Zorah Vas Normandy."

"Aye, aye, Commander," Tali replied, straightening her back. Shepard nodded and walked to the elevator as the Quarian entered her quarters. Vakarian was still in the shuttle bay when Shepard arrived. He was at Steve's workbench, in front of his new toy. Shepard smiled a little. Maybe he would ask permission to take it to his quarters later.

"Anything to repair?" Steve asked as he walked to her.

"Nope, not this time," Shepard smiled. "We got lucky, I think." She started to remove her armor and Steve gave her a hand. The shuttle bay was still open and Javik was busy receiving and counting crates with Alenko and Ashley's help. "Liara didn't come back yet?"

"No, not yet." Shepard frowned. "Don't worry," Steve reassured her. "She's with Wrex. What could possibly go wrong?"

"You want a list in alphabetical order or in statistically-most-likely-to-happen order?"

Steve laughed as he took her armor to his workbench to clean it up later. Vakarian noticed him and turned his head around. Shepard smiled. He had zoned out because of his new toy – that was cute but damn, Spectres weren't supposed to be cute. She removed her boots and walked bare feet to him to lean on the workbench. "You gonna name it?" she asked, playful.

Vakarian gave a quick look around before talking to her in a low voice. "Do I have to?"

"No," Shepard laughed, "no you don't." Vakarian seemed both relieved and disappointed.

"Regarding the serial number," he said, "I think I can find it." He hesitated a second, looking at Shepard before lowering his eyes. "The previous owner of this weapon was from the same military group than you and you seemed concerned about them so, I thought I could give it a try."
"We're not a group per se," Shepard shrugged. Turians were pretty attached to their platoons. Vakarian had transposed the feeling to her. She decided it was a good sign. "We just graduated from the same program, the ICT. There isn't much comradely between us, we're too goddamned independent for that, trained to be super one-man badass black ops. Kind of nuts, each in our own way, to be honest." She sighed and noticed Javik coming her way with a datapad in hand. "But, yeah, I wouldn't mind knowing who's the previous owner." Magos description wasn't precise enough to give her a clear idea of who sold him the rifle, plus anybody could have brought the weapon to the merchant, so there was no way she could put a name on that guy yet. Still, she was concerned. If N7 artillery was sold in the Terminus Systems, she wouldn't hear the end of it from the Alliance.

"I'll do my best, Commander," Vakarian assured her.

Shepard smiled while Javik arrived. He gave her the datapad, keeping an eye on Vakarian – Protheans could move their four eyes separately, which was pretty creepy, but gave them a fantastic field of vision. If he hadn't asked for privacy to speak to her, it meant he had info on Solus. It also meant Javik was somehow assisting Vakarian in his Spectre job. He would rant about it later. Helping Shepard was his job but he had no obligation towards her protegee.

"Everything's alright?" she asked as she scrolled through the data.

"The Salarian wanted to dissect me," Javik frowned. Wouldn't be the first, Shepard thought. "I told him he could try, then threw a crate through a wall of the docks." He seemed pretty pleased with himself, so much Shepard couldn't help but smile. Javik's biotics could be terrifying.

"I'll talk to Solus about the 'no dissecting the crew' closure of his contract later," Shepard assured him. Javik frowned again. "I know you can kick his butt, that's not the problem. I just don't trust the guy and he's the kind to create deadly accidents around him, I think."

"He can try that too," Javik smiled, showing two lines of sharp little teeth. Shepard had learned to be careful around the Prothean when he was smiling like that. She would have to ask EDI to inform her each time Javik and Solus were on the same deck, just in case. Javik regained some seriousness. "You may want to take a look at the surveillance footage, Commander," he told her in a low voice.

Shepard arched an eyebrow – ah, the good part! – and loaded a video of a corridor leading to the ship, showing it to Vakarian at the same occasion. EDI took great care of the security of the Normandy, the home of her mind, and she usually infiltrated the networks around to keep an eye on everything. She was a fantastic hacker. Good thing the AI was not of the evil kind.

The video showed Solus talking to his assistant, crates all around them. They suddenly turned to the end of the corridor as an Asari ran to Solus. She was tall and slender, pale skin for her kind, in tears. Solus opened his arms and she found refuge in it, hugging him desperately, her wet eyes pleading. The assistant left. There was no sound on the footage so Shepard could only imagine what they were talking about but it was clear this was the third person of the equation. Solus stroked her head with infinite care, whispering soft words in her ear for long minutes. Shepard looked at Javik and thanked him. The Prothean nodded and went back to the front of the shuttle bay without a word.

"She is very young," Vakarian observed. He had understood too.

If the fate of a whole species wouldn't have been on the line, Shepard may have felt conflicted about what she was taking from Solus, but the Salarian had chosen on his own to follow her in what would surely be his last trip.
"That doesn't change much," Shepard said. "He didn't ask to take her with us, that means she is less important than his new job. He's committed to the cause. Might be a good thing for us." Vakarian nodded. "I just hope the girl won't be a problem for Aria, otherwise she'll be a pain in the ass next time I'm on Omega." Shepard frowned at that thought. She had to keep Aria in her friends list, for her job and her personal safety. She knew too much about Omega's queen to be allowed to walk away if things got bad between them. "That's a problem for another time," she sighed. "For now, all I care about is a shower, I reek." Shepard patted Vakarian on the shoulder, a gesture that startled him a little. "That reminds me, got some orders for you: take the rest of the day off, eat, sleep and be here tomorrow morning at four thirty. I have yet to see what you are capable of in hand to hand combat."

The sparkle in his eyes told her he knew he was good but he wouldn't risk to be cocky in front of his superior. Shepard replied with a smile of her own as she walked away. She yelled to Javik to take care of the rest for the next thirty minutes and to call her when they would be ready to go, then went straight for her cabin. She locked the door before removing her clothes, throwing them on the pile she had to take care of before long, and jumped in the shower. The water was recycled in the ship so she could virtually stay forever there but Shepard kept the shower short. Military life had taught her to be quick and efficient. Besides, they were still docked on Omega. Shit could happen any second.

Once dried and in her uniform, she still had fifteen minutes to spare. Sighing, Shepard sat at her desk and opened her terminal to read her emails. Between reports of mercenaries activities, Anderson was asking how things were going with the new recruits. She replied everybody was still alive, even if she didn't know if Liara had came back yet with Wrex and Vega. A mail from Hackett gave her news about Udina and some politicians. Shepard wasn't a big fan of politics but she had to keep an eye on what was going on. She only was a pawn in this game and she had to play smart to stay alive till the end.

She hesitated a second but eventually opened a new mail and addressed it to Anderson.

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**Thought you'd want to know about this**

**From:** Commander J. Shepard, Alliance Normandy SR-2

**Confidentiality Classification:** XB-PRIME

Went shopping for guns with Baby-Spectre while on Omega and found a N7 Valiant at Magos Armory. Serial number erased but BBS says he'll give it a try. The guy has high engineering training, I bet he can find it. Magos told me a tall black guy with messy hair (dread locks?) sold him the rifle a week ago. The seller might not be N7 but who knows. I'll keep you posted but please keep it for you. I don't want to alert everybody over a stupid sniper rifle.

She hit "Send" before she could regret it and shut her computer off. She keyed on her desk a second before starting her computer again.

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**Hey**

**From:** Commander J. Shepard, Alliance Normandy SR-2

*I'm sorry for today. Solus has to go with me but I'll make sure to keep him alive and hop to Omega*
Shepard hesitated longer before sending this one but did it nonetheless. She walked to her bed, fell on it head first and stayed like that until Javik called.

Shepard waited for the Normandy to take some distance from Omega before summoning the crew, in CIC this time. Vakarian was still in armor, which meant Steve probably dragged him from the shuttle bay to the second deck. Liara had came back with Wrex and Vega. The latest had a black eye and a split lip, courtesy of the good Doctor T'Soni. Wrex had told Shepard the story: they were going through the list without a problem and Vega had been talkative but otherwise quiet, respecting Shepard's orders so far. He had explained he had trouble remembering names so he had to give nicknames to people. Wrex was Grumpy Red and Liara Pretty Azure. She had turned black instantaneously and punched him in the face. Shepard had laughed with Wrex at Vega's expense. At least now the lieutenant would know "azure" was slang for Asaris' private parts.

Shepard introduced the crew to Solus, repeating names, ranks and responsibilities like ten days earlier, which reminded her she hadn't find a daily occupation for Vakarian yet. Something related to engineering and weapons, probably.

Solus didn't say a word about Legion or EDI.

"Crew, this is Professor Mordin Solus, specialized in genetic but he also worked on diseases transmission, including between species, and on species behavior." Solus turned a little to look at her, surprised. Oh yes, fucker, Shepard thought, I know about all of your classified dirty work. She continued, as innocent as the newborn lamb. "He's ex-STG, as you can imagine, and the Council wants him to work on a cure for the genophage, based on the work of his former assistant, which I found a couple of years ago on Tuchanka." Wrex cleared his throat, or throats, Shepard wasn't sure. "With Wrex," she added, smiling at the Krogan, "because I can't tie my lasses without him."

"Damn right you can't," the mercenary snorted. Wrex loved to play the alpha male. As long as he followed her orders in missions, Shepard didn't care.

"But," Shepard continued, "this operation is top secret so let it be known I recruited Solus by Council order to study the potential of multi-species crews like mine. I'll send you all the details later. Learn them and never deviate from them in any circumstances." Vakarian gave a quick look to Alenko and Vega. Fucking Turian. "I trust you all," she said, speaking louder to catch Vakarian's attention, "and I know no one will fail me. You are the Normandy's crew, my crew, my team." She looked at each of them in the eyes, locking hers into Vakarian's in the end, making the Turian shift his weight from one foot to another. Dance my pretty, Shepard thought. It was because of him she had to give a motivation speech. She hated motivation speech. "I'll say it once and for all: the Krogans and galactic peace depend on us. This mission is crucial, people, so don't be stupid and screw it up, understood?" All the crew replied at once, some with a 'yes, Commander', others with the classic 'aye, aye, Commander', one or two even daring to call her by her name. Shepard felt pride warm up her chest. She couldn't help but have a thought for all the people who had told her she was nothing and would do nothing of her life. Look at me now, she thought, chin up.

It took her less than a second to bottle up that feeling again and to regain a more professional attitude. Self-gratification would be for another time.

"Anyway," she added, "let's welcome Professor Solus on board and it's my duty as Commander of the Normandy to remind everybody dissection of a fellow crew member is strictly prohibited, even in the name of Science." She looked at the Salarian. "Accidental deaths will not be tolerated either."
Solus replied with a smart little smile – he was amused. Liara rose her hand. "I have data on Javik if you're interested, Professor." Javik snorted. Shepard knew Liara had tricked Javik more than once to collect her data – she even stole some of his dirty clothes to find DNA.

"Much appreciated," the Salarian nodded, "but cure to the genophage priority number one."

"Alright," Shepard said. "I asked Joker earlier to take us to Lorek, a planet in the Fathar system, nearby. There is an Eclipse outpost there and we'll take it down tomorrow. Alenko, you'll come with me and Vakarian."

"Aye, aye, Commander," the lieutenant replied, back straight and chin up. Wrex mumbled something about the fucking Turian who took all the fun from him. Vakarian ignored him brilliantly. Truth to be told, Shepard would have liked to go planet-side with Wrex because the old grumpy Krogan was just a delight on the battlefield. They worked wonderfully together but she needed someone less explosive to test Vakarian in a real planed mission. Alenko was all professional, head clear, quiet and cool at all time. If things turned ugly, he would be a solid example to follow for Vakarian, whereas Wrex would just swear a lot and destroy everything around him.

"Dismiss," Shepard ordered but quickly added: "I swear to God Vakarian, if you're going back to work on your new toy, I'll make you free-fall to our target from orbit tomorrow." Vakarian opened his eyes wide as the others returned to their occupations, some of them laughing at the new Spectre's expense. Shepard didn't wait for his answer. She caught on Solus at the door of Lab 2. "A word, Professor," she said and she wasn't asking. Solus knew it. He smiled at her and opened the door for her.

Lab 2 was actually composed of two rooms, one small connecting to CIC and the main one, larger and longer. Solus was using both, as it was intended. The first room was already full like an egg, crates and machines wrapped in plastic from ground to the ceiling. Only a small passage was still free. The main room was also packed but its proportions gave it a slightly less claustrophobic atmosphere. There was one of those awful camp bed in the far end of the room. Solus apparently planned to stay in Lab 2 a lot. Shepard didn't care much about that. She had supposed he would sleep in crew quarters, lots of bed were still empty, but it may be for the better. Salarians didn't sleep much, one to two hours per day, and not even all at once. He would have disrupted the rest of the crew with his comings and goings.

"Do you need an assistant, Professor?" Shepard asked. The mission came first, she repeated herself like a mantra. She'd give him a piece of her mind after. "I don't have anyone qualified on board for your kind of work, but some members of my team, like Doctor Chakwas, are capable of filling the position while we find someone more suitable." Someone Tevos and Spartacus would choose with great care.

"Always worked better alone," Solus replied, unwrapping a machine that looked like a microscope and putting in on a workbench on the right side of the lab.

"You worked on the genophage 2.0 with a team," Shepard reminded him.

"Yes but had to for studying impact of new genophage on krogan population. Took us years. Process not efficient. Have no time for a team."

"Alright," Shepard shrugged. "Let me know if you need someone at some point. You will have to pass your findings to someone else, I suppose." Because you're old and you're gonna die, she wanted to sing-song but that would have been childish and not professional at all. That would be for later and in private, probably after a few drinks to have an excuse.
"Yes," Shepard replied sincerely. He did ask anyway. Might as well use the opportunity. "I built my team on capacities and trust," she explained. "I have to be sure a member of my crew won't put a bullet in the back of my head when I'm not expecting it, or send me to a trap."

"Understandable," Solus said, unpacking another machine, much smaller. It looked like a microwave oven. "Have trouble trusting people because of childhood. Very common for orphans."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Yeah, as if nobody ever tried that on me, Professor. Everybody thinks speaking of my past will get me angry or whatever but it won't work, I can assure you that."

"Not a tentative to intimidate you by knowledge of your private life," Solus assured, "simple statement. Trust issues in orphans common, nothing more, nothing less." Shepard stared at him. "Although, do know about your past."

"Of course," Shepard smirked. "A guy like you has to know."

"Knowledge is power."

"On that we can agree. And speaking of, I know about your daughter." Solus ticked and lost his affable smile. Shepard snorted. "Don't worry, your secret is safe with me, Professor. I won't even use that info against you. Not my style."

"Gun to the head more efficient," Solus confirmed, bitter. "Knew that by reading your dossier. No threats on third party. Have similar methods."

"So I've heard." Shepard made a big deal out of sighing. "We're pretty much alike, Professor. Sure, I can't compete with you on the brain-side but we're both smart nonetheless, ruthless, focused on our goals and terribly good at what we do. We can make good work together, given the chance."

"Agreed," Solus nodded, busy with Petri dishes. "Chances of success higher if both come to peace. No need for threats, insinuations or manipulation." Shepard smirked. "Counter-productive even."

"Very much." She lifted a hand. "But trust will come in time, it's stupid to force it. Let's get to know each other if we feel like it and see where our collaboration goes."

"Sounds reasonable." Solus put down the shiny sharp things he was unpacking and turned to Shepard. He presented his hand to her. "To our collaboration."

Shepard took his hand and shook it. "Let me know if you need anything."

"Will notify you."

Shepard went straight for the communication room once the door closed. She asked EDI to make sure nobody would spy on her, then called Councilor Tevos. Spectres had direct access to the Council, they didn't need to ask for a call or a meeting. They just had to be careful about the time – Sparatus could be really pissed off if awaken in the middle of the night. Shepard had kept time on board the Normandy based on the Citadel, to make things easier with her bosses. That meant Hackett and Anderson sometimes woke her up at indecent hours but she wasn't a big sleeper anyway. Due to faster than light speed, time on board passed slower than on the Citadel, but the ship corrected time and date after each jump. The phenomena was even worst within the relay network. Shepard had witnessed some crazy shit while traveling between two relays, like objects spinning like crazy or ghost-like figures disappearing into the walls. Thanks God, the Normandy was a state of the art spaceship and those phenomena were extremely rare on board, unlike on less
advanced Alliance frigates. It could be spooky and she knew more than one Marine who had nervous breakdowns because of that.

"Spectre Shepard," Councilor Tevos saluted as her hologram appeared in the quantum entanglement communication device. Shepard was damn glad her new Normandy was equipped with that machine. She couldn't stand the lag during normal calls. But it still was a pretty experimental communication system and its functioning coasts were terrifying. Plus, it required a lot of energy. The Normandy's kinetic barriers were reduced to thirty percents when someone used that device. Each call had to be short and really important.

"We have Solus on board, Councilor," Shepard informed Tevos. She couldn't help but be at parade rest. Tevos had no military rank whatsoever, she had dedicated all her very long life to politic, but she still was one of the three most powerful persons in the galaxy. "I'll send you my report shortly."

"Good," Tevos nodded, "but you can't possibly call me just to tell me that."

"No, ma'am," Shepard confirmed. "We both know this mission is critical, ma'am. My head is on the line if the Saliarians make you choose between them and the Krogans." She would be accused to have plotted a Krogan invasion or something like that if things turned that bad. Shepard knew it. She was nothing but a fuse to preserve the Council's power.

"It's a risk you were willing to take, Spectre."

"And I still am, ma'am, but the equation changed when you put Vakarian under my command." Tevos' eyes glowed slightly, even in their holographic form. Asaris' eyes were much did. It could be scary for those who didn't have a clue about alien biology. Frankly, Shepard had jumped to the ceiling the first time she had encountered Liara at night in the mess. "I'd like to keep his name out of my reports, ma'am," Shepard asked. "His career just started, he deserves a chance."

"I will ask Sparatus his opinion on the subject," Tevos nodded, "and contact you soon. Please, await for our decision before sending us your report."

"Yes ma'am," Shepard barked, back straight and eyes still. She shut the communication off after the necessary salutations and headed for the cockpit.

She knew she could already strike Vakarian's name out of all her future reports on the cure of the genophage. Sparatus would never allow one of his precious turian Spectres' reputation to be dragged into the mud. Turians had the highest count in Spectres' ranks, representing more than fifty percents of the profession just by themselves. They were pretty damn proud of it and had troubles admitting one of them had failed the Council, even during super secret operations that no one would ever admit existed. It happened though. Turians also had the highest count of rogue Spectres.

Their society was pretty rigid and well ordored. Each had a place and a role, a rank that clearly defined the responsibilities of an individual. The only Turians without someone above their head were the Primarchs, who had power over whole planets. Otherwise, each Turian knew how to behave thanks to their rank and peers. Turians also were a very social species. They needed their kind around them, their friends, family, superiors and subordinates to support one another. Big decisions in one's life were never taken alone, they were the result of consultations and discussions – heck, they even decided who to have children with like that, all for the good of their society.

Nomination to Spectre was really destabilizing for a Turian. Suddenly, they were above the law and out of their social order. They had no marks whatsoever in a cold and empty galaxy. They had to take decisions on their own, to travel alone most of the time and to overcome the lack of social
contacts. It was not a surprise some turian Spectres went completely nuts over the years.

The mentor/protegee system had been created to avoid this particular problem. The "buddy system", as Shepard called it, had actually been imported from turian culture. They very much liked to know who had a higher rank than whom, they needed it to define all their relationships. There always was a dominant/dominated dynamic within a relation, even between friends, but not necessarily in all aspect of their relation. For example, in a heterosexual family cell, the man could have a higher rank than his wife, which gave him the dominant role in society, but still be "dominated" by her in their private life because she simply was a better accountant than him, or has more personality. That dynamic tended to be fixed in time but it could also vary and shift. Still, it was always there.

Shepard had came to think the buddy system was nothing less than a safety net for turian Spectres, a way to keep them connected to someone they could rely on. It also served to teach Turians how to take a step back and see the big picture, how to work and think on their own. As a species, they were a fantastic armed force, the biggest and most powerful of the galaxy – for now – but they seriously lacked good old common sense as individuals. That's why people like Vakarian were good candidates for the Spectres. He was independent and capable of thinking on his own, to decide what to do at critical times. He still needed a mentor but it was to keep him grounded more than anything. Being independent was a good thing but being too independent could rapidly become a problem, especially from the Hierarchy's point of view.

EDI was with Joker in the cockpit, like often when she didn't have anything else to do. Shepard made sure the door was closed behind her before talking – this thing tended to stay open because of motion detectors.

"EDI, darling, I want you to keep an eye on Solus."

"I thought you'd ask me that, Shepard," the AI replied from her sit without moving, "and I took the liberty of starting the surveillance protocols as soon as Professor Solus came on board."

"I'm seriously considering asking you to marry me, EDI," Shepard said. She just loved the AI and her dedication to her work. EDI was just the most advanced weapon in the galaxy. Her firepower may not have been much but she was terribly smart and quick to learn. Decryption never took her long and she could hack anything within seconds without even thinking about it. And she had acquired a witty personality in the past months, that helped too.

"I'm flattered, Shepard," the AI smiled, turning her head a little to make eye contact, "but our love is doomed."

"Mostly because none of you has a dick," Joker snorted before Shepard could play the desperate girl in love. He sighed. "But, I guess I can sacrifice my well-being and be your devoted servant when you'd need a good hump. I'm that dedicated to my commander."

"How noble of you," Shepard smirked, "but I'd crush your pelvis."

"And I his face," EDI added. Shepard laughed so much it took her two whole minutes to regain a semblance of seriousness. Joker laughed with her and a smile grew on EDI's metallic lips.

"Oh damn, I needed that," Shepard admitted, wiping off her face from tears. "Thanks guys."

"You're welcome, Commander," Joker smiled. "But I'm serious about my dick being yours."

"I don't fuck my crew, Lieutenant," Shepard reminded him, rubbing his head through his beloved
cap. She knew he was joking. "It isn't professional."

"Well, a very drunk Shepard once told me I was her friend, sooooo..." the pilot teased, removing shortly his cap to put his hair back in order.

"Must be another Shepard because I don't get drunk," she snorted.

"Like Hell you do," Joker laughed. "By the way, with three new guys on board, we should do a little mingling, don't you think?"

"I guess," Shepard shrugged. "I doubt Vakarian and Solus will magically open themselves, talk and make friends if we just ask them to, but we can try."

"Alcohol could provide some help," EDI informed, "and it is socially accepted to use liquors and spirits either as a pretext or an excuse to behave with more liberty, therefore easing the creation of links between individual."

"Or," Joker intervened, "you can just say being wasted is exactly what Baby Spectre and Doctor Doom need to get the stick up their asses out."

"Noted," EDI confirmed, "but lubricant would be of greater help in case of a foreign object stuck in an anatomical nook. Also, I have to point out that Turians and Salararians don't have asses but cloacae, Jeff." Joker stared at the android for several seconds, not sure if she was messing with him or dead serious. He shrugged and returned his attention to his shiny console. "If I may, Commander," EDI continued, "I noticed your insistence on Spectre Vakarian's need to rest."

"He's in the cargo bay, isn't he?" Shepard sighed.

"He is. May I remind him your orders?"

"I'll go. I need to talk to him anyway."

"What did he do?" Joker asked. "I thought you were pretty pleased with him today."

"The speech I gave earlier about my crew, my team, blah blah blah?"

"Yeah?"

"It was because of him," Shepard mumbled. "He can't grasp the concept of trust in a team, apparently."

"Well, to be fair, you did break his ribs on day two," Joker reminded her. "So much for trusting the team."

"I didn't break anything," Shepard grunted, "his ribs were just cracked."

"Tomatoes, tomatoes." Joker moved his cap up to scratch his forehead. "You know, I wasn't around when you became a Spectre under Nihlus' command but I bet he didn't tell you everything at first. Must have taken some time, right?" Shepard sighed. She had to admit Joker was right. It had taken months for her and Nihlus to trust each other. "Besides, you have your team, your habits, you know the ship and your people, heck, even their habits!" Joker continued. "But he has nothing of that. To him, we're pretty much all strangers. He may trust you because you're his mentor and all that shit, but the rest of the crew? He only has your word on our loyalty." He spun his chair as Shepard thought about the last ten days. She had barely talked to him. "But don't worry," the pilot smiled. "Sure enough he'll join the Cult of Shepard. They all do, eventually."
She rolled her eyes. Saren had invented that to insult her but Joker had decided to use it in a positive way. Fortunately, his altar for her sake had perished with the previous Normandy and nobody had dared make another one. Yet.

"Thanks, Jeff," Shepard said before turning heels. She had needed that too.

"Always a pleasure."

She went straight for the elevator, asking Traynor on the way to send the details about Solus' official reason to be on board, then to the cargo bay. Shepard's ears popped when the doors open. The pressure in fifth deck wasn't easy to maintain due to its size and there often was a difference between the shuttle bay and the rest of the ship when they were using the relay network or traveling at FTL speed. The noise was also something, as if iron cables whipped the hull. Shepard hated that noise, even if she knew the Normandy wouldn't suddenly break in half and kill them all in the void of space. She shivered, just thinking about it. God, she hated deep space.

Vakarian was not at the workbench but actually with Steve, crooked over one of the Kodiak's thrusters. Shepard frowned. He wasn't working on his new rifle, still, he was working nonetheless. But, he was also talking with Steve, which was a very good thing. She felt conflicted. Her orders were absolute but it was important that he bounded with the crew. After a few seconds of hesitation, she decided it was for the better to let him work with Steve and walked back to the elevator, hoping nobody had seen her. Sighing, she hit the button to her cabin. Reports awaited.

TBC

Note
When I first created my own headcanons for the Mass Effect universe, I came close to something Veritas had developed on the Cerberus Daily News forums. Since I discovered their version and largely agreed with it, I decided to embrace it. Link on my profile page on FFnet.
Shepard was late for breakfast, which was highly unusual. She always trained with Javik before breakfast and arrived at the table, starving to death, to devour what certainly was her biggest meal of the day. She wasn't a big eater otherwise but breakfast was sort of sacred for the Commander. Kaidan knew it was because of the ICT. The only twenty minutes of peace in the hellish training program the attendees could enjoy were dedicated to breakfast. The rest of the day was nothing less than a battlefield. Shepard had kept that rhythm despite having graduated ten years ago.

Ten years, Kaidan thought as he sipped his coffee, barely following the conversations around him. He'd known Shepard for ten years, been nine under her command. Anderson should give him a medal for his exploit because it certainly was some sort of record nobody could ever beat. Kaidan smiled for himself behind his cup of coffee. It hadn't been that difficult, to be honest. Despite her reputation, Shepard cared for her team. She was capable of scarifying a few for the greater good, she had been trained to, but Kaidan had never seen her pull that card on her team.

Well, it wasn't true. Torfan had happened and she had been ready to sacrifice them all during their raid on Cerberus' HQ, her included.

"Good morning everyone!"

Kaidan turned his head to see a delighted Shepard coming their way, Javik and Vakarian on her heels. It was the first time Kaidan saw a Turian in sport wear and he found it odd to see Vakarian's naked arms and hands. He was wearing some sort of black body-tight T-shirt with two vertical orange stripes on his chest, and rather loose and fluid pants, with holes for his spurs. He also had a tissue in the nose tinted with blue blood and dark spots were forming under his gray and brown skin. Shepard herself had a split lip, some bruises and scratches but she didn't seem to care. Actually, she seemed pretty pleased. Kaidan wasn't the only one to notice.

"Happy to see some of us got some action this morning," Wrex grunted. Liara slapped his arm but the Krogan probably didn't feel it through his armor.

"Don't be jealous, Wrex," Shepard replied as she purred herself a cup of coffee in the kitchen. She then started to wait for Gardner to prepare her tray, Vakarian and Javik just behind her. "Makes you look uglier than usual."

"You know fighting and fucking are basically the same thing for those bastards, right?" Wrex insisted.

"Then sex was awesome," Shepard smirked. Vakarian frowned. Kaidan had never seen a Turian frown so much. Before that instant, he would have thought it was physically impossible. Shepard wiggled her eyebrows to her protegee behind her cup of coffee while the rest of the crew laughed, exception made of Javik and Wrex. "How are you feeling today, Alenko?" she asked.

"Pretty good, Commander. Ready whenever you are."

"Atta boy. Let's say eight hundred in the shuttle bay then. Vakarian?"
"I'll be ready, Commander," the Turian replied, square shoulders and hands in the back. Kaidan wondered if he had taken Shepard's punches in the face with the same seriousness earlier.

Vakarian stayed perfectly still at parade rest until his tray was ready, five minutes after Shepard's and Javik's, then sit at the table with everybody and started eating his breakfast with enthusiasm. The smell was off-putting for most of the crew but he seemed to appreciate his scrambled brown eggs with vegetables dices. Kaidan had been surprised to see Vakarian's food. His diet was mostly based on vegetables, contrary to popular believes. Meat represented maybe thirty percents of his food, and cereals were completely excluded. Very little fat and even less sugar. No wonders Turians all looked like scarecrows. Though Kaidan knew Nihlus had a sweet tooth for some candies but it was unusual for a Turian – Nihlus was nothing but unusual anyway. Eating levo food always made the Spectre sick but he didn't care. He would have sold his own mother for a sour apple flavored lollipop.

The rest of the breakfast was pretty much like any other, only interrupted by the newest member on board, Professor Solus, who came to take a handful of ration bars in the kitchen. He exchanged a few words with the crew while he was at it, his affable smile somehow contrasting with what Kaidan knew about the guy. Shepard kept her eyes on the Salarian until he disappeared at the corner of the elevator but didn't say a word. Kaidan knew what had happened on Omega, Tali had talked about it after dinner yesterday, just before exiling herself in her quarters for a few days. It wasn't a surprise if Shepard was careful around Solus. The real surprise was that she hadn't broken the Professor's teeth yet. She took betrayal pretty seriously. It certainly helped that Solus was very important to the Council.

Kaidan rapidly brushed his teeth after breakfast, put his belongings in order in his locker, as always, and headed for the shuttle bay. Vakarian was already there, in armor, adjusting a thermal scope on his new sniper rifle. Steve was preparing Shepard's armor while Vega was in charge of Kaidan's. The Lieutenant helped him suit up, double checking each seal and joint. Vega might have been a big mouth but he was very serious in his work. Shepard generally delegated the Alliance personnel to Kaidan, so he made sure to compliment Vega on his good work, giving him a manly pat on the arm to make it sink. Kaidan then turned to the wall to take his weapons: a M-96 Mattock and a good old fashioned M-6 Carniflex, a team's favorite. He took as many thermo-clips as his pockets allowed and stuffed ration bars where he could. Shepard always insisted to take extra ration bars with them. Kaidan had understood why when they got stuck for two whole days in a cave during a mission. He wasn't eager to relive that experience any time soon.

Shepard arrived just as Kaidan was testing his radio, in her usual leggins and white top tank, bare feet. A quick look down told him she had painted her toe nails of a bright red, a color she liked a lot. The Alliance was pretty strict regarding grooming. Women weren't supposed to wear make-up or nail polish but Shepard couldn't care less. Kaidan knew she often needed to busy her hands when she was thinking. Seeing her with nail polish on her feet simply indicated she had thought a lot the previous night. She probably didn't sleep much and would be easily irritated today. Biotics weren't the most reliable people when it came down to stability.

"Ready, boys?" Shepard asked, smiling.

"Yes ma'am," Kaidan replied. Vakarian only nodded, for once.

"We'll fight in close quarters at some point so take an assault rifle from my locker, Vakarian. You can't snipe at close range."

"Some of us can, Commander," Vakarian assured her, at parade rest but his voice was clearly playful. Kaidan frowned. That was the first time he had ever heard Vakarian talking like that. The
guy didn't speak much and stayed very cold and distant in general, even if Kaidan had seen him being more friendly with Chakwas and Liara on several occasions. But there was a clear difference with his ton right now. He sounded confident, cocky even.

Shepard laughed and walked to Steve to put her armor on. Kaidan didn't say a word. He finished his tests and concentrated a little energy around his hands to make sure everything was all right. It required fine control to produce biotics over a glove, even more over a reinforced one. Most human biotics used their powers bare hands because they couldn't achieve such precision, but Kaidan had mastered it years ago. It hadn't been easy, a number of gloves had either exploded or flown away, but being a biotic wasn't easy anyway. They all took the hard way. There was no other option for them.

"Starting descent through atmosphere, Commander," Joker announced through the speakers.

"I'll warm up the thrusters," Steven said and he left them to walk to the shuttle. Vakarian came next to Kaidan, a Valkyrie in hand. That was another weapon created for N7 operatives. He seemed to be fond of those. Shepard jumped a little to settle the weight of her armor as the hull started to protest against the friction of the air.

"Alright," she said, adjusting a strap. "Lorek is a bitch. One pole is oriented toward the star it orbits, the other is in the dark, which means, Vakarian?"

"Extreme weathers, Commander."

"Five points to Ravenclaw. The target is located seven hundred kilometers west of the equator, far enough to avoid the storms but we'll face winds and probably rain, fog and crazy humidity. Local temperature should be around thirty Celsius degrees. Just like home, Vakarian." He nodded. "Atmospheric pressure is not even half of the Normandy's and gravity is a third weaker. That'll take some adjusting, that's why Steve will drop us ten kilometers south of the target and we'll walk for two hours or so. Might get dizzy, oxygen level is lower, but we are in no rush so if we need more time, we'll take it." A subtle quake in the hull made her pause to listen carefully. "Lorek is a batarian colony," she continued, "but the tidal lock makes the planet difficult to live on. That's our chance. Most of the population lives in the capital, on another continent, so we shouldn't find anybody on our way. Still, the possibility exists. That's why I asked Joker to enter the atmosphere. The Normandy will stay a hundred kilometers above us during the mission and EDI will keep an eye on our surroundings."

"That won't be easy," Kaidan commented. Considering the weather on Lorek, the Normandy would face strong winds, even at that altitude, and dangerous magnetic fields.

"Where would be the fun otherwise?" Joker asked through the speakers. "I was bored of deep space anyway."

"The outpost is underground in a rocky area. I'll give you the layout on our ride down. Shouldn't be more than twenty Eclipse mercs in there. Be ready to take down engineers and biotics."

"Drop in two minutes, Commander," Joker informed.

"Alright. In the shuttle, boys. Javik, the ship is yours!"

"Yes, Commander," Kaidan and Vakarian replied at once, the Prothean echoing them a second later through the speakers. They walked together to the shuttle while Shepard grabbed her weapons. Kaidan gave a quick look behind him and saw Ashley at the window of fourth deck. She pushed her breasts up and kissed him goodbye. Kaidan smiled back and hopped in the shuttle.
before Shepard could notice what Ashley was doing. The Commander didn't care about relationships within her crew as long as she didn't hear about it.

Kaidan sat in front of Vakarian, his back to Steve in the cockpit. Shepard entered the shuttle as the alarms rang through the cargo bay, signaling the opening of the ramp. Steve sealed the shuttle, made sure everything was okay and waited for Joker's signal. Because the Kodiak used mass effect fields to move vertically, which could interfere with the Normandy's own fields, it had to be mechanically ejected from the shuttle bay on rails. The "combat cockroach" had to free-fall out of the Normandy's influence zone, then it could start its engines. Vakarian wasn't aware of that particularity by the look on his face when he realized the shuttle was falling through Lorek's atmosphere. First time Kaidan saw a Turian turn white.

Steve started the engines after the longest ten seconds of Vakarian's life and the shuttle slowed down, until its velocity allowed the thrusters to do their office. Shepard, still standing, hand on a strap hanging from the ceiling, smirked to her protegee.

"You alright, Vakarian?"


"You have those too on Palaven?" Kaidan asked. He wasn't really interested in the answer but chatting would keep Vakarian's mind focused on something else than the bumpy ride. Vakarian gave a quick look to Shepard before answering.

"You'd be surprise how similar sentient species are, Lieutenant Commander." It was Kaidan's turn to look at Shepard, frowning a little. She didn't need him to voice his concern to understand him.

"Just call him by his name," she said to her protegee. "He'd have time to die twice by the end of 'Lieutenant Commander'. Same goes for you, Alenko," she added as she turned to him. "Forget about the 'Spectre'. We're on a mission, not in a formal reception."

"Can I call you Jane then?" Kaidan joked. "We've known each other for a while, after all." Shepard opened her mouth but Vakarian intervened before she could talk, dead serious.

"You are being very disrespectful, Lieutenant Commander. Apologize at once."

"I call her Shepard all the time," Kaidan defended himself. She raised a hand to shut Vakarian up.

"My first name is the problem, Alenko," Shepard explained. "Turns out 'Jane' is either an insult or really vulgar slang for one's private parts in most alien languages. Translators always pick it up wrong. That's why I never use my first name."

"Seriously?" Kaidan asked, astonished. He looked at Vakarian who still seemed pretty angry, though it was hard to tell considering how foreign his features were. "That's not a joke?"

"I wish," Shepard sighed. "You'd think they'd have done something about that by now, but no! Let's all the Janes..." Vakarian frowned, "...all over the universe suffer!" Kaidan apologized, still startled, and waited in silence the end of the bumpy ride. Shepard sent them the outpost's layout between two turbulence, then grabbed again the strap for landing. Steve gave them a rapid summary of atmospheric pressure, composition, temperature, visibility and everything useful before opening the door. A hot and terribly humid wave of light yellowish fog hit them instantaneously. It didn't smell bad, at least. The vegetation was pretty dense but low, grass-like imitations as high as the knee. Little drops of water pearled everywhere and Kaidan could hear a
small river run nearby despite the shuttle cooling down. Thanks God, they weren't in a swamp. He hated swamps.

They retreated from the shuttle to be at a safe distance when it lifted up and saw the fog swallow it. Insects, birds and whatnot started their songs soon after.

"Alright," Shepard said, adjusting her weapons on her back, "EDI, you hear me?"

"Five on five, Commander," the AI replied through the radio, "and I see you as well in infrared."

"Yeah, that's not a bad idea," Shepard nodded. "Visibility isn't great here, twenty meters at best."

"It will greatly improve when you'll reach the rocky formation where the outpost is located," EDI informed. "Until then, I'll be your eyes."

"And what do you see around us, my pretty?"

"Nothing corresponding to any known sentient life forms, Commander. Although, I have to point out Lorek's fauna is mostly cold blooded on this side of the planet."

"So you can't see if a pack of something big with sharp teeth is ambushing us?" Kaidan asked.

"Don't be ridiculous, Lieutenant Commander," EDI scolded him. "I can detect an ant ten meters underground from orbit with five different methods, and that would only be warming up." Kaidan blushed a little, embarrassed.

"You should know better than to fuck with the lady, Alenko," Shepard smirked, looking at the direction on her omnitool. "Alright, let's move people!" She took her pistol in hand and led the way.

Kaidan felt the effects of the lower oxygen level in the air a few minutes later. His head became heavy and his heart-rate quickened a little but nothing dramatic. The humidity was much more annoying. Droplets ran along his face, getting caught in his eyebrows and his eyes. The wind was somehow regular and sort of whistled endlessly through the grass, but it was hot and carrying more droplets. On his right, Vakarian didn't seem to care. He walked carefully, practically without making a noise, his head swaying a little right to left to keep an eye on their surroundings, assault rifle ready to fire. Kaidan had no difficulty imagining the terror Turians had inspired to Humans during the First Contact War. Vakarian looked like, acted like a predator.

Nihlus was nothing like that. Kaidan had worked with the Spectre on several occasions in the last four years despite the disdain they had for each other. Nihlus was smaller, to begin with, not even two meters high, and stocky for his kind. He was more relaxed too, more in control of the situation. Nihlus was the kind to smile at you while plotting to eviscerate you with the minimum energy required, whereas Vakarian gave the impression he was just waiting anxiously for the inevitable troubles. That made a big difference.

"You're quiet, boys," Shepard said over her shoulder. Kaidan's heart jumped in his chest. Damn. That was the kind of mistake that could have them all killed in a second.

"Nothing to report, Commander," Vakarian replied.

"We're approximately four hundred kilometers away from the nearest village. I think it's okay to chat a little."

"The target is only nine kilometers ahead," Vakarian corrected.
"I doubt they have detectors so far from their base," Shepard snorted. "EDI?"

"I only detect your electronic signature in the area, Commander," the AI confirmed. "Nothing big with sharp teeth either."

"I'm sorry EDI," Kaidan apologized, "I shouldn't have doubted your capacities."

"Indeed," EDI said before cutting the line. Shepard laughed.

"Isn't it a problem, Commander?" Vakarian asked.

"What is?"

"The AI."

"EDI?" Shepard looked genuinely surprised when she turned a little to look at Vakarian. "Why would she be a problem?"

"It's a machine. Machines are not supposed to talk back."

"EDI is as alive as you and me, Vakarian, and I happen to like her personality very much." Yeah, Kaidan thought, because EDI based hers on yours. Good thing Shepard could stand another Shepard though. Kaidan wouldn't have bet on that.

"It's not alive," Vakarian said on a slightly tensed tone. "Disconnect its core and it will fall on the ground like a puppet." Shepard frowned for good.

"A bullet in your head will have the same effect on you," she warned him.

"I'd be dead, whereas it can be reactivated," Vakarian insisted.

"EDI is a member of our crew," Kaidan intervened before it escalated too seriously. "She has her temper, I agree with you on that, and that's precisely what makes a difference between her and a vulgar VI."

"AIs are self-aware," Vakarian corrected him. "They'll protect themselves if threatened or in danger. VIs won't do a thing if you cut their power off in front of them, even if they have simulated personalities. AIs will."

"And why on Earth would I want to cut EDI's power off?" Shepard asked. "She's a fantastic addition to my crew, she has a wicked sense of humor and she's my friend. I don't unplug my friends."

"A friend who can kill you just because it made a mathematical mistake is not a friend."

"Wow!" Shepard rose her hands up in the air. "And what do you know exactly about friends, Vakarian?" Here we go, Kaidan thought, seeing the Turian take the hit pretty badly. He straightened, gaining easily ten centimeters, and looked embarrassed, more than he ought to be. Maybe Shepard had stroke a big nerve for a Turian. She knew a lot about them.

"AIs are banned for a reason, Commander," Vakarian insisted. "Each species had to deal with a rebellion of their own AIs at some point. Humanity won't be different, especially if you're grooming AIs like the Normandy's."

"Well maybe if you had treated your AIs like normal people," Shepard replied, "you wouldn't have had to fight them."
"I'd bet your Cerberus are normal people," Vakarian snorted, "and look how friendly and peaceful they are."

That's a good one, Kaidan thought as Shepard, mouth wide open, was trying to find something witty to reply. It shouldn't have amused him.

"You have separatists yourselves!" Shepard protested.

"Yeah but they are not terrorists trying to impose their dominance over the galaxy," Vakarian replied viciously. Touché. "They live on their own, on colonies nobody cares about, and we never hear about them."

"Oh I will so enjoy your first meeting with Nihlus," Shepard laughed, haughty as she knew to be so well.

"Please inform me of the date ahead, Commander," Kaidan intervened to calm the conversation down. "I have some days off to take and I'd be glad to use them to avoid this fated event."

"Are you kidding?" Joker asked through the radio. "Man, I'd buy tickets for that! I've to ask Javik for pop-corn next time we refill because we're already out," he added on a sarcastic ton. "You're so entertaining!"

"May I remind you to whom you're speaking, Joker?" Shepard grunted.

"Ouh, look at the time!" Joker said. "Gotta go! Bye! Love ya!" The communication was cut. Kaidan shook his head, a smile on his lips nonetheless. Vakarian didn't seem to enjoy the light atmosphere.

"Come on, Vakarian," Kaidan smiled at him. "Let's forget about that and move on. Still have eight kilometers to cover."

And eight kilometers they covered, mostly in silence. Kaidan tried to talk on neutral subjects like the weather ("pretty nice, isn't it? Bit humid though"), the grass ("ah, look at that! The stem is hollow, that's why it makes so much noise!"), Tali ("she took it pretty seriously but Chakwas said her precautions were unnecessary because Tali's immune system actually improved over the years, but Tali is a bit of a hypochondriac so..."), and so on. Shepard answered with monosyllables ("yeah", "oh", "hm hm"), whereas Vakarian didn't even pretend to care. Longest eight kilometers of Kaidan's life.

The outpost was indeed in a rocky area, in a canyon under the wind. It was easily accessible with a shuttle but three men on foot had to climb on loose, wet rock eaten by lichens, spongy moss and ferns. The exercise revealed itself difficult but the view was big enough of a reward once on top. The rocky plateau had been polished by millennia of winds and water, sculpting fantastic figures playing with the fog. It was beautiful and terribly dangerous. The ground creaked when they walked, and they found more than once deep sinkholes with cutting walls under their feet. At least, the non-existent vegetation up there didn't throw them in one of those deadly pitfalls.

It took some time to reach the outpost and they did a little recon first. Shepard let Kaidan with Vakarian and went on her own around the canyon. She came back ten painfully long minutes later. There was nobody outside and she had found stairs carved into the rock. That meant the mercenaries probably came here once in a while, or maybe it was an escape way, she didn't know. It was well hidden though and they used it to go down in the canyon. There, the fog was lighter, the visibility much better. No wind – that was a relief. There was a landing platform and some prefab around but most of the base was indeed underground. Only one entry. Three men coming
from there by surprise and blocking the only exit could make a lot of damage indeed.

"EDI," Shepard whispered behind a rock. "status."

"I do not detect any suspicious movement, Shepard. I count twenty one infrared signatures."

"Twenty one?" Kaidan asked. Shepard had counted on less than twenty.

"Eight Humans, ten Salarians and three Asaris," EDI detailed. "They are divided in three groups. The first..."


"The intel it can provide could be useful," Vakarian said from his cover on the right, eye on the scope of his sniper rifle. It was a bit ridiculous, the ramp was only thirty meters away.

"Oh now EDI is useful!" Shepard mocked.

"I never said it wasn't useful," Vakarian corrected her, still as the rock he was leaning on, "just that it was dangerous."

"I am very much, Spectre Vakarian," EDI confirmed. "I can lock on your position from orbit and kill you with a single shot."

"No you can't," Vakarian snorted, "not with canons that badly calibrated. Besides, you'd kill the Commander too, and that's something you would never do. Your survival depends on her."

It took a second to Kaidan to understand what Vakarian was assuming: if EDI were to kill Shepard, all the crew would get rid of her – Javik first. They wouldn't tolerate such a betrayal. Kaidan shivered despite the temperature. Did EDI only cooperate with them for her own survival? Considering how she had manifested herself during Shepard's lil' suicide raid on Cerberus HQ a few months back, it was a very plausible theory. Plus, EDI had adapted really fast and became an important part of the team in only three months. She had befriend Shepard in a very short period of time, which kind of was a record now that Kaidan was thinking about it. Oh shit, he thought. It made sense. It made a lot of fucking sense.

Shepard whistled her admiration and Kaidan shook himself out of his thoughts. "Kind of an asshole, huh, Vakarian? Don't you remember the little speech I gave yesterday about me trusting my team?"

"I remember perfectly, Commander," he replied, "but trust can kill you as efficiently as a bullet. Or an orbital strike."

"But not with those canons, huh?"

"No, not those."

Shepard snorted. "Fucking Turians," she added. "Alright, you don't like EDI, I'm pretty sure EDI doesn't like you either now but I have to remind you we're all on the same team so let's keep your shared hate for one another for your private time. I don't want to hear about this anymore during a mission. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander," Vakarian replied.

"Yes, Shepard," EDI agreed.
"Good. Now, we have a base to wipe out, if I may recall you. I'll take point, Kaidan behind me, Vakarian, take the rear. The Asaris will be our biggest problem so they are our primary targets. Wait for Kaidan and me to take their shields down, Vakarian, otherwise you won't even scratch them. Then, anything that looks like an engineers. Stay low, take cover, keep a wall or two in your back and shoot when they recharge. Easy enough."

Kaidan nodded but Shepard didn't wait for his approval to jump out of cover. Heavy pistol in hand, she kept a low profile, zigzagging at the bottom of the canyon between rocks and crates. Kaidan followed silently, relying on his assault rifle. A quick look behind him told him Vakarian hadn't changed his weapon, going in with his newly acquired sniper rifle. The N7 Valiant had been built for Humans and was a rather compact sniper rifle, not like Shepard's favorite, the Black Widow – Kaidan was sure she liked that rifle just for the name, because otherwise it was too big and weighted too much. The Valiant was smaller and it almost looked like an assault rifle in Vakarian's hands. One thing was sure: it hadn't been made for people with a total of six fingers. Vakarian's grip on the rifle wasn't the best.

Shepard waited for everybody to be just behind her to open the door. A short corridor led to a cargo area, with stairs on their right and a balcony on the left. Crates everywhere. Cover. Kaidan noticed none of the Asaris were there as he ran behind a crate. That wasn't good. Six mercs were there though, surprised to be under attack. Shepard threw one to the opposite side of the room in a second. Vakarian, still in the corridor, took one down with a headshot. The noise surely echoed in all the base. Kaidan moved to have a view of the door giving on another corridor to the back of the outpost. He had his left flank pretty open but he knew Shepard would cover him. They had done this enough to spare a little verbal communication.

The remaining four mercenaries lasted long enough for the reinforcement to arrive. Kaidan threw back the first two coming through the corridor but had to draw back into cover while he stabilized his biotics. Shepard stood to take the next ones, and that's when the first Asari showed up. Kaidan saw the blue woman load her wrap in her fist. Shepard's shields must have been too low because she preferred to jump behind cover instead of taking the blow, only a little too late. A bullet ricocheted on the Asari's barrier just when she was throwing her wrap, putting her off balance and the big ball of raw energy exploded on the ceiling. A fraction of second later, the Asari's pretty head exploded as well.

Shepard almost fell on her butt after she was done rolling on the ground. She gave a quick look behind her and sort of smirked to Vakarian. Kaidan heard the Turian reload from his cover. Something was telling him the fight wouldn't take long.

And it didn't. Roughly five minutes later, Shepard called for clear. They had had to run down that corridor to take the second room but it had been easy with a sniper like theirs behind two strong biotics opening the way. Almost too easy, to be honest. Kaidan was sure Wrex would have complained if he had been there. Something felt terribly off though.

"You'd expect a little more resistance from mercs," Shepard grunted, looking around. "They're supposed to be professionals, dammit."

"Ah, I know!" Kaidan said.

"Know what?"

"You used your biotics a lot today. That's unusual."

"Yeah," she mumbled. "With Gunaholic with us, I was kinda forced to. Shit, I liked to be the sniper of the team." Kaidan smiled. Shepard never had been a fan of close combat. The day Nihlus had
introduced her to a sniper rifle was probably one of the best of her life. It seemed odd to Kaidan nonetheless. Biotics were not supposed to kill their target at two hundred yards. It felt unnatural to him.

"Twenty," Vakarian said, standing up behind a desk on the other side of the room.

"Twenty what?" Shepard asked, turning to her protegee.

"I count only twenty dead. Thirteen for me, by the way." Shepard frowned.

"It's not a contest," Kaidan reminded her but he was quite amused by her bruised ego. It had been ages since she last had a little competition on the battlefield. She required efficiency from her team and they were all very good at what they did, but it wouldn't have occurred to anyone to try to be better than her. Vakarian didn't care.

"We helped him anyway," Shepard snorted. "There's a room we didn't check in the back. I'll go see if Number Twenty-one is there while you boys snoop around."

"Roger that," Kaidan agreed. "Be careful."

Shepard nodded and walked away, recharging her pistol. Kaidan gave a look around, noticing a few terminals, lockers and a safe on the wall.

"Can you open the safe?" Kaidan asked to Vakarian, pointing the metallic box with his rifle while aiming for the lockers.

"Sure," the Turian answered. He started walking, stepping over a cadaver. "What can be in it? It's not hidden."

"Money, I guess," Kaidan shrugged. He opened a locker and found a few weapons, military grade. Bingo.

"That's looting," Vakarian said, stopping.

"It's confiscating their funds," Kaidan corrected, going through another locker. Salarian high tech there. Not bad. "Do you know why Spectres hunt down seemingly meaningless merc outposts in the Terminus Systems like this one?"

"No." His ton said "but I wasn't told much so it's not a surprise". Kaidan had to talk to Shepard about that.

"Well," he started, going through a third locker, "there are different reasons. First, limitation of mercenary forces. Mercs are no more than private armies for hire. The Council's main force is the turian army but decent mercenaries in the Terminus System outnumber your people twelve to one, thirty-five to one if we count the men who think they know how to use a gun. That's pretty bad odds." Kaidan saw a picture of a little human girl on the knees of a guy in armor, probably dead on the floor somewhere around. Deciding there was nothing of importance there, he closed the locker and aimed for the computers. "Second, it would be stupid to let mercs their money, weapons and loots after a raid. We hit them to stop their activities, not to give another group the opportunity to take all of this back home." The first computer was dead but the second had survived. It wasn't password protected and Kaidan easily accessed it to download its memory. EDI would analyze it later. "And finally, mercs buy and sell military grade artillery but those weapons have to come from somewhere, right?"

"So part of our job is to track down who sold them those weapons in the first place," Vakarian
understood.

"Yes," Kaidan smiled. "Although, we're not in charge of the tracking part, the Council has people for that, some Spectres and their networks from what I know. It happened, though. Once or twice, the Council asked Shepard to follow a specific lead but you'd have to ask her the details, it's classified and I don't have the clearance." Vakarian made a little snap with his mandibles. Kaidan had heard Nihlus do that a lot. It was the equivalent of a human click. "What is it?" Kaidan asked, curious.

"It's C-Sec all over again," the Turian complained. Kaidan couldn't help but laugh. It took a second to the Spectre to open the safe when he finally reached it. "Credits, forged identification passes and data discs." His frown confirmed it was definitively C-Sec all over again.

"We done here?" Shepard asked as she came back to the room. She looked at Kaidan who nodded. "Found Number Twenty-one in the back."

"I didn't hear a gun shot."

"Didn't have to kill him, he died on me," Shepard shrugged. She stepped over a body and took a data disc from a pocket. "But this will be way more valuable than the guy. Turns out he was a prisoner here and also a Cerberus agent." She threw the disc up in the air before catching it swiftly and putting it back in her pocket, a very satisfied smile on her face. Kaidan smiled back. It wasn't a bad day, after all.

Shepard called for Steven to come pick them up and the shuttle arrived within minutes in the canyon. Shepard hopped in it first, followed by Kaidan. Vakarian hesitated a second.

"What is it?" Shepard asked.

"Are we going to let the base like that?"

"Of course not. Jump in."

She tended her hand to help him. Vakarian looked at it a second but grabbed it quickly when the shuttle started to lift up. The door closed just behind him.

"EDI?" Shepard called through the radio.

"I'm ready, Commander."

"Alright. Steve, the windows, please."

"It's monitors, Commander, not windows," the pilot explained for the hundredth time. He keyed with a few buttons and the exterior appeared on screens through the shuttle. They took some distance and altitude before Shepard gave the green light. A flash of light fell down the sky and the clouds opened around with a fraction of second of delay. "Grab something," Steve advised. Vakarian took a strap, still near Shepard, arching a little to have a better view of the monitor – he was too tall to stand straight in the shuttle anyway. The first bump destabilized him a little. Then, an enormous ball of fire grew and rose from the ground, so bright Kaidan's eyes hurt. The turbulence hit the shuttle within a few seconds, making Vakarian almost fall on Shepard. She smirked.

"See? Those canons work just fine."

Kaidan didn't get a chance to talk to Shepard until late that evening. They had came back without a
problem, had their debriefing like the usual, eaten something and so on. Vakarian had been his usual silent self once back on the Normandy and Kaidan was now sure it was more because of shyness than anything else. He just wasn't comfortable around a lot of people he didn't know. They would have a chance to break the ice soon enough, Joker had told Kaidan Shepard agreed to throw a little party for the new guys. That was actually a good idea.

"Wait!" Shepard shouted. "Don't close the door!" Kaidan smiled for himself and moved a little to let her throw her dirty clothes in the washing machine with his. "Did you put laundry powder yet?"

"Yep. The one you think stinks."

"Ah, damn," she whined but still closed the door and pushed the button to start the machine.

"Everybody has to buy their own laundry powder if I remember correctly, Commander, even you," Kaidan teased, folding his arms and leaning on the nearest wall. "It's in our internal rules."

"I'm a Spectre, I'm above the law."

"You made those rules."

"Fine!" she sighed dramatically, hands in the air. "Get a lawyer, Alenko, but this will mark the end of our friendship." Kaidan smiled, quickly followed by Shepard. She hopped on the washing machine to wait. It wouldn't take long, a full cycle took fifteen to twenty minutes. That was a big improvement compared to the exhausted washing machines back on the SR1. Cerberus didn't joke with their improvements for the new Normandy. "I'm sorry, Kaidan," Shepard said more seriously.

"What for?"

"I took you on this mission hoping Vakarian would rely on you in case he went all batshit crazy on us, you know," she explained, eyes on her hands, "but in the end you helped me more than him." Kaidan blushed a little. It was a bad tendency of his.

"It's okay," he assured, waving off her worries, "it's what friends do. You know I'd never let you down, Shep." She gave him a tired smile back. "Besides," he added before his blush intensified too much, looking away, "I helped him while you were with the prisoner."

"Oh?"

"I gave him the reasons why we busy ourselves with petty targets like mercs."

"Ah, yes," she sighed, arching her back to stretch, her breasts pushed on the front. "I should have told him that, and a million other things."

"He hasn't been on board for long," Kaidan shrugged, keeping his eyes on the ground. "You still have time."

"Joker told me the opposite yesterday. No offense but I'll follow his advice whenever I have the time."

"What? I'm outsmarted by our loud-mouth pilot?" Kaidan asked, faking outrage.

"You're a nice guy, Kaidan," Shepard smiled, "a dear friend too, but your advices suck."

"Yeah, well, we'll see that next time I advise you to dodge a bullet." Shepard laughed but was interrupted by EDI by radio.
"Commander, a call for you from Councilor Tevos."

"I'm coming, EDI," Shepard replied. She jumped on the ground and put her hand on Kaidan's shoulder. "Thanks."

"What for?" he asked as she walked to the door.

"To take care of my laundry when it's done," she smirked.

"Don't be surprised if some of your underwear are missing!" Kaidan snorted.

"I'd be happy to land you lingerie if you're too shy to buy your own, Alenko", Shepard teased from the shuttle bay. Kaidan blushed. He should have seen it coming. He had known her for ten years, after all.

TBC
It started raining a few minutes after they had stepped into that nameless abandoned city, small scattered drops, and it seemed it would never stop. It was fitting from Garrus' point of view, the perfect weather for the shittiest day since he became a Spectre. Waist-down in the muddy water of the mangroves that once were a brilliant city, followed by a terribly angry Prothean and a very talkative Salarian professor, he could only blame himself. He had stepped behind the line with Shepard, even if he had known she wasn't the most patient person in the galaxy nor her mood the best at the time. He should have kept his mouth shut, like often.

Garrus had woken up the day after the raid on the Eclipse base on Lorek with the firm intention to talk to Shepard. He had to apologize for his attitude the previous day but she also had to explain him a lot of things. That was her job as his mentor, dammit. He couldn't keep going blindfolded like that for very long.

Shepard wasn't training in the shuttle bay and nobody seemed awake yet so Garrus waited in the mess until everybody arrived. Shepard came last, in uniform, her face dead serious. She asked everybody to sit in silence and she stood at the end of the table, her hands in the back, cold and determined like her pictures on holo. They were going to Ilos in the Refuge System, Pangaea Expanse, right away. Councilor Tevos had called her late the previous night to ask her to investigate on the disappearance of her mentor, Spectre Nihlus Kryik, on the former prothean colony, now a quarantined planet.

Prothean technology was deemed dangerous by the Council and treated that way. It was illegal to collect it or to sell it but, of course, that didn't stop the black market. Even at C-Sec on the Citadel, Garrus had had to deal with a few prothean tech traffics.

He never had heard about Ilos though, and his newly acquired Spectre status authorized him to learn about the planet in the on-board codex. It had been a flourishing prothean colony a very long time ago, taken from the Inusannon, whoever they were. The planet was once verdant and gifted with a luxurious life but it now was a dead world, devastated by the greenhouse effect, continent-wide wildfires and algae suffocating the oceans. It was a pretty classic destiny for a planet inhabited by careless civilizations. Garrus, like everyone else, always had pictured the Protheans to be a wise people because they had managed to create so much during their time as rulers of the galaxy but it seemed they had doomed Ilos like the Krogans Tuchanka, minus the radioactivity.

Though Ilos was under quarantine and that was unusual. Most planets "searching for a new equilibrium" were accessible to research teams from universities, or even industries if resources were still profitable. The Refuge System was out of reach, officially because the Mu relay, the only nexus of the network connected to the system, had been lost four thousand years ago, when it was pushed out of its orbit by a supernovae. But it obviously had been found in between if mercenaries went to Ilos to collect prothean tech. Plus, Shepard didn't seem to be worried by the missing relay problem. Garrus supposed the Council knew about the new coordinates of the Mu relay, therefore Spectres had access to the Refuge System. He had had to dig a little in History to find a plausible unofficial reason: the Rachni War.

The supernovae that pushed the Mu relay out of its orbit eventually transformed itself into a
nebula, swallowing the relay in its dust and gas and making it impossible to detect. The nebula was nonetheless in the Rachnis' territory and the race of giant super intelligent bugs tried to find it in order to close all routes into their space. They eventually found it and controlled it, instead of destroying it like others they had managed to take over, probably because it was a crucial nexus in their territory. During the Rachni War, while the Krogan killed millions of billions, the coordinates of the Mu relay got lost again. The Rachnis didn't have anything like a writing system. They shared their knowledge in their collective mind. Wiping them out also meant destroying their science. The Refuge system became once more isolated.

Garrus could only speculate but his theory seemed plausible: Ilos was under quarantine because Rachnis still lived on the planet. Some of them probably retreated to the Refuge system at the end of the war, knowing the Mu relay would prove to be nearly impossible to find without its coordinates, and colonized Agetoton and Ilos, which where harsh worlds but not enough to discourage Rachnis.

His theory rose more questions than answers and Garrus spent most of his time during the trip to Ilos thinking about it between his study – Shepard was definitively not in the mood for talking about anything anyway. The Council had declared the Refuge system under quarantine after the Rachni War, so they must have known about the Rachni's survival for a thousand years. Why keeping the Rachnis alive? They had been the biggest threat to galactic peace since the Fall of the Empire that wiped out the Protheans. The war had cost billions of asari, salarian and krogan lives, and its repercussions had changed the galaxy ever since. The Krogans' uplifting by the Salaritans was a consequence of the Rachni War, as much as the Krogan Rebellions, Digeris, the predominant place of the Turians in the galactic power play, the genophage and countless minor events. It made no sense to Garrus to keep the Rachnis alive. As long as they were around, the galaxy was under a deadly threat.

There was a more reasonable explanation, but Garrus had learned the truth often was a mix between crazy and rational theories. The Council could have quarantined the Refuge system just to keep the prothean knowledge for themselves. Considering how advanced and powerful the Protheans were, their knowledge could still change galactic balance if a lesser species like the Krogans or the Hanars had access to it – though the biggest threat at the moment was the Humans. The Asaris, Salaritans and Turians could just be protecting their position by preventing other species to access a greater knowledge. That was kind of a dick move but it also made sense. The Council's power came from its capacity to maintain peace at a galactic scale. If a war was to start because, say, the Humans suddenly gained more power than the three major species thanks to prothean tech, the Council would lost its utility. The Asaris, Salaritans and Turians would lose their grip on the galaxy. Nobody wanted that.

Garrus learned during the trip between the Omega Nebula and the Nimah Cluster, first nexus they had to take to rejoin Ilos, that it was possible to decrease the length of time spent in the relay network. Reaching Hawking Eta would normally take five days from Omega, but Lieutenant Moreau intended to do it in three. It was a matter of mass, he had told Garrus very early on the second morning. Garrus had barely slept because of the noise the reactor was making, and he had asked the pilot what was going on. Beard-face had admitted it wasn't exactly normal but EDI had assured him the Normandy wouldn't break if they exceeded the speed limit.

"There's a speed limit?" Garrus asked.

"Yeah, a theoretical one," Joker answered after a yawn. "Depends on the mass of the ship. The bigger, the slower, because it requires more energy to cancel her mass, and she gathers more kinetic energy the catcher has to evacuate and there's a limit to that too."
Garrus blinked, trying to fill in the holes while the pilot sipped his cup of hot beverage. "The catcher?"

"Ah, that's how we Humans call the exit relay," Joker said. "The entry point is the pitcher. Comes from a game, baseball, where you have to throw a ball in hope a guy in your team will catch it. Makes no sense but more than american football."

"So, if I understand correctly," Garrus tried, "the, huh, pitcher throws a vessel through the network and the catcher has to cancel the kinetic energy she accumulated?"

"Put very simply, yes, but not exactly." Joker put his cup on the table and illustrated his explanations with his hands, using them as talking puppets. "See, when you want to enter the relay network, you have to talk to a relay. You give it your name, your mass and others parameters like the aerodynamic coefficient of your ship and the resistance of the hull, stuff like that. The only tricky parameter is the mass, really, because it varies all the time."

"So the mass of the ship given to the pitcher will be different from what the catcher will receive."

"Yep. There are equations to calculate the difference, the Hauptmann-Puntambekar equations. Still have nightmares about those."

"Isn't the AI in charge of calculating that?" Garrus asked.

"Yes and no. A ship's navigation system will calculate the mass difference anyway but a good pilot has to be able to do the maths. And I'm an excellent pilot." Joker smirked and resumed his puppet show. "Anyway, with all those info, the pitcher calculates how much energy it will need to throw the vessel. Of that quantity of energy depends the speed limit and the kinetic energy the catcher will have to evacuate. The pitcher gives back the vessel those data, okay? The vessel has to carry it with her, otherwise she'll be trapped forever in the relay network." Garrus nodded. "Then, you start the acceleration phase, it's a question of forces applied to the ship, you can't be thrown by the pitcher if you're going too slow, otherwise, boom! Too many Newtons and all that shit."

"Okay."

"And the pitcher throws your vessel," Joker mimed. "You are now massless, therefore out of time, and weird shit happens to you and your ship, but, anyway, at some point, when you're in reach of the catcher, it will call you and ask you the data the pitcher gave you. Then it can calculate how much energy it'll have to evacuate and what mass it has to give you back. You know vessels can deviate like crazy from the catcher, right? Like, they can arrive at the opposite side of a system."

"Yes, I've heard of that."

"That's because of shitty pilots who make maths errors. Now it doesn't happen that much thanks to super computer but still. Anyway, your exit point depends on your theoretical arrival mass and speed."

"Not the kinetic energy?"

"No, that, that's the catcher's business. A part of that energy is captured by the rings around the ezo core to keep the relay working, and some of it is used to give you back your mass, because, you know, energy is equal mass times speed of light squared, but some of it still goes into space as gamma rays and deadly stuff like that. That's why relays are never pointed towards planets. It'd wipe out all life on it each time it's activated."

"But gamma rays travel through space nonetheless," Garrus frowned. "Those bursts can reach other
"Yeah, but it's not faster than the speed of light, so it takes billions of years to hit something, if it ever hits something. By the time it reaches a planet, it has lost a lot of power anyway, much like a gamma ray burst from a black hole. You can receive the signal from your planet, observe it and still be alive, right?" Garrus nodded.

"So how do you exceed the speed limit?" he asked.

"By lying to the pitcher," Joker smirked. "You tell it your vessel is super resistant and super light."

"But that has consequences."

"Of course. The higher the speed, the greater the force on the hull. Normally, we keep a safe margin between what the hull can theoretically take and what it will actually endure. You're an engineer, you know that stuff." Garrus nodded once more.

"So you flirt with the limit."

"Exactly," Joker winked and lifted his cup.

"Still, the catcher will give the ship back an incorrect mass."

"Yeah, well, we can also play on the H-P equations. Basically, you say to the pitcher 'hey man, I'm not so sure about my mass so it can vary between m1 and m2 at the arrival'. If the margin between m1 and m2 is believable, the pitcher will throw your vessel, otherwise you'll be denied passage. The trick is to reduce the margin during the trip. Data given to you by the pitcher is super encrypted and encoded but some super computers can crack it in time and change the margin to something more reasonable. And the catcher will give you a coherent mass for your ship and everything inside on the other side."

"And by super computer, you mean the AI."

"AIs, actually," Joker corrected. "The Geths theorized that trick to travel faster than anyone. They're not organic, so if weird stuff happens to their units, it has less consequences. It'd be a risk worth taking if they had anywhere to go. Anyway, a few weeks after we got the Normandy SR-2, Legion talked to EDI about the trick, EDI to Shepard and Shepard had to test it, of course. Successfully, it goes without saying," he showed off.

"And you trust them."

Joker had smiled behind his cup. "Absolutely."

And they had reached Hawking Eta in three days, two hours and seven minutes, with chaotic exits at each nexus of the network. The Normandy vibrated for several minutes, recalling Garrus' souvenirs of the few earthquakes he had lived through, and alarms rang all over the ship. That didn't stop them to continue their trip to Ilos via the Mu relay, which was a few hours out of the Chandrasekhar system. Joker informed they would arrive eighteen hours and thirty minutes later on Ilos but the ship would be in no shape to enter the atmosphere. The shore party would have to go down with the shuttle while Joker made sure the Normandy was able to do the trip back as soon as possible.

Shepard summoned all fighting personnel in the communication room an hour before they reached the Refuge system. Garrus arrived first in the room and noticed his mentor probably didn't have slept much during the trip. She had avoided him again during those days but he hadn't been the
only one. Shepard had spent most of her time alone, from what he had seen. She barely showed up for breakfast and dinner. Garrus stood at her left at parade rest and waited in silence.

Javik followed quickly, his grumpy self charming as always. Alenko, Williams and Vega arrived together, seriousness on their faces. The Krogan came next with the Quarian and T'Soni on his heels. That surprised Garrus. He had never thought the good Doctor could be part of the fighting personnel. The two AIs walked in together. Garrus felt more than saw Shepard's eyes on him but he kept his on the far wall, still as a rock. The merrier, the better. Searching for a guy on a planet would require a lot of people anyway.

Solus squeezed himself into the room just before the door closed. Shepard frowned.

"You're not going on the ground, Professor," she said coldly.

"Will be going," Sollus replied and his tone quarried a lot of authority. He squared his shoulders and straightened his back, his age somehow at bay for a moment. Garrus had no difficulty imagining the old Salarian in STG during his younger years. "Only turian physiology specialist on board."

"Doctor Chakwas..." Shepard started, raising her hand to dismiss his argument, but Solus interrupted her.

"Very competent but nothing compared to me. Will be welcome to assist me if necessary." Garrus refrained a laugh. And he thought Salarians didn't have testies! Shepard stared at him for a long minute before sighing, really annoyed.

"Fine. But we won't wait for you to catch your breath."

"We're twelve with the Salarian," the Krogan noticed. "We can form four teams of three." He turned slightly to the Prothean, as if pleading for his friend to join him on an adventure. That didn't surprise Garrus at all.

"Not so fast," Shepard stopped Urdnot. "I'll tell you more about the mission before we decide anything."

"But we're all going?" the Krogan insisted.

"Yes," she sighed. His smile widened. Shepard took a second to reorganize her thoughts. "For those who don't know him, Nihlus, my mentor, is also a watchman of prothean tech. The Council placed a ban on prothean tech, don't ask me why, I don't know, wasn't even born at the time. Anyway, it's illegal to sell it, therefore it is sold, mostly on black markets. Nihlus was following a lead on a mercenary group which found its goods on Ilos. He came on the planet ten days ago, was supposed to report periodically because Ilos is a dangerous world under quarantine, but eventually vanished. Fortunately, his last location is known."

Shepard didn't even have to ask the AI for it to display a map of the area where the Spectre had disappeared. Garrus recognized the layout of a city immediately. There were large perpendicular avenues and smaller streets, channels for several rivers, probably a highway or something like that circling it all. It was somehow fascinating that a city more than fifty thousands years old looked like a contemporary one. The hologram changed to display a picture this time, showing the decay of the city. It was mostly eaten by a dense vegetation and water. A mangrove. Garrus refrained a smile. He always had loved operations in the wild.

"As you can see, we'll paddle in water most of our time on the ground," Shepard continued. "It won't be a nice walk in the park. We'll face high temperatures, probably over forty Celsius degrees,
high atmospheric pressure, which is eleven times the Normandy's, crazy humidity, low oxygen level with high concentrations of carbonate monoxide and dioxide. Don't be idiots and put on your helmets."

"Don't need one," the Krogan smirked, pointing his two thumbs at his impressive self. "Born and raised on Tuchanka." Shepard usually answered to the Krogan's bravado by a joke but she didn't this time. She stared at him until he folded his arms and looked sorry to have interrupted her. It was a disturbing view, the big Krogan somehow afraid of the human woman.

"Gravity is the same as the Citadel's," Shepard continued, "at least that won't be a problem. Consider the fauna and flora highly dangerous. We stay in radio contact at all time and within each other's sight. Ilos might forgive your mistakes. I will not."

Garrus gave her a quick look. He knew Shepard's reputation and she finally lived up to it. He wasn't sure he liked it. Her more jovial self had grown on him during the two missions they had worked on together. He could easily deal with her teasing but he didn't know how to answer to the cold Commander Shepard, hero of Torfan.

"Now, the teams," she continued after a short pause. "I want a biotic in each one and that is not negotiable." She looked at everyone carefully in the room. "Alenko, you'll lead team alpha. Williams and Liara with you. Wrex, team beta, Tali and Legion with you." The Krogan grunted something but nodded with force and determination nonetheless. "Javik, team gamma, with EDI and Solus. I'll lead team delta. Vakarian and Vega with me."

Vega seemed pretty pleased but Garrus frowned. He had never worked with the soldier and Ilos didn't seem to be the best place to test this configuration.

"What is it, Vakarian?" Shepard asked suddenly. Garrus straightened – how did she know? He wasn't even in her field of vision. She turned slightly to him. "Speak, dammit." Everyone was now looking at him and Garrus felt his throats tighten. He hated the attention.

"I don't think a team with two of the newest elements is a wise choice, Commander."

"Yeah," Shepard snorted, "because you obviously know better than me who's capable of what." Garrus took the hit pretty badly. He had earned that one and he would have kept his mouth shut if Shepard had stopped there. But she didn't. "You've spent so much time talking to the crew recently," she mocked. "Great job bounding with your teammates, Vakarian."

"I only followed your example, Commander," Garrus automatically snapped back. Shouldn't have said that, he thought, feeling cold sweat running along his spine. The look Shepard gave him made him regret his words, his disputable choice of career and the day his mother had brought him to the world. Garrus kept his eyes on the wall, waiting anxiously for the hammer to fall, while the room felt absolutely silent. He didn't dare to breath until she spoke again.

"EDI, you're coming with me. Vakarian, with Javik and Solus. Dismiss."

She walked to the door without another word, her people giving her way. Some of them, particularly the Prothean, gave Garrus a cold look as they left the room one by one after their commander. Garrus stayed at parade rest with the firm intention to be the last to leave but Solus stayed with him in silence. The Salarian eventually nodded for himself and came closer to Garrus to give him a sorry pat on the upper arm.

"Stupid move. Impulsive. Won't be forgiven easily."
Garrus nodded and walked out of the communication room, Solus on his heels.

"I am sick of you, Salarian!" Javik roared. Garrus' finger twitched on the trigger of his Carniflex, and he looked around him nervously, searching for visual clues. It seemed he hadn't zoned out for very long, they were still in sight of the big tree with black leaves. "Stop talking or I will make you, permanently!"

"Can't," Solus replied with a solid smile behind his breathing mask. "Have to cure the genophage."

Javik's figure glowed green for a second and ripples formed around his chest in the water – he was much smaller than Garrus or Solus who both had muddy water up to the waist. Garrus knew he had to interrupt him but he was also afraid the wrath of the Prothean would fall on him. He cleared his throats nonetheless. Javik turned to him swiftly, his four eyes screaming for murder. Solus also looked at Garrus, his eyes already focused on the next move.

"You're both right," Garrus compromised. "Javik, you can't kill the Professor, the Council needs him, and, Professor, we have to keep it quiet so please refrain on the talking." Both aliens stared at him for an uncomfortable minute before resuming their walking through the mangrove. Garrus sighed in his helmet. People. Always in the way of good work.

They walked past the tree on their left, slowly aiming for the building from which Kryik emitted his last signal. Shepard had wanted to cover the surroundings before going in, just in case. Her "always in sight" rule had proven impossible to follow for long so they just had kept a periodic radio contact with the other teams. It was Javik's job as leader of team gamma and Garrus was pretty grateful for that. He was in no shape for talking to Shepard now, nor she to him anyway. They both were tensed and angry at each other, that would only lead to yet another argument. There wasn't many options to release the tensions between them: talking, fighting or fucking. Garrus snorted. He'd choose the fight over any other option anytime. He never looked like an idiot during a fight.

Solus suddenly stopped in the middle of the channel and looked on their right. Garrus automatically followed his movement and saw a long scaly red fin break the surface of the water, fifteen meters or so from them. Garrus shivered. He knew his armor could take the bite of big animals but this fish or reptile or whatever it was seemed pretty big. A look to Javik, still walking on point, informed Garrus the Prothean didn't notice the fin.

"Javik," Garrus called by radio, "four o'clock."

The biotic wave was so violent and sudden that for a second the water level fell to Garrus' knees. The water hit him in the back and made him lurch on a few meters. Javik had slammed an enormous fish-like creature on an antic wall covered with rusty vines. It was over ten meters long, greenish brown scales as big as the palm of the hand all over, whiskers and teeth like sabers around an enormous round mouth gasping for water. Javik maintained it still a second before slamming it again and again against the wall. It eventually broke down in a formidable blast, projecting muddy water, dark blood and plants all around. The creature's tail thrilled over the wall one last time and fell, inert.

"What's going on?" Shepard's voice rang through the radio. Garrus straightened automatically.

"Just a fish, Commander," Javik replied, already resuming his walk.

"A fish?"

"A big fish." The radio link was cut but Garrus knew Shepard just wanted to talk to Javik in private.
as the Prothean kept answering her questions. He could barely hear him over the distance. "I'm fine, Commander." A pause. "I've seen enough of what is left of the Empire to know Ilos is nothing more than a dead world." A pause and a snort. "I intend to keep on killing animals, yes." He almost yelled: "Which Salarian were during the Empire, by the way."

"Nonsense," Solus replied. "Fall of the Protheans dated back to roughly fifty thousand years before Council Era. Primitives at the time, not animals. Had developed tribes, several languages and rudimentary agronomic, astronomic and mathematical knowledge."

Javik glared over his shoulder and glowed green again. Solus was smart enough to stop talking and they walked in silence until they reached the building. It looked like a temple or something like that, Garrus thought as he detailed it from its large parvis, but somehow dedicated to science. The top of the building revealed a metallic cover, once shiny but horribly degraded today. Most of the lower levels were covered by the vegetation but it was clear people had came here on multiple times. Tunnels had been created through the plants and there were traces of fires all around.

A noise on his right made Garrus point his gun in this direction, only to find Alenko, followed by Williams and Doctor T'Soni. He lowered his weapon and nodded to the Lieutenant Commander.

"This is amazing," T'Soni said, slowly turning on their heels to look everywhere. "Definitively Eferon era architecture. Look at those engravings! It's a shame they're so damaged." They practically ran to Javik and took his arm to make him spin with them. "Isn't it fantastic? I'm sure we can find marvels in the city!"

Javik violently pulled out his arm and took a few steps back. "You disgust me, Asari," he spat before walking away. T'Soni tried to apologize but Javik rebuffed them each times. Alenko came to the Doctor to put a hand on their shoulder.

"I understand your enthusiasm Liara, but I think Javik needs to be alone for a moment," Alenko said softly. The Asari nodded and walked back to Williams.

It took five minutes for the Krogan to arrive with his team. Garrus had understood he was friend with Javik but Urdnot didn't try to talk to him or anything. He just looked at the Prothean, sighed deeply and went to assist T'Soni and Zorah in their exploration of the parvis. They waited another five minutes before team delta arrived. Shepard summoned everybody but Javik stayed a few meters away, sitting on what was left of a statue. The Commander let him.

"No sign of Nihlus?" she asked.

"The place's pretty big," Alenko said. "We could have missed him ten times."

"And fauna relatively aggressive," Solus added. "Could have eaten the body."

Not helping, Garrus thought while everybody stared at the Salarian.

"Nihlus' three last signals came from inside this building," EDI intervened. "There is no reason for him to have moved outside."

"No reason?" Solus mocked. "Plenty of reasons! Seeking help an excellent reason."

"There would be blood all around," the Krogan said.

"No," Garrus dared to contradict him. "It rains everyday somewhere like that, blood would have been washed away. Plus, our blood decays faster than any else. It'd require a fully equipped lab to find traces here after ten days and I'm not even sure they'd find anything considering the
"You're suddenly the expert, Turian?" Urdnot grunted, folding his arms.

"I recall having worked at C-Sec for a few years," Garrus replied, checking how many ammo he had left out of habit. "Not many but still more than you, Krogan."

"Shut the fuck up," Shepard interrupted before Urdnot could reply, "both of you. EDI, Legion, Tali, try to find something around. The rest of you, take five and I don't want to hear any of you." She didn't wait for an answer and walked past them in Javik's direction.

"Gotta take a piss," the Krogan grunted as an excuse to put some distance between him and the group. Garrus snorted and receded a few steps back, deciding to stand guard, facing the mangrove, gun in hand. He would have liked to shoot one of those big fishes and kind of hoped one would show up, teeth first.

"Hey, Garrus," Vega whispered, coming his way. Garrus gave him an annoyed look back but the Human didn't understand. "What's going on, buddy?"


"Come on, I'm not an idiot, can't be nothing. I know the Commander is worried sick for her mentor, pretty obvious. She's been jumping at everyone's throat since we left the Omega Nebula. Well, I'm not complaining much. She was on fire and needed someone to spare with so you can say we had fun together. Not the kind of fun I'd like to show her but still, good stuff."

"You're being disrespectful, Lieutenant," Garrus reminded him, keeping his eyes on the large devastated avenue in front of them. Vega poked him with his elbow.

"And you got some dirty mind, Vakarian," Vega smiled behind his mask. "Wasn't talking about horizontal tango, if you know what I mean."

"I do not."

"Anyway," Vega continued, totally ignoring Garrus' protest, "I understand why she's angry but you? I don't get it, and I'm usually pretty good at reading people. Wanna talk about it? Maybe I can help."

A hundred thoughts raced in Garrus' mind but not a decent reason made its way to the finishing line. He was upset, of that he was sure, but over a thousand stupid little things. He missed his shitty apartment in the wards, barely bigger than his quarters on the Normandy; he missed his numbing job, his stool at the bar he went everyday after work; he missed his workbench where he'd clean his weapons; he missed the amazing view he had of the Citadel when walking through the stairs; he missed the stupid chatters of his colleagues, the twisted mind of his boss, the so-tired-of-your-bullshit face of the Executor, the crowd in the public transportation, the smells in the streets. He missed his quiet dulling life and the occasional rush of adrenaline that proved he was still alive.

It was easier to blame Shepard for being a shitty mentor but those words didn't come out of Garrus' mouth.

"I'm just tired, I guess," he said, his chest heavy. He was glad to wear his helmet, otherwise Vega might have 'read' what he really felt.

"I can help with that," Vega smiled again, bumping Garrus with his shoulder. "Doing nothing all
day gets on my nerves too so I've been working out after dinner, you know, to be at least physically
tired. Come down to the shuttle bay sometimes, that'd be cool to spare with you."

"Vega," Shepard barked as she walked behind them to the group, "stop talking, you're giving me a
headache."

"Sir, yes Sir!" the Lieutenant snapped, giving a salute to the avenue. Garrus waited for a similar
comment but Shepard kept on walking without a word for him. He rolled his eyes and followed
her.

Kryik's last signal came from deep within the building, probably underground, but there weren't
many ways to access his location, only one actually, a long corridor after a series of outdoor
gardens with balconies, discreet corners and secret passages. The perfect place for an ambush. It
was decided that Shepard, Javik and Urdnot would take point. Garrus, the Geth and Williams
would keep an eye on them from above, following catwalks between the balconies. The rest would
form the rear, lead by Alenko.

The sniper team hadn't left the main group for more than thirty seconds that Garrus turned to the
Human and the Geth.

"I'll take the right, you two, cover the left," he said, switching for his sniper rifle.

"No way," Williams told him. "We stay together."

"That makes no tactical sense at all," Garrus replied, checking the thermo clip.

"Correct," the Geth approved, its facial plates waving. "Maximum potential can be reached with a
does points formation. We recommend for a sniper to stay at the entry point, and two exploratory
units on both sides on the area following the leading team."

"Yeah, like it said," Garrus nodded, engaging the first bullet in the canon. He didn't let Williams
time to protest. "Geth, can you find an optimum location at the entrance?" The machine seemed to
calculate for a second before answering by a simple yes. "Then get there and keep everybody
informed of what's happening."

"Affirmative," the Geth replied. It put its impressive sniper rifle in its back and prepared itself to
jump on a balcony above them. "This unit has a name, Spectre Vakarian. It is called Legion."

This Spectre doesn't care, Garrus thought as the Geth jumped and disappeared in the vegetation. He
ignored Williams' stillness and walked to a couple of stairs leading to a balcony.

Garrus immediately felt better once alone. His mind got quiet and his instincts kicked back. He
found cover, an eye still on the leading party thirty meters or so before him. Eye on the scope,
Garrus had a clear view of the area and he explored it to find traces of the mercenaries. They were
supposed to come here to find goods to sell, after all, and they might have been around. It was
unlikely, Garrus knew it, but a man could dream.

Discreetly following Shepard's team from cover to cover, Garrus quickly found himself blocked by
a wall. The map on his omnitool told him he could jump over and continue on another balcony. He
would have done so without thinking if he had been alone but he was part of a team. Garrus called
Williams and the Geth to inform them he was going to lose sight of the leading party for a moment,
then went back to his original plan. He ran on a few meters and jumped against the wall, easily
lifting himself with forty kilograms of equipment trying to make him fall. Garrus
made sure he had a good grip and pushed hard on his arms. He was glad he was alone because his landing on the other side didn't look good. Efficiency mattered anyway, not style, he thought as he took cover behind a statue, gun already in hand. It had been cleared of vines, contrary to some others around.

A quick look over the statue told him there had been a camp here. There were crates, trashes and a dead fire not five meters from his location. And armor parts. With all kind of bloods splashed over it. Dammit.

"Commander," Garrus called reluctantly, "I've found a camp with armor parts and bloods here. No survivor."

"What kind of armor parts?" Shepard asked. Garrus took a few steps in the camp, keeping an eye on his surroundings. The blood was fresh. Whatever took down those mercs could still be around.

"Mostly human," Garrus noticed. "Some salarian and turian too." He followed a trail in the grass for a few meters and saw what was left of a krogan helmet. It had been chewed. "And krogan."

"The turian parts, anything black and red?"

"Hard to tell." He retreated with precaution, his gun pointed in the trail's direction. Garrus heard Shepard sigh, not of annoyance but just because she was trying to keep her cool. He felt guilty. "Can't imagine any half-decent Turian wearing black and red though," he said. "It's so last season."

Silence rang in his radio for so long Garrus thought Shepard had hanged up on him. "You're impossible, Vakarian," she eventually mumbled. "Heading underground now, some sort of elevator. Shepard out."

"Aye, aye, Commander," Garrus replied, breathing again.

A branch creaked somewhere on Garrus’ left. He aimed in that direction immediately, his eyes searching through the vines for anything bigger than a bird. Slowly retreating, Garrus kept all his senses focused in front of him until he saw a shadow over his own on the ground. He just had time to notice its enormous size before a bullet pierced the monster behind him, followed by a fantastic roar.

The vines in front of Garrus suddenly moved and a gigantic gray insect came out of its cover, mouth wide open on scissor-like mandibles, tentacles like whips clapping on the ground, hissing and sputtering. Garrus didn't think. He discharged his clip in the bug's mouth, barely noticing the second shot from a sniper rifle, and started running, charging his gun at the same time. The monster followed him, shrieking and squeaking. There was no time for a plan so Garrus veered off to the balcony's railing and jumped over it.

The ground received him six meters lower. Garrus felt bolt in his legs and threw himself to roll on the ground. He then knelled and discharged a second clip on the monster following him. The ground shook when it fell, leaves flying all around. Garrus rolled away, recharging again.

"We don't have a clear sight of the second target," the Geth said through the radio. "Moving now."

Garrus got back on his feet and ran to the nearest cover. He discharged another clip while the monster approached, zigzagging to avoid most of the bullets.

"I don't see you either, dammit," Williams shouted between two heavy breaths – she was running. "I told you to stay with us!"
"And we would all be in this mess if I had followed your idea," Garrus replied, searching for another clip. Which wasn't there. A quick look over his cover told him his clips were on the ground behind the bug, where he had landed. That was inconvenient.

"You fucking Turian!" Williams swore but Garrus didn't pay attention to the rest of her insults. The bug seemed to have noticed the lack of bullet thrown at it and it charged in straight line. Garrus had no choice but to start running again. He put his gun in its holster and took his sniper rifle. Far from perfect for close range but at least he had a full clip in it and it packed a lot of power. Garrus just had to manage himself enough time to aim and shoot. A second, that was all he asked for.

"Spectre Vakarian," the Geth said, "please remove yourself from line of sight."

Garrus didn't hesitate and jumped on the side, pumping on his legs and probably breaking a personal record. The bullet pierced the monster in a perfect headshot but it wasn't enough to stop it. The bug curbed its heels and Garrus took his chance. He aimed and pulled the trigger once, twice, three times, emptying the clip. He fell on the ground hard, his shoulder protesting in the process, and the monster followed him, squeaking and spitting all over. Garrus didn't dare move a muscle as the bug released bubbly breaths. When the Geth shot it one last time, the explosion made Garrus jump a little.

"Target terminated," the Geth announced. "Moving to new location."

Garrus barely had time to catch his breath and sit before he received a call from Shepard.

"Solus's near you?" she asked. The communication was shaky at best but he clearly heard panic in her voice. Now wasn't the time for a bitchy comment about how fine he was, thank you very much, even if he was dying to tell her that.

"Not in my immediate surroundings, no. You need him?"

"Get his skinny ass to the elevator ASAP," Shepard ordered. "We found Nihlus."

TBC
Someone was singing in English but Nihlus couldn't understand a word of the lyrics. He never had had a thing for languages, to the point he even relied on his translator to speak with his fellow Turians. The damn thing must have been deactivated again. It was an old model but changing it meant two to three days of rest and Nihlus wasn't the kind of guy to sit tight and wait. He tried to lift his left arm to his temple but all he managed to do was hurt himself. A terrible pain spread from his shoulder to his arm and chest, radiating like a supernova. Nihlus growled.

The singer stopped and talked to him in a language Nihlus definitively didn't understand. Wasn't anything turian he knew three words of, that's for sure. The voice was alien, high with nasals and throat clicks, salarian probably. Nihlus opened an eye but his vision was blurry and the light in the room was dim anyway. He was in a corner, sitting low in a horizontal bed, with a wall on his left and a long room on his right. Some other beds, medical stuff all around and a door behind a tall and slender fuzzy silhouette. Definitively a Salarian. Where the fuck was he?

"Spectre Kryik?" Etherian, his mother tongue. Thanks the Spirits. Nihlus tried to talk but his throats were dry like Palaven's salt desert on a hot day. The Salarian noticed it and came to him with a bottle of water. Nihlus detailed him as he drank, even if the Salarian was still a little blurry. Light skin, beige and red, pretty uncommon for his kind. His face was marked with countless wrinkles and little scars. One of his horns was missing.

"Professor Solus, I presume," Nihlus saluted him when he was done drinking. The Salarian nodded. Nihlus knew him because he had worked on the genophage cure with Shepard and Wrex. He had been one of the few trusted Spectres to search for a good candidate up to the task. Solus' dossier had been in his hands a couple of times.

"Just a second." Solus put the water bottle on another bed behind him and twiddled on his omnitool. "Might hurt," he said before hitting a button.

Bolt pierced Nihlus' brain for a long second. When he opened his eyes again, his implants focused correctly and he could see all the details of the room, slightly enhanced. There was someone else sleeping in a bed under a light cover, a Human with red hair. Shepard.

"Had to sedate her," Solus admitted, scanning Nihlus' head with his omnitool. A low vibration resonated in his skull, indicating his translator was functioning again. "Won't ameliorate our relationship but necessary. Been on my back for thirty-nine hours straight. Couldn't take more."

"I hear you, Professor," Nihlus snorted. "She can be a real pain in the ass."

"Added that fact to her dossier, for future reference." Nihlus couldn't help but smile. He relaxed a little in his bed and noticed all the pillows used to make him more comfortable. Human beds were not made for Turians at all. He also wore turian clothing, a black and orange shirt and some large pants, but nothing of his own – orange? Seriously?

"Where am I?" Nihlus asked, going back to business. He took a look at his left arm, immobilized tightly against his chest by stretch bands over his shirt. Well that explained the pain.
"Normandy SR-2, under Spectre Shepard's authority," the Salarian answered, now activating a
machine above the bed. It glowed blue as it scanned Nihlus up and down several times. "Medbay,
obviously. Currently heading for Arcturus Station in Arcturus Stream where transport has been
arranged. Have been rescued on Ilos thirty-nine hours ago. Unconscious since then. Multiple
traumas to abdomen and legs, had to remove five bullets and restore six ribs, scapula, humerus, left
lung and muscle tissues. Blood loss very important, no more stock, fortunately other Turian on
board compatible but reached his limit too. Please refrain from bleeding."

"I'll do my best," Nihlus assured, an amused smile on his face due to the incongruity of the request.

"Recommend rest," Solus continued, stating the obvious. "Will sedate you if needed."

"I can't lift a finger without hurting all over. Don't worry, I'll stay in bed." That was a lie. The trip
to Arcturus Station would take six or seven days. The only way to make him stay in the medbay
was to sedate him all the way. Solus studied Nihlus' face for several seconds. He didn't buy his
bullshit.

"Will administrate painkillers in two hours," the Professor said, probably deciding keeping Nihlus
in bed was not worth the trouble. "Have to be careful, Turians easy targets to addictions."

"Tell me about it," Nihlus grinned. He didn't know many of his own not addicted to something.
Himself could easily fall into his favorite vices: sex, alcohol, drugs, shooting stuff, adrenaline,
anything he wouldn't feel bad about the next day, really.

The machine stopped and Solus put it back on the side of the bed. "Can wake Shepard up if you
want," he offered.

Nihlus' eyes fell again on the sleeping form on the other side of the room. He barely saw her in the
dim light but he could hear her breath softly, her chest rising and falling under the cover. She
seemed at peace.

"No, let her sleep. She probably needs it."

"Yes," Solus confirmed. "Sleep pattern deeply impacted by your disappearance and let's not talk
about mood. Hm. Been around more balanced Humans before." Nihlus snorted, and damn if it hurt.

"Bad temper, military life and biotics have this kind of impact on Humans, I can confirm that."

"And Humans not known for their hormonal stability, especially females."

"Ouh, don't ever say that around a woman," Nihlus warned him.

"Biological fact," Solus insisted, going back to the desk where his computer was.

"Still, you might get punched."

"Always a pleasure to be hurt for scientific accuracy." Nihlus smiled. He liked the guy.

Nihlus couldn't find sleep again but Solus was kind enough to give him a datapad to spend the
time. They were in the middle of the night shift, that meant only Legion was up and running in the
new configuration of what was left of Shepard's crew. And that human AI, Nihlus remembered. It
had been part of the package: steal a brand new Normandy and get a free AI with it! Nihlus had
seen the ship docked at the Citadel two or three weeks after the Cerberus attack but he didn't have
the pleasure nor the time to take a tour. Shepard had just arrived and had a million things to do
while he was sent once again in batarian space to deal with those four-eyed motherfuckers. They
had exchanged a few words in an elevator and that was it. Oh he had sent a few emails but Shepard rarely answered. She didn't like to be under surveillance. One of the reasons their partnership had been so rough. And enjoyable.

Nihlus first checked the crew list. He knew Shepard had lost a lot of men during her raid on Cerberus' HQ. Pressly was dead. Well, Nihlus wouldn't miss the old racist prick. Pakti, Chase, Dubyansky, Grenado, Emerson, Laflamme, Waaberi, all those names didn't mean anything for the Turian. They were dead anyway, nothing he could do about it.

All the non-human personnel had survived, strangely, but Nihlus was glad to know Wrex, Tali and Liara were well. He liked them. Javik was still around too and the new Executive Officer apparently. That wasn't bad news per se but Nihlus would have been fine without the Prothean. Joker, Williams, Alenko, Traynor, all good news too, he supposed. Nihlus didn't care much for the engineers so he switched to the newest members. A Human, Vega, Alliance Navy, put there by Anderson. The Admiral would do a big favor to Nihlus the day he'd leave Shepard alone but the two Humans were friends and admired each other. A man could still dream.

There was Solus, of course, but Nihlus knew all he had to know about the Salarian so he focused on the Turian, Garrus Vakarian, Shepard's protege. From the picture in his file, there was no doubt Garrus was the son of Argoth Vakarian, C-Sec Executor for many years. He was the spitting image of his father, minus the eye color. Nihlus had known Argoth and even punched him in the face a few times during his career. The old Turian – how old was he now? over a hundred for sure – had a reputation of Rightfulness. He had respected the law all his life, not even plowing once. Nihlus somehow admired the man for his determination but he couldn't stand him otherwise. Argoth was the picture of the perfect Turian born and raised under the glory of the Hierarchy, for the glory of the Hierarchy, never thinking out of the box, never arguing the rules. There was Argoth's picture in the dictionary at the "pain in the ass" entry for sure.

Vakarian Junior apparently tried to live up to his father's reputation, from what Nihlus could read in his dossier. Top of his class all his life, engineering, tactics, weaponry, computers, described as brilliant, a genius even, but he only was a class thirteen. Nihlus frowned. Shit, they had the same grade. Vakarian had the potential to be much higher in their social order considering his skills but he had been a thirteen for a very long time. That meant the guy lacked leadership, or even rudimentary social skills. Double shit. They both were Spectres, that didn't help either. Nihlus had a lot more experience than Vakarian on the field because he had been a Spectre for more than a decade, but his range of skills was nothing compared to what the kid was capable of.

He put the datapad aside before he could learn too much about Shepard's protegee. It was better to meet and talk to the guy before jumping to conclusions. Nihlus' left arm hitched nonetheless. That was just his luck.

Solus administrated him painkillers on time and informed him Doctor Chakwas would soon be here – the mess was now brightly lighted up as the day shift slowly started. Nihlus waved goodbye to the Salarian and waited for him to reach wherever he was going to get out of bed. The painkillers helped a lot but walking to the mess turned out to be an unpleasant experience – damn, the new Normandy was way much bigger than the previous one, that was kind of ridiculous. Nihlus fell more than he sat in a chair and saluted Gardner who was starting breakfast.

"Still alive, huh?" Gardner teased, taking stuff out of the fridge.

"I can return the compliment," Nihlus replied, searching for a comfortable position in the chair. It had clearly been designed for Humans by Humans. Damn, the Normandy was supposed to be a collaboration between Turians and Humans, you'd think they'd take that into consideration for the
furniture. "I'm kinda disappointed," Nihlus added. "If you were dead, the Normandy would finally have a decent cook."

Gardner laughed. "Wait till you see the marvels I can do here, Spectre Kryik. The SR-1 didn't have a proper kitchen, we just heated up frozen military rations, but here, look at all the shiny equipment I have! I cook fresh every day for no less than seven species and nobody complains anymore!"

"Nobody complains because they're afraid you'll poison them." Gardner laughed again and started cooking. Within five minutes, Nihlus had a cup of hot cafínex in front of him, the instantaneous stuff found anywhere where a Turian from the Hierarchy had been. "Who drinks that horror?" Nihlus asked. "Your new Turian?"

"Yep," Gardner replied, busy slicing vegetables.

"Well he has shitty tastes," Nihlus grumbled. "You have some spari somewhere?" Gardner fumbled in a drawer to find a little bag of the quarian spice that he threw through the mess. Nihlus didn't catch it, all his chest vigorously protesting against it, and a laugh like a bark mocked him.

"Isn't that my favorite Krogan in the galaxy," Nihlus smiled as he turned to see Wrex take the sachet from the ground. The Krogan was followed by Tali, so small compared to their old friend. "And look at this gorgeous apparition," Nihlus added. "I must be hallucinating if such beauty gives me the honor to see her." Tali twiddled her fingers, looking away. Nihlus' smile widened.

"Keep your dick in your pants, Kryik," Wrex laughed. He threw the sachet on the table. "She's mine, remember?"

"I heard quite the opposite," Nihlus replied, reaching for the spari. The Quarians weren't exactly a matriarchy but their women had the upper hand in their society nonetheless. They decided who could get into their pants. Wrex was Tali's, not the other way around.

"I fuck her, that's enough for me," Wrex shrugged. Tali slapped him on the arm but the Krogan only sneered in return. He sat next to Nihlus and Tali in front of her – her what? Boyfriend? Giant angry sex toy? Uncle she had really unhealthy and disturbing sex with? Nihlus couldn't decide as he chewed on the sachet to open it – with his left arm immobilized, he had no other option. Wrex eventually took pity of him and opened the spari for him. "Did Shepard scold you yet?" he asked.

"She's sleeping," Nihlus replied, finally putting the spice in his beverage. "Why would she scold me? I'm nothing but incarnated perfection." Tali snorted behind her mask and Nihlus gave her a smug little smile. She may have had a thing going on with Wrex but that didn't mean Nihlus had no chance with her anymore.

"Ilos, Kryik, Ilos" Wrex said in a low voice. "What were you thinking?"

"I had to go," Nihlus answered. He sipped his cafínex, trying to not splatter liquid everywhere because of that horrible human cup. Shepard totally had to invest in turian tableware now that Vakarian was part of her crew. Nihlus was looking forward to that.

"The Council knows what lives on Ilos," Wrex continued, whispering now. "Sending you there was a stupid move."

"It was a smart move," Nihlus contradicted his old friend, "precisely because the Council knows what lives on Ilos."

"But the Rach...," Tali started, only to be interrupted by Nihlus and Wrex's hard look over the table.
"What lives on Ilos," she corrected, "is pretty determined to kill you, Nihlus."

"They tried and failed," Nihlus shrugged – and regretted it immediately. Damn, it hurt. Instead, he lifted his cup in a salute. "I'm that good, Love."

"We had to rescue you."

"Details, details." Tali shook her head as Liara appeared behind her, getting out of what should be Shepard's quarters. She was as pretty as always, more voluptuous than ever in her white and blue light armor. Her bosoms looked bigger, to Nihlus' delight. Oh the things he would do to her! "Good morning, Beautiful," he grinned. "I see you finally gained indefinite access to Shepard's quarters."

He wiggled his brows and Liara's cheeks got almost black.

"The Commander's quarters are on first deck now," Liara replied with what was left of her dignity, sitting in front of Nihlus. "Those are mine."

"But you're still all lesbo for Shepard, right?" Nihlus insisted behind his cup. Liara blushed even more and stammered something incoherent. Nihlus shared a laugh with Wrex under Tali's disapproval silence.

They exchanged news as the rest of the very small crew arrived in the mess. Nihlus saluted Williams with a cold nod and not much more for stupid Alenko – that one could have had the decency to die. Karin scolded him for not being in medbay but the Doctor knew she'd have to attach and sedate him to keep him in bed. Nihlus flattered Traynor when she showed up, even if he knew he didn't have his chance with her – he had a reputation to maintain anyway. Cortez arrived with the new guy, Vega, and introduced him. Joker made it to the mess before the end of breakfast, the curvy android on his left. Nihlus never had any interest in synthetics but he might start now. The three engineers and the two privates made the rest of the crew.

Nihlus waited patiently, listening and smiling as Shepard's crew talked and talked about how great the new ship was and other stuff he couldn't give a damn about. Some left faster than others, Alenko first. Nihlus knew the Lieutenant was a good friend of Shepard but he never had managed to like the guy. Alenko was too righteous, noble and loyal, a knight in a shiny armor, enamored with the idea he had of Shepard too, which didn't help his case. Nihlus wasn't stupid, he knew Shepard would laugh at him if he ever asked her to settle down with him some day, but that didn't mean he had to sit quietly and watch all the men in this galaxy woo his protegee. Besides, it was absolutely normal for a mentor to discourage any suitor deemed unfitting and Nihlus had decided Alenko was nothing but unfitting.

The new protegee finally showed up with Javik when most of the Humans were leaving the mess. He was tall, maybe taller than his father, lean but strong, with all the right muscles at the right place. Damn hot from a turian point of view, even with the enormous scars on his face and neck. Nihlus wanted to hate him badly but he kept in mind he had to actually talk to the guy before deciding anything, so he waited for Vakarian to sit with his tray of regulatory bland Hierarchy food. He was in front of Joker, practically on the other side of the table. Nihlus had to move his chair to have a view.

"So, Vakarian, is that right?" he asked.

"Spectre Kryik," Vakarian saluted strictly.

"Don't worry," Joker intervened. "It takes two to three weeks for him to defrost. Too bad you won't stay so long with us."
"Might take longer this time," Wrex commented.

"Why?" Joker asked.

"You obviously never saw a Turian from the Hierarchy and a Seppy try to talk."

"I'm not a Separatist," Nihlus corrected. "My father was and, true enough, I was born and raised on a colony but my mother sent me to bootcamp at fifteen like any other good kid and I have been a brilliant element of society ever since." Tali snorted. Vakarian seemed to defrost slightly. He even gave a look to Nihlus, who felt obligated to give more details. "My mom was raised in the Hierarchy," he said, "and she became a mercenary at some point. Never asked why. Anyway, she was at peace with her decision but she didn't want to impose me a life as a Seppy. It was better if I could make my own choice, and for that I had to know both sides. I turned out pretty well in the end."

"That's debatable," Tali teased. Nihlus smiled at her, charming like he knew how to be.

"What's your class?" Vakarian asked. Shit, Nihlus thought. Turians from the Hierarchy always asked for names, classes, why one had chosen those tattoos and this kind of crap. It helped them determine who had the upper hand in a new relationship. Nihlus hated that in the Hierarchy. Seppies were much more relaxed on the subject.

"Thirteen," he admitted.

"Huh." Yep, Nihlus thought, we're gonna have a problem. "Your tattoos are from Pallin," Vakarian continued.

"Yep."

"Your mother?"

"No, she had Chronidas tattoos."

"Why the Pallin's then?"

Because I'd never have heard the end of it, Nihlus replied for himself. Damn, he had been a kid from a secessionist colony in the middle of Turians born and raised in the Hierarchy. He had known his origins would follow him all his life even if he were to excel in everything. Nihlus had chosen the Pallín's tattoos when he had gained citizenship simply because it was the most vastly spread tattoos you could find in the Hierarchy. One fifth of the population claimed those marks. His first – and unique – language, accent and looks were enough to remind people from where he came.

"I wanted to blend in, is all," Nihlus replied. "Yours come from your father, correct?"

"Both my parents were Vakarians."

"What?" Tali interrupted. "This is horrible!"

"Why would it be?" Vakarian asked, frowning.

"It's a relatively common name for Turians," Nihlus explained. "His parents weren't necessarily from the same family but their ancestors came from the same city a very, very long time ago, before the Unification. Don't worry Tali, it has nothing to do with consanguinity."
"Oh," she replied. "I guess it's acceptable then." Vakarian gave her a look that clearly indicated he didn't need her authorization on the subject.

"Quarians are very careful regarding their lineage," Nihlus told Vakarian. "It's because they have a very small pool of genetic material and they can't afford the price of incest."

"Can anybody?" Joker snorted.

"Consanguinity within royalty was common in human societies less than eight hundred years ago," Vakarian replied.

"I'm not going to listen to a History lesson on my people from a Turian," Joker declared as he stood up, falsely offended.

"I'm sure you'd learn a thing or two," Vakarian continued, dead serious.

"See?" Joker laughed, turning to Nihlus with his cup of coffee in hand. "You talk to the guy for fifteen minutes one morning, your head still up your butt, and that's what happens. He defrosts and leaks his bad sense of humor everywhere." Vakarian snorted behind his cup of cafinex. A turian cup of cafinex.

"Where did you get this?" Nihlus asked abruptly, making Joker look guilty for nothing.

"Cafinex? I asked for a..."

"I don't care about that disgusting thing you call a drink," Nihlus interrupted him, "I'm talking about the cup." Vakarian gave him a doubtful look.

"We bought turian tableware on Omega," Liara answered.

"Oh so this guy shows up and he gets in five minutes what I couldn't in five years? Fantastic!"

"It was necessary," Javik intervened. "The Turian will live with us for a year, whereas you just use the Normandy as your personal cab without even thinking of the inconveniences you generate."

Nihlus chose humor to reply, even if he wanted to punch the Prothean pretty badly. "Yes, Javik, you're right, my entire life is dedicated to make you miserable. I'm sorry, really." The sarcasm didn't please the Prothean at all and Nihlus had counted on it. He lifted his empty cup to Javik, looking at him straight in the eyes, and barely noticed the movement in his back. A flick on his fringes made him jump on his feet. "Fuck! That hurts! Who did..." Turning, Nihlus' eyes fell on a very angry Shepard, arm folded and eyebrows frowned. She would have been more convincing without her bed hair though. He tried to hide his amused smile but didn't succeed. "Hello, Sweetheart. Slept well?"

Shepard stared at him for a long minute, dead serious. Nihlus asked himself how much of the previous conversation she had heard. Probably a lot, by her look. Shepard could tolerate a lot from him when they were alone but a direct provocation to her new Executive Officer in the middle of the mess, on her ship, largely exceeded her limits.

"Vakarian," she eventually snapped, still staring at Nihlus. "You're up for a second round?"

"Yes, Commander," he replied with confidence.

"Meet me in the shuttle bay in ten then," Shepard ordered, her voice still full of authority but softer. Pleased. She kept staring at Nihlus for another second before turning heels, leaving him stupidly
standing where he was. Vakarian stopped eating immediately and stood to put away his tray like the good little soldier he was. Nihlus looked at him over his shoulder as he walked through the mess, fists clenched.

"It's decided," Nihlus said an hour later as Shepard entered her cabin, "I hate him."

"What are you doing here, Nihlus?"

Nihlus lifted his head from the pillow to take a look at Shepard, in sport wear, all sweating and bruised. Exhausted but with that satisfied sparkle in her eyes. Spirits, did he love her like that.

"Waiting for you to complain," he replied, patting the bed.

"I'm not in the mood, Nihlus," Shepard sighed. She came closer to the bed nonetheless to retrieve her uniform she had thrown on a chair and picked it up.

"I admit things did not turn out like I wanted," he said, leaning his head again on the pillow. "The Rachnis were a bonus I could have done without."

"You knew they were on Ilos. Mercs weren't worth the risk."

"I wasn't on Ilos for the mercs," Nihlus corrected, looking through the skylight. Pretty cool idea but you had nothing to see within the relay network. "Well, because of them but not for them." He turned his head to look at Shepard, still standing next to the bed, her uniform in her hands. Still annoyed. "You found me in a capsule not far from a VI, correct?"

"I found you in a capsule in the middle of a bloody mess."

"Oh. Well, I was on Ilos to retrieve that VI." Shepard frowned slightly, understanding all the implications. She was smarter than what she let people think. Nihlus had learned that the hard way.

She sighed again and sat on the bed. "Who told you about the VI?" she asked. "Couldn't be a guess."

"Saren," Nihlus said. Shepard frowned for good. She didn't exactly hate Saren, she just didn't trust him. And he never had done a thing to encourage her on the opposite path. "He found an Echo Chard a few months back with memories of Ilos," Nihlus had to explain. "It was a cryogenic center, Shepard, something huge, tens of thousands of pods, like the one you found on Eden Prime with Javik inside."

"No survivor?"

"None." Nihlus slid his hand on the sheet to touch Shepard's knee with a finger. She pushed him away. "The center ran out of energy and the VI had to shut off pods after pods to keep the rest running. Eventually, it decided to kill everybody to preserve itself, to be able to give its knowledge to someone worthy."

"And were you worthy?" she mocked.

"I didn't ask," Nihlus smiled, "was too busy bleeding out and figuring out how to survive." Shepard shook her head and stood. "Did you take it?" She walked to her bathroom.

"The VI? No. Didn't even see it." She closed the door behind her.

"Keep the door open," Nihlus pleaded. "I wanna see if I can't touch."
"Fuck you, Kryik," Shepard replied from inside the bathroom. The water soon started running and Nihlus extracted himself from the bed – which wasn't easy in his state. He dragged his carcass to her desk and fell on her chair. It was a mess, papers everywhere, books, reports, pens, parts of her model ships here and there. Nihlus played a second with a pen, looking around. He opened a drawer but didn't see anything interesting in it. "If you're looking for candies," Shepard said from the bathroom, making Nihlus jump on his chair, "everything is in Javik's quarters." She had stopped the water.

"You're a cruel woman."

"You're allergic to levo food," Shepard reminded him. "Do you want to throw up in your condition?"

"Totally worth it if I could eat your pussy."

"Yeah, not gonna happen."

"Did you fuck your new Turian?" he asked, spinning with the chair.

"None of your business."

"I'd fuck him. He's hot."

"Good for you."

"I hate him, Shepard," Nihlus whined.

"Not my problem."

Nihlus sighed. Shepard was too smart to stay in the middle of two Turians questioning their respective position. She wouldn't pick a side.

"But you took him to the shuttle bay," Nihlus mumbled for himself. The look she had given him, angry, furious even. She had been worried for him, he knew it, but he had made a fool of himself because of a stupid cup. She had expected better than that from him.

"What?" Shepard asked as the bathroom opened. Nihlus stopped spinning in front of her. She was already dressed up in her Alliance uniform but her hair was wet and messy. Soon Vakarian would be sitting where he was, waiting for her to get out of the bathroom, but she wouldn't wear a thing. He would appreciate her defined hips and square shoulders, the fine color of her breasts, the sweet smell of her cunt.

"If I were in a better shape," Nihlus said, deciding to not let her see how jealous he was, "I'd take you against the aquarium, your legs around my waist, my hands under your lovely ass, my mouth in your neck and I'd fuck you all night long. That's what I said." Shepard rolled her eyes as she walked past him. She always had been better at reading him than him at reading her. "Do you plan on buying any fish, by the way?" Nihlus asked, spinning again. There was no point insisting on the subject.

"Nope, not my thing," Shepard replied from the other side of her model ships collection. She was taking something he couldn't see. "Do you plan on staying in my quarters until we reach Arcturus Station?"

"Yes."
"Then make yourself at home," Shepard said, now walking to the door. Nihlus' heart bounced in his chest. "There is still room in crew quarters, I'll sleep there. Just, don't let anybody in, okay? Not even Chakwas." She didn't wait for an answer, nor for the pieces of his shattered heart to fall to the ground. "Gotta go, I pushed Ilos' debrief until now but I have to explain a few things to the crew at some point. You can join us if you want."

"I'm tired," Nihlus lied, spinning and spinning again.

"Alright. If you can't find sleep, ask Solus for a sedative. The asshole knows what he's doing with those. Laters."

"Laters." The door closed behind Shepard and Nihlus stopped spinning, staring at the aquarium. Well, Nihlus thought, trying to look at the situation positively, at least he knew what Saren had felt when Shepard had been assigned to him. And that actually explained a lot regarding his mentor's attitude ever since. Nihlus sighed. He owed the old Turian an apology or two.

The first Normandy had had a skeleton crew with less than thirty people to make her run and Nihlus really didn't know how to call the dozen operating the SR-2. Everybody was too busy to hang out with him. The trip to Arcturus Station would surely be boring like a lecture from Councilor Valern. Nihlus almost went back to the medbay to lay down. At least, Karin would entertain him with chit chat – and alcohol if he still knew how to use his silver tongue.

He stayed in the mess to have the opportunity to talk to someone now and then, meanwhile scrolling endlessly on a datapad. Wrex showed up eventually. Nihlus gave him his most pleading look.

"How can a renowned Spectre like you be such an annoying little shit at the same time?" the Krogan asked as he sat in front of Nihlus.

"Not at the same time," Nihlus corrected. "I have to be serious in my work and you've seen me enough to know I'm professional when required."

"I've seen you shoot a guy in the face because he asked you for direction."

"I'm professional, not necessarily sane."

Wrex snorted. It always shook all his impressive self when he did that. "I've been around a long time, Kryik," the Krogan continued, "and I know a thing or two about your skinny kind. There is more between Baby-Spectre and you than a question of rivalry."

Baby-Spectre. That was a good one. "We can't fight, is all. If we could, we'd be done already. Or still fucking," Nihlus teased to elude the subject. Wrex frowned, disgusted. Krogans hated homosexuality with a passion. Nihlus didn't know if it always had been in their culture or if the genophage had changed things, but he found it amusing. He had to be careful though. He was in no shape for a fight with Wrex today. Or any time soon. Still, he couldn't help himself. "He's hot, right?"

"What do I know," Wrex growled. "You all look the same anyway."

"That's rich coming from a Krogan," Nihlus laughed.

"At least our women don't have balls."

Nihlus snorted as Wrex laughed at his good words. Aliens! True enough, there weren't many anatomical differences between women and men, at least not for a foreign eye. Turians didn't have
any difficulties knowing who was what, it was evident, as evident as the difference between a
female and a male Elcor from an Elcor point of view, but aliens always had troubles with one's
gender. Nihlus had heard from Saren that Humans during the Relay 314 Incident had thought
Turians were a hermaphrodite people, until they had dissected their war prisoners and found
biological differences. That was fair, Turians had done the same to Humans prisoners, even after
the intervention of the Council. It was a common practice within the galaxy anyway. Ships
sometimes disappeared, especially in salarian territory.

"Their ovaries happen to be at the same place as our testicles," Nihlus said, "so what? It works,
that's what matters. And speaking of, last time I checked, Krogans had enormous flat dicks. How
do you do it with Tali? You can barely fit a finger in a Quarian."

"Last time you checked?"

"I'm a Spectre. I live dangerously."

"Right," Wrex grinned. He looked around and bended a little over the table, almost whispering. "I
don't use my dick, if you want to know everything."

Nihlus arched a brow. Wrex had admitted something pretty shameful for a Krogan. They made a
big deal out of their masculinity. Krogans could talk all night long about their dicks, all the women
they had fucked and all the children they had fathered. Or tried to father. It extended to any woman
willing to fuck a Krogan, most of them after receiving a substantial amount of credits. Nihlus had
seen more than a hooker coming out of a private room covered in krogan cum head to toe. A real
Krogan had to know how to fight and to use his dick. Fucking a girl with a finger was for sissies.

"Does she use hers on you?" Nihlus teased.

"Bah," Wrex dismissed him, "you're just jealous. I know you always wanted to fuck my Tali but
that's not gonna happen, Kryik."

"And you will never fuck my Shepard either," Nihlus replied with a smirk.

"Charming," a very judgmental Turian said. Nihlus turned to see Vakarian coming their way,
wearing a blue and silver armor now. "Commander Shepard may be your protegee, Kryik, but she's
my mentor and I'd like you to treat her respectfully as long as you're on her ship."

"Wow," Wrex mocked before Nihlus could find something to answer, "that's more words than he
gave me since he got there. You two really have something special."

"Yeah," Nihlus snorted, "it's called hatred."

"I don't hate you, Kryik," Vakarian shrugged as he reached the kitchen. He opened a cupboard to
take a box of human tea. "I just don't like your attitude towards my mentor."

"A little bird told me you weren't exactly thrilled to have a Human as your mentor," Nihlus replied.
"You argued with her and kept mostly to yourself. Not exactly how a perfect little soldier like you
ought to be."

"Long term relationships take a little adjusting," Vakarian admitted, now pouring water into cups.
"And it has nothing to do with species," he added, looking over his shoulder. "I'm not a team
player, that's all."

"Of course you're not," Nihlus growled. They even had that in common. Damn, he hated that kid.
Vakarian gave him a cold look but he was interrupted by Shepard running out of the elevator. "You," she pointed to Vakarian then turned to Nihlus, "and you! I forbid you to be on the same deck at the same time, understood?"

"Yes, Commander," Vakarian approved before Nihlus could open his mouth.

"And what the Hell are you doing, Vakarian?" Shepard continued, clearly angry. "I told you to assist Liara and Javik this afternoon, didn't I?"

"The Doctor asked for a cup of tea..."

"Liara can move her fat ass down to the mess herself!" Shepard yelled, her face as red as her hair. Vakarian didn't insist, abandoned his cup in the sink and went straight for the elevator, mumbling a 'thanks, EDI' on his way. Nihlus would have taken pity of Vakarian if he hadn't ticked on what Shepard had said. Liara and Javik. A specialist of the Protheans and a living subject of her study, assisted by a very good engineer. Shepard had lied to him, Nihlus realized as she started to scold him. She had taken Ilos' VI. Why didn't she tell him? Why did she lie to him?

It could have been an order from the Council, Nihlus rationalized. Shepard had had to report to them eventually and they might have judged Nihlus unfit for the rest of the mission. It happened before. The Council had asked Nihlus and Shepard to go to Noveria instead of Saren, even if he had started the investigation. And Nihlus had lied to his mentor at the time. "It's not a mission for an old man like you," Nihlus had told Saren, "you'll get a cold". But Nihlus knew the Council had their doubts on Saren's loyalty at the time. They had sent Nihlus and Shepard to the frozen world to insure Saren wasn't on a bad path. And the old Spectre had been cleared of every suspicions, he had had nothing to do with Lady Benezia and her Rachni queen.

Nihlus understood why the Council could doubt him. Few Spectres stayed in the business after a decade. Most of them died in a mission and the rest was simply pushed away. They knew too much. Nihlus had kept secret information that could have ended political careers, started wars, saved very important people. He knew about the Rachnis, the cure of the genophage, the prothean beacons. He was a liability.

"Understood?" Shepard's voice snapped. Nihlus looked at her, arms folded, her eyes illuminated by anger under the harsh light of the mess. Spirits, she was beautiful.

He smiled, cocky, to hide his despair. "Yes, Commander."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Shepard sighed, throwing her arms in the air. "I'm so done. I'm out. I didn't sign up for this shit." She turned heels and walked to the elevator, leaving behind her a very still Krogan relieved to have been spared of the Commander's wrath. Nihlus watched her disappear at the corner, his chest heavy. He closed his eyes for a second, then took the datapad back and opened a new mail. He had some catching up to do with an old friend.

TBC

A note about anatomy headcanons

Turians have two throats: one from the mouth to the stomach, another from the mouth to the lungs, where is located some sort of sac they use to make sounds in order to speak. Unlike Humans, their mouth don't play a big role in air modulation for speaking. And the sac actually resonated with the other throat, creating the flanging effect.

When I first played Mass Effect 1, before I started searching for info, I found it interesting to only
see one model for Turians, and soon came up with the idea that Turians of both genders are practically identical – leading to a theory on how they don't give a shit about gender in general. I learned later that only male Turians walked the Citadel in ME1 because Bioware couldn't have two distinct models running at the time. Then I've read the comics and played to the other games but that everybody-looks-the-same headcanon stayed in my mind. I changed it a bit over time, especially after the Omega DLC, where we can see a turian woman. To me, it's just a juvenile form of some sort. Before their 20's or so, Turians are much more slender and fragile, with smaller fringes. I really like it that way so I decided to keep that headcanon for this fanfiction.
Shepard was not sure to be ready to enter the lounge. Joker had insisted to do the little mingling before they arrived on Arcturus Station and it somehow transformed itself into a party, with music, food and alcohol – damn pilot. He argued it would be nice to have Nihlus with them for this, without knowing the Spectre didn't care much about anyone in the crew. He liked her and the aliens but he had told Shepard he had no interest in the rest of the Humans. Kaidan somehow managed to be a little special but just because Nihlus couldn't stand "the most righteous and ridiculously handsome knight of the galaxy".

Frankly, Shepard had said yes this morning just because she needed an excuse to drink alcohol. She needed alcohol. A lot of it. And probably a smoke or two too. God, she badly had wanted to smoke since she had heard about Nihlus missing on Ilos, and the attitude of her mentor the last four days had deteriorated the situation. She had known Nihlus could be annoying at times but he had been way worse than that since he had woken up.

Nihlus actually didn't miss a chance to screw with Vakarian. He had taken advantage of the "not at the same time on the same deck" rule to prevent Vakarian to have access to the mess or his quarters, playing with his nerves. And Vakarian had been too much of himself to come to her to complain about Nihlus. He even had slept in the shuttle bay without telling anybody. He would still live there if Cortez hadn't ratted him out, Shepard was sure of that.

At least Vakarian wasn't mean to Nihlus. He did his best to ignore the other Turian. Shepard didn't know if it was because he was too proud to fight a wounded man or to make Nihlus enrage even more – which worked perfectly. Freaking Turians. They could have found who had the upper hand with a game of chess or anything, but noooo, they had to figure it out with their hands. That was an aspect of their culture Shepard couldn't stand. Best army in the galaxy, and yet their soldiers would bicker over who had the biggest dick. Well if it came down to that, Shepard could solve the problem with her credit card on the extranet.

"A problem, Commander?" Vega asked as he arrived behind her, in his civvies, jeans and red tee-shirt. Shepard sighed. At least, Vega had been nothing but charming and helpful since Ilos. He hadn't tried to hit on her for four days, which was his personal record. He was certainly compensating for Nihlus who couldn't shut up whenever she was around.

"I'm just praying for a platoon of angry Krogans on the other side of this door instead of my mentor and my protegee," Shepard admitted, burying her hands in her trouser's pockets.

"Oh, you too?" Vega laughed. "That new religion is trending."

"No kidding..."

"I have a question, Commander," Vega continued more seriously, looking at everything but her, "and it's not something I can ask Javik about, he'd throw me by the airlock. What are your rules about, huh, fraternization?" Shepard gave him a tired look back. There went his record. "I'm not flirting with you," he corrected awkwardly, blushing a little. "It's, huh, you know, a general question, about rules and, huh, stuff."
"I don't care what people do with their free time unless it interferes with their job and the rest of the crew," Shepard said. She wasn't blind. She knew Vega had hit on anything that looked female on the ship and some had responded positively to his sweet words. It was a matter of time before troubles popped out in front of her. "Just, I really don't want to know."


"De nada, LT."

"So, huh, what are you doing tonight, soldier?" Vega asked smoothly, ridiculously flexing his arms. "Can I buy you a drink or something?" Shepard smiled at his bad joke, shaking her head a little. James Vega was nothing but trouble indeed.

They were welcomed by raised glasses and loud spiro music, some sort of salarian arrhythmic electro jazz. It was pretty popular those days. Not Shepard's favorite but she could tolerate a few tracks before using her authority to change the playlist to something that didn't require a degree to be fully enjoyed. A quick look told her everybody was there, Legion and Javik included. Wrex had took charge of the old Prothean in a corner. They were currently talking with Adams and Chakwas. Shepard smiled at the Elders gang. Javik rarely relaxed. It was good to see him like that.

Joker was sitting on a couch, EDI standing behind him, chatting with most of the human crew and Liara. Legion stood behind the bar, in front of an already drunk Tali talking with Solus and Nihlus, who was obviously trying to flirt with the Quarian. And, of course, Vakarian was silently on his own in a corner, facing the window and the void.

"Want me to go talk to the big guy, Commander?" Vega asked.

"No, I have to do that," she sighed.

"Seems like a chore."

"I enlisted to avoid prison," Shepard mumbled, "not to talk to everybody and solve their problems." Vega laughed and abandoned her at her duties. Shepard aimed for the bar, where Solus was apparently mixing drinks.

"Anything that'll make me fall asleep in a second?" Shepard asked, caustic.

"You needed to rest," Nihlus intervened while Solus just smiled. "But, seriously, Sweetheart, you have to test what Mordin's capable of. That Salarian knows what he does with alcohols." Shepard arched an eyebrow. Mordin?

"Please, Nihlus," Solus replied humbly, "basic chemistry. Knowledge accessible to anybody."

"No!" Tali protested. "We're surrounded by idiots. Look at them! All idiots!"

"And she only had one drink," Nihlus smiled. "See? This guy is a magician!"

"I don't like magicians," Shepard replied, looking at Solus straight in the eyes. "Their job is basically to screw people over. Anyway," she added, knocking on the counter, "I need shots, barkeeper. Levo and dextro."

"Are you planing to get me drunk, Shepard?" Nihlus asked smoothly while Solus was playing with the bottles. "You know you don't need that to put me on my knees."
"What would you do on your knees?" Tali interrupted, her straw still in mouth. Or entry port. Whatever.

"Things I could do to you too, Gorgeous," Nihlus answered, all sweet and mysterious. Shepard rolled her eyes while Tali giggled.

"You won't do anything to Tali unless you want Wrex to kill you," Shepard said, taking the four little glasses full of brightly colored liquids Solus pushed in front of her. "Legion, please keep an eye on Tali. If she goes anywhere alone with that pervert, you're authorized to shoot him. Just don't kill him, I have to deliver him tomorrow to the Turian ambassador."

"Acknowledged," the Geth replied.

"You're a buzz killer, Shepard," Nihlus pouted. "I can't drink and I can't fuck. Awesome party."

"It's for your own good, idiot." She turned heels and aimed for Vakarian.

"Love you too," Nihlus laughed loud enough to be heard over the music. Shepard saw Vakarian give a look in the direction of the bar. She didn't believe he could be jealous of Nihlus but the comment annoyed him nonetheless. He wasn't the only one in this case, to be honest.

"There," Shepard commanded as she presented the drinks to Vakarian, "take one of each." He obeyed. "Now's the time to tell me you lied and you're actually allergic to levo amino acids, Vakarian."

"I didn't lie, Commander," he replied with a coy smile telling her he knew exactly what she had in mind.

"Bottoms up, then." Shepard drank the blue shot, imitated by Vakarian. The alcohol was some sort of ice cold peppermint flavored vodka, very sweet and fresh but burning the throat nonetheless. Exactly what Shepard had needed. Vakarian's face as he gulped also had been on her list, she realized. "Horrible, huh?"

"Tastes like rotten marolkf," Vakarian grunted, "and it says a lot because marolkf is basically a mix of spicy macerated vegetables in rotting fish juices." Shepard laughed. She saluted him with the dextro alcohol filled glass and drunk it at once. It prickled in her mouth and tasted like very salty soy sauce with a hint of strawberry. Awful.

"That's alright," Shepard lied, trying not to wince. "But not strong enough for me. Want another round?"

"I'm okay, Commander."

"Come on, Vakarian, you can relax tonight. And if you need permission to have fun, there, you have it."

"It has nothing to do with permission." He gave a quick look to Nihlus over everybody's heads.

"Myeah, he's the kind to attack if you show weakness," Shepard admitted. "Talk about a buzz killer. Legion," she called loud enough to cover the music, "if Nihlus approaches Vakarian, shoot him."

"Acknowledged," the Geth replied while the crew laughed and Nihlus protested.

"Now I could walk to him and enjoy the show."

"That's the spirit," Shepard laughed. He smiled a little but didn't add anything. Shepard wished she had a beer in hand to fill the blank with a sip. Or a cigarette. Or both. God, she wanted to get drunk but biotics kind of prevented that. She really needed a lot of booze to feel its effects. To the contrary, biotics multiplied the properties of nicotine. To quit smoking was literally the hardest thing Shepard ever did in her life. And there was a very pernicious aspect in that story too: nicotine actually inhibited biotics. It had helped her to keep her powers in track when she was a child roaming the streets of New York. Smoking had hid her abilities at a time when gifted kids tended to disappear at the corner and never come back.

Shepard patted her pockets in search of a lollipop, only to remember her stock was in security in Javik's quarters.

"Did you forget something, Commander?" Vakarian asked. Shepard blinked. Either it was the alcohol making him a little more human – or a little less turian in his case – or Nihlus' presence had actually modified Vakarian's behavior. Shepard had tried to stay away from both Turians during the trip to Arcturus Station to avoid drama but Javik had told her Vakarian had been more talkative than usual lately. Not much, mostly mumbling and bitching in his corner in Lab1, but enough to tell her it wasn't the alcohol.

"Did you keep the lollipop I gave you your first day on board?" Shepard asked, curious.

"Yes but it's in my armor. Might be a little crushed, though. I thought I should keep it, you know, for emergencies," he felt the need to explain. "Do you need it? I can go look for it if you want." That was a lot of words for Vakarian, Shepard realized.

"No, it's okay. What emergencies?"

"Humans have that thing," he said, searching for a word that came out in English, "hypoglycemia? Did I pronounce that right?" Shepard nodded. "Well, I thought you needed sugar at some point if you kept candies around. I looked it up on the extranet and also asked the fine Doctor Chakwas. I wanted to do something right, for once," he snorted, bitter.

"Huh huh," Shepard hesitated. Something was wrong. "You, huh, you did good, Vakarian," she said with a forced smile, backing off a little. "Stay there, I'll grab a beer and I come back, alright?" Vakarian nodded and Shepard turned heels, walking straight for Solus. "What did you do?" she asked, murder in her eyes.


"He's high," Shepard realized. "You drugged my protegee." Nihlus laughed even more and complained his ribs hurt. Shepard couldn't feel sorry. "Did you drug anybody else?" she asked, barely holding her anger. "Did you drug me?"

"No, wouldn't risk that," Solus chuckled. "But thought it would help nonetheless. Can ask questions, Vakarian will answer truthfully." He took a little flask of translucent liquid from a pocket of his lab coat and shook it gently with a smirk. "Can even make him forget everything."

"Do I look like a rapist?" Shepard growled. "Put that away before I shove it up your ass, Solus, and get out of there. I don't want you touching another bottle of anything tonight. Or ever." Legion's face plates waved. Shepard held her breath, trying to regain her cool again. The Geth had nothing to do with her anger and he would probably not understand why she'd snap at him. "Yes, Legion?"
she asked as nicely as she was capable of at the moment, but still keeping an eye on Solus who was now walking to the human group.

"Can this unit be the entity known as the barkeeper?"

Shepard blinked. "Huh, yes, if you want," she agreed, "but you keep it regular, alright? And be careful between the levo and dextro drinks."

"Yes, Shepard-Administrator." He looked happy, as much as a Geth could anyway.

"And that's how a Human satisfied a Geth for the first time in History," Nihlus mocked. Tali laughed, banging the counter with her fist. "And for once you didn't do it with your cunt."

Shepard's blood boiled but Vakarian punched Nihlus in the face before she could do it, hard enough for blood to be shed on the counter. He then grabbed Nihlus by the collar and easily lifted him off of the bar stool.

"I've had enough of you disrespecting Shepard, Kryik," Vakarian said, everybody looking at him now. Nihlus grinned back.

"Release him, Vakarian," Shepard commanded. He didn't obey. "I said..."

"I heard what you said," he interrupted her, eyes still locked with Nihlus'.

"Stay out of this, Sweetheart," Nihlus advised her before she could bark another order. He saw Javik and Wrex approach slightly. "And you too. This is between Wonderboy and me." Vakarian snorted but eventually put him back on the ground. "Maybe we should take that somewhere more private," Nihlus smiled.

"Let's get this over with," Vakarian growled as he walked straight for the door, the crew making way. Nihlus followed him, chin up, removing the bands immobilizing his left arm. They got out of the lounge as the music ironically changed for something more relaxed. Shepard wanted badly to go down with them to kick both of their asses – she could do it with her biotics – but she knew all too well where it would end to do that.

"Shouldn't we stop them?" Joker asked, worried. "I'm pretty sure they're going to kill each other."

Solus fumbled in his pocket to retrieve another little flask. "Have something for that too!" Shepard stared at him, her eyes throwing daggers, until he put the flask back in his pocket.

"EDI," Shepard growled, "keep an eye on those idiots and inform me of what's going on."

"Yes, Commander," the AI replied. Shepard sighed, trying to push the anger away. It wouldn't work, she knew it.

"I'm not in the mood anymore," she said, "but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy the party so, please, continue. Reasonably," she insisted as Joker showed signs of excitement. "We'll all be in shore leave tomorrow but you still have a job to do before we dock on Arcturus Station. I'll be in my cabin if you need me. Have fun." Shepard didn't wait for an answer and walked out of the lounge. She didn't hear a sound coming from Life Support, which meant the Turians had probably gone to the shuttle bay. Shepard hesitated a second to go to fifth deck to check on them but she eventually decided it wouldn't help. Nihlus could say whatever he wanted, she knew the situation had to do with her at some degree. Shepard sighed, pushed the button for her cabin and let the door close on her.
The mood of the crew was still pretty good the next morning during breakfast, as Shepard walked through the mess after training, Javik on her heels. Nihlus and Vakarian weren't there yet but she knew they hadn't killed each other in the shuttle bay the previous night – EDI would have told her that. There had been blood on the floor though. Shepard asked her silent question to Chakwas with a quick eye contact but the Doctor shook her head. No Turian in medbay. There still was hope then.

Shepard had just sit when Nihlus showed up, shirtless, limping a little and a lot of scars showing, old and recent. He had a bunch of band-aids stuck on him, and more serious bandages around his left arm. Otherwise, he looked pretty pleased with himself. Shepard couldn't not notice he came out of Life Support. No doubt he had waited for everybody to be in the mess to show up. Very subtle.

"Good morning everyone!" Nihlus saluted out loud. "What a beautiful day, isn't it?"

Tali growled in front of her cup of water as the rest of the crew answered more or less enthusiastically. Shepard smiled behind her cup of coffee. Quarians weren't big drinkers and their hangovers were legendary. That didn't stop Tali to reiterate her mistake each time she had the occasion. A few others also seemed to have a headache, now that Shepard was paying attention to that. Vega had a hickey on the neck. Shepard frowned a little but couldn't try to find who had made the Lieutenant a lucky man last night as Vakarian joined them in silence. He was wearing his armor already but his face and neck showed a little bruises here and there. He kind of looked calmly angry, if it made sense. Angry but at peace with it. The grin on Nihlus' face when they both waited for their food side by side explained everything.

At least they had solved their problem.

Nihlus sat in front of Shepard while he relieved Vakarian to the far end of the table. He smiled even more when Vakarian obliged without a word. Shepard rolled her eyes.

"Hello, Sweetheart," he whispered in her direction. Javik mumbled something not sweet at all in prothean, knowing Nihlus would understand it.

"Put your shirt on," she replied, digging in her scrambled eggs. "Where do you think you are? It's a military ship."

"Can't put it on, my shoulder is killing me," Nihlus said.

"Find a way," she insisted, locking her eyes with his. Nihlus stared at her for a few seconds and eventually smirked. He stood and walked to the elevator, leaving his tray untouched on the table. Asshole.

"And you, Vega" Shepard raised her voice, "where did you get that hickey?" Vega understood the message and shut up. Vakarian sighed and started his breakfast. Shepard resumed her meal in a very silent mess.

"I have to apologize, Commander," Vakarian told her an hour later. She had been on her terminal in CIC, waiting for docking on Arcturus Station, when her protegee had showed up. It was highly unusual for him to come to her so she had played it cool and not concerned, as if he was a scared little animal coming shyly to sniff the strange human she was.
"What for?" she asked, giving a look to Traynor. The Specialist understood and found an excuse to head for the cockpit.

"For my behavior yesterday evening," he said and it cost him. "It was a private matter and I shouldn't have dragged it in public. It is unforgivable and I'm ready to face the consequences."

"Why would I punish you, Vakarian?" Shepard shrugged, scrolling through all the emails she hadn't read yet. "I'd have punched that asshole too," she continued, "he deserved it." Vakarian didn't say a word. Shepard tried to lighten up his mood. She abandoned the computer to lean on the desk, folding her arms. "Or maybe you can actually apologize, yes. See, I really wanted to break his smug face yesterday but you kept all the fun for yourself. We're a team, Vakarian, you should have shared with me."

Vakarian shifted his weight slightly. "There is still time for that, Commander."

Shepard smirked. Maybe Solus' drug was still running in Vakarian's system. Thinking about it, without the chemical helper, Vakarian would probably have kept his cool the previous night.

"How are you feeling, Vakarian?" she inquired.

"Aching all over but I'm fine, Commander," he said, rolling his shoulders. Yep, definitively still under the influence. Fucking Salarian. "To be honest, I kind of needed that. A good fight always eases tensions and I had piled up quite a lot lately."

"We trained a few times," Shepard reminded him. It wasn't nice of her but she'd use the opportunity.

"It's not the same," Vakarian shrugged. Shepard arched an eyebrow. "You're all squishy. No offense."

"None taken," she lied with a forced smile. She was not squishy, she was nothing but toned muscles, dammit. "So you've been taking it easy on me?" Vakarian nodded. That didn't sting at all. "FYI, I've been doing the same," she added.

"Oh?"

"No biotics. You'd know who's all squishy if I had used them so far."

Shepard heard Vakarian laughed genuinely for the first time but he stopped quickly, trying to keep a straight face. "Maybe you could train with Wrex for a while if you think I'm a fragile little thing. I know he'll love using you as a punching-bag."

"I've meant to ask earlier but you always look so angry, I never dared." Shepard frowned a little but Vakarian continued, not noticing. "What does the Krogan do on your ship, exactly? Everybody on the crew works to maintain the ship somehow but I never saw him do anything."

"Wrex never wanted to be under my full authority because he says he's his own boss," Shepard explained. "We agreed on the term of consultant. He's no good with tech, so he's in charge of training the personnel on board. He also helps Liara and Alenko with their biotics." Javik was a more powerful biotic than Wrex but he had never agreed to help anybody with their own powers but Shepard. She couldn't complain. That meant more cool secret techniques for her.

"But T'Soni is an Asari. She should be better at this than a Krogan."

"She's a little more than a hundred years old," Shepard explained, "whereas Wrex is six times older." Vakarian looked surprised. People tended to forget Krogans could outlive even Asaris.
Truth to be told, Krogans often died relatively young because of their life style. "Never bet on Liara when it comes down to biotics," Shepard told Vakarian seriously, even if it felt like betrayal to her. He had to know. "She may be an Asari but she is young and she is not a soldier. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander," Vakarian replied, all business again. Shepard nodded. She checked on the time. She still had a minute before docking so she pushed her luck.

"The ship will be in dry dock for a week. What do you plan to do with all that free time, Vakarian?"

"I... didn't think shore leave applied to us, Commander," he answered, a little surprised.

"Why not?"

"Because we're Spectres and we already have quite a lot of free time on our hands considering all the traveling we do, even if technically we're out of time when using the relay network."

"Well, keep in mind the Council can send us on a mission at any time, even during shore leave, but the Normandy still needs repairs. They'll take that into consideration."

"I don't have plans then," he shrugged. "But I've never been on a human station before, it might be interesting. Like going to a museum. Your technology is all new but somehow outdated. It's amusing."

Shepard's comment was cut short by a radio message through the ship from Joker, telling they'd dock on the station in ten minutes and there would be a comity waiting for them. It was time to go back to work, but Shepard didn't want to face the turian ambassador with her protegee in that state. That would only lead to troubles for him if any Turian realized he was high on the job. "Do me a favor and go give a message to Solus for me, Vakarian."

"No problem, Commander. What is it?"

"Tell him to fix his mess," she smiled. Vakarian frowned a little but obeyed nonetheless, heading for Lab 2 after a sharp salute. One problem solved.

"Commander," Joker radioed her, "Admiral Hackett is requesting permission to board the Normandy as soon as possible."

Shit. "Did he say why?"

"No, he didn't."

Double shit. "Permission granted." Either the head of the Alliance had sent Hackett to try to give her a mission or the Admiral wanted to give her a head up on something important. She was in for a fight whatever he had to say.

The airlock opened a few minutes later on the turian delegation, led by someone Shepard would have preferred not to see. Saren Arterus had aged quite a lot since their last meeting, two years ago. Contrary to Humans who decayed progressively from their fifty or so, Turians stayed strong practically all their life. They showed signs of age in their final years and there was no doubt Saren didn't have much time left. He was around eighty or ninety now and would normally have had fifty to seventy years to live, but Saren was a biotic. Turian biotics tended to die young. Saren had had a long life for a gifted.
He was slimmer than before and walked arched, helped by a cane. Shepard was used to see him in a white armor but he had traded it for black head to toes now. He was but the shadow of his young self, tall, bulky, powerful. Shepard had always feared him a little but she now felt pity for the old Spectre. But she knew better than to show it. Saren hated but respected her for her strength. In his bizarre conception of the galaxy, showing pity was for the weak. Shepard had to treat him as if he was still a powerful man.

"Ambassador," Shepard saluted with a humble nod of the head. "Saren," she added, haughty. He snorted and walked first into the Normandy, followed by the ambassador who visibly had trouble dealing with the Spectre's attitude, four guards and a medic. Traynor showed Saren, the medic and a guard with a suitcase the way to the medbay. "I don't know how long it will take for my mentor to be ready to follow you. May I offer you a refreshment, Ambassador?" Shepard asked in her best Kaladran. It took a second for the Ambassador to realize she had spoken to him in the main turian language and it seemed to please him.

"Thank you, Spectre, but I'm more interested in a rumor I've heard," he said, looking around. He was curious. The first Normandy had been a turio-human collaboration but the second had been built by Humans only. The turian influence still showed in the heart of the ship but the leaving arrangements were definitively humans. Shepard didn't have the ship for long, four months now, and she had had to give the blueprints to the Alliance. She knew the Turians wanted them too but they probably couldn't put their hands on it yet.

"What rumor?" Shepard asked, opening the way to CIC.

The guards stayed near the airlock while Shepard and the Ambassador walked down the alley. "I've heard you have a turian protegee," he whispered.

"Yes, Sir. Garrus Vakarian. Would you like me to summon him?"

"No, no need for that," the Ambassador said, faking interest for the holographic map of the ship.

"He has been under my protection for a little less than a month," Shepard answered his silent question, "and rest assured he has been exemplary since he stepped foot on my ship. I couldn't be more proud of him." The Ambassador studied her face for long seconds and gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"Commander," Joker called through the radio, "Admiral Hackett is on his way."

"I'll leave you to it, Spectre," the Ambassador said. "I'd like to thank you in the name of the Hierarchy for the safe return of Spectre Kryik."

"I only did my job, Sir." The Ambassador nodded and Shepard walked back to the airlock, passing by the guards. Hackett was already at the door. She welcomed him with a sharp salute, even if she didn't have to. She was a Spectre under the Council's authority, technically not part of the Alliance anymore. Though the Alliance tended to forget that.

"Commander," Hackett saluted her with a handshake, "it's been a while."

"It has, Sir. What do I owe the pleasure to?"

Hackett smirked. "Straight to the point, huh?" Shepard had a smile of her own. All admirals had to play the politicians to stay where they were but some, like Hackett and Anderson, were glad to cut the bullshit when possible. He looked around, seeing the Turians in CIC. They needed privacy. Shepard took him to the cockpit and asked Joker to give them some room. The pilot obeyed,
limping his way out. "This is bad, Shepard," Hackett continued once the door closed.

"Bad how?" she asked, leaning against the back of the pilot's sit.

"This could lead to a ban from the Council," Hackett murmured. "Humanity would be revoked all its privileges, embassies, colonies, trades, everything, and probably quarantined to its system for the next millennium."

Shepard inhaled deeply and held her breath. Now wasn't the time to be angry but damn, she wanted to explode. It always was the same story with Humanity. They were too cocky and didn't see the big picture. They thought about all the benefits without imagining their so called fantastic ideas could lead to enormous problems. Humanity was optimist and selfish, no more than a stupid kid making a scene until it won.

Shepard knew she had been like that too before her nomination to Spectre. Hell, her cocky attitude had helped her become a Spectre but she had learned better since then. Despite all his flaws, Nihlus had taught her to shut up, listen and see the galaxy for what it was: a gigantic mess in a precarious equilibrium. Everybody had to play nice and Humanity wasn't. It was more or less tolerated because of its youth but the Council's patience ran thinner with the years. But the Alliance was blinded by its own stupidity.

"I can't help you, Admiral," Shepard eventually replied. "I'm not the Alliance's dog anymore," she added before he could speak. "I am a Spectre and I take my orders from the Council, period." She knew the Alliance would threaten to cut her allowances and without that money she wouldn't be able to keep the Normandy and her crew. It would be for a time only though. Each species had the legal obligation to support their Spectres, financially and logistically. The Alliance wouldn't play nice but they'll have to pay at some point. Unless they were banned, like the Quarians. Still, Shepard wouldn't help, even if that meant the end of her career as a Spectre. Humanity had to learn for its own good.

"I know," Hackett sighed. "I had hoped you wouldn't go that way but it's for the better." Shepard arched an eyebrow as the old man straightened his back. "Spectre Shepard, I request the Council's help. I have proof the Alliance's Prime Minister has been plotting to destroy a batarian colony in the Bahak system by deviating an asteroid to the planet Aratoht."

"Terra Nova," Shepard understood. "The Alliance will use their own tactic on the Batarians." That was bad. Hackett nodded, his face a mask of hard steel.

"We have lost contact with Project Base four hours ago."

That was very bad. Shepard didn't lose time. She opened the door with the firm intention to call the Council right away, but she was blocked by the turian delegation on their way out. She tried to pass through them without being too rude but Nihlus caught her forearm. "I have to talk to you before we part, Sweetheart."

"I don't have time," Shepard replied, annoyed by the surname – dammit, why did he use it now? Saren was just there, with the Ambassador and Hackett! She forced her arm out of Nihlus' grip.

"It's important," he pleaded.

"I doubt that," Shepard snorted, walking past the last guard. Nihlus followed her despite Saren's protestations. He walked with her through CIC, Hackett not far behind.

"Our bond is profound, Shepard," Nihlus said, not caring if everybody could hear him, "and I don't
"Now's not the time, Kryik," Shepard insisted, aiming for Lab2.

"Saren is old," he continued, pressing. "He won't be around for long and someone will have to take care of his dossiers. We work on similar cases, him, you and me, so I'll ask the Council to team us up again. You and me, working together like before on the most dangerous missions. No more Alliance on your back, just the promise of a thrilling life till death parts us. It would be fantastic, wouldn't it?"

"No," she cut short, opening the door of the storeroom. "Solus," she yelled, "whatever you're doing in there, stop it." She didn't leave him time to hide anything and stormed into Lab2, Nihlus and Hackett still following her. Solus was innocently playing with a tube, Vakarian nodding behind him, trying to look interested. "Get your ass to the comm room, Vakarian," Shepard commanded, "shore leave is canceled." She continued on her right, ignoring her protegee's evident relief, but eventually stopped before the comm room's door. "You're not going in, Nihlus."

"I can come with you," he insisted.

"It doesn't concern you."

"You're taking him with you," Nihlus accused her, pointing to Vakarian behind Hackett who was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

"He has to learn and it's my role to teach him," Shepard replied. She ran out of patience. "Look," she continued on a cold tone, "I don't have time for your bullshits, Nihlus. This is really..."

"I love you," he interrupted her. He could have punched her in the face, it would have hurt the same. Nihlus sought for her hand but she stepped back to the door, not even looking at him. How could he do this to her?

"Get out of my ship, Spectre Kryik," she said, the words heavy on her chest. Nihlus didn't move. She didn't have time for that, dammit. "Javik," Shepard called, "escort Kryik out of the ship and revoke his status. He's not allowed to board the Normandy anymore."

"Yes, Commander," Javik replied through the radio.


She didn't listen to him and entered the comm room, pushing away all of that. The door closed behind Vakarian as Shepard was already calling the Council. He was looking everywhere but at her. Shepard hoped Solus had cleaned his mess because she wasn't in the mood for a little speech from Honest Vakarian. Fortunately, Tevos replied quickly.

"Yes, Spectre Shepard?" the Asari said. "Spectre Vakarian, it's good to see you." Vakarian nodded, not sure of what he was supposed to do. "Admiral Hackett."

"We have a problem, Councilor, and it requires your undivided attention," Shepard started.

"Very well."

Shepard let Hackett speak. "Councilor Tevos," he saluted her, "I am here before you on the behalf of a few of my colleagues and I to try to amend for a terrible mistake the general staff and the Prime Minister of the Alliance have made. My superiors do not know I am informing you now but I am ready to face the consequences. Galactic peace is at stake."
"I am listening," Tevos replied coldly.

"In 2183, our colony Terra Nova has been attacked and destroyed by the Batarians," Hackett continued. "They used an asteroid to pulverize all life on the planet. It provoked a major shift in politics all around Earth and it naturally impacted our representatives in the Alliance. I have proof the current Prime Minister has secretly funded a revenge of the same kind. He planned to throw an asteroid on the colony of Aratoht in the Bahak system." Tevos shook her head a little, understanding all the implications.

"This is extremely disappointing, Admiral," the Councilor said. "The Alliance insured us there would be no initiative of this kind. It goes without saying that the Council will vote for the abandon of this plan."

"Unfortunately, there is more, madame," Hackett added. "We lost contact with the asteroid four hours ago."

"What?" Tevos growled. "What does that mean?"

"We are assuming the worst, Councilor," Hackett admitted. "Project Base was originally part of the Cerberus division."

"This is unbelievable," Tevos snorted, clearly pissed off now. "A lot of heads will fall for that, Admiral. Heck, I'd reap them myself with my bare hands if I have the chance." Too often people saw the Asaris as an elegant species of cultured beautiful women but they could be as barbaric as anyone. Sure, their military was a joke compared to the Turians' or the Humans', but they compensated with their biotics. Tevos was currently glowing blue, never a good sign with an Asari. "You have to stop this immediately, Admiral."

"I'm requesting your help, Councilor," Hackett reminded her. "I am betraying my superiors and the head of my government for the good of the galaxy, I cannot..."

"The good of the galaxy!" Tevos laughed. "You're just trying to save your ass, damn ape!"

"I'm trying to spare my species the consequences of a terrible act committed by a few blood-thirsty politicians, Councilor," Hackett replied, conviction in his voice. "My head can fall, I am ready for that, but I cannot stand there and do nothing."

"Humanity will pay for that, even if you came to us," Tevos threatened. "Spectre Shepard, on behalf of all members of the Council, I command you to investigate and stop this nonsense."

"Yes, ma'am," Shepard replied with a sharp salute.

"I believe your ship is currently grounded for repairs," Tevos continued, trying to regain her calm. "Admiral Hackett, you'll provide Spectre Shepard with transport for this mission."

"I cannot..."

"Don't you command a damn fleet, Admiral?" Tevos yelled. "You will provide Spectre Shepard everything she sees fit for this mission. She can even ask for a dreadnought, I don't care, you'll find her one!"

"Yes, madame," Hackett finally agreed.

"Spectre Vakarian," Tevos barked. Vakarian almost jumped, surprised to be the Councilor's next target. "You'll assist Spectre Shepard."
"At your command, Councilor," he replied with a salute of his own.

"This will not be unpunished, Admiral," Tevos threatened once more before cutting the communication. Somehow, Shepard's anger had disappeared. Seeing Tevos yelling at Hackett had actually been quite cathartic.

"I'll arrange transportation," Hackett sighed, already walking out of the room. Shepard didn't reply. She let him leave in silence before she authorized herself to relax a little.

"I won't take anybody with me, Vakarian," she said. "This could turn pretty bad pretty fast."

He shifted his weight from one foot to another. Shepard had noticed he often did that before giving her a word of support. "I'm afraid I have orders from your boss, Commander." He gave her a smart little smile. "Besides, I'm pretty good at shooting Cerberus goons."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Come on," she said, walking to the door, "we have an asteroid to stop."

TBC
The SSV Ain Jalut was a small vessel but packed with a crew of forty or so. It was a pretty recent ship, based on the original Normandy, the first of its class, more or less half the size of the SR-2 but its design was completely different. Almost turian, actually. Garrus could see his people's influence everywhere: each corner had a purpose and no space was wasted. Somehow, the Humans had smoothed every angle but it didn't change much. It was a strange mix of turian and human influences.

The crew was very much human though and Garrus didn't feel particularly at ease around them. It was the first time of his life that he had been the alien. From his point of view, he was surrounded by foreigners but numbers didn't lie: he was the oddity on the ship. He was a Turian in the middle of Alliance Navy soldiers, thirty-five years after a war between their species. Might have been too soon, by the looks he had gotten since he had stepped on the ship.

Fortunately, Shepard had commanded him to be with her at all time and had been quite vindictive to remind people to mind their own business when they were staring in Garrus’ direction for too long. Kim Eun-seo, the captain of the Ain Jalut, a short woman with black hair and a funny face, had advised her crew to do the same. Kim had offered her cabin to Shepard and Garrus for the time of the trip but Shepard had refused. She had elected to stay in the cargo bay instead, since the vessel had no space for extra passengers, and Garrus hadn't complained. That was better than sleeping in crew quarters, surrounded by Humans. Having just Shepard next to him at night was disturbing enough.

Spending time with her wasn't that bad, to be honest. They still weren't exactly at ease around each other but Garrus knew it wouldn't take long to accomplish that now. Shepard could be pretty relaxed when she allowed herself to do so. He had seen it an afternoon while they were cleaning their respective weapons in the cargo bay. Her permanent little frown had slowly vanished and her lips had lost their permanent inflexion to the ground. She hadn't been smiling exactly, but at least she hadn't looked worried, which was a big improvement in his opinion.

But she wasn't chatty, that was for sure. She could go for hours without saying a word, which was just the thing to make Garrus anxious. Turians couldn't shut up when they had nothing else to do, like during the long days of transportation. One would propose a game, another to tell a saga, some would improvise debates, and so on. Silence meant something was wrong. Garrus had tried to start a conversation a few times, at least in his head, but each time he had looked at his mentor, she had seemed so focused on what she was doing that he hadn't dared interrupt her.

That didn't have much importance now that they were almost ready for launch. The Ain Jalut had exited the relay system thirty-three minutes ago and was now approaching the asteroid known as Project Base, still unnoticed. Garrus had to admit he was greatly impressed by the stealth systems keeping the ship undetected. They hid almost every radiations the ship was emitting, exception made of the visible spectrum. Only an active search for the Ain Jalut would reveal its presence in the system, even if the relay's activity had been monitored. It had emitted a blast of gamma rays when the Ain Jalut had exited the network but this kind of things happened periodically, Garrus had learned. The relay network sometimes needed to evacuate a little pressure. Captain Kim counted on that to be unnoticed.
Garrus checked one last time his armor's seals and helmet. The plan was simple: since Project Base was a pretty big object, the Ain Jalut would approach it as much as possible somewhere nobody could see them and Shepard and Garrus would simply jump on its surface. From there, they would have an hour to reach and enter the base. Then, the mission consisted in eliminating all hostiles. There would be time for questions and answered once the base secured. Garrus was pretty confident, to be honest. Sure, the odds weren't in their favor and they could have done with a lot more data, but it reminded him of his years in the army. This sort of scenario would have been considered casual and boring by his supervisor, Major Elin Fori. The Turians didn't have the best army in the galaxy for nothing.

"All good, Vakarian?" Shepard asked. She was also checking her armor, adjusting a strap. Garrus had seen her do that before each mission. Must have been some sort of habit or good luck charm. He couldn't judge, he had some of his own too.

"All good, Commander," he replied. "And you?"

The question surprised Shepard. She gave him a long look through her helmet before focusing on the airlock's door. "I'm okay." She continued on a tone much colder: "Captain Kim, status."

"We're maneuvering. Depressurizing the airlock now."

The hum of the ship and its clicks disappeared from Garrus' radio as the air was removed from the room. He could still hear his own breath and Shepard's through the link. Hers was faster than his but a rapid look told him her vitals were normal. Garrus had never paid attention to that rhythm difference before. A low vibration told him the door was going to open and he grabbed a rail along the wall to stabilize himself. An asteroid of this size had a very light atmosphere and it could put him off balance when it entered the airlock.

There was nothing but dark gray dust and the black of space pierced by countless stars in front of him when the door opened. They were on the dark side of the asteroid at the moment, to avoid reflection from the ship that could compromise its location, but it would eventually rotate. They didn't have much time. Shepard jumped first and Garrus followed, falling slowly to the ground, counting the seconds. They landed softly, barely disturbing the dust. Garrus immediately took his Valiant and checked the perimeter with the scope.

"SSV Ain Jalut," Shepard called, "we touched ground. Retreat."

"We'll be around," Kim replied.

"Negative. You are to head back to Arcturus Station immediately."

"What?" the Captain protested. Garrus turned a little to look at Shepard.

"The Alliance did its part," Shepard continued casually checking direction on her omnitool. "By the authority given to me by the Council, I command you to head back to Arcturus Station, Captain. Leave now or face consequences."

There was a short silence on the radio before the Ain Jalut confirmed the order and started its ascension.

"Huh, shouldn't we keep them around, you know, for the trip back?" Garrus asked, watching the ship go. Shepard started walking. "Wait, do you even plan to go back?"

"I'm not suicidal, Vakarian," she said. "The longer the Ain Jalut stays around, the greater are the chances for someone to notice her, and us. We're in batarian space, remember? Besides, we'll figure
out a way to go back once we're done here. It does no good to think about it now."

"It took us three days and ten hours to come here, Commander," Garrus continued, following her.

"So?"

"Let's say it takes us six hours to clean the base and that we call for transportation right away. The Alliance will have to send another ship from Arcturus Station or Earth, but they can't do that immediately, so we'll be on our own for four days, at least."

"Didn't I tell you to pack rations for the duration of the mission plus three days, Vakarian?"

"You did, and I have five days worth of rations on me but..." Garrus hesitated.

"But? Speak freely, Vakarian," Shepard insisted. "Nobody can hear you scream in space." He frowned a little. He had heard that somewhere before. Maybe it was just a human saying.

"But, maybe we'll be stuck here for longer than that and I'm not overjoyed by the idea of starving."

"All Alliance facilities keep emergency dextro rations, Vakarian," Shepard reassured him. "It's mandatory, you know, a galactic law. The same applies to Turians and levo rations by the way."

"Oh." Garrus felt stupid. "I, huh, didn't know."

"Though Turians often 'forget' about that law," Shepard continued, "especially high ranks who fought during the First Contact War. Strange, huh?"

"I suppose my people are not unfamiliar with malicious intentions," Garrus admitted.

"Ah, you sounds pissed off. Don't worry, your people are no different from all the other species in the galaxy, Humans included. They'll all say they want peace but secretly plot for war or revenge behind closed doors. We're here exactly because of that universal trait. Now, let's keep it quiet. Stay sharp."

"Yes, Commander."

Garrus searched for sensors or traps during all their walk but couldn't find a single one. Apparently, the Alliance hadn't anticipated this kind of attack on their base. Which was a big flaw in their plan, if they wanted Garrus' opinion. Humans were really too confident for their own good. At least Shepard wasn't like that. She was careful, walking under cover and keeping an eye on their surroundings at any given time, assault rifle in hand. That was proper work.

It took them thirty-one minutes to reach the canyon where the base was located. Three enormous thrusters had been built around but they were inactive at the moment. Garrus and Shepard laid on the ground to study the layout of the base and to search for sign of activities. Each with their own scope mounted on their respective sniper rifle, they looked around.

He focused on the left part of the base while Shepard checked the other half. No activity outside. No shuttle either, they must have been stored in the hangars. Unfortunately, the higher ground they were on didn't give them a great view of the interior of the buildings, the angle wasn't correct. Garrus managed to see brown boots by a window nonetheless. He double-checked.

"Could there be a chance Cerberus changed its soldiers' gear, Commander?" he asked. Last time he had seen Cerberus agents, they were wearing white armors, not brown ones. He twiddled with his scope to activate the heat sensors.
"How would I know?" Shepard grunted. The silhouette in his scope wasn't human.

"We're gonna have a problem, Commander. There are Batarians in the facilities."

Shepard pointed her sniper rifle on the same window as Garrus. "Shit," she mumbled.

"We could draw them outside and snipe them one by one."

"Only to be surrounded at some point or to suffocate outside, yeah, great plan. I'm curious, how did you survive Cerberus' raid with tactics like that?" she teased, putting her sniper rifle in her back.

"I have no idea," Garrus answered honestly, following her example. Luck, probably. Garrus knew he was a good sniper but that couldn't explain everything. He didn't remember parts of those forty-something hours of his life. At some point, he had focused on his own breath and his next target, forgetting about the pain, the fatigue, the hunger and the smell of burning corpses. Inhale-reload. Hold-aim. Exhale-fire. Repeat. It had been as simple as that.

They were down the cliff fourteen minutes later and didn't have much time to waste now. They needed to enter the base within ten minutes, fifteen max, if they didn't want to suffocate. They made their way easily enough in some sort of utility room full of large tubes and generators. It wasn't pressurized. That meant they were most likely in the cooling system. Eight minutes of air remained. Shepard pointed to a door and Garrus hacked it. Once in, the door closed and decontamination started, air filling the room. Garrus checked his in-suit computer for the composition of the atmosphere before removing his helmet. Human atmosphere. Good, he was used to it now.

"Keep your helmet on, Vakarian," Shepard told him. "I know it dramatically reduces the field of vision but it can be the difference between life and death." Garrus nodded and put his helmet back on. "I'll take point," Shepard continued, "you watch my six. Don't play the hero, Vakarian. Sharp and clean, alright?" She bumped her fist on his chest twice, as any Turian would do to a comrade before an assault. Garrus hesitated a second and eventually mimicked her gesture. She took a step back, pushing his arm away. "Yeah, huh, don't do that."

"Who's squishy now?" he snorted.

"My boobs are under that chest plate, Vakarian," Shepard snapped. "My boobs. Rings a bell?"

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

Shepard mumbled something about Turians Garrus chose to not understand and opened the door, gun in hand. She took the left, staying close to the wall and stopping at each corner to give a quick look around. Nobody was in this part of the base but it wasn't surprising. Utilities weren't a top priority when you were pretty sure of your victory. Something didn't quite make sense though. The Batarians had taken control of Project Base more than three days and a half ago. What were they waiting for? And what was their plan in the first place? Garrus understood the Batarians could use precious intel from this base for their war against Humanity, but they couldn't be stupid to the point of thinking the Alliance wouldn't do something about the situation. They had to protect their base, their people. The Batarians must have known someone was coming to retake the base.

Maybe they counted on that, Garrus thought as they jogged along a glass corridor between two buildings. Maybe the Batarians were waiting for a full Alliance fleet. It would be a violation of their space – well, another one, considering the location of Project Base. The galactic community would see it as a human attack on Batarians who had only protected their colony. That, Garrus had to admit, that was smart, and true enough to put the Alliance in serious troubles. The Batarians may
have been out of the Council species and not particularly appreciated in general but for once they would be the rightful victims in the story, attacked by blood-thirsty Humans.

If the Batarians were waiting for a fleet, they wouldn't have a lot of soldiers on Project Base, just enough to contain the remaining Humans. They wouldn't even have a lot of spaceships waiting nearby for the attack. It was useless to sacrifice so many people just to report the blame on the enemy. That theory explained why they hadn't seen a single living soul in the last fifteen minutes. There had been blood and corpses on their way but no hostile so far. It reminded Garrus of so many exercises going nicely all the way, only to turn dramatically bad just before the end. Shepard must have had the same impression because her heart rate had accelerated, slowly but surely. Something was wrong and they both knew it.

The first bullet missed both of them by a good meter and was in fact made to separate them. Shepard jumped on the other side of the corridor they were crossing, while Garrus backed off to gain cover against the wall on his right. Shepard shot a few rounds in the direction of their attackers without aiming, just to make them take cover for a second, second Garrus used to aim. He took down two Batarians and the third bullet of his clip missed a man's heart by ten centimeters on the left. Garrus regained cover as the rest of the Batarians, six or them, started firing. His last target would die without immediate assistance but, still, that wasn't proper work. He reloaded, exchanging a look with Shepard on the other side of the corridor.

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She waited for the Batarians to reload to throw a singularity. Garrus used the surprise and the flash of light to shoot two others Batarians, one behind a crate, the other caught in the glowing blue orb. Another had been caught and Shepard killed him with two rounds of her Carnifex. Three hostiles remained. She prepared a new biotic attack but Garrus shook his head. The Batarians were in a parallel glass corridor joining a couple of buildings and the one where Garrus and Shepard were, but they didn't have helmets. Garrus shot the wall behind the Batarians, emptying his clips, and the glass cracked. The corridor was automatically sealed to avoid depressurization of all the base and that was it.

"Nice work," Shepard complimented him as she looked at the three Batarians being ejected outside with crates, glass shards and dead bodies. Garrus nodded his thanks. The singularity evaporated, releasing the two bodies. Shepard walked to them to take their clips and gave half of it to Garrus. "Come on," she said, returning to the corridor she had taken cover in, "they know we're here now."

They eventually arrived before a door giving on a hangar, if they were to believe the map. Shepard didn't want to barge in and shoot everything in sight. Garrus agreed – that was kind of reckless. Instead, they unsealed a steal panel on a wall and squeezed themselves in a small maintenance chimney. There was a ladder and they used it to reach a catwalk on top of the hangar. They now had a great view of the room. Five shuttles, ground vehicles for outside and inside the facilities, crates, barrels, diverse machines, nothing abnormal for a hangar. Two heavy doors on the left must have given outside considering their seals and yellow and black paint. There was a small elevated dock in front of them, with another heavy door giving on the next building, and a small cabin with windows on the left. And only six Batarians.

Shepard took her sniper rifle and signaled to Garrus to take position. He crouched behind vertical pipes as Shepard walked to another cover. It could be done under five seconds, Garrus knew it. They wouldn't let the Batarians take cover or even draw their weapons. The main difficulty was that their targets were dispersed all over the hangar. Finding them through the scope wouldn't be easy, even if Garrus were to memorize their initial position. He breathed in deep and exhaled slowly. Five seconds. Wouldn't even be his best time.

Shepard gave the green light and Garrus shot his first target, far in the right corner, near the cabin. 
Blood was thrown on the glass as the detonation rang in the hangar. Another one followed, more powerful, a terrible roar compared to the discreet meow of his Valiant. Shepard's target fell on the ground, thrown by the force of the bullet, even if he had been behind cover. Damn, if that was the power of a Black Widow, Garrus wanted one. He found his next target, startled by what was going on, and shoot again. The third one had moved but he caught him nonetheless, piercing a nice hole in his head. Shepard took down her second target while Garrus reloaded and he finished the job since he had a good line of sight.

It was time to move again because they basically were sitting ducks now that their position had been compromised. They ran along the catwalk and jumped on a truck to gain ground level. The inner door started to open. Shepard threw another singularity in the opening, giving them time to find cover behind a pile of crates. Their new position wasn't ideal, too in the middle of the hangar. They had to retreat to have a wall on their back, preferably without a door on it. That meant aiming on their right, behind the trucks. They would be a little too trapped for Garrus' tastes but it was still better than being surrounded.

He pointed the new position to Shepard and she agreed with a nod of the head. She fired a few rounds with her gun as Garrus started running, then followed him quickly from cover to cover. As they retreated, the Batarians invested the hangar, turning counter-clockwise around them. Garrus shot five of them on his way, Shepard four. Once settled behind a pile of barrels, Shepard switched for her assault rifle, the Valkyrie. Garrus let her deal with the closest targets as he focused on the more distant ones. The twenty-something Batarians didn't manage to surround them and soon the fight was over. Just in time. Garrus had one clip left. A low hum filled the hangar.

"Nine and six and twenty-three," Garrus heard Shepard count.

"Thirty-eight," he automatically replied, loading his last clip in the Valiant.

"How many do you think are left?" she asked, reaching for a little flask of water. She gave a quick look around before removing her helmet.

"I don't know. The base is pretty big. I'd keep two platoons to secure it and I'd throw in four or five turians ones to take it. If we hadn't sabotaged or nuked it from space earlier, of course."

"Of course," Shepard snorted after a sip, "but you guys like to crush your opponent by force and number."

"It works."

"I'm not saying it doesn't, it's just not everybody's tactic. So, two Alliance platoons, forty men." She presented the flask to Garrus who took it.

"Twenty each? Ours count thirty soldiers. How did we manage to lose on Shanxi with those numbers?" Garrus joked. Shepard rolled her eyes. "I'd take the base with at least sixty Batarians," he said more seriously, removing his helmet. "Eighty would be better. A hundred if I want it done quickly."

"A hundred it is, then. Sixty left."

"Sixty-two," Garrus corrected. He drank a long sip. The water tasted a little like metal. The hum was kind of annoying now, more like a buzz. "I have three bullets left, Commander," he said, giving her the flask back.

"Use your gun," she replied, sealing again her helmet.
"I don't like guns. Using mine means people are at close range and I don't like people at close range. Too many pathogens."

"You're impossible, Vakarian," Shepard said, shaking her head a little. "You're done?"

"Yep." Garrus put his helmet back on and looked over the barrels. "Why didn't they send more men at us? A hangar is a pretty strategic point."

The ground suddenly shook, throwing them both on the floor, and the hum became a roar, resonating in every structure. Garrus was glad to wear his helmet at the moment. His fringes would have caught that vibration and it would have hurt a lot.

He felt a sudden change of gravity, floating for a second before smashing into the ground. The barrels and crates around them fell, rolling away, while the vehicles slid on the metallic floor with a horrible grinding. It took a few seconds for everything to settle down, even if the floor kept on shaking a little, but there was definitively something not right, a push of some sort.

"Commander, you're okay?" Garrus asked, looking around. Shepard was upside down, buried under barrels, swearing with very graphic words Garrus decided to ignore. He walked on all four to reach her and move a barrel.

"They started the thrusters," she said, fighting the shaking ground and gravity to kneel. "Those motherfuckers started the thrusters." Garrus stood.

"That explains why they didn't come at us." He helped her stand too. "The reactors are a much bigger strategic point than the hangar."

"Why did they start the thrusters?" Garrus shrugged. Shepard clicked and picked up her assault rifle from the ground. "I don't like where this is going", she mumbled.

They didn't find a lot of full clips on the corpses, not nearly enough from Garrus' point of view, and headed for the dock. The little cabin didn't have a door, which meant they had to pass through the heavy one. Garrus switched for his gun, not liking the idea. They took position each on one side of the opening and silently counted down to zero before entering a large and high corridor. It gave to the cabin on the left, to a smaller corridor on the right and to other heavy doors in front of them. Those were locked. Shepard took a step back and Garrus started hacking their way in. The lock turned green easily enough – standard Alliance encoding, he could crack that in his sleep – and the doors opened.

The room they were in was a large square with windows giving on the outside on the left, a higher ground with a security post of some sort on the right, doors up front and a small garden-like area in the middle, with big pearly black orbs incrusted in solid rock. It looked like a confinement area for new visitors, much like on the Citadel. There even were couches and those human vending machines with snacks and drinks. No hostiles. No dead either but there were blood traces here and there.

They walked carefully around the little garden, one on each side, keeping an eye on everything. If Garrus had wanted to trap someone, he would have done it here. It was the perfect place for that. You could hide your soldiers in the security post, waiting for the assailants to enter further the room. There wasn't much cover for them if you held the higher ground. And the windows giving on the outside were a pretty big reminder of how bad the situation could turn because of a few lost bullets.

It was the perfect place for a trap and Garrus wasn't surprised when the doors behind them were
sealed, nor when thirty or so Batarans roared and jumped from behind the counter of the security post. Garrus retreated to the windows and took cover behind a big pillar, shooting right and left with his gun to cover Shepard. She couldn't reach him so she crouched behind the small garden. Garrus switched for his sniper rifle. It was slower and not made for close range but one proper shot could take down a man, whereas he needed at least two carefully placed bullets from his gun to do the same. He emptied a clip and took three men down before retreating behind cover. The Batarans on the right were gaining ground as Shepard was focused on those on the left. Garrus reloaded, breathing in calmly, just like during training. He held his breath and aimed, fired three times, breathed out as he regained cover.

A bullet made a hole in the pillar where he had been a second before, with enough force to have been shot from a sniper rifle – luckily, not something as powerful as the Black Widow. Garrus gave a quick look around from the other side of the pillar as he reloaded calmly. The Batarian with yellow stripes above the eyes, seventeen meters, thirty-five degrees right. Garrus breathed in and out. "There is no secret", Major Fori often said. "Just don't be more stupid than usual and breath." Garrus turned and shot in a fraction of second, and took down two more Batarans with the remaining bullets in his clip. They were closing in. Reloading, he ran for a corner of the room and jumped behind a metallic bench, high enough to crouch behind.

Shepard had used his surprise sprint to retreat herself behind the pillar but she was still too close to the Batarans. Garrus shot the three closest to her, neglecting his left. A bullet threw him off balance and took down part of his shields. Garrus endured the next round as he reloaded and killed a man not five meters from him. Way too close. Asingularity stopped his next assailants. Garrus returned the favor by taking down two men closing on Shepard. He engaged his second to last clip, looking around quickly. Thirteen hostiles remained. That was manageable.

The doors giving on the hangar opened and Garrus saw a reflexion on a massive canon high above ground. It was followed by the rest of an Atlas, a Cerberus heavy armored mech with a machine gun capable of shredding a fifty centimeters wide concrete wall into confettis before it ran out of ammo. It also had a rocket and grenade launcher, a thick armor and powerful shields. Well shit, Garrus thought.

There was no time to lose. Garrus abandoned his rifle to start overloading the Atlas' shields. The mech wasn't yet fully in the room but its machine gun started rotating. Garrus hit the command as the gun turned to Shepard, but the single overload wasn't enough. Just when he was starting a new one, he saw Shepard throw a warp to the mech. Still not enough. The Atlas fired. Shepard crouched behind her pillar, hands over the head, a blue glint surrounding her. Smoke and debris filled the air, the noise resonating in Garrus' bones. He could still hear the dangerous clicks and cracks from the glass window behind Shepard. Please don't break, Garrus thought ardently as he finished his overload.

The attack took down the Atlas' shields and the pilot seemed to remember Garrus. The heavy mech turned to the ridiculous cover Garrus had, still shooting at a five bullets per second rate, creating a long crack in the window and the wall. Garrus saw the cracks spread and the glass broke. Everything in the room was instantaneously ejected outside. A terrible pain in the chest choke him and all went dark.

He woke up because of the cold. Garrus opened carefully an eye and immediately noticed his visor was missing. He was somewhere dark, but not enough to blind a Turian. Even without light, he could tell he was in a cell. That was the logical choice. Not dead so in a prison. A shiver ran along his back and he realized his jailers had thrown him butt naked on the metallic floor. No wonder he was freezing.
There was a displeasing smell in the air, disinfectant and smoke, mixed with something more animal, more sour, with an acidic touch. Piss and vomit. Garrus hoped it wasn't his.

The smoke smell became stronger as a small reddish light caught Garrus' attention. There was someone behind the bars, sitting on a stool or something. A Batarian, Garrus saw as his face was enlightened by his cigar.

"Woke up just in time, boy," the Batarian said.

"If it's to torture me...," Garrus spat, sitting.

"No, no," the Batarian interrupted him on a sweet ton, as if he was speaking to a child. "Torture is ineffective with trained soldiers, it's a waste of time. Screwing with your head, on the other hand, is what I was waiting for." He drew on his cigar. "We're leaving," he continued, exhaling a thick gray smoke, "and you're staying here, boy. I guess you noticed we started the thrusters earlier, right? The asteroid is en route for the relay. In nineteen hours, the whole system will be erased from the galaxy map. And you'll be in the first row to admire the show."

Garrus stayed as still as possible, not giving his jailer the pleasure to see fear on his face. "This is insane," he replied, his voice in check. "You have people on Aratoht."

"The Hegemony has people on Aratoht," the Batarian corrected. He paused and smiled. "Ah, well, is this the time where I reveal my evil plan? I guess, huh?" He drew again on his cigar, to exhale between his sharp little teeth. "Alright. I'll indulge you a little culture. Not that'll serve you." He grinned. Garrus stared at him. "The Hegemony rules Khar'shan and most of batarian space but it's nothing more than a dictatorship, with its crazy laws, propaganda, castes, paranoia, supplying problems and epidemics. A shitty place to live in." He played a little with his cigar, rolling it between his fingers. "You've figured out by now that I'm not a slave to the Hegemony, I guess. I'm my own free man and I want nothing more than to see my people freed of the tyrant. But me and my guys are outnumbered one to a hundred thousands, at least. We can't openly fight the Hegemony. The beast is too strong. So, what do you do when you can't behead your enemy, hm?"

"You'll destroy the Bahak system and let everyone assumes the Alliance did it," Garrus resumed. "You'll encourage war between the Alliance and the Hegemony and wait to strike an exhausted enemy. Clever."

"It is, isn't it?" the Batarian smiled again. "Inspired by your people, actually. Turians generals are often great tacticians. Kind of fucked up too but that's part of the job, I guess." He drew on his cigar for long seconds. "So, anyway, we're leaving," he said before exhaling the smoke by the nose. "I wanted to give you a watch or a clock but it's more fun for you if you don't know when you'll be vaporized." He stood up and stretched his back. "Oh, by the way, the Human who was with you," he continued, "Commander Shepard, right? She's famous for Batarians, you know? Because of Torfan. Ask her if you have the occasion, I bet it's a nice story from the human point of view. Oh, wait." The Batarian laughed. Garrus gritted his teeth. "Ah, don't look so angry, Turian, we didn't kill your bitch. No, we did way worse than that." He smiled over his shoulder. "Maybe you'll find out what in your last hours. Enjoy the rest of your life."

Garrus didn't move for the next hour, shivering in silence as he listened carefully at what was going on around. There were sobs and cries in other cells, even after the Batarian's departure. Human prisoners. He couldn't hear Shepard though and each time he remembered, the ball of anger mixed with anxiety in his chest grew more and more. There were too many interpretations for "worse than death".
Garrus stood eventually, his body aching all over. It was because of the cold, he told himself, denying his injuries, and he started exercising to warm up. More pain arose in his body as his heart pumped more blood. He had no recollection of what had happen after the sudden depressurization of the confinement room but it must have been rough. His chest hurt, his left shoulder, his right knee and ankle, and his head was heavy, from dehydration probably. He must have been unconscious for a long time but there was no way to know exactly.

Once warmed up, Garrus studied his cell, tested the walls and bars' resistance, threw a few punches here and there but all he managed to do was hurt himself again. He tried to reach a panel on the right of his cell, without success. He pushed, drew and swore a lot. Eventually exhausted, he sat on the cold floor to think but didn't find a clever idea to get out of there.

Sixteen hours passed.

Garrus hadn't moved from his spot against the wall, knees up, arms resting on them, waiting for the inevitable. He felt dizzy and cold but he refused to die in his sleep. He may not have been a good Turian but he still had pride. He would hear and see everything fall apart, feel the ground shake as the relay'd distort the asteroid to pieces and welcome death with determination, like he had been taught to.

A door opened, flooding the corridor with harsh light. Garrus hid his eyes behind his arm, his heart almost jumping out of his ribcage. Who the heck was that? Did the Batarians leave a soldier behind to make sure their plan would follow through? Garrus stood as foot steps came closer to his cell, the sound soft compared to all the vibrations from the asteroid and the base's structure. There was a beep and the bars retracted to both sides of the cell. A silhouette appeared, exhausted, arched, and with it the smell of alien blood.

"Shepard," Garrus whispered as he recognized the Human. She was wearing large pants and a tank top too big for her but she was going bare feet. Her clothes were tinted with dark stains, on her stomach, her chest, her pants. Blood, Garrus realized after a second. Her blood, probably. She was hurt, but not as badly as he had imagined. She could still walk and move but she had been cut numerous times. Hit too. Her face was a red and black mosaic on pale sweaty skin, swelling here and there.

"I just woke up," she said with a sore voice, all her body shaking. "How long before we hit the relay?"

"Less than three hours."

"Well shit." Her legs flailed and Garrus jumped to help her stand but she preferred to lean on the wall. "At least I saw you butt naked before the end," she grinned, then winced. Garrus snorted. He passed an arm under one of hers to help her walk out of the brig. There were other cells all around, with naked and beaten up Humans – that explains what he had heard – but Shepard didn't pay attention to them and neither Garrus despite the cries and pleas. If he had only three hours to live, he didn't want to have crazy, desperate Humans doing stupid stuff around him.

They roamed the floor for a while and Garrus eventually found his armor, or what was left of it. His undersuit had been untouched and he was glad for that only – he wouldn't face death naked. Once his arse covered, they followed signs to a cafeteria. There, Garrus let Shepard sit and started looting the cabinets in the kitchen. He found a box of emergency dextro rations as advertised and it made him smile. Shepard didn't want to eat there though and she limped until she found the perfect spot for their last meal: the commanding room. It was circular, with screens on three hundred and sixty degrees, showing what was happening high above ground – the cameras were on top of the buildings, apparently. There were desks and computers everywhere. Shepard drew two chairs on a
platform in the middle of the room and sat on one. Garrus took the other.

"Don't punch me but I have a surprise for you," he said, giving her a bottle of water. Shepard drank, curious, as Garrus took a lollipop out of his pocket. "Found a box in the kitchens."

"Thanks," she said, accepting the gift with a coy smile, "but if you want to try it, it's now or never."

"Way ahead of you, Commander," he replied, producing a second lollipop. This time, Shepard laughed – and winced again. Garrus followed her example and removed the plastic before putting it in his mouth. It was sour and acid but the taste wasn't that bad for levo food. The relay was a growing blue star on the screens in front of them.

"Any regrets?" Shepard asked.

"Giving a hand to Kryik when he was down," Garrus replied. "You?"

"Too many to list them all," she sighed, "but, on top of my head, I'd say never learn how to play an instrument." Garrus gave her a curious look. "You know, music. That's not something the army teaches you."

"We could pursue in music," Garrus said, "there were classes offered to whoever wanted, with extra credits and bonuses to encourage vocations. But turian music, really? What a waste of time."

Shepard chuckled.

"Turian arts in general."

"Agreed."

A comfortable silence fell on them, like a warm blanket, and they enjoyed their simple meal. The relay grew bigger by the minute on the screens. The asteroid shook now and then, but the commanding room was deep underground, it wouldn't fall on them until the very end, when everything would be vaporized. It was quiet. Peaceful.

A VI came to life on their left, glowing orange over its projector. It was a human model, female, reminding Garrus of the annoying Avina on the Citadel. "Warning," it said, "Project Base is approaching the Bahak mass relay. Collision course cannot be avoided."

"Urh," Shepard grunted, "shut up."

"Invalid request," the VI replied. Garrus snorted as Shepard mumbled even more and eventually lifted his tired ass off of the chair. He reached the console and was about to shut the VI down when numbers on the screen caught his attention. A speed, to be precise. Garrus closed his eyes and did the maths in his head. Shit. It could work.

"What takes you so long?" Shepard asked. Garrus turned his head to look at her and noticed new dark stains on her pants, between her legs. _Worse than death_, he heard the Batarian again. Spirits.

"I, huh, I have an idea, Commander," Garrus said, sitting in front of the console. "Give me two hours, I have to run some calculations." He heard Shepard walk to him as he started playing with numbers. She leaned a little on his shoulder, the contact of her five fingered hand a bit strange but warm. She was studying the screen as he typed.

"You'll use Project Base as a vessel," she understood after a few seconds. "This is crazy."

"I know," Garrus nodded, "but what do we risk trying? It's too late to deviate the asteroid so let's
accelerate it. If we fail, we'll be vaporized anyway." She hesitated a few seconds before patting him on the shoulder.

"That's the kind of crazy I like. Do it."

"Aye aye, Commander," Garrus replied, a new warmth spreading in his chest.

TBC
"You're not going in, Nihlus."

Not now. Come on, Nihlus thought, you're not making it easy for me.

"I can come with you," he insisted. Shepard gave him a cold look back, with those piercing green eyes. Funny how green was a rare color in both of their species.

"It doesn't concern you."

Not yet. He had to strike, dammit, something big and bad that would damage their relationship for a while. He had to buy himself time. That didn't come cheap.

Vakarian gritted his teeth, refraining from saying anything. Nihlus would have liked to keep him out of this argument but using him would provoke something in Shepard for sure. She may not like him very much so far but he was part of her crew now. That meant she would protect him against unfair accusations.

"You're taking him with you," Nihlus accused Shepard, pointing to Vakarian behind the human Admiral. Nihlus knew Hackett. He was in charge of the Alliance's fifth fleet, under which authority the first Normandy had fallen. He had been Shepard's superior, over Anderson even, before her nomination to Spectre anyway. The Alliance still used him to try to control Shepard from time to time, but she knew all too well she couldn't accept his missions anymore. She was the first human Spectre. The Council kept an eye on her at all time, even after she had proven her loyalty to them. Shepard couldn't do any favor to the Alliance.

"He has to learn," Shepard replied, picking up Nihlus' attention, "and it's my role to teach him." She had that little muscle contraction around her eyes that told Nihlus she was done being nice. Damn, he had to find something and fast. "Look," she continued, her voice colder than before, "I don't have time for your bullshits, Nihlus. This is really..."

"I love you," he interrupted her.

This was genius. He hadn't meant to say something like that but this really was pure genius. The look she gave him back was nothing but surprise and pain and betrayal. He wouldn't hear from her for months.

Nihlus hid his contentment. He had to sell it properly so he sought for her hand, a desperate attempt to reach her, but Shepard stepped back, bumping against the door. She was avoiding eye contact. Good. Very good.

"Get out of my ship, Spectre Kryik," she said, her voice trembling a little. Nihlus wanted nothing more than to smile like crazy, to be honest. He had lived with this woman for a year, fought against her, fought with her, talked to her, laughed with her, taught her what the job was and how to behave among his people, opened to her, made love to her, and yet, he was still able to fool her. He should have been disappointed, really, because he honestly thought she knew him better than that, but he couldn't at the moment. He liked victory too much to care about that now. "Javik," Shepard
continued, calling the Prothean over the radio, "escort Kryik out of the ship and revoke his status." Oh this day just got better and better. "He's not allowed to board the Normandy anymore."

"Yes, Commander," Javik replied but Nihlus barely heard him. He had to focus to look hurt when all he wanted to do was smile and thanks the academy for the award.

"Shepard," he pleaded but she turned heels and entered the communication room. Hackett and Vakarian followed, without looking at him. Nihlus knew that this EDI android was probably keeping a camera on him so he had to play a little more. He stayed in the corridor, looking at the door until Javik arrived from Lab1. Then, Nihlus fought him a little for the show but eventually followed him out of the Normandy, head low. If Turians could cry, he would be dehydrated by now.

The delegation was still waiting for him on the docks. The Ambassador and Saren looked at Javik with interest. It was a pretty common reaction when people saw a real living Prothean but Nihlus was too used to the grumpy unfrozen green man to consider him interesting anymore. Javik's delightful personality didn't help either.

Saren waited to put some distance between the docks and them before talking. "Is it done?"

"Of course it's done," Nihlus smirked. Saren gave him a satisfied look. Nihlus had had to improvise a lot but the plan had been respected. Saren was dying, he had told it himself in the first mail Nihlus had received from him in ages. He was willing to reconnect with his protegee under one and only condition: get rid of Shepard. Nihlus hadn't complained. He needed a break, to be honest. She drove him crazy, regardless of her new fuck boy, and a crazy Spectre didn't last long. "I'm surprised you wasted your time with my return, Ambassador," Nihlus continued to focus on something else. "I'm merely a Spectre between countless others." That wasn't quite true but Nihlus knew better than to brag with Saren around.

"The Hierarchy is proud of all their Spectres," the Ambassador replied. "You all are precious assets."

"Ah," Nihlus understood with a smile, "you wanted to check on Baby-Spectre."

"Baby-Spectre?" Saren repeated, his cane punctuating his walk. Definitively the right leg, which he had broken at least three times since Nihlus knew him. Spirits, how long had he known the old man? Nihlus would be fifty-one this year, so thirty-five, thirty-six years. Yes, that seemed right. He had met him during the war against the Alliance.

"Garrus Vakarian," Nihlus continued, making the name ring, "son of Argoth Vakarian, ex-C-Sec Executor."

"A child is not the reflection of their parents," Saren grunted. It was a common saying the old man was fond of. Nihlus had heard him say it at least once a week. "You of all should know it." Nihlus snorted. That was a subtle reminder of his own origins.

"I just wanted to give you an idea of the guy," Nihlus defended himself, "but he's not like his father. Well, he looks like him a lot but he's not as tough. Anyway, what do you want to know about him, Ambassador? I didn't spend much time with Vakarian but I've learned enough to have a clear idea of his personality."

The Ambassador looked uneasy. "Well, I've known Vakarian myself," he said. "Argoth, I mean. I was under his command during my years in the army, to be exact. Great man, excellent leader, and smart like a Salarian with that."
"And you've met baby-Baby-Spectre," Nihlus nodded as if he knew everything. Saren gave him a cold look. If they had been alone, Nihlus would have made a silly face to amuse the old man – or make him angrier. Probably angrier, yes.

"No," the Ambassador chuckled, "I'm afraid I'm too old to have crossed this event in time. Major Vakarian was a hard man to befriend and I never succeeded but he was a dear friend of General Fedorian. They did their classes together."

"Fedorian as in Primarch Fedorian?" Nihlus asked. "Palaven's Primarch?" The Ambassador nodded. "So Argoth the Rightful went to his friend the Primarch to ask you to spy on his son."

"You're being disrespectful, Nihlus," Saren growled.

"The Primarch can use his authority as he likes, I don't care," Nihlus replied. "I'm just curious on why Argoth risked his reputation and the Primarch's instead of calling his son to have news. Or even Shepard. She could have told him his son was a massive pain in the ass."

The Ambassador gave a surprised look to Nihlus as Saren hit his protegee in the ankle with his cane. Nihlus barely felt it thanks to his armor but still, he had to be careful around Saren. The old generation was a lot stricter than Nihlus'.

"Is Garrus Vakarian a problem for Spectre Shepard?" the Ambassador asked. "She assured me he had been exemplary under her command."

"I wouldn't say exemplary, Sir," Nihlus answered. "I've heard they had an argument during a mission but Shepard avoided the subject each time I brought it up. Otherwise, well, I know she's satisfied with his work and skills. Things get complicated on the personal level. Vakarian isn't the most friendly guy I've met and Shepard can be difficult to reach too." Saren snorted.

"You were her mentor, Spectre Kryik, correct?"

"Yes, Sir."

"So she knows of our ways."

"I had been instructed to teach her, yes," Nihlus confirmed. Shepard didn't ploy to the Alliance's requests but other Spectres didn't have her integrity. Nihlus was one of them. The Hierarchy had insisted to place Shepard under a turian mentor and the Council had agreed, even if it would have been more beneficial for her to learn from an Asari, considering her biotics. Since Nihlus had pledged for Shepard's nomination, she had been placed under his authority. The Council had commanded him to monitor the first human Spectre, to make sure she wouldn't use her power and authority to favor her species. The Hierarchy had ordered him to influence if not shape her into a reliable agent. Nihlus believed he had done a good job. Shepard had a better behavior than him in society and had been a trusted agent of the Council so far. She was devoted to the Council, even if that meant betraying her species. As long as the Hierarchy's wishes went through Councilor Sparatus, she wouldn't even question her orders.

"Is she reluctant to bond with her protegee?" the Ambassador asked.

"She's never been reluctant with me," Nihlus grinned (Saren clicked), "but it's a bit more complicated than that, Sir. Shepard has this rule, she doesn't fuck with her crew." The Ambassador arched a brow. "Humans in general have rules to prevent the use of their influence to obtain favors from their subordinated," Nihlus explained. "It fails more often than you'd think and consequences are pretty ugly, from what I've heard. Anyway, Shepard knows how our mentor-protegee
relationships work but she sees it as a sort of abuse of power, even if sex isn't involved."

"It isn't."

"I know, Sir, and I've explained it to her countless times but you can't change over night what one person has been taught all their life," Nihlus continued. "That doesn't mean she won't be friendly to Vakarian. I actually believe she's a great leader and Vakarian can learn a lot under her command, even if they don't become friends as we see it. They argued twice, so what? I argued with her on a daily basis for two months before we found our balance." And he had had to isolate her on Palaven to achieve that. Nihlus had made sure Shepard could only rely on him during their time in that research center, after Eden Prime. Lots of fights. Lots of fucking. Good times. "You can tell Argoth his son will be just fine," he added. "He's between good hands, even if those hands are human."

The Ambassador hesitated a second but eventually nodded and let the conversation die there. His job forbid him from any kind of racial speech. Officially, Turians were over the Relay 314 Incident and held no grudge against the Alliance but old men like the Ambassador, the Primarch, Saren or Argoth Vakarian had fought the war and this kind of experience tended to mold one's opinion for life. Nihlus had fought this war too, he actually had been thrown in the middle of it right after bootcamp, and all he had seen was the determination Humans were capable of. They were a young species, they didn't even have properly mastered faster than light travels at the time, and yet they had been able to fight against the best army in the galaxy. Everyone in the galaxy feared Humanity since then.

And that was a good thing. While Nihlus wasn't the kind to wish Humanity took control of the galaxy, he saw them as a great instrument to remind the rightful leaders to be vigilant. Humanity was the whip that had awoken the old dormant species too sure of their power. The Council just had to look at the economy to understand it. In three decades, all armies had increased their annual budget, which boosted research, exploration, resources prospecting all over the galaxy. People moved more. New colonies had been created. The Attican Traverse was actively patrolled and the Terminus Systems feared the Council's power again. Humanity really was a good thing, as long as they were a manageable threat.

An urgent call from the Council awaited for the Ambassador at the embassy and the man let Nihlus and Saren on their own. The Turians had a whole building for their embassy, with offices on the lower levels and apartments above. A hundred Turians worked there, with an official garrison of two hundred more disposable at all time, but since all Turians were part of the reserve, the embassy actually had around a thousand soldiers on the station. That wasn't much compared to the forty-five thousands people living there but enough to secure the perimeter and wait for a fleet or two to reduce the place to pieces.

Nihlus had came here enough to have his habits on the station and he already knew where he would have lunch later – well, dinner considering the station's time zone. The embassy had the obligation to provide him with housing and transportation but Nihlus usually preferred to pay for an hotel room somewhere else. Guests were not allowed at the embassy and Nihlus intended to have fun while he could. Soon the Council would send him on the other side of the galaxy. It would be time to be professional again.

Nihlus was in fact in his way out when Saren stopped him. "Where do you think you're going, Nihlus?" the old man asked. "You're injured and I believe we have much to talk about."

"I told you everything I knew by emails," Nihlus replied, "and I'm fine." Truth to be told, Vakarian didn't go easy on him the previous night but Nihlus felt all right nonetheless. Maybe he needed a day or two to let his new injuries heal but that was it.
"I have much to teach you, then," Saren continued. "You have to learn about my current missions."

"We're not even sure the Council will give me those once you're dead," Nihlus said, not afraid of talking of his mentor's dim future, "and maybe they don't want me to know about your activities. I don't like the idea of knowing what I shouldn't. That's how people get killed."

"The Council doesn't know what is good for them," Saren snorted. Nihlus frowned. That was kind of risky to say something like that in the middle of a relatively public space. Sure, no Turian would interfere with what clearly didn't concern them, but there were a few Humans and Asaris in the lobby. You're slipping, old man, Nihlus thought, and it pained him. As much as he complained about Saren and his out dated paternalism, he was fond of his mentor. Heck, Saren had cared about Nihlus more than his own father.

"Alright," Nihlus sighed, "but can we please do it in front of an enormous befost steak from Pavora's? I kind of skipped breakfast and I'm starving."

Saren had a small smile, which softened his old self. "It's a bit early for dinner but I'm not against the idea. I haven't been at Pavora's in ages."

"That's because your teeth can't manage solid food anymore," Nihlus smirked, knowing fully where that would lead. He felt Saren's cane hit hard against the armor in the small of his back the next second and Nihlus laughed. He caught the cane and tried to draw Saren off balance but the old man wasn't the best agent of the Council for nothing. With a swift shift of his weight, he drew Nihlus to him, blocked his arm with the cane and a kick in the leg finished him. Nihlus fell on his knees, laughing.

"If you want to keep yours," Saren snorted, his own knee centimeters from Nihlus' face, "I advise you to stop mocking your elders, kiddo."

"But you love it," Nihlus replied with a cocky smile. Saren flicked Nihlus' fringes before releasing him, his attention focused on something else. Nihlus stood up, looking in the same direction, hands smoothing the pain out of his skull. The Ambassador was coming their way, giving orders around. "Seems like I won't have my steak," Nihlus mumbled.

Saren gave him an amused look as he turned to the Ambassador. "A problem, Memniris?"

"Spectre Arterius, Spectre Kryik," the Ambassador said, his voice shaking a little, "the Council just asked for the immediate arrest of half the Alliance's general staff." The news startled Nihlus and he saw Saren react the same way. The Turians were the main military force of the Council and it wouldn't be the first time they had to fight for the galactic community but the Council couldn't be serious. They were on Arcturus Station, the Alliance's command center. The garrison had been designed to protect the embassy, not to attack the Alliance's government. And even if they had the Council to support them, the situation would turn really bad really fast. The Ambassador was coming their way, giving orders around. "Seems like I won't have my steak," Nihlus mumbled.

"Spectre Arterius, Spectre Kryik," the Ambassador said, his voice shaking a little, "the Council just asked for the immediate arrest of half the Alliance's general staff." The news startled Nihlus and he saw Saren react the same way. The Turians were the main military force of the Council and it wouldn't be the first time they had to fight for the galactic community but the Council couldn't be serious. They were on Arcturus Station, the Alliance's command center. The garrison had been designed to protect the embassy, not to attack the Alliance's government. And even if they had the Council to support them, the situation would turn really bad really fast. The Ambassador obviously knew it but he also knew what was his job. "You are to assist the army at your full capacities," he continued, falling at parade rest. It was an old habit all Turians had – a minimum of fifteen years in the army tended to imprint that pause in anyone for life. "Admiral Hackett of the Alliance Navy has to be arrested first and the evidences in his possession need to be secured immediately. It's a matter of galactic peace, gentlemen."

Saren snorted. "What did the Humans do this time?" he asked, hitting the ground with his cane.

"I cannot disclose this information," the Ambassador replied, and it didn't please Saren. He didn't like to be kept in the dark.
"Hackett was on the Normandy," Saren insisted, turning to Nihlus. "He spoke with Shepard."

"And I don't know the first thing about that," Nihlus assured. Saren clicked. "I swear, all the man
did was following us to the comm room, he didn't say a word."

"This has no importance at the moment," the Ambassador said. "Admiral Hackett has to be
arrested and his documents seized. You can either waste time and contact the Council to confirm
their orders, Spectre Arterius, or you can do your job."

Bad move, Nihlus thought as Saren glared at the Ambassador. "We'll do it," he intervened before
his mentor could say or do something really stupid. "Hackett, right? Short guy, gray hair, scar on
the face. Got it." Nihlus put a hand on Saren's shoulder and pressed him to go. "Be careful,
Ambassador," he added as they walked away. "The Alliance won't be cooperative."

"Tell me about something I don't know," the Ambassador snorted.

Since Nihlus had lost all his artillery on Ilos, they headed first for the armory. He took a shotgun, a
heavy gun and a temerana, a double-hedged sword as long as the forearm with a curved handle.
Nihlus had learned to fight with it from his mother, a very long time ago. It wasn't a very common
weapon nowadays, even if every kid after bootcamp had to be familiar with it. People tended to
prefer shorter blades, like knifes, but Nihlus liked the temerana, to the point to have developed his
own techniques. If he had had one of those in hand the previous night, Shepard wouldn't have a
protegee anymore.

Nihlus knew it would take at least thirty minutes for the Ambassador to gather his men and
prepare a decent plan. That meant they had half an hour to find Hackett, his documents and take
everything back to the embassy, without drawing attention on them. Considering Saren's love for
drama, the last requirement wouldn't be easy to achieve. Fortunately, people on the station were
used to see Turians in full gear. They wouldn't pay attention to Nihlus and Saren, even if the old
man had a particular look. Turians in his condition rarely roamed anything besides their home.

Since Hackett had been on the Normandy less than an hour ago, Nihlus and Saren had three
options: they could search him on or near the Normandy, at work or at home. Saren doubted the
man would keep his documents at work but they couldn't rule out this option either. They didn't
have enough time to check every location so Nihlus directly called the Normandy to ask if Hackett
was still there. Joker told him the Admiral had left not long after the Turians but he didn't know
where he had been headed. Work or home.

They decided to divide the work. Saren wanted to barge in the Alliance headquarters to find
Hackett but it was a really, really bad idea. Nihlus argued Saren was too old to go all the way to the
headquarters and quickly went on his way after another stroke of the cane – it seemed Saren was
really fond of that now. Fortunately, the station was quite small and it took him only fifteen
minutes with public transportation to reach the headquarters. He still had ten to find and secure
Hackett before the Ambassador would start to move. Nihlus quickened his walk.

Absolutely no one stopped him or even asked why he was walking around the Alliance
headquarters. Nihlus didn't know if it was because Humans were crazy or because they knew him
somehow. Probably a bit of both. He had come here with Shepard a couple of times and he was
known through the Alliance to be her mentor and a Spectre. But, really, Humans were too
confident. It showed everywhere: the non-combatant personnel was chatting in the corridors,
walking without noticing him, and the guards seemed more dormant than anything else. The arrest
would be a mess.

Nihlus found Hackett's office easily enough and encountered his first difficulty: Hackett's
secretary. She was a pretty thing, even from an alien point of view, with everything a man could dream of at the right place, in a sexier version of the regular Alliance uniform. Nihlus unfortunately didn't have time to flirt his way in. He walked straight for the door but she quickly stood to block him. Nihlus straightened and did his best to look impressive and angry. He may not have been in his species standards but he was taller than most Humans nonetheless, especially their women. Few of them were as tall as Shepard.

"Can I help you with something?" the secretary asked, glaring at him through her glasses.

"Council Spectre Kryik," he replied on the same cold tone. "I have to talk to Admiral Hackett, it's urgent."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Just there," Nihlus smiled, patting his gun. It didn't please the lady.

"You cannot..."

"What part of 'urgent' and 'Council Spectre' don't you understand, Human?" Nihlus interrupted her, folding his arms and falling to a hip.

"Admiral Hackett asked to not be disturbed," she replied.

"Again, Council Spectre," Nihlus insisted, pointing a finger at his face. To her benefit, she was doing a good job but Nihlus didn't have time to play with her. He grabbed her by the arms and lifted her off of the ground to move her on the side. It hurt, to be honest, his own injuries weren't quite healed yet, but reminding her of his strength delighted him. Nihlus winked at her as he walked in.

Only to have a gun pointed at him from behind. So the uniform wasn't just for the show, eh? Nihlus caressed his sword's handle, looking over his shoulder.

"Spectre Kryik," Hackett interrupted, standing behind his desk. He wasn't wearing his jacket.

"Admiral," Nihlus saluted him, keeping his eyes on the pretty lady. "I strongly advise you to call back your secretary if you don't want to find a new one in the near future."

"It's alright, Catherine," Hackett said, waving to dismiss her. "Close the door behind you and do not let anyone enter."

"Yes, Sir," she replied, taking away her gun but keeping her eyes on Nihlus until the door closed. Nihlus snorted and walked to the desk, admiring the office. It was spacious and decorated with tastes. Humans loved this kind of display. Buying expensive art pieces somehow showed their power or something like that. Nihlus was completely hermetic to the concept, like most of his people, to be honest. Turians didn't need fancy paintings or sculptures to demonstrate their authority.

"I suppose I'm under arrest," Hackett said, moving piles of paper from his desk to a volt in a wall. He wasn't nervous at all. Tired for sure but not nervous. The Admiral had known what was coming for him.

"Does any of that have to do with Shepard?" Nihlus asked, folding his arms. Hackett gave him a cautious look. "She's my protegee," Nihlus insisted, "I care for her."

"A little too much, maybe," Hackett replied coldly. Nihlus arched a brow. Ah, yes, Hackett had
been there when Nihlus had proclaimed his love for Shepard on the Normandy. He had to play along.

"My feelings for her are one thing, the bond we have through my mentorship another, Admiral," Nihlus shrugged, "but I don't believe a Human can fully grasp the concept. Now, answer my question: does any of this mess have to do with Shepard?"

Hackett sighed. "I hope she can clean it, to be honest," he said and his seemed older suddenly. He checked his wrist watch. "The Ain Jalut should be on her way now." Hackett sighed and waved at all the papers on his desk. "I just need a minute." Nihlus nodded, knowing he wouldn't be told much. At least he knew Shepard had been sent on a mission that could probably save the Alliance's metaphorical ass. She was in trouble, but manageable trouble.

It took Hackett eleven minutes to clear his desk, hiding all his paperwork in the volt. They didn't have time to destroy all the evidences. Besides, Hackett had put everything on a datadisk via his terminal. Nihlus didn't know much about computers but someone with the proper skills could recover those information, even if it had only transited briefly on the terminal. It would have to do for now.

They heard voices outside the office, mostly Catherine repeating the Admiral had asked to not be disturbed. Only human voices. That meant the Alliance had started to move. Either they wanted to kick Nihlus out of the headquarters, or they wanted Hackett. He turned to the Admiral.

"They don't seem too friendly. I suggest we evacuate." Hackett nodded and took a gun under his desk. He then turned to the windows and opened one. Nihlus joined him and was relieved to see they were only two or three meters above some sort of terrace, probably a rooftop of another part of the headquarters. Hackett jumped first, just as the door opened on a dozen armed Alliance soldiers led by an old guy with a very decorated uniform. He was red and furious, all sweaty. Nihlus waved goodbye and followed Hackett by the window.

The Admiral was already running but Nihlus caught up on him easily. The big angry man at the window commanded them to stop and screamed at his men to arrest the fugitives. Nihlus would have been glad to shut the guy with a bullet between his eyes but he probably was someone the Ambassador had to arrest. The Council may have wanted him alive.

"Care to explain a few things?" Nihlus asked as they reached a ladder. "I'd like who I can shoot."

"The Alliance screwed up," Hackett said, starting to go down, "and I have documents proving everything."

"So this guy probably wants you dead," Nihlus added, pointing to the red screaming General or something over his shoulder. A bullet hit the ground near his foot, maybe thirty centimeters on his right. Nihlus took his gun and shot the soldier in the shoulder, soldier who then fell from the window. "That's how you aim, idiot," Nihlus snorted, putting his gun back on his hip. He grabbed the ladder and slid to the next roof.

The only way out was a door giving to the building on their left but Nihlus didn't want to go back inside. Too many soldiers around. Instead, he grabbed Hackett's arm and took him to the edge of the roof. There was a garden two floors under, giving on the street behind a high grilling. Perfect.

"I don't suppose you're a good jumper," Nihlus said. Hackett whitened instantaneously.

"You're not serious, Spectre! I can't possibly..."
"Why yes, you can, Admiral." And Nihlus threw him over the edge, with enough strength for Hackett to reach a big bush. Nihlus followed and rolled on the ground to dissipate the strength of the impact. Hackett was all tingled into the bush, trying to get out on his own, with very few success. Nihlus helped him to get back on his feet and even removed a few leaves from his clothes. The Admiral was a bit scratched here and there but nothing dramatic. Now, the grilling.

Nihlus grabbed Hackett again and walked to the grilling, keeping an eye on all the windows surrounding the garden. He heard weapons being fired inside the buildings at some point. That meant the Ambassador and his men were there now. Good, that would help Nihlus get out of here.

They were maybe three meters from the grilling when a door opened on the garden, far on their left. Six Alliance goons showed up and started firing but they were too far away to have any kind of accuracy with their assault rifles.

"Get your ass out, Admiral," Nihlus commanded, taking his gun with the right hand and his temerana with the left. "I'll stop them."

Nihlus didn't wait for an answer. He aimed and shot. His bullet reached the face of a guy which exploded in a bloody mess. At this distance, his gun didn't have enough firepower to kill properly but it could still inflict pretty good wounds. If that guy wasn't transported to a very competent doctor immediately, there was no chance for him to recover – or to survive.

There was no cover possible but bushes here and there and Nihlus knew all too well he couldn't hide behind those. Instead, he ran and closed on the soldiers in a few seconds, jumping in the middle of their shitty formation. They couldn't fire without hurting one another, exactly what Nihlus had wanted. He shot a guy in the chest at close point and swung his sword to cut a throat on the left. A kick in the back put another soldier on the ground, giving Nihlus the second he needed to fire several rounds in a guy's belly. The last one standing took his chance and aimed with his gun for Nihlus' head but the Spectre spun and with him his sword. The blade was made to cut through hard turian skin, bones and exoskeleton. Compared to that, human flesh was a piece of cake and the soldier lost his hands. Nihlus changed his grip on the handle and swung his temerana the other way, opening the soldier's abdomen left to right. Nihlus let him fall, screaming, as he regained his balance, and turned to the guy on the ground to place a bullet between his eyes. And that was it.

Hackett was still fighting gravity to go over the grilling when Nihlus came back to him. He pushed more than he helped the old man and quickly followed him, jumping easily over the fence. Nihlus grabbed again the Admiral to cross the street. They walked quickly on a few blocks, keeping an eye on their back but nobody was following them. That meant the Alliance's priority was now to protect their headquarters. Nihlus wanted to put Hackett in a cab aimed to the embassy and go back to fight with the garrison but he couldn't do that. The old man needed protection because he couldn't survive on his own. A turian Admiral was capable to fight on the ground with his men but a human one seemed to only be a politician with a short breath after a little action. Sometimes, Nihlus felt bad for thinking Humanity could actually be a threat.

Nihlus found a cab in a big avenue and threw Hackett in it. He sat next to him.

"Where to?" the driver asked behind a thick glass. Nihlus winced. He hated human cabs and their drivers but Humans hated automatic cars even more. It had to do with unemployment and authenticity, from what Shepard had told him.

"The turian embassy," Nihlus said, "and I know the station so go straight for it, understood?"

"Of course the Turian tells me what to do," the driver grumbled. Nihlus forced a smile, only to remember the large majority of Humans couldn't tell a smile from a frown on a Turian. But they
understood guns.

"I'll deal with him, Spectre," Hackett stopped him, a hand on Nihlus'. The Admiral took a few credit chits out of his pocket and placed it in a small drawer in front of them. "There, that should help you remember we're in a hurry, Sir."

The driver drew the drawer to him and opened wide eyes. "Sure, yeah, no problem."

It took them thirty-five minutes to reach the embassy nonetheless, mostly because of traffic – something that could be avoided by the simple use of automatic cars. Unfortunately, the building was surrounded by an angry mob of civilians, all of them humans. The guards were keeping them at bay for now but the situation could become pretty ugly in the next hour. Heck, the whole station could be on fire in the next hour.

"What the..." the driver said, looking by the window.

"Keep driving," Nihlus told him. "Go to the spacedocks, the turian ones."

"What are you planing to do, Spectre?" Hackett asked as the cab passed in front of the embassy.

"I can't tell you now, can I? I'd have to kill our friend there to avoid any leak." Hackett frowned and the driver gave him an anxious look in the little mirror thingy stuck on the windshield. Nihlus couldn't care less. He twiddled with his omnitool to call Saren.

"What?" the old man barked. There was a lot of noise behind him but no gunfire. Saren seemed to be in the subway or something like that. The idea made Nihlus smile – the Council most powerful agent stuck between sweaty Humans during rush hour, that had to crack a smile even on the most fearsome Krogan.

"My friend and I are going on an adventure," Nihlus said, refraining his smile. "Care to join us?"

"I'd love to but I doubt I'll make it," Saren replied. "Don't wait for me."

"Alright. Be careful, grand-pa." Saren snorted before hanging up. Nihlus gave a look to the streets as the cab waited for a light to turn green – another absurdity easily solved by automatic cars. They weren't far from the embassy and people were starting to notice the angry mob maybe three hundred meters from their location. And some people already knew what was happening, if Nihlus were to believe the looks landing on him through the windows.

A woman wearing the Alliance uniform walked really close to the cab. Maybe she was searching for Hackett and Nihlus couldn't let her succeed. He grabbed Hackett by the neck and pulled the old man against him. If someone had told Nihlus he would someday kiss an old bold human Admiral, he would have shot the idiot, but there he was, his mouth against Hackett's, faking a passionate embrace while keeping the man still with his talons on his throat.

The soldier looked at them but kept on walking, a disgusted wince on her face. The cab moved again. Nihlus released Hackett and spitted on the floor – he was not risking an allergic reaction for that dude. The driver gave him a cold look.

"What was that?" Hackett yelled, backing off to the door.

"Something unpleasant for me too, I can assure you that," Nihlus replied, looking around the car. "But it's always an effective diversion, regardless of species. Funny, right?" Hackett was all red and angry, which amused Nihlus a little. "What?" he added, smirking. "Would you have preferred to have a close look at my crotch instead?"
"Your attitude is..."

"I'm not a Spectre thanks to my attitude, Admiral," Nihlus interrupted him. "Well, a little thanks to my attitude but mostly because I get the job done, no matter what." Nihlus saw a sign for the turian docks pointing to his right at the next corner. The driver kept his eyes straight on the road. Towards the Alliance docks. That was unfortunate. "The Council wants you alive," he continued, unsheathing his gun, "and I'll deliver. Pull over the car."

"We're not at the docks yet," the driver replied, his voice trembling a little, his eyes strongly attached to the road.

"We'll walk," Nihlus forced a smile.

"I don't think so, Turian."

"I've asked nicely," Nihlus said, "but next time I'll ask with a bullet in the back of your head, Human." He knocked the window with his gun.

"Jesus Christ!" the man yelled, stopping the car in the middle of the street.

"Thank you," Nihlus mocked as he opened the door. He grabbed Hackett by the arm and drew him out of the car while the driver yelled some more about crazy birds and other nice things on this theme.

They weren't far from the docks – Arcturus was a pretty small station compared to the Citadel or Omega. Nihlus couldn't act as if nothing was happening at the embassy so he chose to avoid a maximum of people by using back alleys. It paid off and were at the docks in less than five minutes. They were almost empty but for a dozen guards around customs. They didn't have their regular weapons and they seemed prepared for trouble, but they wouldn't be enough if an angry mob were to target them.

"Council Spectre Kryik," Nihlus said at the first guard he encountered. "I have to leave the station with my prisoner immediately."

The guard didn't ask any question. Atta boy, Nihlus thought. "The Heta Saramin is scheduled to departure in ten minutes, Sir," he replied with a sharp salute. "Dock G-9, straight down then on your right. I'll call to inform them of your arrival, Sir." Nihlus nodded his thanks and walked along the docks in search of the vessel. The Heta Saramin was a pretty big frigate, maybe a third bigger than the Normandy, with heavy plating, but she had been built to strike fast and hard, like any other vessel of the seventy-ninth flotilla. She was now quietly waiting for her departure, her white and red paint aggressively reflecting the harsh light of the docks. The thrusters were already humming, heating up before the trip.

Nihlus walked straight to the airlock. A woman was waiting for him on top of the ramp, square shoulders, hands behind her back, in a red and black armor, heavy gun on the hip. Her skin was light and her tattoos red, heavy marks under the eyes with lines following her plates, as if a bloody rain had left those marks. Her most noticeable trait was her broken fringes, two of them were half-shorter than the others on her left.

Elin Fori, Nihlus remembered, one of the most feared instructor in the army. Rare were the new recruits who managed to stay under her command during the fifteen mandatory years of service, and those guys usually applied directly for Spectre after, if they didn't become lifers in special divisions. She had the reputation to eat krogans warlords for breakfast and pick her teeth with their bones for the rest of the day.
"Spectre Kryik," Fori saluted with a dismissive nod of the head. Nihlus didn't know her tier but she probably was way above him. He may have been a Spectre but that didn't mean much for people like her – she probably ate Spectres for lunch.

"Sorry to bother you, Sir," Nihlus said, "but I have to deliver our friend Admiral Hackett to the Council as soon as possible."

"The fleet is always at our Spectres' service," Fori replied calmly, "and we're heading for Palaven anyway." Meaning: I wouldn't have changed my plans for you, boy, even if the Primarch had given me a direct order. Fori ate Primarchs for dinner. "Please," she continued, opening an arm, "this way."

Nihlus nodded and followed her, pushing Hackett in front of him. He gave a look back in hope Saren would show up but there was no sign of the old Turian on the docks. Nihlus wasn't particularly worried for his mentor but he would have liked to know the old man was safe nonetheless. Look at yourself, Kryik, Nihlus thought with disdain, smirking for himself, already depending on someone. He had abandoned Shepard only to fall again under Saren's influence. That had to stop, too.

TBC
The SSV Tokyo had docked ten minutes ago but the airlock was still locked. Kaidan had served on a frigate for the last four years and tended to forget everything took more time on bigger ships. Plus, the biggest part of the fleet was not as recent as the Normandy, especially the second one. On a cruiser like the Tokyo, you had to manually change the atmosphere and gravity before docking on a station. Sure, you had the help of a VI but nothing sophisticated. Pilots on cruisers and dreadnoughts may not have been as good as maneuvering as Joker but they were extraordinary engineers nonetheless, knowing their ship to the last screw and capable to determine what was wrong just by listening to the engines. No wonder their pay grade was even higher than captains'.

An alarm rang through the docks and the latch started to open. Kaidan straightened his back. On his right, Anderson smiled a little, amused by the reflex. He had been Kaidan's captain for years, even helped him in his career, and the old man knew him perfectly. He could sense the tension in Kaidan, the anxiety. You didn't need to be a psychic to notice Kaidan's state of mind, to be honest.

He had barely slept since Anderson had given him a general description of Shepard's latest mission. Knowing that Vakarian was with her didn't help at all. Kaidan knew the Turian was a great asset on the field but he wasn't yet used to Shepard, nor Shepard to him. When everything went to Hell, teamwork really mattered. You had to know what your partners were going to do, where they were, how many clips they had left, and that knowledge couldn't be magically learned in three missions. Vakarian may have been a soldier good enough to be a Spectre but he didn't know the first thing about Shepard and that was a liability in this kind of mission.

It seemed it took forever for the doors to open but Shepard eventually appeared, her protegee on her left, slightly behind, automatically scanning the docks. He was wearing a black and green armor, very different from what he had left the station with. Come to think about it, Shepard was in uniform. She never took her uniform when she went alone on a mission. She preferred to travel light, only with her armor set and weapons – she was used to do so from her N7 training. Something had happened.

She walked straight for Anderson, determined as usual, ignoring the agitation on the docks, fists clenched. She was angry, no doubt about it. Kaidan also saw fresh bruises and cuts on her face and arms as she came closer. If he hadn't known her so well, he wouldn't have detected the slight limp on her left leg either. And Vakarian was definitively playing the bodyguard behind. That was the sign that really worried Kaidan.

"Commander," Anderson saluted as Shepard arrived in front of them, "it's good to see you." Her eyes were redder than usual and circled with black. Sleeping problems. Shepard wasn't a big sleeper, she needed four to five hours of rest on a normal day, maybe six after a mission. Kaidan had the same problem. It was caused by biotics – too much energy in an already hyperactive body. But Shepard had worked really hard to keep her powers in check and Javik had greatly helped her since he had joined the crew. Her condition actually improved over the past year and a half. She shouldn't be a mess like that after a few days without training.

"Glad to be alive," Shepard replied coldly. She folded her arms while Vakarian stood at parade rest behind her. "Where's Hackett?" Shepard asked. "I have a few words for him."
"On the Citadel, I'm afraid," Anderson said, keeping his calm. He knew Shepard all too well to answer to her anger. Though it was a rare thing for the Commander to be this emotional in front of her former superior.

"The Citadel?"

"Yes," Anderson confirmed. "The Council commanded his arrest. Spectre Kryik took care of it and thanks to him crucial documents have been recovered. Several generals and ministers, including the Prime Minister, have been arrested and charged with high treason and genocide attempt."

"Who arrested them?"

"The turian troops stationed here." Vakarian's attention jumped on Anderson. "I won't lie, it wasn't pretty," the Admiral admitted. "Ambassador Memniris has been hurt himself and Spectre Arterius took control of the troops shortly after. There were lots of casualties on both sides, even in civilians. The Turians eventually retreated to the embassy with their prisoners, they couldn't handle the riots, and they resisted until the Council fleet arrived three days later, with Councilor Tevos. I came along to pacify the situation."

Shepard stared at Anderson for long seconds, and even the Admiral felt uneasy at some point. Her grudge wasn't with Anderson though so she didn't speak up her mind. Instead, she turned to Kaidan.

"What's your version, Lieutenant Commander?" she asked. Kaidan squared his shoulders.

"The Normandy's crew did not interfere with the events occurring on the station, Commander," he replied, not daring to look Shepard in the eyes. "Javik considered it wasn't our problem."

"Any trouble?"

"None, Commander. The Alliance ceased fire quickly after Ambassador Udina's and Admiral Anderson's statement on all frequencies. The civilians kept rioting but they couldn't get into the docks."

"The repairs?" Shepard asked.

"They started with twenty-nine hours of delay," Kaidan admitted. Shepard tensed slightly.

"I tripled the personnel working on the Normandy as soon as I could," Anderson continued. "They're on it day and night, Shepard, and you will be able to leave the station tomorrow morning."

Shepard didn't reply but it was evident she wasn't thinking about cute puppies and a nice Sunday afternoon. Fortunately, her attention snapped to a dozen Turians in full gear coming their way, protecting the asari Councilor, Tevos. She was in her red and blue dress, like usual, totally out of place in the middle of heavy armored Turians. She looked small and slender compared to them, but not fragile at all. Tevos' eyes screamed "murder" with a rare intensity.

Anderson saluted the Councilor. Kaidan imitated him but waited to take ease. Vakarian did the same, while Shepard just nodded, arms still folded. Tevos did not care for anybody but Shepard. She presented her hands to her, palms up, and waited for Shepard to reciprocate the gesture. The Commander eventually put her hands above Tevos', barely brushing them. Kaidan knew it was how Asaris saluted one another, by putting their own biotic fields in contact, but he had never seen it applied to a Human before. Asaris didn't exactly like other biotics. What was the norm for them was seen as an aberration in other species, especially in human men. Kaidan had lost track of how many times an Asari had look at him with profound disgust.
Shepard quickly withdrew her hands and put them behind her back, avoiding eye contact with the Councilor. Tevos frowned slightly and gave a cold look around. Her turian guards understood the message and took their distance in an orderly manner. Vakarian looked at them and shifted his weight from one foot to another.

"I'll leave you to it, Commander," he said but waited for Shepard's nod of the head to walk away.

"What are you waiting for, you two?" the Councilor asked coldly to Anderson and Kaidan.

"My apologies, Councilor," Anderson replied with a humble bowing. "Lieutenant Commander?"

Kaidan nodded and followed the Admiral who joined Vakarian. The Turian had chosen to stand in front of a railing and look at the activities around the SSV Tokyo. He welcomed them with a flick of his mandibles. Kaidan never knew if it was a smile or a sign of anxiety on a Turian. "I've heard you did an exceptional work, Spectre Vakarian," Anderson complimented him.

"A desperate situation does not make a desperate man," Vakarian replied, straightening like always. It must have been a turian saying because it was the first time Kaidan had heard something like that.

"Still," Anderson agreed with a nod, "no one had ever dared make an asteroid transit through the relay network. You pushed theory's limits, saved a system and its inhabitant, prevented a war and took Shepard home. The Alliance owes you a lot, Spectre." Anderson had a disenchanted little smile. "I owe you a lot."

Vakarian looked at Anderson for long seconds before returning his attention to the ship. "I only did my job, Sir." Kaidan snorted – that was one of Shepard's top five sentences when she wanted to cut a discussion short, right after her infamous "I should go".

Kaidan took a look over his shoulder to check on Shepard but Vakarian cleared his throats. Kaidan blushed, like a kid surprised in the middle of his cookie raid. No picking. "So, huh, what with the new armor?" he asked, embarrassed.

"Courtesy of the Alliance," Vakarian shrugged.

"You forgot to pick up the other one at the pressing?" Kaidan tried to joke.

Vakarian's mandibles flicked again. "Something like that."


"You Humans have a fitting saying for that, I think," he said, turning again to the SSV Tokyo. "Shit hit the fan."

"I see," Anderson replied and silence fell on them for a few minutes. Kaidan tried to eavesdrop on Shepard and Tevos' conversation but there was too much noise on the docks, between the cooling thrusters of the Tokyo, her refueling and refilling, soldiers coming and going and other ships both leaving and arriving. He couldn't really focus anyway. Vakarian kept an eye on him.

Eventually Tevos allowed them to come back.

"The Council cannot reward their Spectres, Anderson," Tevos said haughty, chin up, even if she barely could see above Shepard's shoulder. "They're only doing their job after all, no matter the
mission. But the Alliance will reward Spectre Shepard and Spectre Vakarian and will be very generous with them. That'll start by replacing all their lost gear, weapons included, and you'll toss in whatever they ask for. Understood?"

"This is the minimum we can do, Councilor," Anderson agreed.

"I advise you to make your requests before the Council determines the proper sanctions, Spectres," Tevos continued, ignoring Anderson. "The Alliance may not have the necessary funds once we're done with them." Holy shit, Kaidan thought. He had known the situation for the Alliance was bad but if sanctions could bankrupt their economy, that was a whole new level of bad. Human expansion in the galaxy would probably slow down for the next decade or so. What exactly did Hackett have in mind when he alerted the Council? Had he even thought of the repercussions? He had doomed Humanity to stagnation in an ever evolving galaxy. Without innovation, a species could only go extinct.

Kaidan realized Tevos was staring at him and he took a deep breath to calm down. His energy field must have been disrupted by his emotions. Shepard hadn't notice but the Asari did. It was natural for her, while Shepard and Kaidan were part of the first generation of human biotics. They knew how to control their powers, more or less, but all the subtleties were still a mystery to them. They couldn't "read" another biotic like Asaris could.

"Now," Tevos said, keeping her eyes on Kaidan, "rest assured the Council won't call for you until you are ready to go back on the field. Just keep us posted on your location, as required by protocol." She turned to Shepard and her voice softened. "I wish no emergency will disturb your well earned rest but it's statistically near impossible considering the number of idiots in this galaxy." Shepard had a little smile she hid quickly. Tevos presented her hands to the Commander again. Shepard was still reluctant but she brushed Tevos' hands nonetheless. The Councilor saluted Vakarian and walked away, her turian guards in an orderly fashion around her.

Shepard waited for the Councilor to be far enough before taking a cigarette pack out of her pocket. She lit one in front of Anderson and drew on it. Kaidan frowned but the Admiral spoke before him.

"You're smoking again?" His tone was conversational but Kaidan knew Anderson was worried. He had followed Shepard since she had joined the army, and cared for her a lot. Seeing his protegee fall again in this bad habit was not a good sign.

"Been a couple of stressful days," Shepard replied, exhaling the smoke.

"You do know what effects those have on your biotics, don't you?" he continued.

"I know," Shepard grunted, "Tevos knows, everybody knows and I don't give a flying fu..." Anderson arched an eyebrow. "I don't care," she rectified, choosing diplomacy over bluntness. "That's my problem anyway, Admiral, and you have far more pressing matters to focus on. What time is it?" she asked, looking around to find a clock.

"A quarter past eleven," Kaidan answered.

"You'll have the list of our requests in two hours, Admiral," Shepard said. "But first, I need a shower and the biggest, greasiest cheeseburger I can find on this station."

"I can..."

"No you can't," Shepard interrupted Vakarian. "You have no idea what is a cheeseburger and I didn't survive this long to die today of food poisoning."
"I'll take care of it," Kaidan offered. "Do you want anything while I'm out shopping for Shepard, Vakarian?" His mandibles flicked a little.

"I'm fine," he replied, "thank you."

"See how terrifying it is to let your food in charge of someone who knows nothing about it?" Shepard snorted, starting to walk to the Normandy.

"Point taken," Vakarian nodded, following her.

"Thanks Kaidan," Shepard threw over her shoulder. "Admiral," she added coldly. Anderson saluted her and walked to the opposite direction without a word. Kaidan felt obligated to cross the docks to go on another direction.

Finding a cheeseburger on a human station wasn't difficult. Finding a good one was a task much more difficult. Kaidan succeeded nonetheless in less than an hour, transportation included. When he got back on the Normandy, he found Vakarian cooking something in the kitchen that apparently required a lot of dishes. He had changed to his sport wear. Kaidan noticed a few bruises and scratches here and there on the Turian. Marks should have faded faster than that. They had been absent for ten days. Considering the initial trip to the Bahak system was more or less three days long, they had had a week to recover, but their injuries looked like from yesterday's.

"Hello Sailor," Joker saluted, a cup of coffee in hand. He was leaning on the kitchen counter, looking at what Vakarian was cooking with interest.

"Where's Shepard?" Kaidan asked, putting his paper bag next to the pilot.

"In the lounge," Vakarian replied, stirring something that smelled awful in a pan. Shepard was probably smoking. The lounge was the only room where it was permitted to smoke on the Normandy. Kaidan heated up the oven and put two cheeseburgers and fries on a plate in it. Shepard would get out eventually, and he had the feeling she wanted to be left alone anyway. She always did after a rough mission. There was no point going to the lounge now.

"So," Joker continued, "where was I? Ah, yes: you're a crazy sonofabitch, Garrus."

"So much love," the Turian smirked. Kaidan leaned on the counter, intrigued by the sudden proximity between those two. "Admit it, Joker, you're just jealous."

"Jealous? Me? Are you high again?"

"Pain killers," Vakarian admitted with a shrug, mixing the content of a pan with another. "And yes, you're jealous because I joined the very close circle of asteroid pilots. Oh wait," he smiled, "I created that circle."

"Out of luck," Joker insisted. "You had no idea it'd work. Besides, without the knowledge I gave you, you wouldn't have been able to do it, so you owe me, like, a lot!"

"I'd have found out eventually."

"That's a lie!" Joker's voice went high, faking offense. "You're lying to my face! I swear I'll tell on you to the next Primarch I come across."

"Turians lie all the time, like anybody else," Vakarian chuckled. "If confronted, we have to tell the truth, but it's not even an obligation, more a question of pride."
"I command you to tell me the truth at once, thirteenth tier Garrus Vakarian!"

"Well, technically, I don't have to," the Turian smirked. "My tier is roughly equal to your Lieutenant Commander rank, so I'm your superior, Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau." That was new, Kaidan thought. So they had the same rank. Nihlus too. Maybe that explained Kryik's attitude towards him.

"You're making up your bullshit as you speak," Joker grunted, "admit that at least."

"Who knows?" Vakarian teased.

Joker snorted. "I'll ask Solus, he wrote a whole book on your culture."

"Several, actually," Shepard corrected. Kaidan turned to see her arrive, also in sport wear, hands in her pockets, hair still wet. She looked tired but a lot more relaxed. Maybe not a hundred percent but it was a great improvement nonetheless. "What do you want to know, Joker?" she asked. "I've read them all and I've experienced first hand his findings so I'm like the expert here." She hooped on the counter to sit on it and winced a little. Her hoodie was zipped to the top. Kaidan couldn't see any injuries other than on her face but he'd bet that wasn't pretty.

"That's cheating," Vakarian intervened before Joker could decide which question was the most important. "Besides, you can't reduce seven billions people to an average behavior."

"'Course you can," Shepard assured. "'Humans are ruthless lunatics driven by passion and capable of anything with the proper motivation'," she recited.

"You have to admit it sounds better than 'giant chickens with metal skin and a stick up their ass'," Vakarian replied, his mandibles flickering. Joker snorted in his cup, spilling coffee on his chest.

"Oh shit," he mumbled, "that was my last clean shirt! You people don't realize how long it takes me to go down to the utility room."

The oven beeped and Kaidan got the plate out while Joker cleaned his shirt with water. Shepard opened wide eyes at the vision of so much food. Kaidan smiled. He set everything on the table, sauces, soda and sundae with caramel topping included, before inviting her to sit. Her moan when she took the first bite was almost indecent. Vakarian finished his cooking shortly after and took his five courses lunch to the table. There was enough food for two or three Turians. Joker came to sit next to Shepard and Kaidan joined them on the other side of the table. He didn't want to impose but he also wanted to be sure Shepard ate.

"So," Joker said, "is Baby-Spectre really my superior?"

"If I don't say so, no," Shepard answered.

"Ah ha!" Joker rejoiced. Vakarian winced.

"Alright, I lied," he admitted. "Without our conversation, I wouldn't have had a clue about how the relay system worked."

"And you'd be dead so I basically saved your lives," Joker smiled, easing himself on his chair. "You're welcome," he saluted with his cup.

"Maybe I'd've had his idea," Shepard shrugged. Joker laughed.

"Yeah right. I know you're crazy enough to come up with a plan like that, Commander, but there is
"no universe possible where you'd've been able to do the maths."

"The VI helped," Vakarian informed while Shepard stared at the pilot who seemed to regret his words. "I managed to do the maths while we were already transiting but it took me almost three days just to solve the Hauptmann-Puntambekar equations. The VI did it in an hour before we hit the relay."

"Three days isn't bad, to be honest," Joker shrugged. "Takes at least a week for rookies at the academy the first time they have to solve those equations."

"I'm glad we have computers," Shepard sighed, chewing on a fry soaked with vanilla ice cream – a bad habit of her if you were to ask Kaidan. "We lose enough time as it is with the relay network. I'd be crazy if we had to wait three more days at each nexus."

"Can I?" Vakarian asked, pointing to the fries with his fork. Shepard shrugged and let him pick one. He dipped it in the sundae before tasting it. He nodded appreciatively and continued digging in his plates. Another converted. It was criminal.

"How long did it take you the first time, Joker?" Kaidan asked, out of curiosity.

"To solve the H-P equations? I'd love to brag but it took me three days too."

"Ha." Vakarian's mandibles flickered. He looked amused this time, Kaidan decided.

"Yeah, well," Joker scratched his forehead, "the instructor wrote the equations on the board and told us those who couldn't solve them within a week would've to leave the academy so, you know, no pressure. And we had no fucking idea what those equations were, couldn't find anything about it on the extranet because the extranet is for porn and kittens, obviously, not for knowledge. Besides, nobody cares how the relays work."

"And it's classified material anyway," Shepard interrupted before gulping the last bite of her first cheeseburger.

"Yeah, that too," Joker agreed. "Of course we couldn't find a thing at the library and other classes couldn't tell us anything either because they'd been told they'd get expelled if they did and all the shit. Not a stressful week at all."

"You said you solved the equations in three days," Vakarian commented before digging in a plate full of vegetables covered in brown sauce. It smelled like daisies.

"I spent the first day searching, got super anxious, drank a lot and spent all Tuesday wasted. I started to work on the equations on Wednesday and finished by Friday. Three days."

"But you spent a week on the equations nonetheless," Vakarian insisted, "whereas I solved them in 'almost' three days."

"Stop bragging, Vakarian," Joker grunted. "You're a super badass soldier and engineer, we get it, no need to rub it to the poor cripple's face."

"Your forgot 'handsome' in your description." Shepard almost spilled her mouthful of cheeseburger on the table. Joker patted her on the back to help her recover from her choking. "You're alright, Commander?" Vakarian inquired.

"I'm fine," she assured before clearing her throat. She had tears in her eyes but the good kind. "Hurts like a bitch but I'm fine."
"Try not to kill our Commander, mister Vakarian," Chakwas said as she walked to them, three small paper goblets and an orange container in hands. Solus was following her with a datapad under his arm. Chakwas put two cups in front of Shepard, one in front of Vakarian. Shepard swallowed the pills without a question but Vakarian hesitated. "I can assure you, mister Vakarian, Professor Solus did not touch or alter your medication." Solus nodded thoroughly and Vakarian didn't insist. He gulped the pills with a sip of water.

"Simple complements, vitamins, stimulants," Solus listed, looking at his datapad. "Alarming diminution of thulium in your organism provoked by lack of electromagnetic shields on the asteroid."

"And that's why you'll take three of those twice a day for at least fifteen days," Chakwas added, shaking the container in front of a frowning Vakarian.

"Alright," he mumbled, taking the bottle. He didn't look happy about it and Kaidan wondered why.

"Alarming how?" Shepard asked.

"Wouldn't be able to go on Palaven without proper shielding," Solus answered. "Also, immune system greatly weakened. Recommend avoiding contact with pathogens."

Vakarian arched a brow in Shepard's direction, his mandibles opening a little. "Yeah, well, no worries about that," she rolled her eyes. "And what did our little trip do to me?" She kept on digging into her fries.

"Your immune system is also impaired," Chakwas said, "and you lack a lot of iron, calcium, zinc, vitamins B2, B5, B8, B12, D, E, K..."

"In English?" Shepard interrupted.

"Will be tired, have short breath, difficulties processing nutriments and regenerating muscles and hemoglobin," Solus simplified, hands behind his back, as if he was giving a report.

"That's what happens when you use the relay network without proper shielding," Joker commented.

"Correct, mister Moreau," Chakwas smiled. "It's a very well known phenomena and you'll both recover completely within two weeks."

"Yes," Solus confirmed. "Not enough time spent in the relay network to develop more regrettable effects like tumors, cancers or mutations."

"But what about their injuries?" Kaidan intervened.

"What about them?" Chakwas asked.

"They look like they've been beaten up yesterday. I doubt the rescue crew did that to them."

"Have to remind you lack of shielding on the asteroid," Solus chuckled.

"So?" Kaidan insisted, not liking the Salarian's tone. Joker rose his hand.

"Me, me, pick me, Professor!" he pleaded. Solus nodded humbly, smiling. "The asteroid was trapped in the relay network for six days from our point of view but, for them, the trip was instantaneous. Sort of."
"What?"

"They were out of time," Joker continued while Solus nodded his approval. "See, you need gravity and strong electromagnetic shielding on a ship if you want to diminish the effects of the relays on an organic life form. And I say diminish, not cancel, because there is no possible way to cancel the non-happening of time."

"Again: what?" Kaidan repeated.

"There is no time," Joker insisted, "and you can't cancel something that doesn't happen."


"Felt like six days though," Shepard grunted, now eating her sundae with her remaining fries.

"Gravity on the asteroid," Solus continued, "impression of time but not actual time."

"Our minds think we've spent six days in the relay network," Vakarian simplified, "but our bodies didn't get the message."

"Exactly!" Solus confirmed.

"I see," Kaidan said, even if he wasn't sure to understand everything.

"So," Vakarian continued on a clearly teasing tone, "I may have the impression I solved the Hauptmann-Puntambekar equations in three days but it actually was instantaneous." Joker opened his mouth in a perfect o under the chock. "Well, half of that." Shepard laughed before the outraged face of her pilot.

"Shit, Vakarian, I said it hurts!" she complained, rubbing her side. Vakarian eased himself on his chair, his mandibles flickering. He wasn't sorry at all. To the contrary, he seemed pretty pleased with himself. Kaidan understood that feeling all too well. Making Shepard laugh after a rough mission was a pretty big accomplishment. "There," Shepard said, searching for something in her pocket. "Your punishment." She slammed a folded post-it on the table. Vakarian had to bend to take it, which made him wince a little.

"You know how to read English, Vakarian?" Joker mocked.

"I'm fluent in eight languages, Moreau," Vakarian replied but he still presented the paper to Alenko. Joker laughed. Alenko felt a sudden weight on his stomach as he read.

"A Mako?" His voice may have trembled a little.

"Yes, a Mako," Shepard confirmed. Joker laughed even more, quickly followed by a more discreet Chakwas. "I've wanted one since we lost ours with the SR1 but we didn't have the funds for a new one." She took her soda. "Now's the occasion," she shrugged, straw on her lips.

"What's a Mako?" Vakarian asked. Joker couldn't stop laughing, which made Shepard smile. Kaidan couldn't find the proper words to describe the vehicle. Death on six wheels, maybe.

"The only machine capable of making a Krogan throw up, I'm afraid," Chakwas answered. Vakarian arched a brow.
"And that's my punishment?" Joker kept on laughing. He was all red and had tears in his eyes.

"More like..." he tried saying between two breaths, "more like everybody's... oh God, everybody's punishment!"

"Your punishment is to make the list of our requests, Vakarian," Shepard corrected, fighting her smile hard. Joker was barely recovering, face on the table. "You'll also send it to Anderson."

"Alright," he agreed.

"Be generous with yourself. If you want all the N7 catalog, go for it. And when it comes to me, I want to replace my Black Widow and my armor but I can find a good Carniflex and an assault rifle anywhere. Ask Steve for my armor, he'll know what's missing." Vakarian nodded. Shepard stood, fumbling in her pocket again. "Thanks for the meal, Alenko. Let me know how much I owe you."

"Sure," Kaidan shrugged, "no problem." He had no intention whatsoever to make her pay though.

"Strongly suggest against smoking," Solus commented as Shepard took her packet out of her pocket. "Disastrous consequences observed on human biotics. Humans in general but biotics in particular."

"My boot up someone's butt also has consequences, regardless of species, Professor," Shepard replied coldly. Solus just smiled and nodded. "I'll head to bed right after," Shepard added, "I'm dead tired. Send the list to Anderson and take some rest too, Vakarian, you earned it. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Aye, aye, Commander."

"Night night," Joker added as Shepard walked away. She waved goodbye over her shoulder and disappeared at the corner. Solus waited for the lounge door to close before talking.

"Have something for that."

"I'm sure you have, Professor," Chakwas smiled softly, "but experience told me it's better to wait for her to ask for help instead of doing something behind her back, even if it's for her own good." Kaidan nodded. Shepard described herself as a strong independent woman who didn't need help unless she asked for it. She was proud but not stupid. She would ask for help if she couldn't handle the situation herself.

"What does smoking do to biotics?" Vakarian asked, turning to the two doctors.

"Smoking, nothing but lung cancer over a long period of time," Solus answered. "Nicotine the problem. Simply put, biotics no more than capacity to control flaw of energy created within a body containing eezo nodules. Flaw blocked by nicotine. Energy bottled up. Can eventually explode. Boom!"

"What?" Joker, Vakarian and Kaidan said at the same time.

"It happened once," Chakwas reassured them, "with a subject who was smoking near rusty oxygen tanks."


"Shepard won't be able to use her powers and will probably be more jumpy than usual," she
"Hide yo ribs, yo!" Joker mocked, hands in the air. Vakarian frowned, with a little flickering of his mandibles.

"Anyway, I better get going," he said, piling up his empty plates and Shepard's.

"I'll do the dishes," Kaidan offered.

"Thanks but I'll take care of my own mess," Vakarian replied. Kaidan didn't insist. Politeness made him say a lot of things he didn't mean to, to be honest.

"Yep, back to work," Joker yawned, stretching his back. "I have to make sure the guys don't fuck up again the balance of my baby, then reconfigure everything because of course they'll fuck up the balance of my baby."

"Will hold the elevator!" Solus claimed before turning heels, fist in the air, as if it was a battle cry. Chakwas smiled. "You know where to find me, boys," she said, going back to the medbay.

Kaidan found his way to the shuttle bay later that afternoon, once certain Shepard and Vakarian were both resting. Shore leave officially ended at seven but almost everybody was on board already.

"I'm glad we got to move tomorrow," Wrex said, stretching. Kaidan was waiting for the delivery of the new Mako. Some crew members had stayed with him when they had arrived. "Arcturus Station is no place for a Krogan."

"Or a Quarian," Tali added, sitting on a pile of crate like a queen on a throne. "I didn't like the looks those Humans gave me."

"It's the hips," Vega chuckled. Cortez elbowed him in the ribs. "Seriously, any guy would cry before such a fine ass." Tali giggled.

"Careful boy," Wrex growled, showing his teeth. Vega took cover behind Cortez who held his hands up in the air.

"Don't involve me, please," he asked. "I don't even care about her ass." Cortez gave a quick look to Kaidan. He felt his cheeks warm up and looked away.

"You're disgusting, Cortez," Wrex grunted.

"Imagining you having sex with Tali makes me want to hurl, so we're even," Cortez replied, not afraid to talk back to the big Krogan. He knew Wrex wouldn't actually hurt him. They were good friends regardless of their sexual preferences. They just avoided the subject in general.

Wrex brushed it off with another grumble. "So," he turned to Kaidan, "how was Shepard?"

"Tired," Kaidan admitted. "She should be fine in two weeks, from what Chakwas and Solus said."

"It has nothing to do with the Salarian, idiot," Ashley snapped back. Wrex looked at her with big wide eyes. He wasn't used to get attitude from Ashley.
"Wow, easy Williams," Vega chuckled, still taking cover behind Cortez. "Ate a tiger this morning or what?"

"Fuck off, Vega," she replied and she stared angrily at the docks. Silence fell upon them, only interrupted by the workers still busy with the hull of the ship. Kaidan stared at Ashley's profile, her nose broken at least half a dozen times, her long eyelashes and her black hair cascading on her shoulders. He liked when she let her hair loose but it was a rare sight reserved for shore leaves or special occasions.

"Liara sure is late," Tali wondered after a few minutes.

"She still has an hour of free time," Cortez smiled. "She's the smart one who's enjoying her shore leave fully if you ask me."

"I thought she'd run to the ship as soon as she heard Shepard was back," Tali shrugged.

"Maybe the Doc doesn't know yet," Vega tried.

"Javik informed all the crew," Kaidan told him.

"We should organize a rescue party," Wrex proposed with a big smile full of sharp teeth. "Just in case."

"You just want to punch people and break bones," Cortez smirked.

"Krogans call that helping a friend out," Wrex defended himself. "It's cultural." Kaidan smiled as the others laughed more or less.

"If Liara is late for more than thirty minutes," Kaidan said. "we'll see, but it's not Omega, you know? Arcturus is a pretty safe station."

"Do you remember the three days of riots last week?" Tali mocked.

"Civilians felt attacked," Kaidan shrugged. "They saw a lot of Turians invading the center of their government and reacted to what they thought was a coup. You can't blame them for that."

"But your army barely did a thing to stop them," Tali insisted.

"The Alliance is not supposed to deal with internal problems," Kaidan explained. "It's a force to help our expansion and protect our interests. We cannot fight against the civilians. That's the police's job."

"What's the police?" Tali asked, her accent nicely altering the foreign word.

"It's like C-Sec on the Citadel," Cortez answered. Tali made a little disgusted sound, which made Kaidan smile. He knew Tali didn't think much of C-Sec, mostly because she had had troubles with them at the beginning of her pilgrimage. To her defense, C-Sec officers could be a little rough and racist towards some species, and Quarians weren't welcome in general due to their reputation of thieves and beggars. Plus, C-Sec recruited a lot in the turian army. Turians thought little of Quarians.

"How are things going between you and Vakarian, Tali?" Kaidan inquired. She snorted.

"Very well considering I'm avoiding him."

"Why that?" Vega asked. "He's a pretty cool guy."
"Very polite," Cortez approved.

"He's turian," Tali replied, as if it explained everything.

"Yeah, so?" Vega insisted.

"He's full of himself and tall and he thinks he's so smart with all his fancy accreditation," Tali listed with a pissed off voice. "I've also spent all my life in a military society but I don't feel the need to remind people I'm smarter than them every occasion I get."

"Yes," Wrex snorted, "yes, you do, Baby-girl." Tali gently shook her head, as if Wrex had said something really stupid but sweet nonetheless.

"You know what?" Vega replied, "I don't agree with that." Tali invited him to carry on with a sign of the hand. "I arrived on this ship at the same time and I can guarantee you people I've seen a difference between how you treat me and how you treat him. I know I'm easy going, I'm not afraid to make new friends and stuff, but, frankly, being Human helped me a lot." Wrex grumbled and Tali made an offended little noise. "Seriously!" Vega insisted. "I know Turians did stuff to Krogans, Quarians and even Humans but the guy has nothing to do with that. He wasn't even born when the First Contact War happened! Well, I don't know exactly but I'm pretty sure of it anyway. But he's a Turian so he must be evil, right? That's as stupid as saying all Krogans are brainless cannon fodder or all Quarians are... are... actually I don't know any stereotypes about Quarians but I'd bet those are nasty too, like, really nasty." Touché, Kaidan thought. "What do you know about Garrus anyway?" Vega continued. "Nothing, because you barely talked to him."

"He didn't exactly talk to us either," Tali snorted.

"And you didn't think 'hey, maybe the guy is shy and needs a little help getting out of his shell'?'" Vega returned viciously. "That's literally the first thing that came up to my mind when I met him, and we'll all agree, I'm no genius." Tali wiggled uncomfortably on her throne.

"You didn't see him on the field," Tali insisted. "He was not shy at all when he killed that Turian on Omega." Kaidan had heard of that kill after dinner. Tali had told them Vakarian had shot without hesitation a Turian begging for his life. It had upset her for days.

"We've never been on a mission together," Vega said, "but I can guarantee you I'm way different on the field too, Baby-girl. Everybody is."

"Hey!" Wrex objected. It made sense, Kaidan thought. Vakarian was a lot more open in a mission. Not chatty and friendly per se but more at ease. It made a big difference with his usual self on board, always keeping a low profile and avoiding confrontations.

"And it's the same for Garrus," Vega continued. "He spent most of his life with a gun in his hands. That's his true nature, that's who he really is, and that's certainly the guy who'll save your ass at some point because, damn! He's good!"

Good enough to save Shepard from a certain death, on an asteroid aimed to a mass relay. Good enough to make her smile and laugh despite the shit hitting the fan. Something bothered Kaidan though. Vakarian had been more relaxed and chatty than usual earlier at lunch. Kaidan had thought it was because of exhaustion or pain killers but Vega's speech enlightened the events differently. Vakarian was still in battle mode. He was still on high alert. Something really bad had happened on that asteroid.

Tension broke as the sound of someone running up the ramp echoed in the shuttle bay. Kaidan
turned to see Liara arriving, out of breath and black on her cheeks. She had a big paper bag in her hands. Wrex complained about his missed opportunity to have fun.

"I'm here!" Liara yelled as she stopped near them. She took in a big gulp of air. "EDI," she breathed out, "please inform Javik I'm here." She sat down on a crate, trying to catch her breath.

"Message transmitted," EDI replied through the speakers. Vega patted Liara on the shoulder.

"You okay, Doc? Need some water?"

"I'll be fine," Liara said between two heavy breaths, grabbing Vega's arm. "Please don't tell Shepard I can't run half a kilometer without dying."

"No worries," Vega chuckled, "your secret is safe with me. But we might want to work on that at some point." Liara turned desperate eyes to him, with a little squeak. Making Liara exercise was a task for men stronger than Wrex – truth be told, the old Krogan had a soft spot for desperate young girls like Tali and Liara and he couldn't yell at them nor make them cry. "What's with the bag, Doc?"

"A spaceship," Liara breathed heavily. "For Shepard. Thought she could... use the distraction. Had to go to five different stores to find... a model she didn't have." Kaidan smiled a little. He knew how difficult it was to complete Shepard's collection.

"The Commander is resting now," he said. "You can give her your gift tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, yes... Tomorrow is better," Liara approved. "I'll have time to catch my breath before tomorrow." Even Ashley was amused by the good word. "Why are you all here?" Liara asked.

"Are you waiting for something?"

"You might want to run away," Wrex grumbled.

"What? Why?"

"A brand new Mako will arrive any moment now," Kaidan said. Liara lost several shades of blue in the blink of an eye.

"Oh fuck."

TBC
Wrex had had a good life. He had killed a thresher maw to become an adult, not even one of age at the time. He had fought his way out of his homeworld, alone against his father's warriors; traveled the galaxy countless times, realizing it was a small place after all; won bloody battles long forgotten by all the short-life species; destroyed spaceships, cities, colonies, even a planet once; survived countless raids, ended the life of legends, made new ones of his own and met so many people he had lost track of names. There was no such thing as an old Krogan but Wrex had lived through enough to consider he was experienced. Experience meant confidence. Confidence drove out fear.

Still, seeing the Mako in the shuttle bay every morning made him shiver. He had been perfectly happy for four months without that damn machine. Alliance goons themselves called that thing the space cockroach. It was truly indestructible and too often an obstinate driver would try to prove the Mako wrong, ignoring the screams of the passengers. Wrex had checked in bars all over the galaxy, asking questions to human soldiers: each driver seemed possessed behind the wheel and tended to do stupid things, like throwing the Mako over the nearest cliff. That wasn't just Shepard.

"Is she training?"

Wrex turned to see Tali behind the force field that separated their cabin in two, lasciviously laid on their bed, naked above the sheet, her white skin reflecting the dim light coming from the shuttle bay. He could barely see her – he had to admit krogan sight wasn't the best of the galaxy – so he let his imagination took over, helped by the glimpses of her body: long thin legs, followed by round and full hips, a narrow waist, perky little breasts with dark nipples, delicate shoulders, long and graceful neck, sharp profile with her flat nose and white eyes, shaved head but for her little braid on the right side. She was beautiful and he wanted her just at this thought.

"No," Wrex sighed nonetheless, knowing perfectly of who Tali was talking about. He walked to their bed, passing through the force field and waiting for it to clean him, and laid down next to his lover. She was so small and fragile compared to him, he thought as he caressed her side with a finger.

"It's been days," Tali said. "Why doesn't she train? She always trains, even when she's injured."

"Tali, he thought as he caressed her side with a finger.

"Tali, she's not stupid, she knows she can't always win," Wrex shut up. Tali was young and didn't know the galaxy as well as she thought. She didn't know how ugly a job could turn in the blink of an eye just because you had a hole between your legs.

Wrex had known as soon as he had welcomed Shepard on board. She had smelled like blood and Batarians, even after days and countless showers. He wasn't an idiot, he could do the maths. Batarians were barbaric little shits, slavers who had no respect for their merchandize. They wounded and killed what they considered no better than animals. Still, they raped said animals, regardless of gender and age. They needed the humiliation. It was part of their culture – and probably the only way those less than nothing could get off anyway. Wrex hated Batarians. They didn't know what true power was and they couldn't do a clean job.
Still, he understood why they had wanted to reduce Shepard to an animal. She sadly represented the fall of the Batarians, and even had participated to it. Shepard had fought on Torfan, kicking those bastard back home with their tail between their legs. She had put an end to a lot of traffics created by Batarians, killed hundreds of their mercenaries. She was the face they pictured when they remembered the last twenty years of isolation and humiliation. Killing her would have been too sweet for her. They had needed to destroy her completely.

It actually amused Wrex a little just to imagine those bastards learning the Bahak system was still there, its relay still working, the asteroid now in the Sol system and Shepard alive. They probably didn't know Vakarian had actually saved the day instead of Shepard but that wouldn't have changed a lot of things anyway. Vakarian was a Turian between countless others, unknown from the vast majority of the galaxy. Batarians couldn't care less about him, especially if Shepard was around. She would be the target of all their hatred once again. Not that they needed another reason.

"What are you thinking about?" Tali asked, teasing him with her own little hands.

"Nothing in particular," Wrex lied, his finger tracing the soft curves of her breasts. It wasn't a subject he would talk about with Tali. He loved her but she seriously lacked maturity sometimes.

"Who do you think will go this afternoon?"

"Hm?"

"The mission." Wrex smirked. Tali knew how to awake his appetite for morning sex – not that he needed help. "Shepard said we'd take down merc outposts until the Council calls for her and Vakarian."

"I don't know." He'd like to go though. Shepard was not in her best shape. Wrex knew something was going on with her biotics. She smelled funny, not like herself at all, and it had nothing to do with the smoke and tobacco. Something was up with her, something Wrex could feel but not explained. He could have asked but he doubted Shepard would honestly answer. That would come but not yet. For now, she needed to rest, to digest everything that had happened to her. There would be time later for getting drunk and talking. He was her friend – and proud to be. She'd talk.

Shepard would need a powerful biotic with her for this mission. That meant either Javik or Wrex, plus the Turian. Wrex trusted Javik with his own life. He knew the Prothean would protect Shepard no matter what, so who was going with her didn't have much importance – as long as it wasn't Liara or Alenko. They both were good kids but they lacked the guts needed to reduce a platoon to a bloody pulp at once, especially Liara. When it came down to killing without emotions, Javik and Wrex were the first in line – and Legion too, considering – especially if Shepard's life was in danger.

Wrex smiled for himself. He had came to really like that little skunk. He had met her on her first job as a Spectre. Nihlus was with her but Wrex had barely noticed him, to be honest. He had focused on that Human with hair as red as his own exoskeleton, who had killed twenty of his men in five minutes, just with her little guns. When Wrex had faced her, he had known she was more than what she seemed. He could smell her powers but she wasn't using them, so he tried to trigger her biotics. The result had been interesting: raw power, unshaped, devastating, burning like a thousand suns. She had managed to stop him in his charge and do some severe damages, but it had drained her to exhaustion. Wrex had had no intention to kill her at this point, not after all the fun they had had together, but he had a job to do nonetheless. He was about to knock her down when Saren had stopped him with a bullet in the brain.

Even with regeneration, Wrex had lost memories in that fight. He remembered they had been
important and dear to him but he never could manage to retrieve them, even after hours and days of thinking and meditation. Any other species would say regeneration was a great advantage but Wrex had come to think it was a curse. A smart Krogan could easily outlive an Asari thanks to his cellular regeneration but any damage to his brain would erase his memories. Wrex had had to learn how to speak two or three dozen languages at least twice in his long life. Still, he was one of the lucky bastards. He had seen debilitated Krogans more than often, shitting in their pants because they had once more the mind of a child. It was a sad thing to meet an old friend and realizing he had no idea who you were and what you had lived with him.

He would forget about Tali one day and he feared that possibility more than anything else. He fucked her gentler than usual this morning.

Still, the Mako was a pretty frightening sight in itself. The beast dared to shine and look indestructible in front of Wrex hours later in the shuttle bay. The Alliance had given them a brand new death trap, the latest model with reinforced plating, more powerful thrusters and state of the art mass effect generator. That just meant more charge into whatever was in front of Shepard: barricade, concrete walls, mountains, cliff, you named it. The only comfort Wrex had was in the impossibility to use that damned machine unless the Normandy was docked. The Mako couldn't free-fall from orbit and the Normandy SR-2 was too big and delicate to land without the proper accommodations, or to get too close of the ground. That was a big relief.

"Look who I found hiding in Lab1!"

Wrex turned to see Vega arriving with a not particularly happy Vakarian. The Turian was wearing that black and green armor the Alliance had given him when they had rescued him and Shepard on the asteroid. Good stuff, light but resistant and flexible. Kind of old actually. It had been a week and Wrex hadn't seen the Turian out of that armor, not even at breakfast. Turians trained to sleep in their armor during their years in the army but anybody who had slept one night in full gear would rather not do it again, Krogans included. A warrior in armor to rest could only wait for shit to come.

Wrex snorted. Vakarian was expecting troubles. Wrex wasn't an idiot, he knew it had to do with Shepard. Vakarian reeked of guilt and anxiety. The kid needed to relax and what was better than a good kick in the butt for that?

"'bout time you joined use for training, Garrus," Wrex said. The Turian gave him a cold look back. First names were for friends and family, not strangers, especially Krogans. Wrex counted on that to push the kid to his limits. An angry Turian was a sloppy Turian. It would make a big difference with this one. Wrex had seen him train with Shepard and Javik through the windows of his cabin. Vakarian was good. Really good. Wrex wouldn't put him down easily. "I needed a new sandbag," he pushed a little more.

Vakarian's eyes spoke for him: focused and sharp. He wouldn't miss one opportunity. Wrex smiled back at him and gathered everyone. On all the fighting personnel, only Javik, Legion, EDI, Shepard and the Salarian were missing – though that slimy asshole wasn't really part of the team, he just happened to be with them on Ilos and that meant nothing at all to Wrex. Even Liara had showed up, every day since they had left Arcturus Station. She would come for a while then find new excuses to miss training. Wrex knew the pattern all too well to be fooled.

"So," Vega started, already jumping like a pyjak, "sparring?"

"Yeah, sure," Wrex shrugged. He saw Liara heavily eye Vakarian. Wrex knew the Turian had kind of a soft spot for Liara – they worked a lot together in Lab1 and Liara was a good kid, hard to dislike – but if she thought he'd go easy on her, she was mistaking. All his anger would explode at
her face – or *her face*. "Garrus," Wrex added, waving at him to come nearby, "with me. I wanna see what you're made of, kid."

The Turian snorted and did something Wrex didn't anticipate: he attacked directly, quick like lightening. He closed on Wrex in the blink of an eye. His kick came from below, where he knew a Krogan's field of vision was less than shit. Wrex took the knee in his chin and tried to catch the bastard but Vakarian suddenly used him as support to jump back, out of reach. He landed as Wrex caught his balance and attacked again, this time with his fist. He feinted a right hook, only to punch Wrex' jaw with his left and fall back again.

"Looks like the sandbag is kicking your ass, old man," Vakarian said, keeping his guard high. The Turian may have been smaller than Wrex but his limbs were longer. He was faster, had a better reach and he knew how to fight against a Krogan. Wrex didn't have much choice if he wanted to take him down. He threw his fist in the air, activating his biotics with the movement. Vakarian jumped to avoid the blow but one of his feet got caught in the wave. He lost balance, fell on his back and rolled on the ground, kneeling as soon as possible, only to jump back on his feet, ready to fight again. Vakarian smiled, the kind of smile that promised a good fight. Wrex was happy to oblige.

"What the fuck did you have in mind?"

Wrex winced as Chakwas stitched the loose folds of his skin under the jaw back together. It wasn't really painful but Shepard's yelling always resonated unpleasantly in his skull. And she had done a lot of yelling for the last couple of minutes. Vakarian, in nothing but his pants, had endured it stoically, eyes locked on the wall, as if he wasn't really there, his arms resting on his knees. Wrex hadn't paid much attention to Shepard's scoldings at the time. He had looked at all the scars the Turian had on him, especially that long and deep burn on his chest, down to his hip. Wrex had never seen something like that on a Turian – they hated scars.

"Wrex!" Shepard snapped. "I'm talking to you!" Wrex deigned to turn to her.

"We were training, is all," he grumbled. He really liked Shepard but he hated when she thought she was his boss. Still, her ship, her rules.

"Don't talk," Chakwas commanded, still stitching him.

"You call that training?" Shepard insisted, pointing to Vakarian. The kid was uglier than usual with his broken nose and all the bruises from the fight. Pockets of blood bulged here and there, even under the thin layer of skin above the exoskeleton – wasn't skin exactly but Wrex had never been interested in anatomy, unless it was a useful tip to kill his target.

"I'm fine, Commander," Vakarian said automatically.

"You," Shepard turned, pointing a finger at him, "shut up." Vakarian kept on staring at the wall and didn't say a word, as ordered. Wrex saw Shepard frown a little and he knew Vakarian had done something she didn't like. But what? He just had obeyed.

"'was necessary," Wrex continued. Chakwas clicked and removed her hands from her canvas. "'had to see what the kid was capable of."

"I'll sew your lips together if you don't stop talking now, Wrex," Chakwas threatened.

"Do that to Shepard," he growled, "she's asking the questions."

"She may ask the questions," Chakwas replied, "but I am the one with big needles." Wrex growled
wordless complains and even sat still as the doctor finished her handy work. Shepard kept on lecturing him but he didn't pay attention to her. "There," Chakwas finally said a few minutes later, "all done."

"You know I regenerate, right?" Wrex asked, touching the line of stitches. Chakwas slapped his hand away.

"I know you'll open the wound again if you touch it. Now," she added, turning to Vakarian, "how are those swellings?"

"It's fine," Vakarian replied, standing next to the bed where he had sat until now. He reached for his armor parts. "I'm fine," he assured, then straighten up. "I'll rest before the mission, with your permission, Commander."

"You're not going," Shepard said. A hint of panic crossed Vakarian's face for a second.

"I insist on going, Commander. I have to, I..."

"Have to think about what you're doing, Vakarian," Shepard finished, her voice cold and imperious. "Dismiss."

"I trained with the others as you recommended," he replied, shrugging. Wrex shared a look with Chakwas. Shepard's orders were final, everybody knew it on the team. There was no talking back tolerated.

"Don't play the smartass, Vakarian," she growled, "you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Wrex counted three respiration of tensed silence before Vakarian finally abandoned the fight. He walked out of the medbay, head low. Shepard nervously fumbled in her pocket to find her pack of cigarettes.

"Damn," Wrex said to distract her, "never thought I'd see a Turian disobey a direct order." She snorted but obviously didn't want to stay to chit chat. Wrex insisted. "He changed after that mission."

"I won't talk about it," Shepard said. "It's cla..."

"Keep your classified bullshit for someone else, little girl," Wrex interrupted her. She frowned and looked at him as he hopped off the bed, straightening. Shepard was tall for a female of her species but Wrex easily towered over her by a quarter of her height. He contracted all the muscles he could and held his head high, as if he was facing one of his own. Shepard was a warrior, like him, honed in fire and blood, one of the finest of the galaxy. She deserved the respect, even if she was a stubborn little cunt. "I know what happened to you and if you don't want to talk about it, fine, I won't force you," Wrex said, walking towards her, "but don't you fucking lie to me." He could have punch her in the guts, it would have had the same impact. "We shared blood on the battlefield, Shepard," Wrex hammered, standing right in front of her, covering her with his shadow.

"And?" she asked, a brow raised, arms folded. "You're like my husband or something now?" Wrex snorted. He knew a bunch of people who'd have shat their pants in her situation but she wasn't afraid. He could smell it.

"More like a third cousin," he joked to lighten the tension between them, "but krantt nonetheless. And Krogans fight for their krantt."

"So I just have to ask and you'll kill every Batarian in the galaxy?"
"could be fun," Wrex smirked, bending a little to face Shepard. He saw her lose all trace of humor and he knew he had to change the subject. She probably thought joking about a genocide was a bad idea, considering, but Wrex couldn't care less, as long as his species wasn't the target. He straightened and turned his back to her to retrieve his upper armor. "And I can deal with that rebellious Baby-Spectre of yours if you want." Wrex noticed Chakwas had disappeared from the medbay. He hadn't seen her leave. Damned little terkochenka.

"Vakarian is actually giving me the same shit," Shepard sighed, annoyed.

"What shit?" Wrex asked, putting on his armor.

"Being overly protective over the frail and defenseless little girl I am," she snorted. She rubbed her forehead, then pushed back her hair.

"You're not frail nor defenseless, Shep," Wrex said, adjusting his sleeves. "I saw you rip off the hearts of a Krogan with your bare hands to make sure he'd stay down for good. That's barbaric, even for me." Shepard snorted. "Turians rarely face rape," he continued, sealing the left side of his armor. "It happens in their society, like in any other I guess, but rapists are skinned alive and let to rot in the sun until they die. Well, they did that a few years back. That gotta stop a lot of 'uncontrollable urges', if you see what I mean."

"Your point, Wrex," Shepard pressed him, obviously wanting to avoid the subject.

"The kid failed you," he resumed, finishing to seal his armor, "and he's making sure it won't happen again. It has more to do with him than you, really."

"And you think I don't know that already?" she mocked. "I've spent six days trapped on an asteroid with him, Wrex. He refused to free the other prisoners because they were, and I quote, 'unknown entities possibly endangering the mission by their irrational behavior'."

"You sure he wasn't talking about him?" Wrex joked, stretching to make sure his armor was well positioned. Shepard didn't find it funny. "You have to deal with your own shit," he continued, turning to her, "that's why I offered to take care of him. As I see it, you need to regenerate, Shep. You're strong but you're no Krogan, that'll take time."

"I'm fine," she shrugged. Wrex rolled his eyes. "I'm serious," she insisted. "Not the first time it happens, won't be the last. It sucks but I'm alive."

Wrex gave her a sad smile. Most of the people he knew would curl up in a corner and cry after what happened but Shepard was still standing and fighting. He admired that in her, that will, that fire inside of her. But, even if she acted like everything was fine, she needed time for herself. "Please, Shepard," Wrex said gentler, "let me help you." Shepard's smell was suddenly spiced by fear and anxiety, just a hint but it was enough for Wrex to know he had seen through her plating. She was tough, no doubt about it, but they'd been friends long enough for him to know her down to her core. She needed time alone and he would give her some.

She closed her eyes and sighed. She didn't need to say the words, Wrex knew when he had won a battle — against Shepard! A feat ought to be celebrated! That's why it surprised him when she talked: "Does anybody else know?"

"Ash, I think," Wrex said after a second of thinking. "She's pretty jumpy since you came back. Chakwas and the Salarian?" She rolled her eyes. Yeah, that was pretty obvious. "Javik?"

"I don't know." Her voice was trembling a little. "I kind of avoided him lately."
"Yeah, I get that." Though Javik never penetrated one's thoughts and memories without their agreement through touch, he could still sense strong feelings and emotions with the brush of the skin. And then, he would relentlessly try to know what had caused those feelings, especially if something had happened to one of his friends. Since Javik couldn't live without Shepard, he'd harass her with that for days, then probably start a genocide like the galaxy hadn't seen one for fifty thousands years. "Tali and Liara are completely blind to that kind of shit," Wrex continued, folding his arms. "I love them but they can be pretty stupid sometimes." Shepard didn't say a word but Wrex knew she agreed with him. The kids were pretty smart actually but they still were young and naive. They couldn't imagine all the shit that could happen to a defeated soldier – and death was the sweetest defeat possible. "Vega and Alenko might sense something's wrong but they're not the type to come to you if they only have doubts," Wrex continued.

"Yeah..."

"Joker?"

"He's smart, he probably figured it out, but he knows better than to give me pity." Wrex nodded. The pilot was a good friend of Shepard. He'd be there if she needed him, otherwise he'd act like her, as if nothing had happened. "I asked EDI and Legion to both shut up on the subject."

"Why would they care?" Wrex snorted. "They don't have feelings."

"They do, more or less," Shepard corrected him. "We talked about it once. Not knowing what to do provokes stress in them, actually."

"Fascinating but you're changing the subject, Shep." She growled something in a language Wrex didn't understand. "The others?"

"Cortez, maybe, Adams too but I'm their Commander, they won't try to comfort me or anything." That was apparently a relief. Wrex understood. Shepard didn't want comfort or pity from anybody. As she saw it, it was her problem and only her could deal with it.

"I doubt I can do anything about Ash," Wrex said, "but I'll deal with the Turian. Let me go with you this afternoon."

"I'm not going, actually," Shepard replied. "I can't."

"Your biotics?"

"Yeah," she admitted, burying her hands in her pockets, "I kinda fucked up on that part. I'll put everyone in danger so it's better if I don't go."

"And Vakarian? You'll put him in charge?"

"God no," Shepard frowned. "He's good, there's no denying that, but he can't give orders. He doesn't know how to do that."

"You learn to fight by going on the battlefield, Shep," Wrex reminded her. "You Humans have a similar saying for that, with a baby thrown into water to make it swim or something like that."

"Turians drown, Wrex."

"Because their daddies never threw them in a river," Wrex mocked. "I tell you Shep, that's the krogan way and it works pretty damn well." Before the genophage anyway. They could kill kids by the tone to get results at the time, they didn't care a thousand years ago. Now every kid who
survived birth was overly protected and was barely able to use a weapon at the age of one. That was a fucking pity.

"Not in his current state of mind," Shepard insisted.

"Alright," Wrex conceded, throwing his hands in the air. "Put me in charge for this mission, Shepard, and let Baby-Spectre come with me. We both need to shoot stuff."

"Fine," she winced. "Can I choose the third man or it's up to you too?"

"I'd rather go alone with the Turian actually." Shepard frowned a little more but capitulated.

"You tell him," she said as she walked to the door. Wrex followed her to the mess. Gardner was already fixing lunch. "I'll punch him in the face if I see him again today."

"Lots of anger in you kiddo," Wrex smirked, patting her on the shoulder. "might want to release the tension with some good old fu..." Shepard gave him a cold look. "... exercise," Wrex finished, changing the end of his sentence. "Right, exercise. Lots of exercise. Sweat all your anger and horrible tobacco."

"I'll consider it," she grumbled, heading for the lounge.

Wrex followed her until he reached Life Support's door, at which he knocked. He could have asked EDI to open it for him but he didn't want to scare the Turian. The kid probably had weapons in that room and Wrex didn't want to trigger a stupid reaction. He had seen Chakwas enough for today.

The door opened on Vakarian, still shirtless. The Turian was the only one on board tall enough to look at Wrex in the eyes. It was a little unsettling. Wrex was used to look at everyone from above and use his massive body to impress whoever he had in front of him. Vakarian had never bought his bullshit though, from the moment they had seen each other in the shuttle bay until now.

"Can I help you with something?" the Turian asked, his pale blue eyes searching for the clue confirming his bad intuition.

"Why yes," Wrex mocked. "You'll come with me this afternoon."

"Where?"

"Groundside." Vakarian's face stayed the same but Wrex could smell the surprise in him – and the anxiety. "Shepard's not coming," Wrex continued. "It'll be just you and me, Baby-Spectre."

"Is it one of your idea or an order from the Commander?" the Turian asked coldly.

"Both," Wrex smirked. Vakarian frowned. "You can go ask for confirmation if you want," Wrex offered, moving to the side to give him passage, "but I have to warn you: she's pretty pissed off by your attitude so she might finish the job on your face."

"My attitude?"

Wrex gave a look over his shoulder to Gardner. The Sergeant was a good man but a little too curious for his own sake. Half the gossips on the ship had been his invention. It was a miracle he was still alive, considering all the strong personalities on board.

Vakarian understood what was going on and invited Wrex inside. Life Support was a nice little room brightly lighted and warm with that – and it reeked of the Turian. It formed an angle to the
left, with a window giving on the reactor on the far wall. Vakarian had installed a desk and a chair in the continuation of the left wall, a sniper rifle currently disassembled there. Behind that were another chair, a crate and a suitcase. It took a second to Wrex to remember Turians didn't use beds like most of the known species. They slept sitting due to the spinal crest in their back, covered by their exoskeleton. Krogans usually did that too but comfortable horizontal mattresses had won Wrex over for quite some time now.

"Shep doesn't need your pity," Wrex said, feigning an uninterested look at the weapons on the shelves on his right. Damn, the kid already had an impressive collection, thanks to the Alliance. Wrex mostly used his shotgun and didn't care much for other pieces of artillery but he felt a bit jealous nonetheless.

"I don't pity her," Vakarian defended himself.

"I don't know what you do but you have to stop," Wrex insisted. "Shep doesn't like goody goodies like you."

"I'm not..."

"You're protecting her," Wrex interrupted, pointing a finger at Vakarian, "but all you do is remind her of what happened. She wants to be over it so let her, dammit! Give her some space and stop worrying for her. She's fine. She's alive."

Vakarian's shoulders fell and his face lost its hardness. He looked defeated. "I failed her."

"You were unconscious," Wrex reminded him. He had heard the epic parts of the story from Shepard herself at dinner once far from Arcturus Station. She hadn't talked about torture or rape or anything bad like that, skipping that part with some bullshit about cold cells and Batarians leaving the asteroid. Shepard had teased Vakarian with his nap but the Turian hadn't replied to that. He had stayed very silent during that dinner, more than usual. "What could have you done anyway, butt naked and all?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Something."

"Something stupid," Wrex confirmed. He sighed and folded his arms. "What happened is pretty ugly, I know that, and it comes from a merc who did this kind of things in his life." Vakarian lifted his eyes to meet Wrex'. "I'm thirty-eight and a third, Garrus," Wrex told him, "which starts to be old for a Krogan. I've seen and done enough in my life to write a hundred of your sagas and I haven't been the nicest guy around. I've killed, I've tortured, I've raped, not only prisoners but also their families and friends in front of them. That's the job."

"I doubt rape is a necessity, even for a mercenary," Vakarian snorted, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Don't give me attitude, Garrus," Wrex replied coldly. "You're the Council's bitch now. If they ask you to kill a guy who's doing good for his people just because he's on their way, you'll do it. If they ask you to blow up a commercial flight to discreetly eliminate a target, you'll do it. If they ask you to sterilize a whole species to make sure it's not a threat anymore, you'll do it. Heck, you don't even need to be a Spectre to do this kind of things! You spent fifteen years in the army, taking orders and killing who you were told to. You did your job, I did mine. You're no better than me."

Vakarian wasn't going to agree, Wrex knew it. Turians from the Hierarchy were generally too proud to admit their government was no better than any other. From Wrex' point of view, they were as blind as any Batarian raised under the Hegemony, brainwashed from birth to the Valley of Bones. You could talk philosophy with a Turian like Nihlus, who had seen both sides, especially
when he was high, but not with someone like Vakarian. He believed too strongly in the superiority of his people.

"Let's agree to disagree," Wrex added, dismissing anything the kid would want to say with a wave of his hand. "I'm not here to talk ethic with you." Vakarian nodded. "Leave Shepard alone," Wrex insisted. "She needs it and I'd add she's not stupid. She'll ask for help if she feels like talking or stuff."

"There's really nothing I can do?" Vakarian asked.

"I'd say make her proud but she's not your mommy," Wrex mocked. "You're under her responsibility so not dying on the job would be a nice touch," he shrugged, more serious. "Just don't be stupid, that should do."

"It'd be better if I stayed on the ship and worked on the VI in Lab1 then."

"And miss all the fun? Come on, Garrus, you're a man of action, it's engraved in your bones. Besides, I've heard so much about how impressive you are on the battlefield but I didn't see anything worth admiration so far. So you'll get your skinny ass to the shuttle bay after lunch and come with me take down some mercs," Wrex said. "Understood?" Vakarian nodded and they were done.

Wrex didn't even checked the name of the place they were going to. Shepard liked to know everything about her next target, from the weather down to the position of the stars in the sky at night, but Wrew always had found all those information useless. He had been a mercenary long enough to know how to adapt his aim on the go. He didn't need to know the exact force of the gravity, he felt it in his bones, as much as the pressure of the air on his shoulders or the direction of the wind on his face. Besides, he wasn't a sniper. His shotgun had to be used at close range so the bullets couldn't be deviated by the influence of the nearest moon or whatever.

All Wrex knew was that the view wasn't bad. A gas giant hanged above their heads, huge and red, only leaving a strange belt of yellowish space just above the horizon. The ground was rock-hard ice covered by some sort of turquoise metallic dust, and super flat with that. Wrex could see kilometers around. There was no cover at all. A surface like that just called for horrendous winds and storms but the satellite was too cold and its atmosphere too thin for that. Still, a glace geyser pierced the surface from time to time. The activity was probably due to the attraction of the gas giant.

"Nice, huh?" Wrex said, opening wide his arms. "That's my kind of place: hostile enough to discourage fuckers to come bother me." He turned to Vakarian, who was walking just behind him, using him as a shield. The Turian had his sniper rifle in hand, eye on the visor. He obviously hated the place.

"Bit cold for me," he replied through the radio. Even Wrex had to wear his helmet here. Krogans were pretty resilient but they still needed to breath, oxygen preferably.

"Bah," Wrex shrugged, walking again, "I've seen worse."

The mercenary outpost was just a kilometer away but Wrex wasn't worried. Nobody would stand guard in a place like that, too cold, too open. They could find automated security systems outside, but only if the mercenaries had ever imagined someone would be crazy enough to come here to get them. That didn't leave a lot of people in the Terminus Systems, to be honest. Mercenaries could hunt on their own kind but there were easier targets, like commercial flights, mining asteroids, colonies, or the Attican Traverse.
That's why it didn't surprise Wrex when they find nothing at all on the ground but a landing zone and an entrance to an underground base. "That's your cue, Garrus," Wrex said, pointing to the door.

The Turian nodded and worked his magic on the electronics. The door unlocked under fifteen second. "They don't know we're here," Vakarian told him, lifting his sniper rifle again.

"And I thought you were on board just to eat our food and complain about everything," Wrex mocked, opening the way.

"I don't complain."

"You're not a ray of sunshine either, son," Wrex reminded him. The door closed behind Vakarian and they waited for the airlock to adjust the pressure and the temperature. It was pretty quick nowadays but Wrex remembered the days where you had to wait an hour in an airlock to make sure the rapid temperature change wouldn't fuck up an armor's plating or seals. Those were the good days where all your enemies would gather anxiously behind the door to welcome you with guns and fire. Wrex kind of missed it.

But it was also nice to not be blown by a grenade as soon as the doors opened, he had to admit that. The vestibule was empty but for some crates, gas tanks and generators. Wrex aimed for the next door, taking his shotgun, but Vakarian didn't move.

"What is it?" Wrex asked, stopping on his way. The Turian was looking at the generators.

"Just an idea," Vakarian said, "but you won't like it."

"Shoot." Vakarian aimed and shot the generator indeed, and the explosion made Wrex jumped ten feet in the air. The room went completely dark before red lights kicked in, the emergency generator starting. An alarm rang through all the base. "You fucking moron!" Wrex yelled over the alarm. "It's a figure of speech, not an order! Now everybody knows we're here!"

"Not yet," Vakarian replied as he dragged two crates to the airlock, one on top of the other. He put the crates in the middle of the tracks and activated the doors of the airlock. They started to close but stopped as they found something on their way. Vakarian hacked them just then, blocking them in that position, and put his sniper rifle on top of the crates, aiming at the main doors. Fucking Turian, Wrex thought as he checked his immediate surroundings. He didn't have much choice so he ran to the wall on the left of the main doors, to take the mercenaries between two fires.

The doors were barely starting to open when Vakarian fired his first shot, and Wrex smelled blood immediately, between other things. The next round was as efficient as the first, and the following too. Vakarian reloaded and the mercenaries used that second to pass the doors, only to be welcomed by Wrex and his biotics. He finished those who didn't break their neck in the flight with his shotgun. Someone had the good idea to throw a grenade at him but Vakarian shot said grenade, which exploded behind the doors, devastating the mercenaries' ranks. A few survivors yelled and ran inside the main room. Wrex followed them, shotgun in hand, and finished them from behind.

And with that, they were done. Wrex felt deeply unsatisfied as he looked at the main room and all the possibilities it could have given him for a good fight. There were crates and machines and gas tanks and everything a Krogan could dream of for some decent fun.

Vakarian arrived on his right, sniper rifle already in his back, and gazed at the room too. "So," he said, folding his arms, "was that impressive enough for you, Wrex?"

Wrex snorted. The kid had balls, he had to admit that. He punched Vakarian in the shoulder
nonetheless.

"What was that for?" the Turian asked, making a big deal out of rubbing his armor over his shoulder.

"For thinking you were funny," Wrex replied, starting to walk through the containers maze. "Come on, the job isn't done yet. And since you like to rob me of all the fun, I'll let you catalog everything there is in this shithole."

"Awesome," Vakarian winced, following Wrex. The Krogan couldn't help but smile a little. Vega was right. That Turian wasn't so bad.

TBC
For once, Shepard was standing in front of the door of the shuttle when they arrived, frowning – at least, that didn't change. Garrus didn't hide his surprise. He had avoided her as asked for the last ten days, and she had done the same with most of the crew, still showing up at breakfast and dinner, probably to limit the rumors. She acted like normal during the meals, exchanging jokes with Moreau, teasing Alenko and listening to whatever the others were saying, but she never looked at Garrus. He usually sat at the other end of the table anyway, with Wrex, the Quarian, Vega and T'Soni. Vega and Wrex did most of the talking – the Krogan seemed to always have a story to tell.

"Shep," Wrex saluted as he pushed Garrus out of his way. He hopped out of the shuttle.

"Everything all right?" she asked, arms folded. Garrus let the Geth get out before him and stepped in the shuttle bay last, avoiding eye contact with his mentor. As long as he didn't have a direct order to do otherwise, he would keep his distances. He aimed for the elevator but Shepard stopped him.

"Where do you think you're going, Vakarian?" He turned to look at her.

"Bathroom," he lied. "It's kinda urgent, Commander." Wrex laughed at that but Shepard didn't look amused at all. Garrus knew she had been out of cigarettes for two days now. She had been irritated ever since. Chakwas had given her some sort of patches to stick on her skin but it didn't seem to have improved her mood.

"My quarters, in ten," she commanded and she turned to Wrex, ignoring Garrus once more. He didn't complain and jumped in the elevator as soon as possible. He went to the men's bathroom just because he knew the AI would tell on him to Shepard, waited a few minutes there, under Donnelly's dubious look, then took the elevator for another ride. He stood in front of the door of Shepard's cabin at parade rest until she arrived. She frowned when she saw him in the corridor.

"Jesus, you could have entered," she mumbled, walking past him.

Right, Garrus thought as he followed her inside, because going inside a superior's quarters was not going to end badly for him. That was highly disrespectful and wrong on many levels. Being invited there was already wrong. No turian Commander would invite a subordinate in their quarters, unless they were friends. Shepard wasn't Garrus' friend. She was his mentor and superior. Inviting him on first deck, or even giving him permission to come here whenever he wanted to, was highly inappropriate, as if she wanted to be intimate with him. The idea was really disturbing.

That's why he kept his distances, like every time he had been invited in. He stood, back to the aquarium, arms behind him, and kept his eyes on the collection of model ships on the wall in front of him. Shepard stopped on her way to the lower floor and rolled her eyes.

"Fine," she sighed, walking back to her desk. She leaned against it and folded her arms. "The Council called." Garrus felt half of his anxiety disappear. He still didn't understand why she hadn't summoned him in Comm Room or anywhere else to talk about that though. "We have to pick up another Spectre and her load. She needs help with something." Garrus nodded but Shepard didn't need his approval on that matter. She was her boss for the next twelve galactic standard months. Two had already passed, more or less. "And you won't ask any question?" Shepard grunted.

"You're not even a little curious?"
"It's not my place to question your orders, Commander," Garrus answered by habit.

"Bullshit," she replied and she was pretty pissed. "You did that at least a dozen times since you set foot on my ship." Garrus could clearly remember three times he had given her attitude but he wouldn't correct her now. That wasn't a good time – if there was any. He kept his mouth shut and Shepard eventually sighed. She pushed her hair back. "I'm sorry," she said, "I'm jumpy today."

"No need to apologize, Commander," Garrus told her.

"God you're so annoying," she said, throwing her head in the back. That remark should have rebounded on Garrus' armor like a plastic bullet from a kid toy but it hit him nonetheless, as if a grenade had just exploded right in front of his face.

"Permission to speak freely," he asked, keeping his eyes on the wall and his hands in check.

"Yeah, sure, why not," Shepard agreed, moving to sit on her chair.

Garrus opened his mouth but anxiety shut it up for him right after. He had no idea how to express his frustrations. He couldn't say Shepard was not a good mentor, even if she had given him permission. She may have been a fantastic soldier but she was a shitty mentor and probably the worst person ever when it came down to communication, Garrus included. She expected people to follow her lead without a word, to understand what she wanted and needed. Maybe that worked on the field with trained soldiers, and Garrus had had proof of that when they'd been together on Project Base, but her methods sucked otherwise. If the rest of the crew understood her non-verbal communication, it only was because they had known her for years. It was unfair of her to expect the same from him.

"I'm listening," she reminded him.

"Well I'm thinking," he snapped back. Shepard raised a brow. Shit, he thought immediately. He wasn't supposed to talk to her like that. "I..." he started but stopped to sigh. "In all honesty, Commander, I have no idea how to behave around you. I've been walking on eggshells since the beginning with you and I don't know what to do anymore. You wanted space but you didn't tell me anything, probably because you expected me to instinctively know it, somehow, and I, I mean, I don't mind going on missions with Wrex and the others but I'm supposed to learn from you, not your team."

"Hold on," Shepard stopped him, hands in the air, "I'm not here to teach you anything, Vakarian."

"Moral," he reminded her, looking at her straight in the eyes. "That's what you said to me the day we met."

"Yeah and?" she frowned. "You sound like I'm your instructor or something. I don't have anything to teach you on the field. Heck, I could learn from you! You're a better sniper than I'll ever be, engineering has no secret for you and I'm pretty sure you're holding back when we train in hand to hand combat!"

"All true," Garrus confirmed, and Shepard opened wide her eyes and mouth, "but that's not my point. My point is..."

"Oh come on," Shepard snapped, "you don't even know what your point is."

"We have," Garrus said louder, "a serious communication problem." Shepard opened her mouth to protest but a look from Garrus made her shut up. He was only putting the spotlight on something they both had known for a while. "I'm not blaming you, Commander," he continued with a more
measured voice. "We're both equally terrible at this. And we can both individually make it work with other people, more or less, less in my case, okay, but, huh, we're supposed to be a team."

"We work great together on the field," Shepard defended herself, folding her arms.

"Yeah, except for the part where we got ejected in space and everything that followed but..."

"Wait," she interrupted once more, "that was not our fault. That wasn't even something we could manage!"

"I've stopped three Atlas by myself during the Attack on the Citadel."

"Well good for you but I'm pretty sure the situation was way different, without any window giving on the void of space behind you."

"Maybe," Garrus winced, "but..."

"There is no but," Shepard replied, dismissing his argument with her hand.

"Alright," Garrus conceded. "What is done is done and we can't change what happened, obviously." Shepard frowned. Oh shit. "I'm sorry," Garrus continued, his shoulders falling, "I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay," Shepard mumbled, looking away. "I'm over it."

Yeah, Garrus thought, and I'm Palaven's Primarch while you're at it. He kept his remark for him though and regretted it. "This proves my point, Commander," he sighed.

"What proves what?"

"This," he gestured. "You throwing remarks at me, me holding back until I say something stupid that aggravates the situation. We can't keep doing that. You're my mentor, we're not supposed to do that."

"You keep forgetting one thing, Vakarian," Shepard told him coldly. "I'm not Turian. I'm not your mentor as your culture sees it. And I refuse to be, because, frankly, your buddy system is kind of fucked up."

"Well imagine my situation for a second, Commander," Garrus snorted. "My mentor, the person I'm supposed to look up to, to get inspired by and love unconditionally is a Human. A Human," he insisted as he saw Shepard frown, "an individual of a species Turians basically see as dangerous lunatics threatening the balance of the galaxy."

"Wait," she stopped him, "love has nothing to do with that."

"Love has everything to do with the relationship between a mentor and their protegee," Garrus replied, a little annoyed. "It's the same feeling we have for our people, our family, our platoon or even for the Hierarchy. It's overwhelming, strong. It's noble. Absolute."

"You're talking about adoration, not love."

"Then we have different definitions for the same word," Garrus conceded. That actually explained a lot. "Your love is like a fire, from what I know. You Humans are passionate people and Turians hate nothing more than passion. It's highly irrational."

"Alright," Shepard said, rubbing her forehead. "Humans are passionate dangerous lunatics, while
Turians are disabused and righteous assholes with a taste for drama. Can we agree on that?"

"Yes," Garrus nodded. He frowned a little, realizing at what he had agreed, but Shepard didn't leave him time to correct her.

"I'm still not Turian," she insisted, "and you'll have to accept that. My mentor was a Turian and look what happened between us!"

"In all honesty Commander," Garrus said, squaring his shoulders, "it has nothing to do with species. Kryik is just an asshole." Shepard snorted.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," she nodded, a small smile on her lips, "but that's not my point."

"Oh? What is it, then?" Garrus asked, sarcastic. Shepard rolled her eyes.

"You're impossible, Vakarian," she sighed.

"Well that's me," he admitted with a sign of defeat. "I'm not a good Turian, never been, never will be, and I'm not even good at pretending. I'm tired of pretending, Commander, and it does no good to the relationship we're supposed to build."

"Then again," Shepard insisted, pointing at her, "not your usual turian mentor."

"I've heard you the first and second times and I know I have to stop expecting too much of you." Shepard looked outraged again. "Not in a bad way," Garrus tried to explain, "I mean, not in the turian way! My species' standards are way higher than yours' so, you know, I have to expect, huh, normal human mentorship level."

"Sure," Shepard replied, clearly upset again. "Anything else on your mind?"

"I really hate connip and it'd be great if Sergeant Gardner could stop cooking it at every meal," Garrus joked to lighten the mood, keeping his face straight.

"Oh my fucking God," Shepard grumbled, looking at the ceiling again. "Other Spectre, picking her up during the next refilling, big mission, now get out."

Garrus couldn't help himself. "Regarding the men's bathroom..." he added, refraining his smile.

"Out!" Shepard shouted.

Garrus first went to his quarters to stow his gear and weapons and put on his light armor. Wrex had programmed the mission early in the morning and it hadn't taken them more than a couple hours. Garrus still had plenty of time to work on Ilos' VI in Lab1. Restoring its processes was a nightmare. All modern technologies were more or less based on the Prothean's so Garrus didn't have much difficulties with the basic architecture of the programs, but everything was written in an unknown prothean computer language. Garrus had had to start by learning the prothean language on top of English before trying to understand the VI's programs.

Fortunately, the prothean language was relatively easy to learn – it had been developed with that purpose in mind, actually, as Javik had explained. It was a necessity that all the people of an empire spoke the same language. Garrus completely understood that. His own people had done the same. Kaladran was spoken by all within the Hierarchy since the Unification War. Vanquished cities and colonies had had to abandon their languages, their money and culture to fit in the new unity led by the Hierarchy. It had occurred two thousands and seven hundred years ago for the Turians and it still worked today, proof that it was the right thing to do.
Garrus hopped by the kitchen to grab a cup of cafine, a bottle of multifruit juice in the fridge and a couple of dextro and levo ration bars before heading for the second deck. He took on his right as he exited the elevator, saluting Traynor, Westmoreland and Campbell on his way, and entered Lab2 by the storage room. Solus was mumbling for himself and pacing in the middle of the room, as often when he was thinking. Garrus put the bottle and the levo ration bars on the desk without a word and walked out of the room by the door giving on the corridor between the two laboratories.

Garrus sat on the chair in front of his workbench, put the cafine cup down with his own ration bars and, alone in the laboratory, he finally authorized his hands to shake and the massive ball of anxiety to fall into his stomachs. It was a good thing Shepard wasn't Turian indeed because this kind of display could have cost him a lot. Someone like Fori would have thrown him to the brig and let him rot there for a week.

Garrus shivered at that idea. A month was a more realistic hypothesis. Fori always had been harder with promising soldiers and Garrus had been nothing but promising all his life. That wasn't a guarantee for success and greatness though. Garrus had failed to be a good son, never had been a decent friend, had abandoned his career in the army and had drawn himself in a mindless job at C-Sec. He would have been brought to the martial court after the Attack on the Citadel for ignoring orders if C-Sec had been ruled by Turians. Instead, it had given him the chance of his life: being a Spectre. And he had failed his mentor.

The door giving on CIC opened, frightening Garrus. He jumped on his chair and automatically put his hand to his hip. Fortunately for T'Soni, he had gotten the habit of leaving all his weapons in his quarters. They arrived with a bottle of something blue in hands, looking tired and totally unaware of Garrus' reflex. That probably was better that way, Garrus thought as he put some order in a stack of papers to busy his hands. T'Soni was a nice person. They didn't need to know.

"Oh you're back!" they said. "Good morning!"

"Good morning to you too, Doctor T'Soni," Garrus replied, suddenly really interested by some notes he had taken the previous day – ‘42’, to be precise. He didn't remember why he had written that with the numeric symbols used in English.

T'Soni smiled softly, probably thinking he was silly to still call them by their title. Garrus couldn't help, it was a reflex. He could drop the 'Doctor' if his mind was focused on something else, but he couldn't manage to call T'Soni by their first name. Sure, the Asari was sympathetic and they had a lot of respect for each other but that didn't make them a friend. Garrus wouldn't put his life in their hand on the battlefield, even less since Shepard had told him T'Soni wasn't reliable in a fight.

So far, Garrus had only called the Krogan by his first name – and Javik but only because he didn't seem to have a family or clan name – and he knew exactly why: he had simply replied to the provocation. Although, Garrus trusted Wrex on the battlefield. The Krogan may have been a mercenary but damn, he knew what he was doing and he was very good at his job. They had been roaming a couple of systems in the same nebula for the past ten days, totalizing five raids on merc outposts, and each time Wrex had shown his talents.

But there were the Krogan and mercenary things Garrus couldn't get over. Krogans were a threat to the galaxy, or so believed Turians anyway, and mercenaries were no more than scum. Wrex had admitted it himself and didn't even seem ashamed of what he had done in the past – or the present, for what Garrus knew. He could trust him and call him by his first name, that didn't make him a friend.

"How was your mission?" T'Soni asked as they checked a terminal near Garrus. They were bent over and Garrus could not not notice the way their breast slightly swung, pushed by gravity. He
looked away and blamed Vega. That damn pervert always made comments about how pretty and well proportioned T'Soni was. Garrus had never considered an Asari like that before. It was disturbing. "Vakarian?"

"The mission," he said, back to reality. T'Soni didn't notice his embarrassment, thanks the Spirits. "Right, well, it went... smoothly, considering we had a Krogan and a Geth on the team."

"Smoothly?" T'Soni giggled. "With Wrex?"

"For us," Garrus smirked, "not for our target." T'Soni laughed. It felt good to make someone laugh, to be honest, and equally bad to keep in mind T'Soni would never be a reliable friend – if a friend ever. Garrus turned his attention to his own terminal. He could probably help Solus write a whole chapter on how difficult it was for a Turian to integrate a multispecies crew. "I've talked to Shepard earlier," he felt the need to confess. T'Soni understood immediately the gravity of the subject for him. They sat on the workbench and encouraged him to speak with a little smile. "I have to admit my hands are still shaking a little," Garrus continued, bitter. He leaned on his chair and held his hands in front of him to prove his point.

"She can be pretty scary at times but she's a good person," T'Soni said with a hint of admiration in their voice. Garrus had figured Shepard was T'Soni's mentor too at this point – though he saw their relationship from his turian point of view but Asaris might have had another way to explain it.

"It's one thing to know, another to believe," Garrus replied.

"Is that a turian common phrase?" T'Soni asked. They often talked when they were working in Lab1, with Traynor and sometimes Joker – who liked to come for an hour or so before heading back to his post. Exchanging sayings and discussing them was kind of a habit now.

"Ah, yes," Garrus confirmed. "It means you have to experiment something first hand to be sure of it."

"I figured," T'Soni giggled softly with a knowing glance. "And do you believe Shepard's a good person now?"

"Meh," Garrus shrugged. T'Soni laughed. Garrus smiled to hide his discomfort. Shepard was a fantastic soldier but he wasn't sure about the person she was yet. He didn't know her, to be honest. "We admitted we have a communication problem," he continued more seriously. "And admitting the problem is half the solution, right?"

"You'll have to ask Samantha," T'Soni said, "I think it's a human saying."

"What do Asaris say in this kind of situation?"

"My people don't mind spending decades or centuries on a problem. I doubt anything we can say on the subject is relevant."

"Right," Garrus replied. He moved his papers again. "I know she likes straightforward people," he said, "but I've not been raised like that." Garrus had learned to shut up and bottle up his emotions. Well, none of his parents had taught him to behave like that exactly but he didn't really have a choice anyway, not after his sister's entry in the army. From that day, his mother had fallen into depression and his father had been harder, colder than before – not that he ever had been the jolly type anyway. Garrus had shut up because he didn't want to disturb the silence in the house and he had bottled up his emotions because they were meaningless compared to his parents' agony. "Don't be an annoyance", he had told himself during many years. By the time he had been on his own at
boothcamp, it had become a second nature to him.

T'Soni put a soft hand on his shoulder. "Did you tell her that?"

"I can already picture the scene," Garrus mocked. "Me kicking the door of her quarters, jumping on top of her desk and declaiming the wonderful story of me! I'll just end up with more broken ribs."

T'Soni laughed a lot this time, their cheeks darkening.

"Talking is good though," they assured once calmed down, "even if she hates it too."

"She hates talking?" Garrus asked, a little surprised. "But I've seen her speaking to everybody on board daily."

"That's part of her job," T'Soni smiled. "She's our Commander, it's her responsibility to make sure her crew is fit for duty. She can bare small talk but if it lasts more than two minutes, she'll just say she has to go or something and she'll leave."

"Really?"

"Yep," T'Soni giggled. "It took me five months to have a serious conversation with her for the first time."

"How can anyone follow her so blindly then?" Garrus asked, truly curious – and a little worried too. Unity was the most important part of a platoon. Soldiers didn't necessary need to feel a connection between them and their leader for the spirit of their unit to manifest itself, but respect and care were an absolute necessity. Shepard didn't seem to consider those virtues necessary.

T'Soni shrugged, a smile on their face. Their eyes became a little distant, lost in thoughts. "She has that energy, you know?" they said, almost whispered. "She's just so confident, so bright, you want to follow her anywhere, because you know everything will be alright if you do."

"Well I can think of at least one occurrence where nothing went according to plan," Garrus snorted, more bitter than he had expected. Damn, how long before he could let that one go? He winced for himself. Probably all his life.

T'Soni bit their lower lip. "I know," they told him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"It's alright," Garrus replied, standing up. He took his stack of papers to have an excuse to go in Lab2. If T'Soni saw through his bullshit, he didn't care.

Solus was sipping his fruit juice in front of the window when Garrus arrived. The Salarian turned to face him, chewing on a straw in the bottle.

"Iridescent shine back."

Garrus gave a look at his reflection in the nearest polished surface and saw the shine indeed on his exoskeleton under the harsh lights of the laboratory. Damn, he hated that. "I can stop taking supplements then, I guess?" he asked, brushing his fringes, as if it could diminish the shine.


"Shining like a spotlight can also be problematic," Garrus mumbled, putting his stack of paper on the main desk. Solus smiled, still chewing his straw.
"Loss of iridescence natural for Turians outside of their homeworld," he said, "but not seen well by peers. Withing the Hierarchy at least. Great pride taken from being physically fit in turian society and iridescence part of a healthy body. Mens sana in corpore sano," he continued, now walking along his desk. "Satires by Juvenal, circa Humans' first century. Though full citation's meaning quite different. Orandum est, ut sit mens sana in corpore sano. Need to pray to have a healthy mind in a healthy body. Turians not religious people, animists, but still accurate." Solus stopped and looked at the ceiling, thinking. "Turians and Humans very similar on many subjects." He chewed some more before passing again. "Disturbing. But, not my point. More interested in why lack of iridescence seen as good in your case."

"It's seen as a sign of incompetence in C-Sec," Garrus shrugged. "It means you're a rookie just out of the army and you know nothing of the job."

Solus stared at him for several seconds before sipping his juice. "Interesting," he said. He pointed at the stack of paper. "And that?"

"I needed an excuse to get out of Lab1."

"Smart," Solus smiled, "but your work?"

"It can wait."

"Oh really?" Garrus jumped in the air as he heard Shepard behind him. She was standing in the doorway of the storeroom, frowning but still wearing a smile on her face. He was fucked – and pretty sure she liked to sneak on people.

"I, huh, still have to study a bit the Protheans to get a grip of their culture and mind," Garrus hesitated. "I have to understand them to find the, hm, the logic behind their code." He looked at Solus, kind of desperate. "Right?"

Solus finished slowly his bottle of juice, making a lot of noise, alternatively looking at an angry Shepard and a very uncomfortable Garrus. The situation must have been funny for the Salarian because, damn, he seemed to enjoy every second of the torture. "Correct," he said nonetheless and Garrus could breath again. "Cultural impregnation. Very important." He turned to Shepard. "Did that on Palaven, actually."

Shepard grunted a yes as she walked to them. She kind of looked small, for once. Like any other Salarian, Solus was more or less two meters high. He may have been old but age hadn't affected his height yet.


"Fine," she growled, rolling her eyes. "Joker told me you could help me with my... addiction."

Garrus blinked. Right, the cigarettes. Shepard had decided to fix her biotics problem. That was a good thing, Garrus decided. It could only be a good thing, considering. That meant she may really be over the latest bad episode of her life. That was a relief.

"Of course," Solus genuinely smiled. Shepard seemed to relax a little. Maybe she had thought the Salarian would have tried to trick her or something less pleasant. "But require a few days for preparations," he warned her. "And have to be prepared for sides effects."

"Which are?" Shepard asked, a brow raising.
"Three days in Hell," Solus replied. Shepard grew more serious, maybe a little anxious too. "Time for the medication to purge your body," Solus explained. "Will experience extreme nausea, fever, heavy sweating, headaches, sleep deprivation, cramps and biotic outbursts. Have to be ready for it but efficiency guaranteed, and will forever be freed of tobacco."

"How so?"

"Provokes nausea if smell of tobacco detected and gag reflex in case of use of nicotine. Artificially create allergies, if you like. Or reconditioning to make you think smoking's really unpleasant."

"Great," Shepard mumbled. "Just fucking great."

"But better than your current state," Solus remarked. Shepard winced.

"Alright, I'm in," she said, folding her arms. "I've been in Hell before anyway." Garrus looked away. Shepard may have decided to be over it but he wasn't there yet. That would probably follow him all his life. "When can we start?"

"Four days from now if drop everything else," Solus answered. "Don't have the medication here, have to make it from scratch. Basic chemistry, no worry, everything required already on board."

Shepard frowned. "We'll have guests in four days, and a mission after that. Can your potions wait in a fridge or something until we're done?"

"No problem," Solus assured, a big smile on his face.

"Good," Shepard mumbled, looking around, "good, good, good." Silence fell in the room for a few seconds. "I should go," she said, turning heels. Garrus couldn't help but snort. Shepard gave him a cold look. "You," she commanded and Garrus straightened automatically, "shuttle bay in ten. 'been a while since last I kicked your butt." And she aimed for the door.

"Aye, aye, Commander," Garrus replied, resigned, as she walked out of the room. Solus smiled, looking at the door, hands in his back. Garrus hesitated a second but decided the question was worth it. "Does she come to talk to you every day?"

"Yes," Solus nodded, turning to Garrus. "No precise schedule, can come in the afternoon or in the middle of the night shift. Not a problem for me, very little sleep needed, and doors locked if can't be interrupted." Garrus was dying to ask of what those two could talk about. He didn't dare but Solus seemed to know how to read minds. "Never exchange more than a few words, salutations, questions on progresses made, reiteration of offers about funds and help. Nothing personal, strictly professional, but still detected a change of attitude. More at ease. Not trust, not yet, if ever, but improvement." He shrugged and went back to his computer. "Relationship complicated anyway. Doomed from the beginning, maybe."

"What do you mean?" Garrus asked.

"Unofficial mission, not approved by all the Councilors," Solus explained, back to work. "Secret mission, if you like. Shepard's head on the line. Can be accused of high treason. My work more important than her career, her life, maybe. Better her than diplomatic incident with Salarians, this kind of thinking."

"I didn't know," Garrus hesitated. Why didn't he know? He was Shepard's protegee, he was working with her. He should have known but she hadn't told him anything about this. She had treated him like any other crew member. Why? Wasn't he trustworthy? Maybe in the first weeks but he had proven his capacities since then.
"Don't worry," Solus reassured him, still writing something at an impressive rate on his computer, "just protection measure to insure your future, probably. One out of ten new Spectres fit for the job, five out of ten dead by the end of the first year. Don't need accusation of high treason on top of it. Chances already against you."

Garrus winces. He didn't know those statistics either. "So she's protecting me... How ironic."

"Her role as your mentor," Solus simply shrugged. "Survival rate greatly increased by good mentors. Nihlus, for example. Put Shepard in incredibly difficult situations and pushed her to her limits, but was still there to help. Safety nest. Learned she could rely on him but fully capable of taking care of pretty much anything. Built her confidence. Probably the most important personality trait in Spectres."

Garrus snorted and leaned against the desk, folding his arms. "There's a difference between being confident and being an arrogant asshole."

Solus laughed. "Complicated personality, tortured even. Strong need for recognition. Has to be sure own life matters, makes a difference. Suffers from loneliness and uses anything to forget. Clearly an addict, any toxic as good as the other, Shepard included." Solus looked at Garrus in the eyes. "Seen as obstacle between him and Shepard. Reactions totally predictable. Will try to eliminate you."

Garrus frowned slightly but his train of thoughts was interrupted even before it started. Shepard yelled his name through the speakers, making Garrus' heart miss a beat or two. "Get your ass down to the shuttle bay now!" she barked.

"On my way, Commander!" he replied, already at the door of the storeroom. Shit, he had forgotten the time. He hesitated a second and turned back to Solus. "Thanks for the talk, Professor."

"A pleasure," the Salarian smiled but he wasn't looking at him, focused on his computer. Garrus nodded and ran to the elevator.

The doors opened on a full shuttle bay. All fighting personnel was gathered, plus Traynor, Cortez, the three engineers and the two privates. That meant only Joker, Chakwas, Gardner and Solus were still working. Garrus wondered what could possibly happen. Shepard showed him her back and her arms were folded.

"You're late, Vakarian," she said over her shoulder. She didn't give Garrus the occasion of apologizing. She turned, gun in hand, and aimed for his heart. Garrus jumped on the left by reflex but felt the impact on his shoulder nonetheless. He rolled on the ground and found cover behind a crate, a hundred questions submerging his brain. What was happening, for example. Why did Shepard shout him? He touched his right shoulder to evaluate the damages – damn, he had so much adrenaline in his veins, it didn't even hurt – only to realize his armor wasn't damaged. Garrus took a look and saw something red and partly liquid on his shoulder. Paint.

He risked an eye over the crate. That's when everybody started laughing with more or less restrain, exception made of the two AIs. Shepard had the most vicious smile on her face and she was obviously very proud of herself. Garrus stood up carefully, still ready to go back to safety any second. "I'm sure I'd find the situation hilarious too if I knew what was going on," he frowned.

"Come on, Vakarian," Shepard smirked, "don't be an ass. It's just paint." She pointed her gun at Alenko and shot him in the shoulder. The Lieutenant yelped. Shepard rolled her eyes. "Can you be more dramatic, Alenko?"
"It hurts," he said, rubbing his shoulder. Shepard shook her head and looked at the ceiling.

"What's happening?" Garrus asked, staying near the crate, just in case.

"I figured we could use a little fun," Shepard shrugged, walking to him. Garrus took a step back, which made Shepard smirk even more. "You scared, Vakarian?"

"I'm careful," he replied, "that's different."

"Sure," Shepard mocked. She grabbed a pistol on the workbench and threw it to Garrus. He caught it – it was very light, just a toy – and shot Shepard in the shoulder right after. She opened her mouth wide, outraged, and Garrus shot her once more – well she was just standing there after all, she couldn't blame him. "We didn't start..." she protested and Garrus shot her a third time, "...yet. Oh you're so going down!" She aimed but he was already running to cover. "Everybody for themselves!"

Garrus checked his clip as he ran: twelve silver paint pallets left. He stopped behind a pillar. There were sixteen targets but nobody would probably get out of the game once shot if Shepard, Alenko and him were still playing. Maybe the victor would be the one with the less paint at the end. Garrus heard noise on his right, aimed and shot two rounds by reflex, then ran between the crate piles to reach the relative cover of the Mako's tires. He could do with a little more information. He crouched to go under the machine and rolled under it. He saw Shepard's feet and shot her once more.

"Oh come on!" she whined but Garrus rolled the other way to escape her. Fuck it. The game was on.

The shuttle bay was big enough for sparing but not enough for seventeen people with paintball pistols so the game eventually spread all over the ship. Strategic rooms and private quarters were de facto unauthorized areas but every corridors and common rooms saw paint fights at some point that morning. Garrus learned where maintenance ladders and passages were more surely than if he had studied the Normandy's maps. That didn't prevent him from being shot six times in total. And he learned Joker was also playing, even if his only strategy was to ambush people in the cockpit – which was pretty efficient. Clips of different color pallets had been spread all over the ship too but Garrus didn't know if Shepard had planned all of this in ten minutes or if they had been forgotten there during another game – probably a bit of both.

A very colorful crew attended a postponed lunch at two in the afternoon. Wrex got shot the most, but that wasn't a surprise considering how big of a target he was, and Joker the least. He only had red and silver paint on his shirt, which meant Shepard and Garrus had shot him – and they were heartless monsters, as the pilot liked to repeat over and over. The Commander's red was on everybody, as for Garrus' silver. He had been shot by Shepard, twice, Williams, Javik and Legion, also twice. That was nothing compared to Shepard. Her uniform had everybody's colors on it, exception made of T'Soni's. The Asari looked completely mortified and barely ate. Garrus kind of wanted to ask them why – it was just a game after all, not the end of the world – but Shepard didn't let him the chance. She took him to the shuttle bay, to the Mako to be precise, just after lunch.

"There," she said, arm folded, looking at the impressive machine Garrus had heard so much about, "I want you to take a look at it."

Garrus blinked. "What do you mean, Commander?" he asked.

"Seriously?" she snorted, turning to him. "You yelled at me for ten minutes straight and shot me five times today and you're still giving me the Commander line?"
"Six times," Garrus corrected, squaring his shoulders, "and yes, I'm still not comfortable calling you by your name. Besides, I don't remember you calling me by my first name either."

"Yeah, well, I'm not Turian but I still know the decision to use first names has to come from the one dominated in the relationship," Shepard said.

"I'm not..." Garrus started but a look from Shepard stopped him. "Alright, you have the upper hand."

"Look at us," she mocked, "solving our problems without yelling."

"I didn't yell," Garrus mumbled.

"Yes you did," Shepard insisted and Garrus knew that would follow him all his life too. "Now, I want you to go all engineer on this baby and find a way to use it from space."

"What?"

"The Mako can't be launched like a shuttle," Shepard explained, "and the Normandy SR-2 can't land outside of proper docks. But most of our work happens very far from proper docks. That means the Mako is useless right now, which is stupid because this machine is fantastic." Not from what Garrus had heard but he didn't share his thought. He had done that enough for today. "You think you can take a look at this?"

"You have other engineers on board," Garrus reminded her.

"I'm pretty sure they'll try to sabotage the Mako if I ask them," Shepard laughed, bitter. "No, I trust you, Vakarian." She patted him on the back. Garrus frowned a little. That was too friendly of a gesture for his tastes. "Besides, I recall you said we had a lot of free time on our hands during transit and you can take your time with the Mako, it's not urgent, nor is Ilos' VI. No pressure."

"Alright," he agreed. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good," Shepard nodded. "Well, I'll leave you to it. I have three weeks of unread mail to attend to."

"Good luck with that," Garrus told her as she walked to the elevator, hands in her pockets.

She laughed. "Yeah, thanks." Garrus looked at the Mako, asking himself where the heck he was supposed to start with that. He also felt like he had to keep that project secret if he wanted to avoid any murder attempt on his person. "Hey Vakarian," Shepard called from the elevator. Garrus turned to her. "Thanks for the kick in the butt," she said, "I needed that."

"Anytime, Commander," he replied.

"Yeah," she winced, "let's not make it a habit, 'k?"

"I don't know," Garrus shrugged, "I kind of liked it." Shepard rolled her eyes and the doors closed on her. Garrus had a slight smile on his face when he started to work on the Mako.

TBC
Shepard was glad to be able to get out of the Normandy. She loved her ship, there was no denying that, but she sometimes felt trapped inside and the crew wasn't big enough to lessen that impression. Fifty was a minimum for her to feel really comfortable – that was just enough to not see the same faces everyday. The SR-2 could have a crew of fifty but Shepard had missed the occasion. She had preferred to discover the ship and make sure her crew would continue with her after the loss of the SR-1 instead of recruiting. Plus, she had had to deal with a lot of paperwork. Everybody wanted a piece of the SR-2: the Alliance since the ship had been built by Cerberus, the Hierarchy because the SR-2 was also based on their technology and the Council which claimed the Normandy should be theirs since one of their Spectres had found it.

Shepard had had no other choice but to register the Normandy under her name. She was officially the proud owner of a turio-human war frigate, which was probably illegal but what the Hell, she was a Spectre and didn't care much about the law. That had made a big hole in her bank account, even if Spectres were well paid. This decision had heavily played against new recruits and now that the Alliance was on the verge of bankruptcy, she just could not think about having a bigger crew. The Alliance paid for all their Marines on board, from the food to their equipment, plus half of Shepard's salary and bonuses. Every species wanted a Spectre, proof they were powerful and important on the galactic scale, but having one meant big expenses. Very big. Goyle and Udina certainly regretted Shepard's nomination now.

Shepard gave a look on her left to Vakarian, walking with her through the station, scanning the crowd like his usual self. Turians represented half of the Spectres' workforce. The Hierarchy probably spent billions each year just to sustain maybe seventy soldiers – there was no official Spectres count but Nihlus estimated their organization was around a hundred and fifty agents strong. It was actually a miracle the Hierarchy wasn't bankrupting either. All the turian population between fifteen and thirty years old was enrolled in the army, and a third of them continued to become lifers after their release. There also were the reserve, all medical personnel, firemen, policemen, medias, professors, scientists, and a myriad of lesser professions, all affiliated to the army. And the Hierarchy had to maintain their fleet, which was five time bigger than the Alliance's. Sure, the Council paid the Hierarchy to be their galactic army, the Volus counted on them for protection too and the turian economy was strong thanks to their fine weaponry, but Shepard was pretty sure their budget was in deficit at the end of the year.

Like most species, probably, she thought as they walked by a group of Vorchas begging for a few credits. She checked the pockets of her uniform and gave them a few chips, to their surprise. She kept on walking, not wanting the attention. The situation in the Attican Traverse wasn't as bad as in the Terminus Systems but Humans weren't loved here either. They were on the verge of the galaxy, a refueling station in the Hekate system, Hades Nexus. The system had nothing particular for itself, just its proximity with the quarian homeworld, but the activity had greatly decreased around since the Geths had rebelled. The Terminus Systems were nearby too, which meant raids happened frequently. Only ships needing refueling and refilling stopped by now since the station wasn't far from the relay. It only was a shitty gas station on a secondary highway in a bad neighborhood.

And yet, there was a McDonald's on the station, rendezvous point the other Spectre had fixed. Shepard didn't go straight for the restaurant though. She found a minimarket and bought all the
cigarettes she could find there. Javik was supposed to buy her cigarettes during refilling but she knew he would greatly underestimate her consumption, like last time, and she would not stick another patch on her shoulder until she solved her addiction problem. No Sir. She hated those patches. They may deliver nicotine to her system but they were highly frustrating at the same time.

She lit a cigarette as soon as she stepped in the street and drew on it as much as she could. She felt the bitter and dry smoke invade her throat, her lungs, and her blood pressure lost at least five points.

"Oh yes," she sighed, exhaling the smoke, "that's the good stuff". Vakarian winced and moved to avoid the smoke. He carried the two bags full of cigarette packs Shepard just had bought.

"I don't know what stinks the most: your cigarette or this place," he said.

"Better get used to it, Vakarian," Shepard smirked, "because Spectres don't sleep in silk sheets often." She looked around to find a sign for the McDonald's and started walking, Vakarian on her heels. "Cheap hotels with mold and bugs everywhere, yeah, if you're lucky, but you'll sleep in the street or in the wild more than you can imagine."

"Turians always welcome their peers," Vakarian replied with assurance, head high and eyes straight.

"It might be true in more civilized parts of the galaxy but not in the Terminus Systems, nor in the Attican Traverse, unless they are from the Hierarchy. And admit there isn't many Hierarchy Turians there," she winked. Vakarian winced, his nose wrinkling and his mandibles spreading a little. Shepard drew on her cigarette to hide her smile. "I'm not saying all turian mercs are Seppies. Most of them just don't give a shit about politics, actually. Though you'll travel under cover most of the time so you can give it a try, I guess. Just be careful, is all."

"I suppose it was kind of strange for Kryik and you," Vakarian said, daring to look in her direction. Shepard encouraged him to continue by raising an eyebrow. "I mean, a Turian and a Human traveling together. It's not very common."

"Oh no, that was alright," Shepard shrugged. "A lot of Humans and Turians mercenaries work together actually. The hard part was to explain to Nihlus' friends why I was with him without screwing his cover. Fortunately, turian men with exotic tastes, which happens to be a very common type within the merc population, automatically assume it's just a sex thing. Women are way harder to convince."

"What sex thing?" Vakarian asked.

"I won't spoil if you don't know," Shepard laughed. "That would ruin the surprise."

"Or sex," he grimaced, "forever."

"Not into inter-species shenanigans, Vakarian?" Shepard teased. She threw her cigarette butt in the nearest trashcan and took another from her pack right after. Sweet Jesus. Three days in Hell seemed very unpleasant compared to that delicious sensation of peace within her mind and body.

"Not at all," he replied. "I'm comfortable at home." Shepard laughed at the very turian expression.

"You lived on the Citadel for four years and you never tried to woo a pretty Asari or a Human?" She didn't give him time to answer. "Oh sorry, maybe you're more into Elocor or Hanar."

"You're hilarious," he said with a forced smile.
"Hey, I'm not judging," Shepard mocked, hands in the air. "What happens in your cloaca stays in your cloaca." Vakarian gave her the most shocked glance she had ever seen on a Turian. Shepard couldn't help but laugh to tears.

She was still recovering, eyes wet, cheeks red and shaken from time to time by a late laugh, when they sat at a table with their order on a tray ten minutes later. It was the middle of the afternoon on the station, but around five in the morning on the Normandy. Breakfast consisted in two cheeseburgers and their fries, half a liter of soda and a sundae with caramel sauce. She had seen worse in her life.

"I've never been to one of those restaurants on the Citadel," Vakarian said, checking what was inside his hamburger with a suspicious look, "and I think I was right to avoid them." He twiddled some sort of red leaf replacing the good old salad.

"Your version is healthier than mine, I bet," Shepard shrugged, checking at the time on her omnitool. "Turians don't eat cereals, right? So no bread for you. Your hamburger is all veggies and meat."

"I wouldn't call that meat exactly." Shepard smiled. Truth to be told, she was just amazed some idiot had came up with the very stupid idea that were dextro menus. Turians were picky on their food in general. They expected a certain quality and uniformity in their plate, due to their years in the army. Standardized food was the norm within the Hierarchy. Nihlus had often ranted about it since he had been raised with a spicier cuisine during his young years. "Commander," Vakarian whispered and Shepard looked at him. He pointed to an Asari and a buff Salarian in an old black armor following her, scanning the almost empty room, their tray in hand.

"Must be her," Shepard confirmed, chewing on her straw. She nodded to the Asari who did the same before starting to walk in their direction.

"Her?" Vakarian repeated. "But it's an Asari."

"So?"

"When you told me we'd work with a female Spectre, I assumed she'd be Turian," he said, leaning a little over the table but still keeping his eyes on the new comers. "Asaris are not women."

"Ah I see," Shepard mocked, "you were hoping to get laid." Vakarian showed all the signs of outrage: raised brows, flatten nose and dilated nostrils, mandibles tight against the cheeks and general stiffness. Shepard let a little smile wander on her lips before turning to the Asari and the Salarian.

"Are those sits taken?" the Asari asked.

"No, not at all," Shepard said as she moved to the window. Vakarian followed her example, and it was clear from his face he thought that was a stupid approach considering all the empty tables. The Asari sit next to him while the Salarian in anabolic sat at Shepard's left and started eating right away. It was the first time she saw a Salarian so muscular. He wasn't very tall for his kind but he easily was twice as big, with broad shoulders and a thick neck. His skin was blueish with gray to black spots and marbled with lighter scars. Both eyes were of a dark muddy green, with a hint of blue reflected deep inside of them. Shepard didn't like salarian eyes, too big, too still. She always felt uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

The Asari was quite something too as her face was tattooed like a Turian, on top of her own discreet skin pattern: two horizontal lines under each eye rising to her temples then stretching to the
tip of her crests, all in white. Turian father, probably, Shepard thought as she sipped her soda. The stripes on her crests indicated that too, and there was something definitively turian in the way she walked, head high, confident. That was strange. Asaris were usually raised by their mother, not their father.

"Veni Mandor," she introduced herself. Vakarian noticed her last name too. Yep, definitively a Turian daddy. That killed two birds with one stone: he could probably score outside of home but not too far either. Maybe he'd be more relaxed after. Shepard was looking forward to that. "And this is my partner, Été," the Asari continued. The Salarian just nodded, mouth full, gulping more than eating his food.

"Shepard and Vakarian," Shepard replied. "So, traveling, huh? Seen anything interesting around?"

"Nah, this place is a shithole," Mandor shrugged, toying with a fry. Shepard didn't miss it. "And we're stuck here on top of it. Commercial flights are rare and too expensive for us."

"You could enroll in a merc gang to get out," Shepard continued, leaning on the bench. "With a big guy like him, that wouldn't take long, unless you both wear armors just for the show."

"It's not just for the show," the Asari smirked, "but we're not interested in merc business. No, we're kind of explorers."

"Oh? And where are you heading then? Somewhere interesting?"

Mandor's smile widened as she pointed to the ceiling. Shepard raised an eyebrow. It was generally accepted that the galaxy was a flat disc and all the systems were on the same plan – which wasn't true actually. People refereed to direction with a two dimensional cardinal system. Pointing to the top meant Mandor wanted to get out of the galaxy disc by its non-existent roof. Interesting indeed.

"I have a ship," Shepard said. "Dock mok-tet if you're interested. We're leaving in six hours."

"Good to know." Mandor stood, imitated by the Salarian who had finished his meal in less than two minutes. "See you around." Shepard nodded and they left. She waited a minute, senses in alert, before relaxing a little.

"Everything all right, Vakarian?" she asked as she saw her protegee still tensed.

He scanned the floor one last time. "That was them?"

"Yep."

"How do you know?"

"We exchanged a few emails and we agreed on what to say," she shrugged.

"You could have told me," Vakarian reproached her.

"Relax," she told him, "everything's fine. I didn't say anything because I wanted you to stay sharp."

"Were you expecting troubles?"

"Not troubles, no, but you never know. And since you're kind of paranoid, I thought I could use that." Vakarian winced again. "Come on," she teased, "I'm showing you a lot of trust here. You're my safety nest." It didn't please him at all, becoming all stiff and anxious at the same time. This was exactly why Shepard had wanted to keep her distances from him for a while. She couldn't turn
the Project Base page if she had a constant reminder of what had happened right in front of her. Vakarian's attitude screamed guilt and anxiety all over the place, while all she wanted was to forget and move on.

That was particularly unfair considering they had been on a good path before that mission. Poking him playfully usually was enough to make him react with sarcasm, and sarcasm was better than nothing. Not exactly a solid base to develop anything but a start anyway. Sure, he had been borderline disrespectful a couple of times but only when she had been unbearable herself. He had defended himself when attacked and Shepard couldn't blame him for that. She knew she could be a bit aggressive sometimes. Knowing where to push to hurt didn't help either – but hey! a gift was a gift.

She did her best to change the conversation and even took Vakarian shopping after breakfast. The station unfortunately didn't offer much in what they were interested in so they went back to the ship. Mandor and her partner arrived an hour before departure. When Shepard asked where was the load Mandor had mentioned, the Asari pointed to Été. Shepard frowned.

"I know we Spectres are above the law but slavery is a bit too much, don't you think?"

She had welcomed them at the airlock and they were walking to the elevator. Mandor had nothing on her but her armor and weapons (a submachine gun and a pistol), while the Salarian carried some sort of small backpack who had seen better days. He had an assault rifle, a shotgun and two guns on him.

"He's not my slave," Mandor laughed, "but I'll admit his situation is complicated."

"How so?"

"He's not registered."

Shepard called for the elevator, exchanging a look with Traynor who was working at her station. Keeping track of the galactic population was a nightmare. The Council asked each species to count and register their own people. They used those records for everything but especially for security. The Council had its own intelligence agency keeping an eye on everybody. Spectres were a part of this gigantic organization actually. The only difference between them and a random agent was their level of badassery. Spectres were the fields agents, the little hands digging in the dirt or physically infiltrating a computer, a group of terrorists or a cave on an ice planet on the other side of the galaxy.

An unregistered Salarian was the oddity. While the species not under the Council's authority didn't have the obligation to give a reference number to their people, the others did. Salarian kept track of their population with zeal, even in the Terminus Systems. Salarians mercenaries and rebels were all registered. Été was the first exception Shepard had ever heard of. Maybe he was a Lystheni, one of those salarian offshoot she had seen sometimes on Omega, but the shape of their skull was a bit different, more elongated to the back.

That didn't change much for her anyway, she thought as she showed them the way to the observation deck. Everybody on her ship traveled under her authority and were virtually untouchable. Nobody would ask a Spectre for proper registration forms, which was a good thing considering she had a Krogan, a Quarian, a Geth and a Prothean on board. An unregistered Salarian added to that wasn't a problem, really.

"I thought you'd feel more comfortable here," Shepard explained as she presented the vast observation deck to Mandor and Été, "so this will be your quarters for the duration of our mission.
It's a bit empty and austere but it's better than sleeping in the shuttle bay."

"S's a bit cold," Mandor said with a wink. Shepard pointed to the thermostat on the wall near the door.

"We don't use this room often, actually," she shrugged, "only when someone needs alone time to meditate or something." How would she know? She didn't come here ever since she had her own quarters.

"I like it."

The light voice surprised Shepard. She turned a little to look at Été, standing on Mandor's left, his big empty eyes focused on the window – a small parcel of space was visible at the end of the docks. Mandor smiled and patted his shoulder gently. She then turned to Shepard. "We'll take it, thank you very much."

Shepard smiled. "Come on, I'll show you around. You'll have all the afternoon to make yourself comfortable."

She had decided that several parts of the ship were inaccessible for the guests: the fourth to prevent curious eyes in the core room and protect the private quarters, the canons room on the third and all private quarters, the laboratories on the second and all the first deck for obvious reasons. EDI automatically kept track of everybody's location on board, following the two guests wasn't going to hurt. To the contrary, it could prevent a lot of problems. Lab1 was full of geth and prothean tech, between other discoveries from unknown species, both dead and very much alive. Lab2 screamed "biological hazard" for those with three functioning neurones and that would lead to a lot of questions since Solus' job was officially to study the crew, not experiment on them – which he did despite the ban. And that only was the tip of the iceberg considering what Javik kept in his quarters or all the little things Wrex and Tali collected in theirs.

It was hard to believe Shepard had gotten her hands on the Normandy SR-2 only five months ago because of all the little tokens everyone had brought on board. You'd think people would only grab their most important belongings when they had to evacuate a ship to jump on another while everything was on fire around them but no. They had taken their time and transported almost everything from the crashed SR-1 to the SR-2 with order and discipline, thanks to Javik who showed great calm and leadership in a hard time. Shepard had always thought he had acted so coldly because he was affected by the loss of a lot of fellow crew members and good Marines but she had never dared to ask Javik. He would have answered her, she knew it, but she didn't want to remind him he had lost friends again.

She owed the Prothean a visit if she still called herself a friend.

Disturbing Javik during his shift with something unrelated to work was a bad idea, even for Shepard, so she waited all afternoon, spending time with Vakarian on the Mako. She wasn't an engineer but she knew a thing or two about mechanic, which gave Vakarian the occasion to settle the score regarding the displeasing comments – and he settled hard. At some point, Mandor and Été joined them, though just enjoying the banters. Shepard asked Vakarian to take care of their guests before dinner and went to fourth deck, taking the left at the elevator's exit. She knocked on Javik's door and waited, hands in her back. She couldn't help but bite her lower lip. This reminded her of all the times she had been convoked to the headmaster's office when she was a kid, even if she was technically Javik's superior.

The door opened and the smell of the room welcomed Shepard. It smelt like dirt and grass in the evening after a hot day. The room was warm, dry and dusty, with very little light. Here and there
rested Javik's treasures: plants he once knew, outdated and broken weapons, pens, jewelries, toys and countless little objects from his time they had managed to salvage. Shepard always felt heartbroken when she came there. It was more a museum full of pain and regrets than private quarters.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Commander?" Javik asked, his low voice rumbling like distant thunder. Shepard could see his shadow on a light curtain separating his bed from the rest of the room. He was changing, apparently. She felt obligated to turn her back to the curtain.

"You can listen," Shepard said, her eyes on the pedestal over which a black tablet hovered, green shimmering on its uneven surface. "I have to apologize for the past few weeks," she continued without giving Javik time to speak. "I wanted to keep things to myself after the mission on Project Base. I still do, actually, and I'd be glad if we just don't talk about it, ever, but I still owe you an apology. I shouldn't have kept my distances with you. I'm sorry."

"We only share what we want to share," Javik replied from the far end of the room. His tone was professorial, not angry at all.

"You, maybe," Shepard snorted, "but I have far less control on that than you." She heard a rustling and looked over her shoulder to confirm Javik was done changing. He was walking to her, now wearing some sort of comfortable gray kimono top over human cargo pants. He always looked less impressive without his armor, almost casual. It was very hard to forget what he was capable of though. Javik's wrath had no match.

"Of course," he said, "you are not Prothean, but your body knows how to do it, or how not in this case. Your mind is the problem."

"A dozen shrinks already figured this out," Shepard joked, folding her arms. Javik smiled, something he rarely did outside of this room.

"Humor can't always save you, Commander," he warned her, "especially from a stubborn Prothean." He stopped at a comfortable distance for both of them and put his hands in his back. "I would have supported you," he said, more serious.

"I don't need support," Shepard shrugged.

Javik looked at her with his piercing golden eyes for long seconds, then nodded once. "Apologies accepted," he said and Shepard felt her throat tightening. A part of her wanted badly to be honest with him, sit down and have a long chat about all that had happen on that damned asteroid but she couldn't. She didn't feel strong enough for that yet. "Will I see you tomorrow for training?" Javik asked.

"I can't use my biotics," Shepard admitted, risking to look at him.

"Do you really think you fooled me, Commander?" he said, rolling his eyes. Shepard couldn't help but laugh a little. "Your biotics are not the only talent we can improve in you," he added. Shepard almost choked on that. At least the Prothean was very pleased of himself. "Tomorrow we'll breath."

"I know how to breath," Shepard grunted. Damn, she hated yoga and all that voodoo but Protheans were big fans of all that bullshit. Half of her training with him consisted in feeling the energy in her toes.

"Energy comes from breathing," Javik explained, moving his hand from his head to his stomach,
up and down again, "it flows through the whole body. A good soldier must be aware of the flow and feel the energy." Shepard winced. Javik grinned. "Bring your Turian. It's always amusing to see a primitive fail at something so basic."

"I'm a primitive," Shepard reminded him, still amused by the idea.

"Enlighten by the Protheans," Javik replied. "You have seen what has been lost for fifty thousand years. That knowledge comes with a price," he said, poking his temple, "but it transfigures the student."

Shepard knew all of this already, it was a recurrent conversation between them. Javik strongly believed she had been transformed by the Beacon on Eden Prime five years ago. Shepard had been tested in all possible ways after that incident but the only anomaly detected had been to survive the contact. To her knowledge, only five persons in the galaxy had touched a prothean Beacon and survived. Nihlus and Saren were members of that particular club, the two others were a Salarian and an Asari but Shepard didn't know them. None of the Turians had been changed in one way or another from what she knew. They had knowledge from a fallen empire in their memories and occasional dreams of a distant time but that was it. No strange brainwave patterns, no change in their behavior, no sudden obsession for a location or anything. Nothing.

That was a good thing. Spectres were already a little deranged from Shepard's point of view, they didn't need the help of a dead species' ghosts to act like crazies to begin with. That made her wonder what were Mandor's quirks.

"It would be nice of you to stay in the present once in a while," Javik sighed. Shepard looked at him, an innocent smile on her lips. Shit, he was pissed off. And double shit because he knew her too well. That was the problem with Javik: she was transparent to him. It was a consequence of their first contact, a little more than a year and a half ago. Javik had absorbed all her knowledge, their minds connected for a second through his touch. Though that link had gone both ways. Shepard had seen glimpses of his life, the beauty of worlds since long forgotten, the faces of many friends and loved ones and the lid of the coffin desperate hands had tried to stop from within when he had been buried alive.

"I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "I have a lot on my mind lately."

"And I'll be honored to help you," Javik replied, bowing a little. "We do not have to talk about everything. We can just enjoy each other's company in silence, that will be fine with me."

"Shepard," EDI called through the radio, "Williams is searching for you."

Shit.

"Heavy is duty done properly," Javik said, cutting her short of any excuse to avoid the confrontation. He showed her to the door and with that Shepard was on her way.

Williams was waiting for her on first deck, in front of the elevator. Shepard didn't want to invite her in so she stood in the small corridor, folding her arms and falling into a hip. Williams showed as much defiance as her. They both were anxious at the idea of talking and very uncomfortable with the situation. Shepard believed this conversation wasn't necessary but Williams wanted it to happen badly. She probably needed it. Though she wasn't willing to start.

"What is it, Williams?" Shepard grunted more than she asked. The sooner they'd be done with that, the better.
Ashley's fists creaked under the pressure she imposed herself. Shepard saw her knuckles whitening then raised her eyes to Williams'. If things turned to that, she was ready.

"I know what happened on that asteroid," Williams said at once, her voice trembling and her eyes red. She couldn't look at Shepard. "I know what they did to you and..."

"And what?" Shepard interrupted harshly. "It doesn't take more than two neurones to figure this out, Williams. So congrats! You're smarter than a slug!"

"It happened to me too!" Williams yelled. "It happens all the time to women in the army and nobody gives a shit about it! They just laugh and joke about it but you need those fuckers to watch your back on the field so you just shut up and smile and pray it won't happen again! I know how it works!"

Shepard felt anger build up in her more than compassion. She should have felt sorry for Williams and tried to help her overcome traumatizing events, but all she could think about was what a fucking joke all of this was. Rape in the army was a dirty secret; everybody knew about it and closed their eyes. But Shepard was the kind of person to think the strong ate the weak, not protected them. The weak just had to learn how to fight and beat the shit out of the so called strong. Heck, she had done that all her life! From the streets of New York to this day, she had fought for her survival. She had failed more than she can count, she had been beaten down, knifed, shot, raped, but she had raised her carcass from the bloody ground again and again, more fierce and angry at the world each time. She had punched assholes touching her. She had broken bones of her supposedly comrades visiting her at night. She had killed men who thought they could have their way with her.

And the victim Williams was thought she could rely to what Shepard had lived through. It really was a fucking joke.

Shepard breathed in deep to push the anger away, squared her shoulders and put her hands in her back. "This ship and crew may follow Alliance rules and regulation but I do not support their politic of silence," she said, keeping her eyes on the wall above Williams' head. "If anything happens under my command, I can guarantee you the culprit will face justice. My justice." She technically had to bring the accused to martial court but she knew all too well how it would end, so she would deal with it herself. She owed that to her crew.

Williams stayed silent, her mouth slightly open, her lower lip trembling a little. Tears filled her already red eyes and rolled down her cheeks, messing her discreet make up. "How dare you?" she hiccuped up, her voice a whisper. Shepard kept her chin up. Williams suddenly grabbed her by the collar and pushed her against the elevator door. "How fucking dare you?" she screamed. "You think you can dismiss everything that happened like that, with your bullshit and your good little soldier act?! Look at the truth for a second, Shepard! They hurt you! They hurt you but it's okay! You're allowed to feel and admit you're in pain!"

Shepard had heard enough. "Release me at once, Williams," she interrupted, her cold voice full of authority. Ashley's grip loosen a little and she looked at Shepard with eyes full of tears. Shepard wanted nothing more than punch her in the face and ask her how she dared compare her life with Shepard's. She wanted to hurt her, to mock the little girl from a good family with a boo-boo on her knee. She wanted to laugh at her face for being such a crybaby, for being weak.

She didn't do any of that. Shepard stayed calm, cold and professional, which didn't stop anger to burn and fret her insides. She withstood Williams' gaze for a long minute and the ex-soldier eventually backed off. "Take the day off tomorrow, Williams," she said, smoothing the collar of her uniform. "I'm giving you a warning here: talk to me like that one more time and your services
won't be needed anymore."

She didn't dismiss Williams nor say another word. She walked to her quarters and locked the door behind her. The room was quiet, lightening up slowly as she entered. Shepard could hear the low rumbling of the ship, her croaks and cracks, the even ventilation on a higher pitch, the humming of the ridiculously big aquarium, even the tick-tock of her clock. A little green light on her computer informed her she had received a message. Shepard was glad for the diversion. She walked to her desk and opened her mailbox. Her heart skipped a beat.

Anderson.

Shepard threw the terminal against the wall, throat so tight it hurt, swept her desk clean in rage, eyes burning, discarding everything on the floor, chest on fire, flung her chair in the showcase on her left, shattered glass flying all over the room. She broke the other showcase with her bare hands, feeling her biotics electrifying her nervous system, and teared down the model ships, throwing them behind her. A burning prickling agitated her hands, a sensation she knew all too well. She needed to evacuate the energy, the anger, the rage inside of her. Turning, she threw her fist in the air, muscle memory activating her biotics. Nothing happened but pain irradiates her arm to her fingers. Shepard repeated the movement again and again, fire eating up her nerves and veins, until she finally saw a blue shimmer escape her fist. She breathed in and held it, activating one more time her biotics. This time the blow was so violent it threw her back and she hit the desk. She fell on the floor in the middle of the mess, her hand shaking and bleeding. Shepard cowered herself in the corner and buried her head between her knees, all her body aching, exhausted.

Vakarian knocked on her door later that evening. Shepard was smoking on her bed, feet on her pillows and head hanging over the edge, not caring at all about the rules or the mess in her room. She hadn't clean it yet and probably wouldn't until her mood was better. That would take time.

"Go away," Shepard yelled to be heard behind the heavy door. She was actually impressed Vakarian, or anybody else, had arrived so long after her tantrum. EDI kept an eye on the crew, Shepard included. She knew what had happened here as surely as the first million decimals of Pi.

"I saved you a plate," he said. "Gardner did wonders with the lasagnas." He paused a second. "Well I wouldn't know, would I? He cooked connip again for the dextros."

Shepard couldn't help but smile a little. "If you can bare to see me in underwear, come in; otherwise, just let the plate outside and leave." She had removed her uniform when she had finally moved her ass to the bathroom to do something about her bleeding hand. She had kept her tank top, her bra and her shorties only, enjoying the ridiculous feeling of freedom it gave her. Nobody would dare to enter if she was in her undies, not even Javik. Even he had his limits.

Vakarian came in nonetheless, in his blue and silver set of civvies. He noticed the mess – he couldn't miss it – but didn't say a word about it. He walked carefully, avoiding to step on anything that would throw him on the ground, keeping his tray rigorously horizontal. Shepard knew he hated the idea of coming in the lower part of her quarters but he did anyway. He looked around, not knowing where to put her dinner. Shepard patted the bed under her hand and Vakarian obeyed. He didn't sit next to her though. He took the chair from the little console where she kept books and gun parts and her chessboard, slid it near the bed and settled there.

"Love what you did with the room," he said, looking around. Shepard snorted. She sat cross-legged and pulled the tray to her. The lasagnas smelled delicious, steaming lightly in their plate. With that came a bowl of fresh strawberries with vanilla ice cream and a glass of water. Shepard was pretty sure Gardner had dug up the ice cream from the freezer just for her. It was a treat too rare to waste it on banal occasions. A missing Commander at dinner wasn't banal. "What happened here?"
Vakarian asked.

"Hurricane Jane," she replied, caustic. Vakarian seemed genuinely surprised. "You don't know?" He shook his head. "EDI didn't tell you?" she insisted.

"She just told me to bring you dinner a couple of minutes ago."

"Oh." So EDI hadn't ratted her out. That improved Shepard's mood a little. "Thanks, EDI," she said out loud before starting her dinner. Vakarian looked kind of nervous. "You don't have to stay if I'm making you uncomfortable," she told him, "and I certainly ain't putting some pants on for you."

He smiled a little. "Actually I'm more embarrassed by the mess than your severe state of nakedness, Commander." Shepard raised an eyebrow, her mouth full, amused by his choice of words. "Turians don't like the mess," he explained, his fingers twitching on his knees. "Old military habit. Can lead to a lot of trouble, brig included."

"You can go all OCD in your quarters Vakarian but not in mines," Shepard told him. He nodded, still looking around, and didn't say a word. He gazed at Shepard a few times as she ate. She was starting her dessert when he opened his mouth again.

"Maybe I could just clean the sofa," he said.

"No," Shepard replied.

"What if it was a matter of life and death?"

"Aren't you dramatic now," she mocked.

"Can I stay here tonight?" he asked abruptly. Shepard stopped eating her strawberries to look at him in the eyes. He was very embarrassed but he continued nonetheless: "Far from me the idea of speaking ill of a colleague..." Which he had done with Nihlus but Shepard let it slide. "... but Spectre Mandor really makes me uncomfortable and experience proved they are not the kind to be easily stopped by a no, or a locked door. So, huh, I would appreciate a little help. Please."

"She's hitting on you?" Shepard asked, feeling a smile spreading on her lips.

"This is hardly a funny story, Commander," he grunted.

"It's not," Shepard agreed and it was really difficult for her to keep her cool. The big badass Turian was afraid of an Asari maiden a little too insistent. To be fair, no meant no for a Turian and it wasn't a big deal. If they were rejected, they shrugged it off and walked away. Shepard doubted Mandor would try anything too serious but her behavior was not tolerable anyway. "I'll talk to her tomorrow," she assured him. Vakarian was a little relieved but waited for more. He could have locked himself up anywhere, heck, even in Lab2 with Solus if he was scared to sleep alone, but he apparently really wanted to stay in her quarters tonight. "Fine," she conceded, "you can sleep here." Vakarian breathed again. "But only tonight, understood?" He nodded enthusiastically and pointed at the sofa. "Yes you can clean the sofa," she sighed. He sprang out of his chair to start to collect the fallen model ships and glass pieces.

Shepard looked at him, a little amused, but couldn't resume her dinner. The irony of the situation ruined her ice cream – it was too sweet anyway. She had thrown buckets of shit at Williams for being weak and yet she was protecting Vakarian from a probably imaginary threat. It wasn't the same, she decided, mixing the ice cream to the strawberries and their juice in the bowl. Not the same culture, to begin with, nor the same situation. She owed Vakarian protection as his mentor. Besides, something like that had never happened under her watch on her ship. What had happened
to Williams wasn't Shepard's fault, it probably occurred years ago, long before Virmire. She didn't have to feel guilty for another woman's weakness.

She pushed her tray away, disgusted by herself.

TBC
"This ship huge," Tali said, resuming what everybody was thinking.

Wrex smiled. He could hear the enthusiasm in the voice of his woman and that always had some effect on him. Sure, the prep meeting one hour before launch wasn't the best time to get all excited but a man was a man. He couldn't help himself.

The hologram they had in front of them in the communication room represented what Shepard had called a giant jellyfish but Wrex saw an atomic cloud in it, more or less: a dome of fifty kilometers in diameter protecting a dozen or more long spear-like structures behind. Some parts of the horizontal tubes were wider than others, round or cubic, like modules attached to a central core, some kilometers wide. The dome, polished like a mirror, faced the galaxy core and had three rings on its curved side with enormous thrusters on it. The ship traveled through deep space quite slowly, barely a third of the speed of light – the Normandy was a hundred time faster. The trip to the ship had been seven days longs, two to get out of the galactic disc from the Hades Nexus, and five in deep space. If the alien ship's goal was indeed the galactic core, it'd travel for a hundred and fifty thousand years before reaching it. Not what Wrex called an urgent threat but Mandor, and the Council, thought otherwise.

Wrex looked at the Asari on the other side of the large table supporting the hologram projectors, and its Salarian buddy. Mandor was younger than him and spoke an outdated Kaladran version. When Wrex had asked Garrus if he knew any Mandor, the Turian had shrugged. Mandor was the name of the fourth biggest city on Palaven so of course it was a common last name for Turians. The Spectre' tattoos were pretty rare though, Garrus had told him, the eighty-third on a list of roughly a hundred, from most represented to practically never seen. It was attached to Altakiril in the Shrike Abyssal, a colony of thirteen millions people known for the valor of their soldiers. A hard world made hard citizen, the Turian had said, and Wrex had easily agreed to that.

The Salarian was more intriguing. He barely spoke and didn't behave like one of his kind. He actually reminded Wrex of a Krogan, as crazy as it sounded. Été walked straight and it was to the others to change their path, for example. He'd look at Garrus and Solus like they were disgusting worms not even worthy of his foot stepping on them to give them a quick death. He always ate quickly, keeping an eye on everybody around and ready to fight to protect his food. All of that was very krogan and Wrex didn't like it. He had avoided the kid as much as possible during the trip.

Something told him this fucked up Salarian would try to establish his superiority over him given the chance. If he tried to headbutt him, Wrex would have no other choice but to put him back right where he belonged. That would only lead to problems. Shepard wasn't very fond of blood strains on the walls of her ship.

"Wrex will lead team Gamma," he heard Shepard say. Wrex focused on what was going on. Right, prep meeting. Gamma was the equivalent of three or something like that, from what Wrex knew. It was a word from a human language he hadn't bothered to learn but Shepard always named her teams with it. Alpha for the first, Beta for the second, Gamma for the third and, if needed, Delta for the fourth. "Vakarian will come with you."

"Tech or support, Commander?" the Turian asked.
"Tech."

Garrus accepted his role with a nod but the decision surprised Wrex. He didn't voice his thoughts though, Tali did it before him: "What?"

"He's the best engineer we have on board," Shepard shrugged.

"Excuse me," Tali interrupted, her voice very high, "he is not!"

"You may be very good when it comes to ships, Tali," Shepard told her on a tone that didn't authorize any answer, "but experience prove Vakarian's knowledge to be more useful on the field." Wrex frowned. Shepard was right. If Tali had been on that asteroid with Shepard at the time, he would be drowning his sorrow in a bar right now. Tali was a very good engineer for a Quarian. She knew everything there had to know about ships, reactors and all that stuff, she even was capable of a few tricks with weapons and computers, but Garrus had been trained to use his brain on the field, in the middle of a shooting, while everything exploded around him. He was capable of cracking a door open even before the order had been given, or hack his way in an unfamiliar system in a matter of minutes, while icing enemies. Wrex had seen him in action. He'd take Garrus with him any day rather than Tali.

"That's fine with me," Wrex agreed. Tali turned to him and he knew what her face looked like under her mask. She was angry and betrayed. He'd have to sleep in crew quarters for a few days after the mission. "No offense," he added for her, "but Shepard is right."

"We're going to board a ship and you're not taking the ship specialist with you?" Tali snorted. "This is stupid!"

"And you forgot to whom you're speaking," Shepard reminded her. Tali tensed but didn't apologize.

"Vakarian can be support and I can be tech," Tali insisted.

"Solus will be support," Shepard said. The decision surprised a lot of people in the room but not Solus. The fucker even smiled. "We have Legion, EDI and Vakarian for tech," Shepard continued. "We're more than covered on tech but we lack someone with knowledge on biology. That's why Solus will go, as our xenobiologist."

"Yes," Doctor Doom approved with a nod. "Will be support and expert, as Vakarian can be tech and support. Most efficient that way. And need someone on the Normandy to analyze and coordinate from a safe distance." He turned to Tali. "Your role." Tali considered it in silence for a second, then snorted. That wasn't really agreeing but it would do.

"Liara and Traynor will also be assigned to team Delta," Shepard confirmed. Traynor straightened and Wrex could smell her panic. Shepard had noticed too. "Don't worry," she said, "there is no fighting involved, not for you guys. If things turn bad, Joker will get you out of here."

"Yep," the pilot said through the radio. "And if we have unwelcomed guests on board, badass Alliance Marines will take care of them."

"Alenko will be in charge of the Normandy while we're out," Shepard precised.

"You're expecting troubles here, Commander?" Vega asked. "But EDI didn't detect any activity on the ship and we've been around for hours! There's been no shooting, no tech attack, no nothing."

"That's not a reason to be reckless, Lieutenant," Shepard replied.
"Well we kind of already are," Garrus commented. Wrex snorted. He could bet the kid had grown a second pair of balls since his little heart-to-heart conversation with Shepard a few days ago. He still ran to his Commander when Mandor hit on him though.

"Let me guess," Shepard said with a trace of annoyance, "Turians would come with a massive fleet to blow everything up in case of hostile sign."

"Yes."

"Three words: First Contact War," she mocked. Realization hit Garrus with a second of delay. He frowned and interrupted her just before she resumed her I'm-Commander-Fucking-Shepard speech.

"You did break the law."

"Law we weren't aware of," she replied with a forced smile.

"It was reckless to open a relay nonetheless," Garrus insisted. "You could have found enemies far more dangerous than us on the other side."

"That's called exploration," Shepard rolled her eyes, "and it's okay for you to do that for thousands of years but when we do it, suddenly it's reckless and forbidden?"

"You didn't have to deal with the Rachnis."

"You neither," Shepard reminded him viciously. Garrus opened his mouth to answer her but a look in Mandor's direction stopped him. He had faced Rachnis on Ilos but he couldn't talk about it. He regained a little seriousness, resigned, while Shepard smiled, enjoying her victory.

"You're done?" Wrex asked. Shepard and Garrus looked at him like kids suddenly realizing they had said something really stupid in front of the grown ups. Wrex couldn't help his chuckle. That was cute. "The kid is right though," he said. "Three teams of three plus a frigate as backup to board an unknown ship is reckless. Can't we call for support? Does anybody even know we're here?"

"The Council knows," Mandor answered, "and that's enough."

"So no cavalry if the Indians come to attack the fort while the Commander is out," Vega joked. Traynor and Westmoreland apparently found that quite offensive but Wrex didn't know enough about Humans to get why. "I have to say, I wouldn't mind big turian ships around to save us if shit hits the fan." Garrus looked at Shepard with a very smug turian smile on his face. She rolled her eyes at him.

"This is a secret recon mission, people," she reminded everyone. "The Council called for me because I have the best ship regarding stealth and speed. We go in, we look around, we go out and we get the fuck out of here. The Council will decide later if they blow this ship up or study it or whatever. Our job is to have a quick look at it, two hours top. If you don't feel up to your assigned task, speak now and take the rest of the day off to pack your shit because you're getting out of my ship next stop."

The room became silent. Wrex refrained his smile as hard as he could and he knew the result wasn't pretty. He couldn't help it, Shepard playing the mean Commander always made him smile. Not that she wasn't good at it, in all honesty that woman had scared more than one Krogan in her life, Wrex included, but he just knew how much she hated it. Shepard wanted her people to listen and obey. There was time for discussion after the mission, unless she asked for advice, but she usually did that during her own preparations. Shepard was far from stupid. She never went on a mission without knowing everything there was to know, without thinking everything through.
Solus, for example. Wrex was sure Shepard had weighted the pros and cons of his involvement in this mission a hundred times. Solus was essential to the cure of the genophage but his xenobiology knowledge was a clear advantage. And he was a Salarian, ex-STG with that. It wasn't a joke. Salarians were mocked as warriors because they were frail little things compared to Krogans, Turians or even Asaris, but those motherfuckers knew how to fight nonetheless. They were fast and flexible and their brain treated data faster than any other species. A Salarian would notice an anomaly long before any other guy. Solus was a better choice than Tali for this mission.

Shepard let everybody rot there in silence for a long minute before talking again: "Alright. Get ready, we leave in forty-five minutes. Team Gamma, a word." People left, leaving Wrex, Garrus and Solus with Shepard. She turned to the Turian once the room cleared. "You don't do that in public," she warned him and she was dead serious. "You don't defy my authority during a crew meeting. Ever."

"Yes, Commander," he replied, straightening his back.

Shepard sighed. "Half the fault is mine, though." She rubbed her forehead. "I kind of encouraged you and that would have been fine if we'd been alone, but we can't do that during a meeting. I'm the authority on board and I have to be fair to everyone. I can't let you talk to me like that and tell the others they can't. I can't play favorite, Vakarian."

"I know, Commander," he said, eyes way above her. "It won't happen again." Shepard looked at him seriously but Wrex could tell she wasn't really angry at him. She didn't smell like anger, though her tobacco perfume had deceived Wrex more than once lately. Krogans counted a lot on their nose to know what was around them. Their eyesight and hearing weren't great but their sense of smell could detect a Turian a kilometer away with the proper wind. Wrex used more his nose to know how everybody was feeling around him than his eyes. Eyes could lie. Not the nose.

"I want your team to play it safe," Shepard said eventually. "Solus, you're our best chance to cure the genophage and Wrex, without you we can say goodbye to clan Urdnot." Wrex grumbled. Shepard didn't need to remind him that. "Anything happens, you come back and you leave us behind, understood?"

"Yeah," he grunted while Solus and Garrus gave more serious answers.

"Vakarian," Shepard continued, turning to him, "you know what to do."

"Yes, Commander."

Wrex gave a look at both of them and it took him a second to understand. Of course. Garrus was to sacrifice himself to insure they came back alive. Solus was the priority though. He had more importance than Wrex and by a long shot.

Shepard dismissed them and went straight for the lounge on third deck. Wrex could tell by the way she walked out of comm room, fast and a little stiff. She was in a hurry, probably in need of nicotine. It was a good thing Humans couldn't smell properly, otherwise Shepard would have noticed his worries.

"You went on Ilos with your usual light armor and a filtering mask," Garrus said as they got out of comm room, "but it'd be wiser to upgrade your artillery, Professor."

"Already took care of that," the Salarian replied enthusiastically. "Worked on a few projects last night. Want to see?"
"Sure," the Turian shrugged. Wrex snorted. Better with Solus than around Mandor, heh?

To his surprise, Solus turned to him. "Have something for you," he said, a sparkle in his eyes. Wrex frowned a little. He didn't like the Salarian's wicked little smile.

"I'll pass, 'have stuff to do before launch." And with that he turned heels.

He was the first in the cargo bay, long before anybody else, and helped Cortez to prepare the shuttle once his weapons ready. Mandor and her Salarian arrived at the same time as Legion and EDI a few minutes before the rendezvous, Javik and Shepard in the next elevator ride, and they had to wait a little for Garrus and Solus. The professor was indeed wearing a heavy armor for his kind, mostly black with red and white stripes here and there. He already had his helmet on. Almost all his face was visible behind a slightly tinted glass. Wrex hoped this thing was strong enough to take a bullet or two because that was a lot of glass for a helmet. Solus also had a submachine gun with him and a Carniflex, and he carried a big duffle-bag on his side that looked kind of heavy. It probably contained whatever he had thought would be required but that didn't please Wrex. He had lived enough to know carrying a bag around was a bad idea.

"You sure about that?" he pointed as Solus stopped next to him.

"Absolutely," the Salarian nodded. "Hope won't have to use it but never know."

Wrex didn't like the sound of that but let it pass. Shepard was probably okay with whatever Solus had taken with him anyway. They hopped in the shuttle. Its cargo could contain twelve persons but it had been designed for Humans by Humans. With a Krogan on board and everybody wearing heavy armors, the shuttle was a little crowded. Fortunately, the ride would be short.

"EDI, Legion," Shepard said as they were already approaching the alien ship, "keep me posted of any disturbance you may feel, alright?"

"Yes, Shepard."

"Affirmative, Shepard–Administrator."

"Anybody feeling something weird is to report immediately," Shepard continued, addressing to everybody. "We don't know what's inside that ship. Could be psychic aliens, could be an atmosphere filled with nanorobots hungry for brain matter, cute fluffy balls of love with poisonous pheromones or whatever, so keep an eye on your vitals at all time. Wear your helmet even if the atmosphere is breathable. I trust you all to not open fire. Each team has a biotic. Stunt, wrap or pin down any hostile and retreat. If you have to shoot, try not to kill unless it's absolutely necessary. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander," everybody answered strongly.

"Cortez will drop each team at a precise location. EDI mapped the ship as much as she could, you all have the data on your omnitool. You stay on the map at all time. Two hours tops, people. I don't care if the answer to life, the universe and everything is in the next room. If it's time to go back, you go back." She looked at each and everyone of them in the eyes. Many nodded. "Alright. It's showtime, ladies."

Team Gamma was dropped the last, on the far end of the ship. Something felt strange the moment Wrex landed on the metallic surface, a pull to his side, as if he was falling.

"Interesting," Solus said as he took a few uneasy steps, searching for his balance. "Gravity not provided by mass effect generators but by acceleration of the ship."
"In English please," Wrex grunted.

"The, *ack*, gravity is the result of the, *ack*, *gjakkeren* – I mean, motors," Garrus answered hesitantly in English with a terrible accent. Wrex laughed. "I admit I don't practice much," he continued in his usual very formal Kaladran, "but I understand English pretty well by now so..."

"And I bet Shepard didn't notice you're incapable of three words in English since she uses her translator a lot," Wrex snorted. "Be careful though. She's fluent in Standard, Prothean and Etherian, and she can speak Kaladran. She'll drop the translator at some point to make sure you did your homework."

"Gentlemen, to the point," Solus scolded them.

"Right," Garrus straightened. "Sorry. I'll find an entry."

"Appreciated." Solus nodded. He then turned to Wrex and spoke in English as required. Wrex actually understood the language Solus spoke on a daily basis, Sessentak, the most vastly spoken language by Salarians, but it was better to let the Professor think he relied on a translator. Wrex had tricked more than a fucker by letting them believe he was a dumb Krogan only speaking Mosuram.

"As said by Vakarian, gravity generated by push of the motors. Basically, when accelerating, creation of an opposite and equivalent force. That force used as artificial gravity. Have magnetic boots so not falling but down actually in that direction," he explained, pointing to the dome.

"Can we assume they know nothing of mass effect generators?" Wrex asked. "Maybe they don't know about eezo and biotics."

"No assumption possible at this point," Solus disapproved. "Ship obviously very old if coming from satellite galaxy to ours. Technology inside might be more evolved than the outside. Theory supported by different cargoes all along main structures. Some very damaged, some practically not. Same process as for moons or rocky planets. The more impacts, the older."

"Makes sense," Garrus approved, on all four on the ground a few meters from them, busy with what looked like an emergency hatch or something like that. "Did you notice the writings, Professor?"

"Of course," Solus said, walking to Garrus. "Limited number of symbols, counted forty-six so far. Syllabic alphabet suggested by repetitions and placements." Wrex dozed off but followed them nonetheless. Krogans didn't have schools like the other species but he'd bet the slight annoyance he felt right now was exactly what kids felt during a boring field-trip.

It took a minute for Garrus to open the hatch and they went down a ladder in a chimney just the right size for a Krogan. They went through numerous hatches and chimneys before reaching what could have been called a maintenance tunnel of some sort. There was no light and a very thin atmosphere but their armors were equipped to deal with that. Gravity was lighter than on the Normandy.

"Must be something alive in here if modules have been built over time, no?" Wrex asked, shotgun in hand. He was on point, following the map.

"Possible," Solus agreed, "but could be between two life cycles."

"Ah, yes, I thought about this possibility too," Garrus commented from the rear.

"Keep in mind one of us is not a nerd," Wrex growled, "and start explaining things instead of assuming everybody knows what you're talking about."
"Ship basically like space station," Solus explained, enthusiast like always. "Could have been colonized by different species over time, as Citadel was by the Asaris after fall of the Prothean empire."

"How could anybody board that ship in deep space?" Wrex grunted. "The very point of deep space is to be empty space between galaxies. There's nothing there."

"Not true. Ejected stars in deep space and should remind you boarding absolutely possible. Living proof walking in that tunnel right now."

"Alright, alright," Wrex mumbled.

"There's also the possibility of a sleeping crew reactivated once in a while," Garrus continued, "or even synthetic life, like the Geths."

"Or collected specimen rebelling and taking control of the ship," Solus said. "Infinite possibilities, really."

"So we know nothing and have to be prepared for everything," Wrex snorted. "What a big step we made, boys!"

"Thirty minutes," Traynor noticed them through the radio, her voice tensed. "All teams to report."

"Team Gamma on schedule," Wrex answered, "no hostile nor life form detected. Though Solus and Garrus are trying to bore me to death with their science." Traynor chuckled and it was good to hear her relax a little. "Everything all right for you, kiddo?"

"Tali is a little... how can I say it?"

"Like a mad varren?"

"I can hear you Wrex!" Tali yelled through the radio.

"Don't worry girls," Wrex laughed, "it's hormonal. Good luck with the mad varren though. Team Gamma out." He cut the communication before he could hear more profanities. Tali sure had learned a lot of Mosuram slur since he'd met her. He was probably to blame for that.

"You could have asked about the other teams," Garrus commented, almost pouting.

"Your precious Commander is fine, Vakarian," Wrex mocked. "She's tougher than you think and she has Javik and Legion with her. They can probably destroy a small system just by themselves. I wouldn't worry."

Wrex didn't let Garrus whine. He pointed a heavy door ahead of them and the Turian got to work immediately while Wrex and Solus kept an eye on their surroundings. Which was hard for the Krogan Wrex was. With his head trapped in the helmet, he could only count on his armor's sensors. They were of good quality, he always paid extra money to make sure of that, but technology could easily fail a man.

"And done," Garrus said, standing up after his hacking of a lower panel. The door retreated slowly for a meter before sliding to the right, flooding the maintenance tunnel with a thicker atmosphere and a soft indigo light barely visible.

"Shit," Wrex grunted. He activated enhanced vision on his helmet to see properly. Krogans could differentiate a thousand shades of yellow, orange, red or brown but no more than twenty of blue
since Tuchanka had lost his oceans after the nuclear winter, a long time ago. Adaptation was great and all but it also could be a bitch.

The door gave on another tunnel but much cleaner, without tubes and cables everywhere. It was a normal corridor like countless others on the Citadel between two elevators. Empty. A silly idea popped in his mind and he felt the need to express it. Solus and Garrus weren't the only ones that could come up with theories, ah!

"What if this ship is a station?" Wrex asked, walking carefully to his left, keeping the wall on his back.

"A moving station?"

"Yeah, like, maybe someone created this massive ship to escape the destruction of their system and couldn't find a suitable planet to live on after, so they built new modules over time, for their population or something."

"Interesting theory," Solus approved. "Could also be exploratory mission."

"The more I think about it," Garrus intervened, "the more life on board seems impossible."

"No dramatic pause, kiddo."

"Right. So, I opened half a dozen hatches and a very big door that looked like the last barrier in case of emergency, something big and strong enough to preserve a pressurized habitat. My work was pretty barbaric, to be honest. Their computer system seems pretty rudimentary but I didn't have time to study it and hack it properly. I opened those hatches manually, with actual levers, and the last door with a basic electric short-circuit. I must have triggered a hundred alarms and yet, nobody showed up, not even maintenance."

"Maybe they're busy watching porn," Wrex joked to relax the atmosphere but he was himself worried about the same thing. He heard Solus snort behind him but when he turned, the Salarian had the best poker-face Wrex had ever seen.

"One hour," Traynor called. "All teams to report."

"An hour already?" Garrus said, surprised. He checked the time on his omnitool. "I have forty-six minutes on my chronometer, Traynor. Wrex? Professor?"

"Interesting," Solus replied, looking at his own omnitool. "Have one hour and eleven minutes."

"Thirty-three," Wrex grunted. Shit. Electronics were probably compromised. "Check your armors," he commanded, "make sure your vitals are correct and you still have enough oxygen. Traynor, call Cortez and tell him to get us at the rendezvous point in thirty." He drummed his fingers on his omnitool to change the radio channel. "Shep, you hear me?"

"There's a bit of statics but I hear you Wrex," she answered with a second of delay. "What's going on?"

Solus stopped moving, hand above his omnitool as if he had frozen, but his big eyes were following something in the dark behind Wrex, who was suddenly very happy to have a Salarian with him. Krogans had the best sense of smell of all sentient life in the galaxy and Salarians had the best sight. They could find a needle in the middle of straw at three hundred yards by a cloudy night.
"Wrex?" Shepard called.

"We're going back," he replied, arming his shotgun. "Something's messing with electronics. Make sure Legion and EDI are okay."

"Will do. Be careful on the way back. Shepard out."

"What do you see, Solus?" Wrex asked, signing to Garrus to be ready to fire.

"Not maintenance," the Salarian replied, still like a rock.

"Alright," Wrex said, readying his shotgun, "it's just like practice, kiddos. The key is to keep thinking. You're both very good at this so I'm not worried." He heard Garrus breath in deeply and slowly through the radio and he knew the Turian was ready to shout, the eye aligned with his N7 Valiant's visor. "Garrus?"

"It's watching us."

"Of course it's watching us," Wrex mocked. "What does it look like?"

"To phax," he replied in Kaladran. Wrex frowned a little. He knew he had heard that word a long time ago but he couldn't remember what it meant or what it was related to. He didn't get the opportunity to ask if they could kill a phax though. Garrus abandoned his stand to look above his shoulder. "They're closing the door!"

"Incoming!" Solus yelled at the same time.

"Run!" Wrex roared. He turned and discharged his clip at random before following Solus and Garrus as fast as he could. He was sure he had seen a glimpse of that phax and it had a lot of tentacle-like arms, way too many, even for an Asari's craziest wet dream.

Garrus arrived first at the door and Solus followed quickly. The mechanism was slow enough to let Wrex catch up to them but he still had to squeeze his enormous self between the wall and the door to enter the maintenance tunnels. Garrus, on his knees, was working his magic on wires, or at least Wrex hoped he was doing that. He turned to face the closing door, shotgun in hand, ready to shoot anything that would point a tentacle at him. The occasion presented itself a second later and this time Wrex didn't miss it. The phax didn't scream or anything. It retreated behind the door and pushed it to accelerate the sealing of the tunnels. Once the heavy door closed, silence and darkness fell on them.

"Okay," Wrex said, walking backward carefully, keeping his shotgun aimed at the door, "everybody all right?"

"Yeah," Garrus answered, standing up.

"Long-distance radios dead," Solus informed them, already busying himself on his omnitool. "Else, no injuries. All vitals good, though heartbeats elevated due to adrenaline rush and..."

"Please tell me you're not going into a cardiac arrest anytime soon, Solus," Wrex interrupted him. He was old for a Salarian after all.

"Artificial heart," Solus chuckled, poking at his chest. "Implanted last year. Best decision ever!"

"Wait, that's electronics!" Garrus yelped. Wrex held his breath.
"Artificial, not synthetic," Solus corrected. "Grown in a lab from stem cells. No worries."

Wrex sighed, relieved to know he wouldn't have to carry a dead Salarian back to the Normandy. "Alright, we're not done yet," he said. "Garrus, you take point. Solus, stay between us. Nose up, head down."

Both nodded. Garrus switched his Valiant for his Valkyrie and walked first, as fast as possible considering the risks. No light disturbed the darkness of the maintenance tunnels. There were barely enough photons for their night vision equipment to work. Wrex added a thermosensible layer to that, just in case. Garrus' armor did its best to stay as cool as the corridor but it was visible nonetheless. Barely, but just enough to signal something abnormal to a careful watcher. Solus' was totally invisible. Wrex wasn't even surprised. Unfortunately, his armor was a big bright spot in the middle of the dark. Wrex snorted. He had better platting than the two others combined and he was a Krogan, dammit. He could take whatever was coming.

The javelin stopped its course right in the middle of his abdomen. Wrex felt the shock but not the pain, not until he saw the javelin bending into a hook and realized he was in for a lot of it. He was pulled back suddenly, his feet snatched from the ground, his guts on fire. Wrex gripped his shotgun and gritted his teeth, waiting for the landing. Once his back hit the floor, he used the momentum to roll over and, head down and feet up, he discharged his clip in the phax. The flashes of his shotgun illuminated a giant squid-like creature with black eyes everywhere. Wrex landed on his feet, abandoned his shotgun and turned on his heels, activating the blade of his omnitool. He plunged it in the phax and the creature screamed this time, a brain-wrecking high pitch Wrex felt the urge to cover with his powerful roar. It screamed and convulsed, its tentacles whipping everything around it, hundred of spikes erecting from its skin, lacerating Wrex' armor and guts.

Wrex took his gun and shot the phax at blank point, emptying his clip with the primal satisfaction of seeing that thing reduced to goo. The phax eventually fell on the ground, still convulsing a little but dead. Wrex grabbed the tentacle still attached to him and cut it with his blade. He couldn't get it out though. The spikes all over it were like dozen of sharp little teeth just waiting for the Krogan to do something really stupid. Wrex snorted his disdain.

"Wrex!" he heard Garrus yell. He turned to see the Turian and the Salarian running to him. Wrex held his hand to make them stop.

"Easy boys," he said. "That one's dead but 'might be others around and they're tough motherfuckers."

"Need medical care," Solus replied, slapping his hand to have a closer look at the tentacle erecting from his abdomen. "Could be poisonous. Could contain virus or any pathogen agent!"

Wrex pushed him back. "I'm krogen, Solus. That's synonym for indestructible."

"Not immortal," Solus frowned, speaking faster than usual, "and certainly not intelligent life form." He tried to approach again. Wrex stopped him with a hand on his chest, determined to push him in the right direction if he was too stupid to not cooperate. Solus grabbed his hand, quick like lightening, and with a few kicks in deadly precise spots, rendered Wrex's arm as weak and useless as a Hanar out of water. A kick behind the knee made him fall into submission. "Don't have time for childishness. Stay put."

Wrex was too astonished to even think of rebelling. He let Solus work while Garrus stood guard. The Salarian managed to pull the tentacle out from the front, which hurt a lot but Wrex had seen worse, and put it in a steel container he carried in his duffel-bag. Two big shots of medigel sealed the holes in his abdomen and Solus sort of repaired his armor with a gray paste Wrex had never
"Won't work," Solus commented coldly. He put his tube of paste on the ground and took a very big weapon out of his bag. The main canon was as large as Wrex's arm and three finger-like metallic concentrators circled it, red glowing all along tubes incrusted in the concentrators. It was obviously too heavy for Solus but he managed to throw it to Garrus nonetheless. "Press, one second, release," he said. "Should work."

The Turian nodded and proceeded. A bright glow formed between the concentrators, taking the shape of a sphere, with something black and hot growing inside. Wrex felt the pull of the machine but Garrus released the trigger and the pulsing sphere disappeared in the blink of an eye. The next instant, Wrex felt a wave of heat hit him in the back through his armor as the ground shook, all the corridor brightly lighted by the blow. The pull was strong enough to make him move a little but it didn't last more than a second or two. When he looked over his shoulder, half of the tunnel was gone, dangling wires and broken pipes everywhere.

"Oh," he grunted. "I want one for Christmas." Solus snorted, not hiding his amusement this time. He finished patching up Wrex with the paste while Garrus secured the heavy weapon in the small of his back and switched for his Valkyries. He was shaking a little, Wrex noticed. "You all right, kiddo?"

"Didn't expect that," he admitted.

"Up," Solus commanded as he stood. He helped Wrex get back on his feet and caught his shotgun to put it back in his hands. Wrex' guts weren't really cooperative though. He had the impression they could abandon him any second. But he had to get Solus out of there. Gritting his teeth, he started running.

"What was that?" Wrex asked as he took point with Solus, Garrus assuring the rear.

"Gravitational singularity heavy artillery," Solus replied, his tone harsh.

"English," Wrex half-pleaded, half-grunted.

"Miniature black hole gun," Solus simplified, clearly upset now.

"Totally want one," Wrex mumbled between gritted teeth. Damn, that hurt like a bitch. It shouldn't. He was krogan, for fuck's sake. His body should have started to heal by now.


"Huuuuuh, I'm carrying it now, you know?" Garrus commented. "And you threw it at me!"

"Less talking, more running!" Solus yelled.

"Yes Sir!" Garrus replied and Wrex couldn't help but chuckle. Barking at a bitchy Turian was always the good solution to make him shut up.

No more phax or whatever those things were followed them and they reached the first chimney in less than eight minutes. Running hurt, but nothing compared to climbing. Wrex swore all along the way up, not repeating twice the same insult. When he finally reached the last hatch giving on the void of space they had closed behind them, he felt feverish and on the edge of passing out. There was blood in his boots and his guts were on fire. He managed to open the hatch nonetheless, and they were ejected in space by the depressurization. Fortunately, the atmosphere within the
maintenance tunnels was very thin and it didn't throw them too far. They landed a hundred meters from the hatch, not as softly as Wrex had wished but it could have been way worse.

The radio started working again and they were flooded with messages from Traynor, Tali, Liara, Joker, Cortez and Javik instantly. They were all calling and screaming but none of it reached Wrex. Lying on his back, he could only notice how beautiful the galaxy was, there, under him, billions of kilometers away but so big he couldn't even embrace it all with his eyes burning from tears. Its trillions of stars shined and one of them was Aralakh, the Eye of Wrath, Battlemaster of Durak, Kanin, Kruban, Ruam, Vaul and Tuchanka, Mother of all life and proud of her most powerful sons, the Krogans. It was beautiful. It was terrifying.

Wrex felt the ground shake and turned his head to see the shuttle near them, its door already sliding open. He shook himself up, helped by Solus and Garrus, and managed to get his carcass in the cargo, gravity hitting him like a hammer, the thresher maw kind. Solus jumped effortlessly next to him but Garrus didn't follow.

"What are you doing?" Wrex asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"I'm going back for Shepard," Garrus said.

"What?" What was going on? Where was Shepard? What had happened? "No, you can't..."

"I won't let her down," Garrus replied, dead serious.

"Don't be stupid kiddo," Wrex grunted, trying to stand. Solus pushed him back against the bench with only one hand and threw his duffel-bag to Garrus with the other.

"Only one shot left," he said and Garrus nodded. Solus knocked on the wall. The door slid, sealing the shuttle.

"Biarnof," Wrex thought and he closed his eyes.

TBC

Note: reviews are always appreciated =)
Shepard had lost count of all the tiers she had climbed so far but she was pretty sure the next one would be the millionth or something like that. She stopped and, gripping the tier with only one hand, looked down the pit of Hell under her, twenty-five kilometers of darkness only pecked by little lights here and there. She was in the main shaft of the alien's ship central tower, deep into the beast. That was the fastest way to get where she wanted to go. There were no doors, no tunnels, no rooms to open and cross in the shaft, no obstacle to slow her down. All the tower was built around that shaft and all sorts of supplies transited by its vast empty space, like electricity and water. No air though. Shepard gave a look at her oxygen level. She'd have to change the capsule in ten minutes or so and have two more hours in front of her. If she kept her rhythm, that would be enough. She climbed again.

Fortunately, the gravity was relatively weak and the climb wasn't that hard. Shepard had seen way worse during her years in ICT. Torfan had made her a valid recruit for the program and she had been invited to the N2 session a few months later. At barely twenty-five year old, Shepard had been the youngest participant ever, and one of the rare females. Anderson had pushed her candidature just enough to irritate the instructors and they had made sure she knew how little they thought of her. It actually had amused Shepard, who had made a point to ace all her classes. It revealed to be more difficult than what she had expected since there were actual classes, not only combat training, but she was stubborn. She had worked twice as much as everybody else, if not more, and learned by herself what she should have studied in the schools she never went to.

Compared to that, field training had been a piece of cake. Zero-G combat had actually been fun, free-falling from high altitude thrilling, jetpack flight absolutely awesome. She had gained a solid reputation of dangerous lunatic over the years, Shepard the suicidal redhead laughing at the face of Death, and she was often looked down by the new class at each session, but by the end of the first survival field-trip, the other recruits always thought differently. It was what Shepard was truly good at, which wasn't surprising at all considering she had spent all her childhood doing exactly that. The scenery may change at each session but the goal was the same. And since only one recruit out of the ten could progress to the next level, Shepard wasn't playing nice with her classmates – not that anybody was doing her any favor anyway. The pretty lunatic girl of the first months invariably revealed the ruthless soldier in her during the final exams, and she could see the shift in the eyes of the other recruits. They stopped laughing at her, stopped flirting with her, stopped talking to her all together.

Shepard should have felt bad for being cast away by men as crazy as her but the realization hitting her peers actually made her feel terribly good. It was a sweet revenge for all their remarks about her vile female parts that apparently made her inferior to them – but still good enough to fuck – or the condescending comments that always reduced her to something small and frail that wasn't supposed to be part of their boy club. She got the same shit from the other women in the program and she probably gave them the same attitude back. Shepard felt strong and proud and empowered in those moments. She felt in control of her own life, the most wonderful feeling there could be for her. And controlling her life was true freedom.

There wasn't much freedom within the army though and Shepard had resented her enrollment until the ICT. The N7 program had somehow liberated her, both mentally and administratively. She had
gained enough assertiveness to know she was worth something, and climbed the ranks from Second Lieutenant to Staff Commander thanks to her training in a matter of years. Being in charge of a team was a lot more rewarding than being just a name barked by an asshole not seeing the big picture. Having a steady team, not just goons just there for the purpose of training, had also worked its magic on her and Anderson had seen it. That's why most of his staff, people Shepard knew from being their superior for a few years, had been transferred under her command when the Alliance had given her the first Normandy, after her nomination as Spectre. Deep down, she was a ruthless survivor, capable of the worst to get the job done, and her people was what raised her to a more human behavior. Carrying for them made her a better person.

That's why she had sent back Legion and Javik as soon as Wrex had called her about the influence of the ship on electronics. Legion hadn't shown any sign but she wouldn't risk it. Legion, who liked to read and could recite poetry all night to soothe her nightmares, who knitted pullovers for Christmas and brought back flowers to the ship after a mission if he had the occasion, who had abandoned his people to explore the galaxy and find a path to peace, that Legion couldn't be corrupted. Shepard would never allow it. Legion was part of her team. He owed her obedience and she owed him protection. She had to bring him back to the ship alive. The same applied to Javik.

The tunnel she was aiming for was now just on her right but she couldn't reach it without jumping. Legion, being the sweetheart he was, had given her his M-98 Widow before leaving, for protection since she didn't have much in firepower on her, but this thing weighted a ton, even with a lower gravity. Shepard wasn't used to this kind of weight on her back. That didn't stop her though. She had only one shot at this and she was terrible good at one shots. She climbed a little more and activated her magnetic boots, hoping her armor wouldn't let her down. She laughed at her own bad pun and let loose of the ladder, both feet on the metallic wall. She couldn't walk on it due to gravity, but it slowed her fall down and she could somehow control her direction. She fell faster when her feet dangled into the void, as planned, and jumped in front of her as soon as she felt the ground under her toes. She rolled on the metal but was certainly not going to win a medal for style on this one. She finished on her ass, her back hurting like a bitch, but alive. That had to be better than a twenty-five kilometers fall.

EDI, Mandor and Été should have been around. The radio was dead and her omnitool useless but Shepard knew they were somewhere nearby. Cortez had dropped them a few kilometers above her head three hours ago – or above her side, maybe, she wasn't sure because the ship was tilted compared to the Normandy and that messed with her sense of direction. That part of the ship was a big circular module relatively empty compared to the others, which had helped EDI scan it from the outside. It contained enormous rooms, kilometers-wide tanks. The logical explanation was that this module contained tanks of useful resources, hydrocarbons or anything used as energy maybe, something that might have helped to understand what was this ship and how it worked, but EDI didn't manage to confirm. That's why Mandor had decided to come here take a look.

Two factors had influenced Shepard to come here too. First, if the ship messed with electronics, EDI could be affected, which only meant troubles. They all tended to dissociate her body from the ship where was her mind, but EDI was in fact the Normandy, as much as the Normandy was her. Her humanoid body was only a way to interact with her fellow crewmates, but her true self was electric impulses on hard cold silicon in a dark room back on the ship. She could lose her body, that wouldn't kill her, but if something messed with her physical self, maybe that could influence her process on the Normandy. That meant Shepard's people could be in danger. It was really easy to kill a whole crew in a matter of minutes when you had direct control of the ship. Cut the oxygen supplies, wait for five minutes, ten if you're not in a hurry, and enjoy the show. Shepard had to prevent that risk.

The second factor was the loss of communication. Mandor had answered the first call but not the
second, not any since then. EDI didn't respond either. Maybe they just were too deep into the structure of the ship, maybe they were all dead. The only way for Shepard to find out was to go and see with her own eyes. She knew she should have kept Javik with her since she couldn't use her biotics, but she preferred to not condemn him to a potential early death. He hadn't survived his fifty thousand years nap to die in the middle of nowhere. Besides, who knew what lurked in the dark corners of this ship? Giving them a Prothean to dissect wasn't a good idea. Giving them a Human to dissect wasn't a good idea either but at least Shepard wasn't one of a kind. There were thirteen billions Humans across the galaxy, given or take a few millions, enough to insure the survival of their species. To the contrary, Javik was the last specimen of a species which had disappeared in a matter of decades a very long time ago. You didn't use that kind of guy as cannon fodder.

Shepard quickly found a corridor at the end of the tunnel she had landed in. It was perpendicular to the tunnel and she couldn't see the end of it, either on her left or her right. Something was odd though: the floor didn't touch the wall in front of her. Shepard came closer and squatted to have a better look. There was a small gap indeed, maybe twenty centimeters wide, between the floor and the wall. She raised her eyes to see the same anomaly on the ceiling. Activating her helmet's enhanced vision, she could see the pattern repeated above and under her, where others tunnels connected to that wall. Bingo.

Since Shepard had aimed for the tank directly under team Beta's landing point, she was pretty sure Mandor was in that one, or somewhere around it. That didn't mean Shepard's troubles ended here though. The tank wasn't round but in a shape of a bean. Four of them occupied this module, so that really covered a lot of ground. Shepard checked her oxygen level and decided to change the capsule now. She replaced the almost empty one by her second to last full, sliding it inside the collar of her armor. She now had one hour to find Mandor. Her last capsule would be for the trip back to the surface.

Shepard jumped when she saw the little blue icon indicating an incoming call popping-up in her field of vision. How was that possible? The radio was dead and the walls were too thick for the communication to come through. It could be a trap, a distraction, calling and attacking her from behind while she was busy with statics. Shepard unsheathed her gun as she blinked to answer the call.

"Danrateraki," Vakarian's voice saluted her. Shepard frowned. If it was a plan to startle her, it was working perfectly. What the fuck was Vakarian doing here? And what language did he speak?

"Vakarian?" she asked, keeping her eyes on her surroundings.

"Tak, Danrateraki." Shepard recognized Kaladran with tak, yes. Unless the owner of the ship had captured Vakarian and eaten his brain to learn that language really fast, there was no way that imitator wasn't her protegee.

Even if Kaladran wasn't exactly difficult to learn, it required a lot of practice and a very different way of thinking. "I" didn't exist in Kaladran. Turians from the Hierarchy never spoke of themselves as distinct individuals. They used different versions of the "we" pronoun, depending if they were referring to a small group, a larger one, an unknown one, and so on. "A Turian never walks alone," Nihlus had told her, trying to explain the concept, but he was worse than her with Kaladran. The reason why Turians from the Hierarchy found Etherian rude and despicable was not only because it was mostly used in secessionist colonies but also because individuals speaking that language had to refer to themselves as "I". It almost was a crime.

"Dottanvatki haea," Vakarian – or his mind-controlled self – continued, "vos votki manamana meterren."
That one was easy: "I'm near by, a hundred meters from you, more or less." That raised even more questions and Shepard started with the most troubling: "What the fuck are you doing here?"

There were statics on the line for a few seconds. "Sorry," she heard, "the walls are pretty thick, comms don't work so well."

She chose to speak Kaladran too. That would help to not switch between languages for general comprehension. "That doesn't answer my question."

"Your what?"

"My question."

"Huh, I didn't quite get that but, huh, I thought you'd need a hand, so, here I am. Well, almost."

"You know where I am?"

"Yes, Danrateraki." Shepard had never heard that word before but it wasn't really hard to figure out what it meant in context. Commander. She had to admit, she liked how the word rang to her ears. But for now, she had to be angry. And she was, a little, if she searched deep down. What did he think? That she wasn't capable of dealing with the situation by herself? That she needed his help? Fuck that and fuck him! She had ten times his experience on the field and she had been perfectly fine so far!

But, she had to admit she was impressed, and dead curious. How the Hell did he find her? That question kept her anger at bay.

"Get your ass down here," she sighed, "and don't be surprised if I give you a lecture on how stupid you are later."

"Huh, sure..." he hesitated. "Why do you try to speak Kaladran, Danrateraki?"

"My translator must be fucked up or something and I'm not sure you can speak English, now that I realize you probably never spoke in English to me, ever, despite my order, so here I am, probably saying shit you don't understand."

"Spirits, that's gonna be rough," he mumbled. "Don't move, I'm coming, and we'll figure something out."

"Ah!" Shepard realized as the blue icon disappeared from her visor. "Standard! We can speak Standard!" But it was too late, Vakarian hadn't heard. Shepard sighed and waited for ten long minutes in the dark, listening to her surroundings. The ship was awfully quiet and that wasn't really a surprise. The atmosphere was very thin, it didn't conduct sounds very well, and Shepard's armor's sensors weren't working correctly. Tech wasn't her strong suit. She could repair a few things, crack a door open and little things like that, but she was no tech expert. Vakarian's knowledge was actually going to improve her situation but he was in for the scolding of his life nonetheless.

He was leaping a little when he arrived, walking carefully, scanning the corridor with the scope of his Valkyrie. Shepard could see numerous scratches on his armor and a breach on his helmet patched up with duct-tape. He was carrying a heavy weapon with him, something glowing red Shepard had never seen before, and a duffel-bag above it. Coming to her rescue hadn't been a walk in the park, apparently. Shepard tried to stay angry for a second but eventually sighed. She'd have other occasions to scream at him anyway.

"Beh'penfah'lok," he saluted in Standard this time, easing his assault rifle. She smiled, glad to see
he had had the same realization on his way.

"You're in so much troubles, Vakarian," she told him, folding her arms and falling to a hip, "but it's good to see you."

"Likewise, Commander," he replied and she could hear a smile in his voice. "I'm sure you have plenty of questions, and I'll be happy to answer them all but on our way back to the surface would be better."

"I came here to find team Beta," Shepard countered. "Your radio works. Any news from them?"

"Long-distance radios don't work inside the ship," he told her, "too many disturbances, but short waves can be used. That's how we're communicating right now, actually." Shepard tilted her head to the side, a sign of impatience in Turians. He couldn't see her frown through the helmet so this was as good as it could get with non-verbal communication. He understood the message loud and clear. "Right, team Beta," he continued, straightening. "Team Delta didn't hear from them since the first call but something definitely happened earlier, maybe two hours ago."

"What?"

"The Normandy rebooted." Shepard's heart skipped a beat. Oh shit. Oh shit shit shit! "Don't worry, Commander," Vakarian reassured her, his voice very steady and calm. "Emergency protocols worked just fine and the worst the crew had to face was a few bruises due to the return of gravity."

"And EDI?" she asked, throat tight.

"Its personality process weren't responding when I called Joker but he said he didn't have time to think about it then and that it'd have to wait. He was busy trying not to crash the Normandy on the alien ship, from what I understood." Shepard breathed deeply even if her oxygen was counted for, and exhaled slowly to calm down. Tali was on the Normandy, with Adams, Donnelly, Daniels and Joker. Her ship would be fine, she was in good hands, loving hands. EDI would be fine. Maybe her personality started last during a reboot, because there were way more important programs to run before simulated emotions and the nasty comments generator.

Jesus fucking Christ, she had done the right thing by sending back Legion before anything could happen to him too. She had never heard of a Geth rebooting.

"Okay," she said, collecting her thoughts, "okay. We need to find team Beta and quick. How did you find me? Can you do it again with EDI or Mandor?"

Vakarian looked around and walked to a wall of the tunnel, obviously searching for something near the ground. Shepard followed him, not liking his silence. She didn't say a word though, and let him remove a metallic panel off the wall. He had to squat to have access to it so she stood guard, gun in hand. "Solus was right," he said, pointing at something she didn't bother giving a look at, "their alphabet is syllabic and that combination of symbols can be found everywhere on the ship. It was near each door I opened so far and on wires. I think it means 'electricity' or it's a warning related to that."

"You infiltrated their system," Shepard understood.

"That's a big short cut," he snorted, tampering in wires in the wall, "but yes. Their system is pretty rudimentary but it also uses electricity to transfer information."

"Don't feel obligated to explain all the science, Vakarian," Shepard grunted. "Now's not really a good time for engineering 101."
"Well, you did ask how I managed to find you," he reminded her, taking a little black box from a pouch at his belt. He connected it to some wires and a small orange holoscreen appeared above it. Only gibberish showed up but that didn't seem to stop him.

"Fine," Shepard sighed. "But give me the short version."

"Wrex took down a hostile earlier," Vakarian continued, still working on his wires, "but it injured him so we had to get out of the ship. The radio started working again when we were on the surface and I heard you were still inside. I knew where Cortez had dropped you so I just ran in your general direction. Which was pretty stupid, I realized that soon after." Shepard snorted. "Anyway, I needed to know where you were exactly. Since the phaxren had found us quite easily, I thought I could use that to my advantage."

"Wait, phaxren? A group of phax?" Shepard stopped him. "Aren't those monsters from your mythology?"

"Yes, they are," he nodded. "I know those things are not phaxren but they look like them and it's not like they gave us their name before attacking us, so..." Shepard approved. "Anyway, I had to find one so I went back into the ship and set a trap. That wasn't easy but I got one." Hence his leaping and all the damages on his armor, Shepard'd bet. "I thought they were only synthetic by the way they moved but they're actually part synthetic, part organic, and really sensitive to electromagnetic fields. That's why there are so many wires in those walls, they transmit information by electromagnetism."

"And that messes with our electronics."

"Yes. And since it's only electric signals, not rocket science, it's not that hard to read the flow and make something out of it. You can see a certain pattern repeating there," he pointed again and Shepard saw a series of peaks on the holoscreen, "that's us. That means 'intruders' and the rest of the data is actually coordinates. Once I figured that out, finding you was just a matter of running fast on the hull."

"With a twisted ankle?" Shepard asked, noticing he had opted for the same 'no obstacle' policy. Though running on the hull was quite clever. The gravity was weaker outside.

"That's not as bad as it looks," he shrugged. "I barely feel it." Probably because of the medigel, Shepard thought. She tended to overuse it too instead of listening to her body. "There," he said. "Two other peaks and their coordinates." He keyed on his holoscreen for a few seconds. "They're not far from here."

"Only two?"

"I don't know if EDI is considered as an intruder or not," he replied, standing up, his holoscreen still in hand. "Maybe the phaxren only hunt down organics. Everything is possible at this point." Shepard nodded. That could also mean someone had died. Vakarian rearranged the balance of his duffel-bag and started walking to the tank. Shepard followed him. "By the way, how did you get there, Commander?"

"I climbed a ladder," she shrugged.

"What?"

"In the main shaft."

"Huh." He paused for a second. "Seriously?"
"Seriously," Shepard replied, offended. "I knew where team Beta had been dropped and what was their target, I had memorized the map of the ship EDI had made, so, voilà! Nothing complicated, geez."

Vakarian shook his head a little and his voice was full of respect when he spoke. "I have to admit I'm impressed, Commander."

"Give yourself a break, Vakarian," she scolded him to hide her discomfort, "you're not half bad either."

"Oh I know," he replied. Shepard pocked him in the ribs with her elbow and he chuckled. It was good to hear.

Team Beta's signal came from somewhere above them. Vakarian had found some sort of stairs to reach the level Shepard had landed in and they took them to go up. They needed a door now to enter the tank, which was in the realm of possibilities since team Beta's signal came from inside, but they had to walk for about two kilometers before finding one. It was enormous, facing an evenly big access tunnel with rails on the floor. It was wide open, a bright blue light coming out of it. Shepard and Vakarian exchanged a look before switching for bigger weapons. She took her own Valkyrie and he his Valiant.

They walked carefully through the door to find a corridor of gigantic proportions, with walls and ceiling made of glowing water. The light came from some sort of kinetic barrier keeping the corridor open, creating a tunnel into the liquid. It was so powerful Shepard could feel its low vibration through her body. Vakarian seemed very uncomfortable there and it wasn't a surprise, it was exactly the kind of vibration Turians hated. They walked slightly faster, ready to run if the barrier showed any sign of weakness. Shepard wasn't eager to end her life reduced to a red pulp by thousands of metric cubes of water, feeding creatures from alien sagas, and she was pretty sure Vakarian had other plans too, probably involving a cave and a lot of weapons somewhere on a secluded planet. She smiled for herself. That seemed fitting.

Shepard had thought the next room was in the dark since she couldn't see anything of it from the water corridor but the more she approached, the more she saw little lights, well aligned vertically and horizontally, like lamps on shelves. Once the corridor in her back and her eyes used to the new luminosity, she could only felt a little baffled. There were cages as far as she could see, square glass cages aligned four by four and piled up from the bottom of the tank under a ground made of metallic fence, to its top, both lost in the dark. They all were occupied by aliens Shepard had never seen before, each different, each in a corrupted version of what she could only imagine was their natural habitat.

"Spirits," Vakarian whispered, lowering his Valiant. "what is this place?"

"Hep, manners," Shepard reminded him. He raised his sniper rifle to eye level again. "How far?"

Vakarian struggled a little to keep his Valiant up and look at his holoscreen at the same time. "Five hundred meters, ten o'clock."

"I'll take point. Stay sharp." Vakarian nodded and followed her.

Shepard followed the rails coming from the corridor for a hundred meters, somehow glad to walk on something solid, but had to turn left eventually and pass on the fence-like ground. She tested it hesitantly before resuming her careful progression. Vakarian slightly on her right, behind her. Some of the aliens followed them on their path, until they reached the wall of their glass cell, some only looked at them, some weren't even interested in them. Shepard felt like a curious animal
trapped in a zoo, under the scrutiny of vaguely bored visitors. Why didn't they try to knock on the glass, to call for them, for help maybe? Were they accustomed to see strangers walking around their cages? Had they been curious strangers once and trapped here ever since?

"Shepard," Vakarian called. She lost her train of thought when she heard her name but her surprise was cut short when he pointed her a cage in an adjacent row. There, standing straight, was a Prothean, a woman wearing a loose pale yellow see-through veil as a robe on her body, a belt made of coral and multicolored heavy bracelets at each wrist. She looked at them with her severe eyes, studying them with cold assertiveness, the same Javik had when staring at a primitive.

That wasn't possible. Protheans were extincted. They had disappeared fifty thousands years ago during the Fall of the Empire, so fast that all records of whatever had happened to them had vanished with them. Javik was the last Prothean, and had only survived thanks to a malfunctioning cryogenic pod, in what was left of a laboratory on Eden Prime. It wasn't logic. What did a Prothean do in a ship aiming for the Milky Way, hundreds of thousands light years above the galaxy, alive and well? It didn't add up.

Shepard shook herself up. She had to find team Beta. She had to know what had happened to EDI. She had to get out of here with Vakarian and go back to her ship, to her people. They were the priority. But what would she say to Javik? She had found a living Prothean but she had left her in a cage because it just wasn't in her agenda to save a dead species? She was ordered to get a look at this place, not to rescue anybody. Javik would understand but it would also kill him to know there was another Prothean somewhere, trapped, and probably doomed.

A little red LED pulsed on the corner of Shepard's vision. Low oxygen level. She replaced the capsule and breathed in deep. She had one hour left.

"Let's go," she said, keeping her eyes off the Prothean woman. It took her a few steps to realize Vakarian wasn't following her. She looked around and found him in front of another cage, rifle low, mesmerized by what was inside. "Vakarian!" she called and she saw him jumping.

"I'm coming!" he said and started jogging to her.

"What was in there?"

"Nothing," he replied and Shepard knew he was lying but something in his voice told her to not ask any question. Once at her side, he scanned their surroundings, eye in his scope. "A hundred meters, one o'clock, head on the ground."

Shepard felt cold lead fall into her stomach. She nodded and walked carefully, not rushing things. If there was a head on the ground, that meant something bad had happened here, maybe an attack from the phaxren. Shepard hadn't seen one yet but she had had the occasion to listen to turian sagas on Palaven, when she had been confined there with Nihlus and Saren after Eden Prime. Turians weren't fond of works of fiction in general but they had stories nonetheless, mostly about historical characters, great warriors and genius leaders who had built cities or defeated a worthy enemy.

Some sagas were a bit more religious, some clearly fantasist and considered like stories for children. They talked about giant walking the earth or fantastic monsters painting the sky at night. From what Shepard remembered, phaxren were those bloodthirsty creatures eating the dead at night after a battle but never satisfied of their meal. They always wanted more, to the point of attacking camps and cities with their long arms with hundred of tiny hands grabbing everything and tearing up bodies with ease. Of course, there had been great heroes, two huntress, sisters called Menae and Nanus, who had found a way to kill all the phaxren, with their wit and ruse. The lowlands had been safe at night ever since thanks to their constant watch.
Shepard had underestimated those legends. It had been confirmed aliens had visited Earth long before Humans could understand it, Protheans for example, and Salarians a few thousands years later, and everybody knew there had been abductions, even if no government ever admitted it – heck, even the Alliance had done it so it pretty much was the norm. Now that Shepard had seen those cages with hundreds of unknown aliens, she started to wonder if the monsters in the sagas weren't actually real. This tank looked too much like a collection to be something else. She just hoped she wouldn't end up on those shelves.

EDI's head laid on the side, her eyes wide open but empty of the sparkle of life, in a pool of black gooey blood splattered all around. Shepard breathed in deep and followed the trail, finding mechanical body parts on the way, and pieces of something else, something definitively organic. She looked at Vakarian over her shoulder to confirm those were *phax* parts and he nodded. Well at least the carnage here explained why none of those things had attacked them so far. But reinforcement must have been on their way.

Shepard felt the biotic wave before she could see it. She tackled Vakarian to push him out of the way, rolled on the ground with him and managed to get back on her feet, eye on the scope, finger on the trigger. She didn't need to fire though. She knew the silhouette radiating biotics a dozen of meters in front of her, even if she hadn't spent much times with her guests. Été was standing, exhausted, his back to a damaged glass cell covered in black goo, his right arm ready to fire another biotic wave. That surprised Shepard. Biotic Salarians were usually confined to their homeworld and they certainly weren't unregistered.

"Vakarian," Shepard called, not relaxing for a bit, "radio." He gave her the green light a few seconds later. "Stand down soldier," she commanded the Salarian in Standard. All she heard back was gibberish she didn't understand a word of but she had heard her crew talking enough to recognize a krogan dialect.

"Don't bother," Mandor said, her voice weak, "he doesn't speak Standard, only Mosuram and Menkesh." Shepard was right, Été had spoke in a krogan language to her – she regretted to have turned down Wrex' offer to teach her a few words now. Menkesh didn't surprise her so much. It was the main batarian language, used through all the Terminus Systems and a good part of the Attican Traverse. It had become the Standard of half the galaxy due to the strong batarian presence there, thanks to their mercenary gangs. It was easy to learn, easy to talk and a lot less rigorous on the grammar. Shepard knew she should have learned that one too.

"Where are you?" Shepard asked.

"Coming." Mandor coughed. Shepard saw her walk to the Salarian with difficulties and put a hand on his shoulder. He relaxed a little and Mandor waved at Shepard to get closer. She gave a look at Vakarian over her shoulder. He nodded but didn't follow her, standing guard just in case. She could rant all she wanted about him but damn, did they work fine together on the field. "Your robot attacked me," Mandor said as Shepard approached.

"The ship has an influence on electronics," she replied. "Did you shoot EDI?"

"Été did." That didn't tell her if this had caused the reboot or the reboot was the result of something else, a computer attack maybe. "And then we were attacked by those things. Wasn't fun."

"Team Gamma's been attacked too." Shepard was now close enough to see the damages on Mandor's armor and it was pretty bad. There were holes everywhere and blood leaking from some of them. Her helmet was also cracked. Going out in space would be dangerous, if not impossible.

"It's bad, isn't it?" Mandor snorted. "You shouldn't have come for us, Shepard. We're fucked."
"We'll figure something out," Shepard contradicted her. "Vakarian, take point. Find us a way out."

"Aye aye, Commander," he replied. Shepard switched for her gun and came to support Mandor to help her walk. Été took the rear. Shepard could feel his biotics radiating in her back and she hated to be so vulnerable. She should have taken Solus' offer right away. She'd be able to use her own biotics by now. "What do we do about the prisoners, Commander?" Vakarian asked as they walked fast, following the rails to the exit.

"None of our business," Shepard commanded, the prothean woman in mind. "Our job is to take a look and report and that's exactly what we're going to do. The Council will decide later what they do with that ship." Vakarian didn't say another word. He just nodded and kept on going. They crossed the long corridor with water walls as fast as they could, leaving the cages behind them without a look over their shoulders.

Vakarian took them along the tank and back to the stairs. His leaping was more visible every minutes now but he didn't say a word nor slow down. Été, despite his fatigue, did the same. Mandor on the other hand could barely walk and often tripped. Shepard was tempted to carry her on her shoulder but the more rational part of her was telling her to just leave the Asari here. She was a dead weight anyway and she was slowing them down. But Shepard knew deep down the Salarian wouldn't let her abandon his partner.

Shepard had used the excuse of talking to Mandor about her insistence towards Vakarian to chit-chat a little with her, to know her a bit before going on a mission with a Spectre she had never heard about. She had asked if "partner" meant something more than a work relationship. Mandor had laughed it off but Shepard had insisted. It could happen, right? There always were some exceptions and lunatics within a species so a Salarian falling in love with an Asari could technically happen – Solus had a daughter with Aria after all but Shepard had kept that information for herself so far. But no, there was nothing more than trust and friendship between Mandor and Été.

He was working with her because he had nothing better to do of his life since he had freed himself of his previous owner, a krogan warlord, head of a mercenary group. The bastard had raised Été and experimented on him. He had made him a biotic, actually. Shepard knew about that. Wrex had told her krogans biotics were not as rare as one could think but it gave warlords so much power that they tried to have a lot of them in their clan. That's why there was a long tradition of artificial biotics on Tuchanka, soldier who volunteered to be implanted with eezo nodules in their bodies. The younger the soldiers were, the better it worked, which had led to a lot of child trafficking back in the days, but death rates were still pretty high. That's why the tradition had been almost abandoned after the genophage. The Krogans didn't have enough of their own kids to do that anymore but that didn't stop them from using children from different species apparently.

Vakarian stopped at the top of the stairs, back against the wall, like the good little soldier he was. "I came from here earlier," he said, eye on the scope. "The exit isn't far but it seems we have a problem."

Shepard laid Mandor against the wall but the Asari slid to the floor, swearing because of the pain – at least she was alive. Été came to her rescue while Shepard took position behind Vakarian. She switched her gun for the M-98 Widow. "How many?" she asked.

"Two. They're trying to seal the chimney leading to the hull." Vakarian gave her a quick look over his shoulder. "What are you doing with Legion's rifle? It's too heavy for you."

"It's my new toy and I don't share," Shepard shushed him, but he was right. The rifle was too heavy to fire it standing up. She laid on her stomach and readied her weapon. "I'll be back up."
"Obviously." He put his Valiant in his back and took the heavy weapon instead. "You Humans pray to a god, right? Now would be a good time."

"Superstitious, Vakarian?" she teased him, calibrating the scope. She had bought a thermal one for Legion, something expensive but absolutely worth it paired with a rifle like that and a sniper like Legion, but it didn't help much in her case. The *phaxren*'s temperature was barely greater than the corridor's. The scope outlined them though, which was a big helper. Shepard could see them busy with the wall to seal, their tentacles tearing up steel panels around to move them with ease to the chimney. Note to self, Shepard thought, do no approach those fuckers.

"A little help from supernatural entities doesn't hurt against mystical creatures, I think."

"True." Shepard gripped the handle and put her finger on the trigger. "Whenever you want."

Vakarian did something she didn't expect at all: he jumped in the corridor, weapon at the ready. The *phaxren* immediately saw him but he didn't shoot. Shepard didn't wait for him to do something. She pulled the trigger and fired. The kick was so strong it put her off balance, pain exploding in her shoulder, her arm and her back at the same time. The rifle wasn't aligned anymore. She had no idea if she had hit her target but that didn't stop her. She took position again, all her body aching, and heard Vakarian swearing as she aimed. The *phaxren* were moving, far from the best targets for a sniper rifle that heavy, so Shepard fired the next round as soon as she saw something in her scope. This time, the bolt in her shoulder told her something was broken. She greeted her teeth, moved the rifle again, reloaded and put her eye back on the scope.

A bright orange light illuminated the corridor for a fraction of a second and a fire orb passed before her. The *phax* jumped on the wall to avoid it but the creature was caught by the sphere nonetheless and it was dragged to the end of the corridor. There, the orb met the wall, and it grew to enormous proportions, distorting the steel around, pulling Shepard to it more and more at each second, absorbing the light even. Shepard didn't let go of the M-98 as she slid on the ground to the corridor – she could still need it, dammit. She stuck it under her broken arm and gripped the door with the other.

The pull ceased suddenly and Shepard was thrown away by a violent flash of light. She rolled on the ground, her broken shoulder protesting, and eventually rammed into something. Something mostly constituted of Vakarian's armor.

"What was that?" Shepard asked, seeing the world upside down.

"Gravitational singularity heavy artillery," he replied with a grunt.

"What?"

"A miniature black hole gun."

"Totally want one for Christmas." Vakarian laughed at that and Shepard didn't really understand why. A green icon appeared in her field of vision. She authorized the communication and the line opened, on statics at first but soon after on Cortez calling to know their location. Shepard sighed, relieved. She'd be home soon.

TBC
The trip back to the Citadel had taken a little less than three weeks, enough time to heal and rest but Shepard had programmed a shore leave nonetheless. Garrus wasn't complaining, he could do with a break. Turians could only enjoy shore leave twice a year during all their active duty. They celebrated New Year at the beginning of summer, and the Unification four months and a half later, in the middle of winter – winter à la Palaven though, which meant you didn't have to stay in the shades at the hottest hours of the day and you could, maybe, if it was a particularly cold winter, feel a chill in the evening. The crew would have three days to spend at their convenience on the Citadel. Garrus didn't know what he would do. He was just glad it didn't leave him enough time to go to Palaven to see his father.

Garrus hadn't received a single mail from him since he had been at the hospital, recovering from his injuries after the Attack on the Citadel. His father had asked what was his excuse to have missed New Year's celebrations this time. Garrus had laughed at that and answered he had been a bit busy. The Cerberus attack had happened during a one in a million years event: a synchronized new year on Palaven, Thessia and Sur'Kesh. It had been the first time in recorded history that the three main species of the galaxy celebrated the same event, which had drained the Citadel of more than half of its population.

And C-Sec had ran with only forty percents of its agents that day. It had been the perfect occasion to invade the Citadel, Garrus had to admit that. C-Sec was usually two hundred thousands men strong, for a total of roughly thirteen millions people. That was one officer for every sixty-five civilians. Attacking the Citadel when C-Sec was at full capacities would have been very stupid, even more when you knew that any Turian living there would have grabbed the nearest weapon to protect the station. Cerberus had started the invasion with a force of nearly sixty thousands men, when C-Sec had had eighty thousands agents to oppose them, most of them too busy with the celebrations and startled by the audacity to be really prepared to defend anything. The perfect occasion, really.

He didn't have news from his father but he had received a mail from the embassy, asking him to come by to take care of a few matters. Garrus wasn't worried. Turians on the Citadel received once a week a mail from the embassy giving them the latest news and interesting tips. Turians were a tight community. New additions to the diaspora were hooked up with a district representative who helped them getting used to the Citadel, finding an apartment or even a job sometimes. They had bars and restaurants where no other alien would enter – the dextro/levo problem helped though – and soup kitchens for the ones in need, who then repaid society with community work. Quarians weren't quite welcomed in the soup kitchens, but Turians actually had to help them by Council law. They were tolerated there as long as they gave back to the community.

Garrus gave a look at Zorah two chairs on his left, over T'Soni's head. Wrex had spent most of his three weeks in medbay and Zorah had been with him a lot. Garrus had known those two were friends but he had thought their proximity came from working together for several years. Garrus had asked Shepard nonetheless, even if it wasn't his business, and she had confirmed his doubts: Zorah and Wrex were together. It had been hard to resist curiosity ever since. Quarians were known for their weak immune system. Even if they were dextros, they could barely eat turian food due to intolerance and allergies. They had to be extremely careful when removing their suit and live
in tightly controlled quarters. But Zorah shared hers with Wrex, a Krogan, probably the most resilient species there was in the galaxy. An adult was never sick and could survive practically anything. Even radiation poisoning didn't work for long on them. Garrus had even heard of Krogans capable of eating dextro food without the sightliest problem.

That didn't make sense. They may have worked and lived together for a few years but what was a krogan merc centuries old doing with a quarian teenager so small he could lift her with a single finger? Zorah, he could understand: the thrill of having an exciting life far from the secluded quarian fleet, the pleasure of seeing this enormous man bow to her feet, maybe the excitement of doing something pretty extreme for a young girl like her, he could understand, yes. But Wrex? Garrus pictured him as the kind of guy who'd look for a woman like Shepard, strong and not impressed by him, someone who wouldn't hide behind a crate at the first difficulty, knees shaking and all intellectual capacities lost.

Someone like Mandor, maybe, he thought as he glanced at the Asari Spectre. Wrex could have children with an Asari. Well, the result would be another Asari and technically not his but Garrus had heard Krogans often tried to seduce the blue people because they wanted their genes to survive them. Though Mandor's father had been Turian, and they had been raised like a Turian from what they had said, so maybe Mandor didn't think much of Wrex. Anyway, the galaxy was full of asari maidens crazy enough to do the do with a Krogan twice as tall as them. Wrex could probably snap his fingers and have a dozen Asaris at his feet the next second, longing for his experience. Garrus lost his appetite just at the thought.

"Gardner," Shepard said out loud, "stop cooking connip for the dextros on board, thank you very much." She then resumed eating her plate as if nothing had happened but Garrus saw the quick look she gave him. He answered with a brief smile of his own. It made him feel good to know she looked out for him.

"It's like the kale of dextros," Gardner replied. "It's full of vitamins and stuff."

"Nobody likes kale, levos or dextros," Shepard commented, pushing a green puree on the side of her plate.

"Eat your vegetables, Commander," Chakwas grunted from the other side of the table. Shepard winced and some people at the table laughed.

"I like connip," Zorah grumbled. She turned to Garrus and T'Soni leaned on their chair, to not get caught between them. "Why do you have to ruin everything?"

Garrus blinked, not knowing what he had ruined so far. Wrex' laugh covered all the conversations. The question bothered him for the rest of dinner. The atmosphere was pretty relaxed and the crew and their guests moved to the lounge to have a few drinks. Legion and Solus joined them and everybody made sure the Salarian wouldn't approach the bar. Shepard smoked in the small part with the game table, which had a special ventilation made to evacuate the smoke. Garrus joined her there to avoid Zorah. She liked to rub her small victories in his face and Garrus could do without a child's petty rivalry tonight.

"Weren't you supposed to stop smoking, Commander?" he teased Shepard once more. She rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I said that, I know, now's not a good time, is all." Garrus snorted. Each time he had spoken about it, she had said something on the same theme: not a good time, my shoulder's still broken, I can't be stuck in my room for three days, I'm fine anyway, and all of that. Solus was ready and waited for the final green light to start the process. Maybe he could start without
Shepard's agreement. She'd be furious though. "What bothers you, big guy?" Shepard asked. Garrus looked at her. "You're all silent and staring. More than usual, I mean. That's the sign you're thinking but don't want to talk."

"Nothing in particular," he shrugged, a little uncomfortable at the idea she could read him so well already – even if she was wrong this time. Shepard stared at him. He had to cover his conspiracy. "What Zorah said, earlier," he said, folding his arms and looking over his shoulder.

"Ah, that," Shepard mumbled, scratching her nose with her left hand. Her right arm still hurt a little when she moved it, he knew it. "Tali is very good when it comes to find someone's weakness so I wouldn't pay attention to her nasty comments. You're Turian, Turians make a big deal out of working together and you're still not really integrated to the team, so she was just trying to make you feel guilty."

Garrus nodded. "I can see why."

"It doesn't matter because she only tried to get under your skin," Shepard insisted, "and succeeded apparently."

Garrus winced but didn't reply as Solus and Traynor entered the little cubicle. "Wanna play, Commander?" the Specialist asked. "Skyllian Five, the loser has to write an essay on phallus representation in elcor poetry."

"My idea," Solus smiled, sitting at the table.

"I'm in!" Shepard laughed. "Vakarian?"

He sighed, fighting his smile. "Wouldn't miss it for the world, Commander."

Of course, he had lost. Garrus waved goodbye at Traynor as she left the Normandy by the airlock the next morning, far from his position near the elevator. He had known she was pretty smart but he hadn't been prepared for the ruthless player she was. She had massacred him, then Shepard, and had agreed to a tie with Solus after the fifth round. Next time, he thought as the elevator opened on Shepard. She was wearing civvies, cigarette already on her lips, her hair pulled back in some sort of tail, and it took Garrus a second to recognize her. She was wearing black boots and pants, with a rather long and loose white shirt showing most of her arms and shoulders – and what was under. Garrus looked away. That was inappropriate.

"That's a lot of skin for a Turian, Imma right?" Shepard teased as she walked out of the elevator. "C'mon, you've seen worse."

"Thank you for reminding me," Garrus snorted, following her through CIC. "I've had nightmares, you know?" Shepard laughed.

"What are you doing here, Vakarian? You have shore leave and you won't spend it following me around. I strictly forbid it."

"I just wanted to say goodbye," he shrugged.

"Ooooow," Shepard mocked, looking at him over her very naked shoulder, "you miss me already!"

"Got me there, Commander," Garrus sighed, falsely affected. "I can't survive without you."

"Damn right you can't," Shepard bragged and Garrus indulged her the victory. The score was in his favor in their little game of "who has saved whose ass" but he'd have to talk about Project Base if
he went down that road. He was not going to do that. Besides, Shepard had scored last by taking down a *phax* and slowing down the other on the alien ship while Garrus was trying to fire Solus' black hole gun. Without the few seconds she had bought him, he wouldn't have been able to fix the gun – with which he had finished the job but that wasn't the point. "Any fancy plans?"

"I have to go to the embassy."

"Wow, so much fun!" Shepard laughed. Garrus smiled. She was definitively in a good mood and she got a strange look from Mandor for that when they reached the airlock. The Spectre and their partner were waiting for them.

"Shepard," Mandor saluted. "Thanks for the ride."

"I won't lie to you, Mandor," Shepard replied, "it wasn't a pleasure. I have nothing against you personally but your assignments suck. Don't feel obligated to give me news." Mandor smirked and their eyes fell on Garrus. He moved slightly behind Shepard, which amused greatly the two Spectres. Mandor walked out of the airlock, followed by Été, which bowed his head to salute them. Shepard waved goodbye. "Too bad he's leaving," she said once sure they wouldn't hear her, folding her arms. "An artificial salarian biotic raised by a krogan warlord. That would've been an awesome addition to my crew, don't you think?"

"If you like to collect alien teammates with a dramatic past, I suppose."

Shepard laughed at that but was interrupted by Joker, still in the cockpit. "Huh, Commander, you have visitors."

"Nope," she declared, holding her hands high, "I'm on shore leave. Cerberus can attack the Citadel again, I won't even lift a finger. Tell Anderson and Udina to go fuck themselves."

"It's not them," Joker replied, looking at Shepard over his armchair, "it's the Consort."

Shepard mumbled something Garrus didn't understand and walked straight out of the airlock. The Consort! Probably the most influential Asari on the Citadel, their business consisted to give advices to the wise and entertain the fool, from what Garrus had heard. They were supposed to be the most beautiful creature of the galaxy, in front of which no one could stay indifferent. Garrus highly doubted that. Asaris may have had some interesting features here and there but they were too alien for a lot of Turians.

"You might want to go with Shepard," Joker advised Garrus, leaning on the armchair. "Seems like shore leave is canceled again."

Garrus nodded and walked to the docks, regretting to have elected his civvies instead of his usual light armor today. There were seven Asaris in the delegation: the Consort, two acolytes and four Commandos in black armor. One of them, seeing Garrus approach, came to him and held their hand high to stop him. Garrus was tempted to laugh, to be honest. Commandos may have been the best asari warriors but they were jokes to Turians. They were biotics and so what? Garrus would break their arms before they could activate anything, especially in close combat.

He walked until the Commando's hand touched his chest, and looked down at them. The average Asari was smaller than Shepard. This one barely reached his shoulder. "Move," he said, his voice low, resonating in his throats, enjoying to see them in his shadow. Doubt crossed the Asari's eyes. It was the perfect moment to attack but Shepard stopped him.

"What are you doing, Vakarian?" she asked a few meters from there, her good mood evaporated.
"Depends on what's going on, Commander," he replied, keeping eye contact with the Commando. He leaned and tilted his head, knowing he'd appear even more alien than usual to the Asari. They backed off a little, which made Garrus smirk.

"Men," he heard Shepard click and the Consort laughed. "Keep it in your pants, Vakarian, everything's fine." Garrus kept staring at the Commando nonetheless but put his hands in his back to show his good intentions.

"Will you come with me?" the Consort asked, her tone still amused and gentle.

"No way," Shepard replied, conversational.

"Then nothing is fine," the Asari said and the Commandos pointed their assault rifles at Shepard and Garrus. Shepard wasn't even impressed and Garrus decided to show as much confidence as her.

"That's all you got, Sha'ira?" Shepard asked, folding her arms and falling to a hip.

"Fine," the Consort grunted. "If you won't listen to reason, maybe a direct order will work." They keyed on their omnitool.

"Good luck with that," Shepard mocked. "Sparatus is waiting for Humanity's ban like a child for Christmas and Tevos would rather fuck Ambassador Calyn than help Udina."

"I'm not calling them." Shepard lost her confidence as Councilor Valern appeared on the omnitool's little holoscreen.

"Yes? What is it?" the Salarian grunted but his attitude changed when he recognized the Asari. "Consort! What can I do for you?"

"Would you be so kind as to command Spectre Shepard to come to Bekenstein with me, Councilor?"

"Of course, Consort," Valern replied but there was bitterness mixed to the honey of his voice. Shepard's omnitool lightened up a second later, indicating she had received the order. Her fists were shaking. "Anything else?"

"That would be all," the Consort smiled, looking at Shepard straight in the eyes, "thank you." They didn't wait for an answer and cut the conversation short. "Shall we?" they asked innocently, opening an arm to show the direction. Shepard walked past them and Garrus didn't wait for an invitation. He followed his mentor, pushing the Commando out of his way negligently. He fell into his usual position, two steps behind Shepard. She looked at him over her shoulder and nodded. Shore leave was officially canceled.

They crossed the docks to board an asari ship, a silver beauty with lines to die for. Garrus felt a bit claustrophobic once inside. The interiors were tight and dark, and the ceiling was very low. He had to crouch to walk and even like that he banged his head on a lot of pipes. Most advanced species of the galaxy his ass.

The Consort led them to what looked like private quarters, a wide circular space with a curved ceiling. Low sofas covered with deep blue fabric and colored cushions constituted most of the furniture. The lights were dim, purple and pink, and played with deep shadows behind curtains cascading on the floor. Garrus had seen enough brothels in his C-Sec career to recognize one when he was standing in the middle of it.

"We'll be on Bekenstein in three hours," the Consort announced, sitting delicately on a sofa. Asari
maidens came in with trays of food and refreshments. Shepard grunted and fell on a sofa. She took a cigarette and lit it to provoke the Consort who couldn't have given fewer fucks than that. Garrus sat too but with a little more dignity. When an acolyte offered him a drink, he declined. "I thought you'd join us, Spectre Vakarian," the Consort said from the shadows, their eyes glowing slightly, "so I selected a few dextro drinks."

"Pass," he replied. Shepard smiled at him, but Garrus wasn't really feeling cocky right now. He had to maintain the appearances though, at least to show support to his mentor.

"You should be careful as to whom you're making an enemy of, Spectre Vakarian," the Consort added, playing with their drink. They slid him a calculating look. "It's an advice I also gave to your father."

Garrus forced a smile. That bitch.

The Consort sipped their drink in silence until other maidens came into the room, this time with cloths, a lot of them but mostly human – or asari, it was hard to tell since the two species influenced each other in that domain. There were dresses of all types, short, long, narrow, loose, colorful or very austere. Garrus didn't know much in term of dresses but it wasn't hard to understand those were for Shepard. A look to his very angry mentor on his left confirmed his theory.

"I'm not wearing any of that," Shepard said, sinking deeper between the cushions. "I'm a soldier, for fuck's sake, not a pretty doll the Alliance can make smile and talk when they need to raise money."

Bekenstein, Garrus suddenly remembered, was a human colony near the Citadel. They had developed major industries on the welcoming planet and they were specialized in high quality goods. They also had luxurious vacation resorts and all of that. He had seen the adds everywhere in the Presidium but a simple Turian like him didn't even think of going somewhere like that. Spending time on a beach and doing nothing was the exact opposite of what any Turian aspired to for vacations.

So the Alliance was trying to gain the sympathy of the galactic community once again, Garrus understood. He hadn't really paid attention to the affereffects of Project Base for the rest of the galaxy, to be honest. He had heard Alenko and the other Humans on board talk about it here and there but he had lived those events very differently and was more preoccupied with Shepard than a possible ban of the Alliance from the Citadel, to be honest. He wasn't interested in politics and the all of that. Maybe he should from now on.

"Don't make me call Valern again," the Consort threatened.

"Yeah," Shepard said, exhaling her smoke, "we wouldn't want you to have to suck his dick next time he visits you, would we?" An angry Shepard made a vicious Shepard. Garrus had learned that first hand and was strangely glad to see all her anger directed at someone else, for once.

The comment didn't amuse the Consort. "We were friends, once."

"Were we?" Shepard asked, playing with her cigarette. "I remember doing your errands, saving your ass from an angry ex-boyfriend high on revenge porn and being offered sex as repayment." She drew on her cigarette and exhaled slowly. "But since you fuck pretty much all your clients, it was just another transaction to you."

"You do not have a voice in that matter, little girl." The Consort stood, not playing anymore. "Do
you realize what awaits you if the Alliance is banned?” they asked, walking to Shepard. "Your Spectre status will be revoked," they thumped, speaking louder at each step they took. "your ship will be taken, your assets frozen, the Prothean and the Geth you protect will be dissected and you'll go back to your miserable overcrowded planet as the woman who turned her back on her own people. Is this what you want, Jane?"

The ire in Shepard's eyes had no limit but she didn't reply. She stared at the Consort for a long minute, the silence only interrupted by the low vibrations of the ship, her cigarette burning slowly between her fingers. There was a blue shimmer in her eyes. Garrus didn't dare to say a word.

The Consort broke eye contact first. They breathed in deeply, flattened an imaginary fold on their dress and walked back to their corner to take their drink. "The black and white merenan silk dress,” they said, snapping their fingers at shaking acolytes. They took a sip, one arm folded, while the maidens ran everywhere. The Consort looked at Garrus over their shoulder. "And the formal suit for the Turian."

Garrus was wearing the full panoply three hours later, when the asari ship boarded the Alliance SSV Ain Jalut. His suit was mostly black with hints of gray and white sleeves, and with a cape to top that. He felt really out of place but he knew Shepard had it worse. Her dress was made of compressed silk, its black softening in a subtle gradient with the length, forming a quite rigid buster marking her waist, and expending in a fluid gauze at the bottom. Only a long, vertical white stripe on the front broke the darkness. Her hair was pulled up in a complicated manner, showing her neck. Her arms and collarbones were naked, as her shoulder blades and part of her back. That, Garrus had to admit, that made him uncomfortable. The dress was rather seductive by turian standards.

Shepard had refused to cover her scars and tattoos. Garrus had seen glimpses of it so far, mostly when he had patched her up on Project Base or during training, but he had a better look at it now. There were human vertebrae, he supposed, along Shepard's spine, in black ink. One of them contained a name in human alphabet, John, as if it had been carved in the bone. The last vertebra wasn't finished, only its contour was drawn, and the column stopped between her shoulder blades. He looked away. He had better things to do than ogle his mentor.

The SSV Ain Jalut was the same, as far as he could remember it. Captain Kim Eun-seo, in her blue formal uniform, awaited for them in CIC, with Admiral Anderson and the other Admiral Garrus had met before Project Base – but he couldn't remember his name. A lot of soldiers were there too, and Garrus didn't like how they looked at Shepard. She wasn't the legendary Spectre anymore in their eyes. She was a regular woman going to a party, walking awkwardly with her high heels, and obviously feeling uncomfortable.

Garrus unhooked his cape and put it on Shepard's shoulders as they walked to the Admirals. "Must be a bit cold for you here," he said nonchalantly, as if he hadn't notice how humiliated Shepard felt in that dress in the middle of Alliances soldiers. Her eyes softened and she thanked him silently. Garrus simply nodded and stood behind her like during any other mission. He might have tried to look taller and more impressive that usual, though.

"Commander Shepard," Anderson started but she interrupted him, raising a hand.

"It's Spectre."

Anderson looked at her for a second. Garrus could see him think the fight wasn't worth it. "Spectre Shepard," Anderson capitulated with a nod of the head, "thank you for joining us."

"I didn't have a choice." Anderson didn't reply. Shepard snorted and folded her arms. "Your
girlfriend isn't joining us?" she asked. "Is she too expensive for you now?"

"The Consort can help a friend," Anderson said calmly, "but cannot take side."

"She can't take side and is paid millions," Shepard mocked. "Sounds like me too." Garrus was aghast, as much as the Admirals and the Captain in front of him. Shepard looked at them for a long, silent minute before walking past them to the stairs. He followed her and respected her silence until they arrived at their destination.

The mansion elected for the party overhung on a hill dominating a large valley where a city shined under the first shimmers of sunset. The sky was of a pure baby blue, with high atmospheric clouds here and there. A fresh breeze came from the nearby ocean, glittering on the horizon. It kind of looked like Cipritine, Garrus had to admit that, but Bekenstein was a pale copy of Palaven's capital. Though everybody around seemed to admire the gardens, the architecture, the decoration and so on. Garrus was more concerned about all the great opportunities this place offered for a decent sniper to kill everyone here in a minute due to the location. The party took place in open air, on vast terraces before the mansion, in the middle of suspiciously well groomed gardens and artificial rivers. The perfect place for a massacre.

And there were high targets walking all around, enjoying their drinks and their foods, without even thinking they were in danger. Diplomats and CEOs from all influential species were there, some ministers and other politicians too if Garrus had overheard correctly. Shepard had avoided everybody so far and he had followed her example. He didn't want the attention, to be honest. He wasn't ashamed of his mentor but he was afraid he'd do or say something stupid in front of a fellow Turian with a higher rank than him. Besides, he was a Spectre and Turians weren't quite fond of those. Of course, it was an honor to work for the Council and protect the galaxy, but Turians didn't like the freedom that came with the job nonetheless.

And there were his scars, he thought, scratching them nervously. Turians didn't like scars. It was a weakness.

"Someone's waving at you."

Garrus looked at the direction Shepard was pointing with her cigarette – she had at least two packets in hidden pockets in her dress and already smoked one. There was indeed a Turian waving at him from another terrace, wearing the long purple robes that came with very high ranks. Garrus frowned. He didn't know a lot of people authorized to dress like that and all the names he could think of aggravated his anxiety.

"I think they're waving at you," he replied, turning his back to the Turian. "I suggest we hide."

Shepard had her first smile since they had left the Citadel hours earlier, a small one. "Are you afraid, Spectre Vakarian?"

"I am... concerned..." he admitted. Shepard arched a brow as she drew on her cigarette. Garrus played the card of his charming self. "... by your well-being," he added smoothly, smile and all. Shepard chuckled, cigarette still between her lips. "I mean, I don't want anybody to come and bother you. You're on shore leave after all. You're supposed to relax." She wasn't buying it the least.

"So you're be my bodyguard?"

"Absolutely," he approved, nodding thoroughly, "and I now recommend you to hide, for your own safety. Wavers are a serious threat. They always come to you at some point."
"Speaking of."

Garrus gave a look over his shoulder and saw the Turian approaching. "Now would be the time for retreat, Commander," he pressed her.

"I thought Turians didn't retreat," she teased.

"Someone has to start," he insisted. Shepard didn't move. She was smiling for good now. "Please?" he tried.

"I'm sorry," she said but her voice was definitively amused, "I have to know who scares you like that."

"I liked you, Commander," he replied, emphasizing the past tense, and he managed to make her laugh. That was a pretty big achievement, considering the day she had had so far. He could make the extra effort of speaking to one of his father's friends, he supposed.

Or maybe not, Garrus thought as he saw Deon Fedorian walk to him. Deon, brilliant tactician during the Relay 314 Incident, charismatic diplomat soon after, wise lawmaker for ten years and now current Primarch of Palaven, was walking to Garrus, absolutely not concerned by all the protocol and the rules. His signature long sleeveless coat floated behind him, gold reflected on deep blue, and his earrings, delicate chains between his jaw and his fringes, bounced as he walked. His eyes were as piercing as before, a silver gray contrasting with his dark skin and the blue of his tattoos. Garrus felt like a little kid once more under the scrutiny of those eyes, even if he was now a bit taller than his father's best friend.

"Garrus!" Deon saluted him with open arms. Garrus took a step back, not overjoyed by the idea of being hugged by a Primarch. Deon smirked, grabbed him by the jaw instead, and shook his head. "Is that how you welcome your uncle? You ungrateful little kibimpba."

"Sir, I..." Garrus tried but Deon pulled him down to look at him straight in the eyes.

"You never called me Sir when I changed your diapers, Garrus Vakarian, and you're not going to start now."

Garrus shut up, resigned. Deon then smiled and rubbed his forehead against Garrus'. Great. Just fucking great. If nobody had noticed him before, he was screwed now. Garrus looked at Shepard on his right while the rubbing continued. She was hardly fighting her amusement.

Deon eventually stopped but didn't release Garrus' face. "I'd seen pictures," he said, looking at the scares, "but the real stuff is really... impressive. Did Elin forget to tell you to not try to stop a missile with your face?"

"I must have missed the memo," Garrus grunted.

Deon laughed and turned to Shepard, still grabbing Garrus. "Spectre Shepard, it's a pleasure to finally meet you." Shepard arched a brow, cigarette between her fingers. She had no idea who Deon was, which wasn't surprising because the Primarch's face rarely was on holoscreen.

"Commander," Garrus said, "this is a friend of my father."


Garrus saw Shepard understand who she had in front of her but she wasn't the kind to be shy. She
grabbed Deon's wrist. "It's an honor, Sir, but please, tell me more about my protegee in diapers."

Deon laughed. "Only if you have interesting bits about him too."

"I might."

"You do not, Commander," Garrus interfered, "and I doubt now is a good time or place to relive memories, uncle."

"I'm sure Spectre Shepard would love the story of our vacations in Detten," Deon insisted, giving Garrus a sharp look. Oh. Something was up. "Get us some drinks, would you? We have much to talk about."

Garrus obeyed, even if he wasn't fond of the idea of leaving Shepard alone with Deon. He went to the bar as quick as possible without running and spent the five next minutes to find Shepard and Deon. They were in a discreet corner of the lowest terrace, behind bushes covered with red flowers, whispering like evil schemers. Deon made a great deal of noticing Garrus and clearing his throats while Shepard played the innocent.

"Yes," Deon declaimed, "like I said, adorable! Big blue eyes and all, tangled in his mother's scarf, really cute."

"You're not convincing at all," Garrus grumbled, giving them their drinks. "What's going on?"

"It's amazing how an excellent sniper like you can be this impatient," Deon remarked. He turned to Shepard. "I hope he shows better manners with you."

"He yells at me all the time," Shepard said, looking at Garrus straight in the eyes, "and he brags every occasion he gets." Garrus stared at her back.

"Unbelievable," Deon ticked, making a big deal out of being disappointed. "We raised you better than that, Garrus."

Shepard raised a brow but Garrus wanted, needed to end this quickly. "Primarch, would you please tell us why you wanted to talk to us?" he asked, falling at parade rest by habit.

"I wanted to talk to Spectre Shepard, actually," Deon replied, his tone still light, "show her support and all of that."

"Support?" Shepard repeated, slightly annoyed.

"Not mine personally," Deon corrected, "I don't know you enough for that, but the Hierarchy's." Shepard frowned. Deon became more serious. "Rest assured we saw the good work you've done, Spectre, and how upstanding you've been. You've been faithful to the Council when everybody expected you to favor the Alliance with your newly gained authority. The recent events have reinforced our opinion, and the Hierarchy has decided to vouch for you if a vote banned the Alliance from the Council Species."

Garrus saw Shepard breath in deeply and relax slightly but he wasn't so sure about the meaning of all of this. "What do you mean, uncle?" he asked. "The Council is independent."

Deon exchanged a look with Shepard. "What did I tell you? Cute and innocent." Shepard nodded but Deon continued before Garrus could voice his irritation. "The Councilors have the independence their species give them. Why do you think Valern is a Councilor, when Salarians are ruled by women in a matriarchal society? Not because he's doing a good job, no. He has to obey the
Dalatrass of his clan. Tevos? I don't even think they believed in democracy to begin with. And Sparatus is a good man, smart and devoted to his work."

"And to the Hierarchy," Garrus understood.

"And that's exactly why I sent him to the Citadel twenty years ago." Deon played with his drink a little. "Our system works, Garrus, but when you have to deal with other species and problems on a galactic scale, you have to bend the rules. Spectres exist for the very same reason."

It was a pill hard to swallow for Garrus. Of course, he knew corruption and all of that existed, even within the Hierarchy, but it was something else entirely to be reminded of it by a man who had practically raised you. The Council was nothing more than a way to control the galaxy for the three more powerful species, a play, a make-believe of democracy. That meant Spectres actually worked for their species' government. Garrus looked at Shepard. There was no doubt she had been groomed by Nihlus to answer the Hierarchy's needs first. And she had now a turian protegee of her own, reinforcing even more her bond with his species. Garrus snorted. His nomination seemed a lot less prestigious under that new light.

"Thank you, Primarch," Shepard said, "I appreciate your support." She didn't sound angry or anything, Garrus noticed. She should have been. She was smart enough to understand the Hierarchy had used her for their interest, which she had avoided doing for the Alliance during all her career as a Spectre. She should have been furious. He sure was.

"It's not much," Deon replied, somehow sorry, "and it puts me in a bizarre position, to be honest. But, I strongly believe good work must be acknowledged and you did nothing less than exemplary work, Spectre. It's a shame the Alliance only sees you as a tool for their propaganda." He gave a quick look at his omnitool. "Udina's going to give his speech in a minute. Would you care to join me? Imagine his face if you showed up at my arm!"

"Sounds like fun," Shepard agreed, a little smile on her lips, "but I won't honor him of my presence."

Deon chuckled. "Alright, I didn't see you then, didn't even know you were there." He played with his glass again. "I wouldn't worry about your presence, Spectre. All the people who matter will know you were here by obligation, not by choice." He looked at Garrus for a second and smirked. "Keep this one alive, would you? I didn't tutor him in maths during all middle school for nothing."

Garrus grumbled but half of his anger had vanished. Deon was doing his job and his job happened to be Palaven's Primarch, the most influential Primarch of all. He had to lead Trebia's cluster, show the direction to all the colonies and deal with other species across the galaxy. Bending the rules was necessary. Using people too.

Deon gave his glass back to Garrus. "Be good, little one, and be careful. Your job isn't easy." He pinched Garrus' jaw again. "And call your father once in a while." Garrus grumbled as Deon patted him on the head. He said goodbye to Shepard with a mock salute, Alliance-style, and left them, the last shimmers of the sun reflected on his earrings.

Garrus sighed, relieved until he noticed Shepard hopping to sit on the large balustrade and turning to hang her legs over the cliff.

"What are you doing?" he yelled more than he asked, ready to catch her.

"Sitting," she replied, taking her packet of cigarettes out of her pocket. "My feet are killing me."

She lit her cigarette but Garrus was still tensed, arms stretched to catch her. She gave him a strange

"This is not funny," Garrus grunted.

He put the glasses on the balustrade and leaned on the stone. Shepard smoked in silence, contemplating the valley, and that was fine. Garrus wasn't up for talking about what Deon had said. He looked at the horizon instead. The sky was still very light above the ocean but most of it was of a deep purple, with thousands of stars everywhere. You could barely see them from Cipritine due to artificial lights but Bekenstein was a lot less populated and the industrial complexes in the valley were mostly dark. Probably to let the rich and famous enjoy the sky, Garrus thought. It was a nice view nonetheless.

"What's a cofhen?" Shepard asked after a few minutes of pleasant silence. "My translator doesn't seem to work properly lately."

"It's a couple," Garrus shrugged. "Well, it's a bit more complicated than that." Shepard chuckled, cigarette on her lips. He hadn't noticed they were redder than usual. Must have been the make up. It was discreet but still there. "My father and Deon have been best friends since boot camp," he explained, "but they weren't suited for each other when time came to settle down. You know how it works, right? Family and friends kind of decide for you who's your ideal partner to raise kids with and all." Shepard nodded. "Dad and Deon both have a pretty strong temper, they argue all the time, that couldn't work. So they both had a family of their own, but once we were proper citizens, their duty done, they had no reason to stay with their partners and apparently they formed another partnership. That's called cofhen. It's pretty common to do that. We live long, there is plenty of time to have two or three partners."

"So the Primarch is your step-dad?" she teased.

"I didn't know," he defended himself, not liking her tone, "and it has nothing to do with my nomination to Spectre. I've literally fought for it. My tier and job are well earned."

"Don't worry," Shepard reassured him, "I wasn't insinuating anything. I just found it funny to watch you act like normal with the most powerful Turian there is in this galaxy."

"He's just a man with a pretty big job," Garrus shrugged, still a bit annoyed.

"And you belched on his shoulder."

Garrus snorted. "Yes, I did."

Shepard chuckled as the crowd clapped somewhere on another terrace. "Thanks for today, Vakarian," she said softly.

"We're a team," he replied simply. "No Shepard without Vakarian."

"Until our next argument," Shepard toasted.

"Damn right!" Garrus raised his glass too and the sweet sound of her laughter cleared his mind of anger.

TBC

Note
If you go to my tumblr (same nickname) and hit the Semper Fi tag, you'll find a sketch of Shepard's
dress and the turian formal suit Garrus is wearing. I took this one from the artbook "the art of Mass Effect universe".
Crew quarters never really were silent. There always was someone to snore or cough or get up in the middle of the night to drink at a bottle, and the reactor hummed nearby anyway. Joker was used to all of those little noises. He had been a pilot for almost a decade now and could count the nights spent outside the ship on his fingers. Shore leave wasn't for him. He didn't like to spend time far from his baby, it always made him worry for nothing. Besides, he was kind of a nerd, pale and fragile, not the type to play outside. The quiet of the ship, her subtle whir, a good book and a glass of Coke, that was all he needed to relax on a day off.

But damn, he would have paid a lot to hear Kaidan move in his sleep, Chakwas' snore or Samantha's incoherent mumbles. Crew quarters were too quiet when he was the only one to sleep there. He understood the others' need to get out of the ship but some of them could have spent the night here. Only Javik, Mordin and Legion were on board. Two of them rarely slept, if ever, and the last would never agree to settle for two nights in crew quarters.

And EDI, Joker thought. He rubbed his face with both hands. EDI was still here.

"Fuck it," he mumbled. He couldn't sleep anyway. Joker grabbed a handle above his head and pulled hard on his arms. Once sitting, he threw his legs over the edge of the bed and started his usual morning stretching. His routine didn't take him more than ten minutes but he had to be careful if he wanted his poor body to not hurt for the rest of the day – which was going to happen at some point anyway, let's face it.

Once his exercises done, Joker could walk to his locker to get dressed. He owned five tee-shirts, three pairs of jean's and snickers besides his uniforms, so picking up an outfit wasn't hard. Joker grabbed his cap by habit and put it on his head. Nine years ago, Shepard had laughed at the idea of his cap being actually glued to his scalp after seeing him wearing it everyday for a month straight. Joker had added some gruesome details about possible skin diseases hidden under his hat, which had pretty much sealed their friendship. He had been perfectly fine at the time – apart from his Vrolik syndrome – but now he was wearing his beloved cap to hide his slight balding. Thirty-seven and on his way to be bald. He'd look just like his dad in a couple of years, handsome and all.

Legion was standing in front of the crew quarter's door when it opened. "Good morning, Moreau–Pilot," he said with his usual strange intonations. "You did not sleep the optimal amount of time for a specimen of your species with your parameters. Do you need help?"

"Thanks buddy but I'm good," Joker replied, fighting hard his smile. "Is there coffee left from yesterday?"

It always took a second to Legion to process this kind of questions. He could find a target, evaluate its position and what was required to take it down, and shoot in a hundredth of a second, but a question like "do I have mustard on my shirt?" could fry his circuits. Organics. Such illogical creatures.

"Yes," Legion said and he walked to the kitchen area without another word. Joker followed him, a delicious smell floating around, but he couldn't resist to look at the observation deck on his right. How many times had he seen EDI walk out of this room in the morning to salute him, or in the
middle of the night when he had to relax his cramped legs?

"I'm here, Jeff."

Her voice had lost all its humanity in the reboot. EDI had explained it was because she had transferred some of her process in her now lost body, her emotion simulator for example. Everything EDI had needed to directly interact with the crew had been in that body. It had been logic to her to store all her knowledge on social interaction in the tool made for that purpose. That meant most of her personality was gone.

But EDI was still here.

"I know," Joker replied with a brilliant smile. He didn't think he could fool her but he had to show her he was fine. Maybe not fine-fine but alright nonetheless.

Joker found Mordin in the kitchen, busy with heating up food in small plastic containers. Legion was pouring a cup of coffee. Joker felt small near those two but it could have been worse. Wrex and Garrus weren't there to complete the quartet of giant dinosaurs. Or Shepard, he thought viciously.

"Morning!" Joker saluted, limping his way to the counter.

"Bought kfä," Mordin replied, not wasting time with greetings, like always. "Salarian specialties. Enough for three. Good thing only Vakarian came back."

"What?" Joker asked, receiving his cup of coffee from Legion. The Geth then moved out of the way and disappeared in the observation desk, his task accomplished. "Where is Garrus? And Shepard?"

"Went to sleep but told me Shepard was fine. Didn't want to go back to the ship during shore leave. Commanded to not disturb her, even if, quote, represents last chance to save the galaxy, end of quote."

Joker frowned. "Did Garrus give any details?" Joker had seen them taken away by the Asaris yesterday. He had waited for a call or a sign to alert the remaining crew on board but Shepard hadn't even looked over her shoulder. That had meant she was able to deal with the situation. Joker had seen Shepard do the impossible, so he hadn't been really worried, but still a bit nonetheless, the kind of worry a friend had for another friend often in trouble.

"No," Mordin answered. He closed the microwave oven and hit a few buttons. "Will wake up soon. Can ask questions then."

"Or, I could pull the fire alarm now and satisfy my curiosity immediately."

Mordin chuckled. "Doubt he'll appreciate. But could be amusing. Hmmm. Vote yes."

"I will not ring the alarm," EDI told them through the speakers.

"C'mooooon!" Joker whined. Mordin bent under the cabinets and unplugged the microwave.

"I will have to trigger the alarm for an actual fire, Professor Solus," EDI said, her voice flat when it should have been all powerful and threatening, "and I will also lock you out of your laboratory and depressurize the room."

Mordin froze for a second before replugging the oven and taking a step back, hands in the air as
evidence he wasn't going to do anything that would compromise his laboratory. Joker didn't even
try to fight his smile. Mordin wasn't the kind of guy to let anything get in his way but EDI blocked
him on a regular basis. It kind of was a game between those two, Joker had noticed. They often
tried to outsmart one another. Mordin's victories never lasted long though. To be fair, an AI's main
job was to learn and get better. EDI's friendly fights with Mordin actually sharpened her mind ten
times faster than any other interaction she could have with the crew.

Breakfast consisted in both salty and sugary dishes. Joker had had dinner at salarian restaurants a
couple of times in the first years of his career, when aliens were still a novelty to his life and the
sight of the Citadel a wonder, but he knew those restaurants for foreigners were the equivalent of
any Chinese restaurant outside actual China. They served bad imitations of a very diverse cuisine,
tuned down for the barbaric and unworthy foreigners eating there. So, when Mordin had offered to
give him a taste of real salarian food, Joker didn't say no – plus, that was one less trip outside the
Normandy to fetch something to eat, which he would never argue against.

Javik arrived in the mess just as Mordin finished his explanations – in short, lots of aquatic plants'
roots, lots of leaves and fruits, fishes, snakes, insects and birds for proteins and a gruel made of a
reddish cereal similar to sorghum. The Prothean took a bottle of juice in the fridge before sitting at
the table. Mordin gave him a small plate, a spoon and chopsticks.

"Never stuff the plate," the Salarian said, "very impolite, make you look like you're in a hurry. Kfä
good occasions for socialization, protocols recommend half an hour once a day. Not a waste of
time if in good company."

"You never eat with us," Javik commented. "Aren't we good company?"

"Often caught in work," Mordin shrugged, picking a few spaghetti-like roots in a purple sauce.
"And have trouble with part of the crew. Good fellows but too slow for me."

"Ouh, burn," Joker laughed while Javik frowned. "Let me guess: Vega, Kaidan..."

"It's hardly a good idea to stigmatize crew members for their lack of intellectual resources," Javik
interrupted, probably feeling obligated to defend the others. He was a hard man, very strict and not
tolerating mistakes but he was also fair.

"Oh c'mon," Joker smiled, "what they don't know can't hurt them."

"Can be oblivious of cancer but can lead to death," Mordin replied. "Not necessarily painful
though." When Joker stared at him over the table, the Salarian wiggled his eyebrows. Asshole,
Joker thought as he started his breakfast, a smirk on his face.

Mordin was a bit strange but he wasn't that bad. Joker regularly talked to him since they worked on
the same deck and both often were awake in the middle of the night. His main flaw was to never
ask for permission before doing something. If he had an idea he thought would prove to be
beneficial, he'd simply work on it and put it into action. That's how Garrus had been drugged
during the little party Joker had thrown before their last stop on Arcturus. Shepard had been furious
but Mordin had been right nonetheless. Garrus had opened up a little, enough to pick Shepard's
curiosity. Or, she had felt the need to protect her protegee from Doctor Doom. Joker hesitated
between those two theories but he wasn't crazy enough to confront Shepard to know which one was
valid.

Shepard didn't sleep much either but she never joined them. She often hopped in the lounge to
smoke in the middle of the night and sometimes found them smoking another kind of cigarette, but
she usually closed her eyes on their midnight break. As long as they were able to do their work, she
didn't care, but she wouldn't join them while on the job. Too bad, really. Joker loved to see his Commander drop her badass mask to just be herself, someone not really different but more relaxed, less on the alert, someone who'd genuinely laugh and smile instead of being always on the lookout. He liked her a lot like that – he even had had a crush on her a few years back but Joker was too smart to try anything with a Marine, especially one acing all her ICT classes year after year and rising in the ranks like a shooting star. Besides, Shepard had made a rule to not fuck with the crew. She had told him the story once, nothing dramatic, just a guy she had fooled around with and who had blamed her for everything when caught. It had been before Torfan, when she was only a Second Lieutenant, an easy target. That was too bad. They really clicked on an intellectual level.

Garrus, in armor this time, arrived in the mess well after the recommended thirty minutes spent on the *kfä*, or, like Mordin explained at some point, a special time of the day where usually lone Salarians would gather and enjoy food, drinks, and the company of one another. It was four and a half in the morning, the usual time Garrus would woke up to join Shepard and Javik for training. But, for once, the Turian seemed a little groggy.

"Wow, you look uglier than usual," Joker greeted him with his cup raised. Garrus grunted, grabbing a handful of ration bars in the cupboard above the sink and two glasses of water. He put everything on the table on his way to medbay and disappeared there for a minute. Joker smirked. Someone had a hangover.

"Actually quite handsome by turian standards despite scars," Mordin corrected. "Tolerable height deviation, strong but narrow waist, broad shoulders and ethemian hands, face symmetrical at ninety-six percents..."

"What are ethemian hands?" Joker interrupted, not really up for a lecture on turian beauty standards.

"Type of hands," Mordin explained, not bothered at all by the change of subject, "like Egyptian or Greek feet in Humans. Genetic particularity found in descendents of subspecies absorbed by main population two hundred thousands years ago. Third finger shorter than the index. Also induces smaller lug on feet."

"You mean spur?"

"No, lug. Spur on knees, lug on feet. Three digits on hands and feet. Lug a trace of third digit."

"The lugs are surgically removed shortly after birth," Garrus grumbled as he sat at the table on Mordin's right. "Well, at least in the Hierarchy. He gulped a handful of pills and topped that with a glass of water.

"Yes," Mordin nodded. "Similar to circumcision in some human groups. Intervention not required but socially meaningful. Adult individuals with lugs often stigmatized."

"Most of them are Seppies anyway," Garrus added, munching on his ration bar. "It's mandatory for boot camp, like vaccines and the Certificate."

"The certificate?" Joker repeated.

"The Aptitude Certificate is the diploma you get at the end of mandatory school," Garrus said. "You're tested on your local language, Kaladran and Standard, maths, physics, physical education, History, culture, alien cultures and personal projects, all along your scholarship actually, so you have to work regularly to have good grades. Without the Certificate, no boot camp, no citizenship, no army, no tier, basically no life."
"What happens if you don't get the Certificate?" Joker asked. He shouldn't have asked. He had a bad feeling about this.

"It rarely happens, actually," Garrus shrugged. "Parents and teachers intervene before the situation gets too bad."

"Yeah but what if?" Joker insisted. Garrus stopped eating and looked at Joker, obvious to the reason of the pilot's tension. "You know I would have been discarded in your society because of my illness, right?" Joker helped him. "That's just fucking wrong. Maybe those kids have other talents, maybe they don't need to be super badass soldiers to be worth something!"

"You'd have been neutralized at birth actually," Garrus replied, slightly annoyed, not even avoiding eye contact. Joker felt a burst of anger warming up his chest.

"Neutralized? That's a nice way to say killed," he cringed.

"Call it a cultural difference," Garrus replied coldly, straight in his chair.

"Same process within salarian species," Mordin intervened before Joker could give the Turian a taste of his own cultural difference regarding assholes. "Non-conform children eliminated shortly after birth. Twenty-two percents of the male population nowadays. Females not concerned."

"This is disgusting," Joker said between greeted teeth.

"Necessary," Mordin shook his head. "Few genetic diversity within Salarians due to clan system. Consanguineous reproductive contracts often established in the past, led to generations of weakening and illnesses. Had to do something to preserve species. Establishing standards and eliminating those not fit a good solution. Got rid of many genetic diseases too."

"But those kids can still have a life!" Joker argued. "Just ban them from reproduction and voilà! Problem solved!"

"Criteria for reproduction established by female's family, actually," Mordin explained, "vary all the time. But some men universally unfit for reproduction. Me, for example." Joker hadn't expected that. "Too handsome," Mordin smiled.

Javik snorted and Garrus choked on his glass of water. Joker would have found that funny another day and in another context but talking about killing sick babies cut his humor short.

"Forget it," Joker mumbled, leaning on his chair.

"Protheans had similar methods," Javik added, ignoring Joker's obvious desire to talk about something else, "on both our species and primitives."

"Yes!" Mordin jumped on that, preventing Joker to say something again. They were killing kids because of standards and Humans were the barbarians of the galaxy? Har har fucking har. "Prothean influence actually proven on Asaris. Genetic markers still found nowadays in some asari colonies."

"Protheans reproduced with Asaris?" Garrus winced.

"They'll never admit it but yes," Javik nodded. "In my time, Asaris were too primitive to be part of our Empire but they were well known for their biotics and their strange reproductive abilities. Weirdos often had a harem full of tamed Asaris knowing three words and how to please their masters."
"So, slaves," Garrus translated.

"We hunted your species for sport," Javik replied. Garrus frowned and shut up. "But, we would have given them a place in our Empire, if time had permitted it," Javik continued. "We had started selection, sterilizing individuals without biotics or with weak powers to improve their talents, and we encouraged certain traits. Asaris were the first species with biotics we encountered during the hundred thousands years of the Empire. They were special enough to not be treated like animals."

"That's genetic engineering," Garrus commented, frowning a little.

"And suddenly you're not okay with that?" Joker snorted. "Dude, you just said your people kill, oh sorry, neutralize kids not fitting your standards! That's genetic engineering!"

"It's more a selection," Garrus corrected, "and it's not even two percents of the population. Mandatory school is twelve years long, there is plenty of time to guide a child on the good path."

"Still the same," Joker sighed, frustrated. "We give our kids a chance, all the kids, even if they have extra-chromosome or fangs or whatnot!"

"Genetic therapy practiced by Humans too," Mordin reminded him. "Percentage of malfunctioning children at birth very low for the last century in privileged population. Not different from selection."

"It totally is!"

"What Humans do makes no sense to me either," Garrus said, picking up his bars' wrapping. "You let diseases spread in the population, you barely control births, you let people in poverty while others can't get rich enough. You just favor inequality and, from my very turian point of view, that's just wrong. So let's get over it and call it a day."

Joker sank in his chair, arms folded, and grumbled for himself while the Turian stood to go to the kitchen. Maybe he couldn't win this argument but he'd remind this idiot of his omissions. "What about Shepard? You could've given us news instead of being all grumpy and judgmental." Garrus made an annoyed little click. It sounded like Victory to Joker's hears. "Where were you guys?"

"Bekenstein," Garrus replied as he put the wrappers in the trashcan. "The Alliance threw a party for support, so, of course they had to parade Shepard, to remind everyone of their power. She did not appreciate that." He straightened and leaned on the refrigerator, folding his arms. "But there was some misunderstanding in the process. I talked to Admiral Anderson for a bit yesterday. Well, Shepard threw me at him, literally, to give her time to run and hide, I didn't really..." His eyes were a bit distant and he had a small smile on his face, but it disappeared quickly. "Anyway, Admiral Anderson actually sent Shepard a heads up a few weeks ago when he noticed she had programmed a shore leave overlapping the party, but she didn't read his email, or any other since, so she didn't know."

"What about the Consort and her Commandos?"

"The Admiral asked them to take care of Shepard. The Earth Ambassador had planed a much more muscular welcome party, in case she wouldn't cooperate." He rubbed his forehead, eyes closed. Mordin chuckled. "That went pretty smoothly, considering."

"And you got intoxicated on the job," Javik grumbled.

"I did," Garrus admitted and it cost him. "At some point we had shots each time we saw an opportunity to take down a valuable target. Let's just say security had room for improvement."
Joker snorted. That sounded like one of Shepard's little game indeed. "Anyway, she let me on my own when we got back, I don't know where she went."

"Her apartment, probably," Joker shrugged. Garrus looked at him, surprised. "Yeah, she has one of those but she's very selective on who she invites. It's a friends only zone but you wouldn't know."

"I'm not her friend," Garrus confirmed, wincing. "Spirits, no." Mordin laughed and it took a second to Joker to remember Turians fucked with their friends. Oh. So Baby-Spectre wasn't into interspecies shenanigans. He could have fun with that.

"Are we...?" Joker teased, leaning on the table a little.

"No!" Garrus replied briskly. It aggravated Mordin's laughter and even Javik defrosted a little. "No, we're not... Acquaintances, maybe, but not friends, not as Turians see it anyway. I wouldn't... Spirits, no."

Joker laughed. Truth to be told, he had wooed a few alien girls himself but only Asaris. They were very similar to Humans – on the outside only though – and maidens often searched for wild experiences. Asaris saw human men as inferior and kind of disgusting so of course they had to bang one in their rebellious phase. Of all the other species on the Citadel, only the Turians could easily try something with a Human despite the levo-dextro barrier. Joker knew for a fact there was way more fuckfests between their species than one would admit, but Turians didn't fuck with strangers. That was alright, nothing wrong with friends with benefits in his book, Joker just didn't see the appeal. Giant dinosaurs weren't on his to-do list.

"I have to go," Garrus mumbled, not appreciating to be the center of attention, "lot to do today."

"Essay to write," Mordin nodded. "Can't wait to read it."

"Yay," Garrus replied with a forced smile that started the laughter again. He ran out of the mess more than he walked.

Routine carried Joker to the cockpit after another half hour of banters with Javik and Mordin. He sat on his chair with caution and the dashboard woke up, holographic panels springing in front of him. No alert requiring his immediate attention though. Joker sighed and scrolled through the normal, boring active process list. It was going to be another slow day. Being docked was no fun at all. The worst that could happen was a guy a tad too curious trying to sneak in to have a look at the ship, and Javik usually took care of those emergencies. Sure, it was amusing to see the intruder piss his pants because a small green alien was yelling at him, but Joker kind of was used to it by now. That, and the personnel of the Alliance's docking facilities hadn't changed since Javik was around. They knew him, and they also knew the Normandy was the property of a Spectre. That doubled the reasons not to come snooping around.

Joker looked on his right by reflex, to the copilot sit where EDI usually sat, even if she didn't need to. Three weeks.

"I'm here, Jeff," she told him, her tone even. He couldn't hear anymore the sparkle of amusement in her voice, reflection of her understanding of his curious species.

"I know," Joker replied. He turned to his left to see the holographic blue orb on its platform, the new EDI in some way. "Hey Beautiful, who do you think will kill me first if I take you for a ride today?"

"Considering Javik is on board and not Shepard, it would be him, Jeff," EDI said, her voice flat like
a dead man's electroencephalogram. Joker winced and sat correctly in his chair. "Besides, it would be an inconsiderate use of the ship," she continued. "May I remind you the current cost of a litter of fuel to discourage you?"

"We don't pay for fuel on the Citadel."

"Incorrect."

Joker frowned and opened a new panel with Javik's neat book-keeping – everybody had access to it. He couldn't find a fee for fuel. "You're sure, EDI?"

"Yes. The Alliance will ask Commander Shepard to pay for refueling and docking fees."

"Will?" Joker insisted. The hologram disappeared for a second but sprang again to life, a sign EDI had take time to check something. She'd probably hacked a few official databases.

"The order has been delayed by Admiral Anderson," she said, "but it will eventually be carried. The Alliance requested a revision of Spectres privileges to the Council through Ambassador Udina."

"Are you shitting me?" Joker snorted.

Several windows popped up on his holoscreens with the recent news. It took him a minute to read the headlines. Yep. Udina was a prick. But a prick currently in charge since the head of the Alliance had been cut off. Elections for a new Prime Minister wouldn't happen before a few months. Udina was in charge until then, which was nothing more than a big steaming pile of shit. Udina had been selected within the UN diplomats, he was a civilian, worse, a politician. The Alliance was independent, a military organization with its own hierarchic system made to take care of all extraterrestrial matters. Juridically speaking, the Alliance had the same weight as any country in the UN parliament. Putting Udina in charge of the Alliance blurred the lines. How could a politician deal with army business? The guy barely handled his job as an ambassador already!

"That motion will never pass," Joker mumbled. "The Council wants to see the Alliance drown in debts, so of course they'll make Udina pay for everything Shepard needs."

"The Alliance is currently under UN tutoring," EDI replied while new windows opened. Udina may have been at the Alliance's head but he took his orders from the UN parliament, Joker understood. That was fucking great. He didn't see how politicians, who had never left Earth, could understand and rule colonies spread all over the galaxy, but, admittedly, it was just fucking great.

"They are working on a revision of the Alliance's status."

"And all those idiots see is how much the Alliance cost, I bet," Joker grumbled. "They'll cut budgets left and right. Goodbye comfortable paycheck!"

"Yes," EDI confirmed. "Without the Alliance's founding and privileges, Shepard won't be able to keep her crew, even if she first dissociates herself from non-Alliance personnel. Her work as a Spectre will be greatly impacted."

"Yeah and with no crew, she has no need for the Normandy either," Joker said, stroking his beard. "She'll have the money to keep her in good shape, I think, but I bet a lot of people will pressure her to just cease the ship."

"This is a very likely possibility." Joker felt a little something as he heard the even tone of EDI's voice. She should have been more affected than that. "The Alliance will probably do everything possible to take me."
Joker nodded. "Cerberus is a human faction after all, and they can argue the Normandy SR2 is too strategical to let aliens put their weird fingers all over her."

"Yes."

Joker rubbed his forehead. Damn, now he wished to have a normal boring day. "Does Shepard know about all of that?"

"She asked me to keep her posted on the political situation and its implications, yes."

"So I don't need to bother her with that now, correct?"

"Correct. You can enjoy your shore leave."

"Yeah," Joker snorted, "that's gonna be real easy now."

He needed to distract his mind with something else and staying on the Normandy wouldn't help. Fortunately, the Citadel was full of activities at all time. Joker extracted his carcass from his chair and stretched a little once standing on both feet. Taking Legion out without Shepard was not a good idea, Javik would never agree to go out and Mordin was probably too busy. Joker gave a look at the copilot's sit again. He loved to walk around the wards with EDI. Her comments were a delight and her questions always a challenge. How many times had he found himself speechless in front of her, incapable of explaining why Humans did this or that, gazing at her bright eyes? Anyone looking at her in the eyes could see the intelligence behind, the need to understand and to interact, the need to live. EDI may have been an AI but she was alive.

"I'm here, Jeff," she reminded him once more, her voice as even as before.

"I know," Joker replied, adjusting his cap. "I'll be out for a while. Call me if there is a problem, alright?"

"I can take care of myself," EDI said blandly when she should have been sure, and proud and fierce. "Besides, it'll take you hours to come back."

Joker laughed as he walked to the airlock. "Damn girl, have some compassion for the cripple!"

"Have fun, Jeff."

He smiled at a camera but couldn't walk fast enough to get the fuck out.

The wards didn't know what night meant – only the Presidium respected a day/night cycle. They always were brightly lighted and full of activity, no matter the hour, due to salarian influence. Their species slept up to two hours per day, often by little naps whenever they were tired, not enough to justify the closing of a shop. Besides, each species sort of respected their own biological clock. Volus slept a lot but Elcors could stay up for days at a time. Salarians wouldn't take the risk of losing a potential client. Not all shops and restaurants were owned by Salarians, the Volus were far more aggressive on the matter, but you could be sure there was at least one of those guys around, at least for the night shift.

Joker spent his time with two movies in a row, had a good old kebab for lunch, went back to the cinema for a third movie, then took a nice long walk to his favorite library to buy a new stock of books. He picked a few novels, mostly thrillers and fantasy, some philosophical and economical essays for his long sleepless nights, two traveling guides for planets he'd never go to considering his job but hey! you never knew!, and topped that with a variety of alien literature translated in English. He could have downloaded all of that via the extranet on a datapad but Joker liked
paperback books. Most of the those spread all over the Normandy were his since he couldn't stock them all in crew quarters. Shepard was okay with it as long as she could borrow some for her own sleepless nights. Besides, she knew he didn't have a home other than the ship. That made them roomies, probably.

Joker couldn't possibly carry all those books to the ship by himself but he was a regular client always spending a lot so he managed to get a delivery out of the pretty human clerk. Hands free, he strolled in the markets a little more and was thinking about heading back to the ship when he got a call from Javik.

"Yes Sir," Joker answered, "overing back to mothership now Sir!" He could hear Javik roll his eyes.

"There is an emergency," Javik said, "but it's not on the ship. It's the Turian."

"Garrus? Did he catch Shepard's bad habit to get in trouble any occasion he gets? We should be careful, seems contagious."

"All I know is that the Commander isn't answering his calls and he's in a clinic in the wards," Javik replied. "He seems panicked."

"If he's hurt, you should send Mordin."

"Already done but you're closer. I'll send you his location and try to reach the Commander."

"Alright, I'll see what I can do."

It really wasn't far, Joker realized when he checked his omnitool, and the fastest way to get there was to take a taxi. Joker arrived near the clinic twenty minutes later, in a pretty shitty part of the wards, the kind where traffic could be done in plain sight and nobody would care. Lots of Krogans around, that never was a good sign. Joker removed his cap to put it in his back pocket. He was glad to not wear his uniform here. That wasn't the kind of place an Alliance soldier could walk without getting into a fight.

The clinic was small but crowded. Joker counted three Quarians, a few Krogans, two Batarians, a bunch of Asaris and Humans of all ages, some of them really not looking good. There was no counter or reception of any sort. The room was just divided in half by a glass wall in the middle, with beds and medical material on the other side. Not everyone could have the luxury of going to one of those fancy hospitals in the Presidium. This was the reality of the Citadel: workers struggling to make a living like on any other station in the galaxy. Space was rare on station, therefore overpriced. Joker had a good pay for an Alliance soldier, but even with his comfortable five figures checks every month, he could barely have afforded a place on the Citadel – not that he would use it anyway.

His train of thought was interrupted by a small human woman, with red hair and green eyes, her round face marked by fatigue. She wore the whites and reds of her profession. "Take a number," she said with a strong French accent, pointing to a little machine, "unless it's for an emergency and then you should stop wasting my time."

"Wow," Joker stopped her, holding up his hands, "calm down, Doc, I'm just here to pick up a friend of mine. Pretty tall, blue eyes, bad sense of humor, and, oh, yeah, Turian. You have one of those around?"

"Garrus?" she asked, suddenly less tensed. She showed him the way to the beds.
"That'd be him, yes," Joker smiled, following her. She had called Garrus by his first name, that meant those two knew each other – or the Doc knew nothing about Turians. That was a surprise. Joker would never have pictured Garrus to be friend with a Human. But, he remembered, Garrus had worked in C-Sec before his nomination to Spectre. Maybe he had roamed those wards too at some point. That was kind of strange, thinking of it. Joker knew nothing of Garrus' life before he joined the Normandy but of course the guy had had friends and habits and a favorite restaurant, even a secret dash of porn under his bed, like any other guy in the galaxy. Or not. Probably not.

For now Baby-Spectre was sitting on a bed, keeping an oxygen mask on his face with both hands and he did look panicked for a Turian.

"Joker to the rescue!" he announced with a turian salute.

Garrus looked at him, his pupils wide open and winking a lot. "Where's Shepard? I called for her."

"Javik is trying to reach her," Joker said, coming closer to the bed. "What is happening here?"

"It's just a panic attack," the doctor shrugged. "First time I see one on a Turian though."

"A panic attack?" Joker mocked. "C'mon, I've seen this guy stare at Death right in the eyes at least three times in the last couple of months, and I'm pretty sure Death looked away before he could blink." Garrus and the doctor both looked at Joker, unamused. Okay, now he got why those two got along. "What happened?" Joker asked more seriously, sitting on the bed at Garrus' feet.

"I went to the bank," the Turian replied. His breath was short.

"To the bank," Joker repeated. "And there was a robbery?"

"No."

"But there was a problem."

"Yes."

"I have other patients," the doctor sighed and she left them. She must have had to deal with this kind of dialog for a while if Joker were to believe her relief when she walked away.

"What kind of problem?" he asked, trying to be comprehensive.


He could have laughed at his very turian face and mocked his reaction but Joker was in fact a little annoyed at Shepard right now. He had told her to talk to Garrus at least a dozen times, and apparently they were working on their relationship, but she had skipped the basics. Spectres were paid millions, while Turians usually lived paycheck to paycheck, with a salary adequate to their rank. This kind of raise could only terrify an unprepared Turian.

"I'm pretty sure it's normal, buddy," Joker said calmly, patting Garrus on the knee. "Spectres are paid like kings." Garrus looked at him with his big traumatized blue eyes. Joker gave him a comforting smile. "It's to avoid corruption, Nihlus told me once. Money corrupts, regardless of species." Garrus opened his mouth but Joker didn't let him speak. "And yes, even Turians can look for more money than they can handle. But, at some point, having more is just useless and stupid. The Council pays you to this point. Like that, no temptation. Well, fewer anyway."
"This is stupid," Garrus decreed, breathing with a little more ease now.

"It's how it works," Joker shrugged. "How do you think Shepard can keep her ship and crew otherwise?"

"I don't know. I assumed the Council paid for all of that."

"They pay half of Shepard's salary, and the other half comes from the Alliance, which also pays for the Marines' salaries and a lot of stuff on board. She pays the non-Alliance personnel's salaries and the all of that. You should ask Javik for the details, he's in charge of the books."

"This isn't right," Garrus mumbled. "I should pay something."

"All complains have to be addressed to the Commander," Joker stopped him, "and good luck with that because Shep hates to talk about money." Like anybody who had trouble with it at some point in their life, probably. "Might be why you didn't have the talk with her, now that I think about it."

"You cannot storm in like that!" Joker heard the doctor yell.

"Like Hell I can!"

"Seems like the cavalry has arrived," Joker snorted, searching for the troublemaker. Shepard was tall, finding her wasn't difficult, and she was with Mordin to top it all. While Shepard kept on arguing with the small human doctor, the Salarian walked straight to them, a duffel-bag on his side. He didn't even need to osculate Garrus to find what's wrong with him.

"Short breath, dilated pupils, hypersensitivity, yes, classic panic attack," he confirmed, searching for something in his bag. He produced a little flask of greenish liquid. "Two drops in each eye, will help."

"You are not giving anything to my patient!" the human doctor shouted, running to Mordin. The Salarian raised his hand to prevent her from taking his flask, which was effective enough considering their size difference. Shepard followed, a mean smile on her face.

"Solus has my permission to do whatever he wants to my protegee," she declared, folding her arms and falling to a hip.

"All I want?" Mordin repeated, a devious little sparkle in his eyes.

"We'll talk about it later," Shepard waved him off, keeping her eyes on the other woman. "Vakarian is under my authority and protection."

"I don't care who you are," the doctor insisted, not intimidated by Shepard at all, "I'm not releasing one of my patient because some manly chick with bad manners has decided so!" Shepard had that annoyed laugh meaning she wasn't going to play nice anymore.

"Easy now, ladies," Joker intervened, hopping of the bed. "Doc, Mordin is a doctor too, he knows what he does."

"Yes," Mordin confirmed, "doctor in biology, exobiology, genetic and behavior, had a professorship in Talat Sciences University for ten years. Know more about turian physiology than any so called Alliance trained doctor."

"It's fine, Doctor Michel," Garrus said while the offended woman stared at Mordin, her mouth slightly open. He wasn't calling her by her first name. "Professor Solus patched me up a few times
already." Shepard cleared her throat. "And yes, I'm really her protegee."

"Oh," the doctor frowned while Shepard's smile widened. "Well then. Take care of yourself, Garrus, and stop by any time you want."

"I'll do my best," he nodded. Doctor Michel gave a last angry look at Shepard and walked to another patient. Solus opened his flask but Shepard grabbed his arm.

"Legit medication," he chuckled. "Dextro version of dronabinol derivative. Will reduce stress level and induce light euphoria and hunger." Shepard stared at Mordin for a few seconds before releasing him. He then started to take care of Garrus.

"So, not answering the phone, huh?" Joker teased Shepard, poking her with his elbow.

"I was busy," she mumbled, frowning. Joker raised his hands in sign of peace. Shepard sighed. "What happened?"

"Baby-Spectre discovered his paycheck and he panicked," Joker shrugged. "Didn't I tell you to talk to him?"

"You did," she grumbled.

"Well then, you owe me dinner."

"Do I?"

"Oh yes you do."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Fine."

"Will come!" Mordin interrupted.

"What?"

"And I'm pretty sure you owe me one too, Commander," Garrus added, rubbing his eyes after his treatment.

"Hey!" Shepard protested.

"I know a good sushi place in the wards," Joker smirked. Shepard mumbled something really nasty in Portuguese but eventually capitulated. Joker patted her on the back, not even feeling sorry for her. EDI would have loved the situation, he thought, his throat tight. She would have looked at them and have that small smile of hers that indicated she had understood. Joker would never see that smile again.

But EDI was alive.

TBC
Liara looked anxiously at the Mako in the shuttle bay, even Wrex looking small next to the machine. She had been glad to see the previous one perish with the Normandy SR1, like anybody else on board. Makos were fantastic vehicles, a perfect example of what Humans were capable of in engineering, but they had flaws nonetheless. For example, the passengers' well-being had been largely ignored. The pilot had a special seat with a harness and all, same for the turrets operator, but the rest of the passengers could only count on hard benches, loose harnesses and handles. The Mako had been designed to transport troops, not archeologists. It showed.

Liara checked nervously her armor, filling strangely naked without her lab coat. Wrex had helped her find that armor on Omega and had assured her it was "the good stuff", light but resistant, flexible but strong, the perfect armor for a biotic – the previous owner had been a Cerberus infiltrator. Liara only knew it was gray, blue and black, and a little tight in the chest area. She was a bit worried though. Viantel was a cold planet and that armor didn't look warm at all compared to the heavy one Garrus had selected. Liara knew the armor could deal with extreme temperatures – Wrex had been a bit rough with the seller to be sure of it – but she couldn't help her feeling on the subject.

The elevator opened behind her and Liara turned to see Shepard exit it, wearing her usual black reinforced leggings and white tank top. She had attached her hair in a small pony tail like often recently. Her neck was exposed, her jawline more defined, giving her a proud carriage. It went well with her strong and long pace. James was following her, in a similar version of under-armor clothes. He looked so serious Liara barely recognized him. James was usually smiling and had soft eyes contrasting with his impressive constitution, but today he was focused as he walked to his locker. Shepard went straight for Steve who had prepared her armor.

"Got all you need, Liara?" Shepard asked over her shoulder.

"Yes!" she replied, feeling her cheeks suddenly burn.

"I helped her get ready," Wrex yelled from the Mako's hatch.

"Got all the reasons in the world to worry then," Shepard joked back, her voice loud enough to cover all the noises made by the ship going through the thin atmosphere of Viantel. Wrex laughed and turned back to the vehicle. Liara twiddled her fingers nervously. "Hey, everything's gonna be alright," Shepard added as she got dressed. "Between Vakarian, Vega and me, you got yourself a small army for the trip. Besides," she said, bending to seal the protections on her legs, "we'll be in extraction facilities, surrounded by Asaris on their own quiet colony. Worst we can catch is a cold, really."

"I don't know," Steve smirked, "I'd be pretty uncomfortable in the middle of so many pretty girls."

"That's because you like dicks," Shepard laughed but Liara didn't find it funny. First of all, Asaris weren't girls, nor women, not even female. They had no gender, even if they had attributes found in females of other species, and not a lot, only three to be precise: the Quarians, the Batarians and the Humans. Secondly, Asaris were all seen as pretty but that was just objectifying them. They were so much more than a cute face or a nice derriere! Most Asaris spent decades studying and were wiser
than any turian General by the age of a hundred. And the culture! Thessia was so diverse, with so
many republics, each with its own language, food, society, literature, all of which made each Asari
a singular individual. But aliens only saw the wild maidens paying their bills by shaking their ass
in bars. It always frustrated Liara.

She stayed silent as Shepard finished sealing her armor, exchanging banters with Steve. James
came to stand by her side when he was ready, also in his heavy armor. He looked buffer than usual
and that was something to say. Liara felt even more small and uncomfortable. She wished Javik
would come with them instead. Javik was a hard man but also a formidable soldier, probably the
most powerful biotic in the galaxy if her calculations were correct. More importantly, he cared
deeply for his team. Protheans never left one of their own behind, much like Turians. Either they
all were going back, or they'd die trying. Liara wasn't for dying at all but, in case of this unfortunate
event, she'd be glad to be next to Javik. She'd know he would have done everything possible to
avoid it.

Ashley was another good teammate choice. She always looked serious and hard but she was a nice
person when you knew her, and had a pretty serious case of big sister complex. Ashley felt the
need to protect all the others women on board, Liara included, even if she was four times older
than the Human. The feeling seemed to have been reinforced lately but Ashley had refused to talk
about it each time Liara had tried to reach her. It had to do with Shepard, Liara knew it, but she
hadn't figured out what had happened exactly. There had been an argument between the two
women, Liara was only sure of that, and since then they kind of ignored each other. It had led to a
couple of awkward silences during dinner but nothing that couldn't be brushed off.

Shepard, in full gear, walked to her locker to choose her weapons but something made her frown as
soon as she opened it. "Vakarian!" she yelled, making Liara jump. "Where's my Valkyrie?"

"What?" the Turian replied from the depth of the Mako.

"Get your ass here now!" Shepard roared.

"Coming!" Garrus hopped out of the hatch, not even bothered by his heavy armor, and jogged to
the lockers. Shepard grumbled for herself as she waited. "What can I do for you, Commander?"

"You can keep your hands off my weapons," she grunted, "that'd be appreciated. Where's my
Valkyrie?"

"I put it on the workbench with mine," Garrus replied, pointing to the weapons over his shoulder. "I
installed a new stabilizer on yours and played a little with the parameters. I think you'll like it."

"I'll like breaking your smug face, yes," she replied as she walked past him to the workbench.
Garrus turned to follow her, absolutely not offended by the comment. Liara found their new way of
communicating quite disturbing, to be honest.

"Viantel's gravity is pretty low, it'll have an impact on your aim without the proper adjustments," he explained.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Shepard grunted. "All I hear is 'I played with your toys without your
permission and I'm not even sorry because, let's face it, I'm better than you on everything'."

"We already established I'm better at everything, Commander."

Shepard punched him in the shoulder but still asked him for details. James smiled as they leaned on
the workbench.
"It's nice to see them like that, right?" he said, turning to Liara. She nodded. She felt a little
envious, actually. Shepard looked at Garrus as an equal, someone she could count on, someone she
didn't need to protect, whereas she never had that level of trust with Liara. Sure, Liara wasn't even
half the soldier Garrus was, but she knew how to defend herself now. In four years, she had learned
how to aim and shoot decently, how to fight hand to hand, and Wrex had helped her with her
biotics – if her mother knew a Krogan had tutored her little girl, she'd be very angry. She could
handle herself now but Shepard only saw the helpless and quite naive archeologist she was before
when she looked at her. That was unfair.

The hull stopped creaking and Joker's voice came through the speakers a few seconds later.
"Permission to land has been granted, Commander. ETA ten minutes."

"Alright," Shepard replied. "Vega, Liara, come here." Both obeyed, with more or less anticipation.
"Today won't be fun," she said. "The facility where they found the prothean ruins is far from the
spaceport we're landing in. It's the closest, be sure of that, but we'll need a ten hours drive to get to
the ruins anyway. We could have used the shuttle, but this is the perfect occasion to test our brand
new and improved Mako. It should be an easy mission, we can run our tests on the Mako and if
anything goes wrong, we'll just have to wait for Cortez."

"I'll be at the ready waiting for your orders, Commander," the pilot affirmed. Shepard nodded.

"Viantel is a pretty boring planet," she continued. "Asaris discovered it a thousand years ago and
started extracting its ice when Illium blossomed. Now you can find Viantel's water through all
Council Space, it's even been used to terraform a few worlds, which is kind of fucked up if you ask
me. Anyway, it's a quiet planet, lots of industries and infrastructures, mostly dominated by Asaris
but a few concessions are owned by Salarians and Turians. You can bet workers are aliens but I'm
not expecting any trouble from them," she shrugged, "Asaris deport troublemakers out of their
colonies pretty easily. But, the dig site has been found two weeks ago already. Prothean artifacts
are a good way to get an early retirement somewhere hot. Workers might already have altered the
site and we have to investigate before any mercs hear about it. Any questions?" Garrus, James and
Liara said no. "Alright. Everybody in the Mako then, and don't worry, Vakarian is driving. Javik,
the ship is yours," she added, louder, already walking to the vehicle.

"Aye aye, Commander," he replied through the speakers.

"You're driving?" Liara asked to Garrus, surprised. He nodded.

"The driver's seat is blocked," he said innocently. "Can't move it, completely jammed. Only I can
reach the pedals." He gave her a knowing smile and Liara could only articulate a silent 'thank you'
in return. She just hoped he wouldn't be possessed by the Curse of the Mako too.

Liara hopped in the machine second to last and sat in front of James while Garrus, arched and
careful to not hit his head, took place in the driver' seat. Shepard was going to be the turrets
operator for the mission. Liara gave a look at the cargo on her right. They had packed everything
she had deemed necessary and six days worth of food and water. The mission was supposed to be
only three days long but Shepard always liked to double the quantities, just in case. She also
wanted everyone to have enough ration bars for three days on them, and Liara knew Shepard
carried some extra dextro rations with her too. It was a questionable habit until your first collapsed
wall, trapping you underground for two days.

The Normandy docked a few minutes later and Joker gave them the green light once the shuttle
bay open. Garrus started the Mako, the motors roaring to life, and drove slowly out of the ship.
Getting out of the spaceport took them no time. From the little Liara could see by the front
windows, it had been designed for freighters and vehicles far more bigger than the Mako or the
Normandy. A dome protected the small city, both keeping a breathable atmosphere and some sort of heat under – zero degree Celsius was considered as heat compared to the minus hundred fifty in average of the outside. A sudden change of gravity indicated they were now out of the spaceport's mass effect generators' influence. Liara hiccuped, feeling nauseous.

"You okay, Doc?" James asked.

"I'm fine," Liara replied quickly. "It's the gravity shift, I can't get used to it."

"Yeah, that one was pretty hard. Hey Garrus," he said, turning to the front cabin, "can you increase the gravity a little? I don't like floating around."

"It's either the gravity or the heat," the Turian replied, "and I'm strongly against freezing to death." Shepard laughed.

"Why can't we have both?" James asked.

"Because we'll run out of fuel before we arrive if we care too much about comfort," Garrus explained. "We can't use the motors' heat, it's too cold outside, so the AC is on, which uses a lot of fuel just to keep us above fifteen degrees. Increasing the gravity to the Normandy's level would make the Mako weight ten times more than now, and the motors would have to compensate."

"And consume ten times more, yeah I get it."

"Huh, three point sixteen times more, actually," Garrus corrected.

"You had to do the maths," Shepard mocked, her tone joyful.

"No, it's just the square root of ten, which happens to be the result of the equations for calculating the increase factor of fuel consumption relatively to the mass of the vehicle."

"I bet you know all square roots from one to a billion," Shepard snorted.

"Square, cube and fourth to a hundred."

"You're shitting me!"

"No. One: one, one, one. Two: one point forty-one forty-two, one point twenty-five ninety-nine,..."

"Oh God, have mercy on us," Shepard laughed.

James turned back to Liara, shaking his head a little as Garrus continued reciting his roots. "Sorry Doc, I tried." Liara replied with a sheepish smile.

The trip took most of the day for them but Liara saw the faint star Viantel orbited disappear behind the horizon and the temperature drop outside. The brightest stars were visible during the day due to the thin atmosphere and the distance to Faia, but with the night came a beautiful view of the galaxy. Viantel was close of the outer edge of the galactic disk, offering to curious eyes a fantastic display of trillions of stars in their globular central amass. It was like a faint cloud peppered with dust. Liara watched it for hours.

It was the middle of the night when they arrived at the M'tasa Incorporated facilities but it didn't have much importance since teams of workers operating the machines extracted ice non-stop. The site was surrounded by surface mines, kilometers wide pits so deep you couldn't see the bottom but for some little moving lights – probably the excavators. The Mako was a small thing on the road
compared to the trucks the size of the first Normandy coming and going to the facilities, lifting powdered ice in gigantic clouds in their wake.

Garrus stopped the Mako where employees directed him, under the large dome protecting the facilities.

"They don't waste time," he mumbled, watching through the front windows. Liara took a look: there already was a welcome party of five Asaris, all wrapped into big puffy colored coats.

"The prothean site probably bothers them," Shepard said, extracting herself from the operator's seat. "I bet they had to stop a pit and wait for us. I'd be pissed too." She stretched as much as the tight space permitted, groaning. "We're Spectres on mission but I want it to go smoothly, understood? Use your authority when needed only, otherwise they'll keep interfering. Asaris consider themselves as the apex species of the galaxy and they don't like to see their power diminished." Liara frowned a little but it was pointless to start an argument now about Shepard's very narrow point of view on her species.

"Can you use your authority to grant us a bathroom break though?" James asked. Shepard rummaged in a small cabinet and threw him an empty plastic bottle. "C'mon, my dick'll freeze."

"I assure you we won't see the size difference," Shepard replied, retrieving her weapons. James grunted.

The dome was much smaller and of a lesser quality than the spaceport's, meaning the temperature outside was way under zero. Liara shivered as they walked to the welcome party, Shepard on point and Garrus and James behind her. The Asaris waiting for them had the clear skin color of colonists. Like any Asari raised on Thessia, Liara had her apprehensions about outsiders. They tended to be ruder and harder than the already pretty rude and hard Asaris of Thessia. It had to do with them having to prove something, she believed. Colonists had weaker powers due to the lack of element zero in their environment – no discovered world was as rich in eezo as Thessia – they had to take supplements like any Asari off world. Their biotics could never compete with those of a Thessian so they were more aggressive in other domains. Trade, for example.

The Asari in the middle, an elder with dark markings on her cheeks and temples, appeared surprised by Shepard's size when they reached the welcome party. Asaris weren't very tall themselves and tended to consider the female Humans, so alike in appearance, as small as they were. Seeing one towering over them was a bad start.

"Spectre Shepard, I am Luko M'tasa," the matriarch said, not offering her hands. "Thank you for coming."

"I'm sorry for the delay, Matriarch Luko," Shepard replied humbly. "I came as soon as I could." Luko nodded once. Shepard hadn't blamed the Council, Liara noticed, even if the delay was their fault. Two weeks ago, the Normandy was still traveling to the Citadel, but the Council could have canceled shore leave to gain three days. And Shepard wasn't the only one keeping an eye on prothean tech – Nihlus was also a watchman, actually, and his mentor too. The Council could have sent another Spectre for this mission. Though Shepard had Liara with her, and a real, living Prothean. That probably influenced the Council's decision. "This is my team," Shepard continued. "Doctor Liara T'Soni, our expert on Protheans from the University of Ashan in the Jorrott Republic on Thessia, my protegee, Spectre Vakarian, and Lieutenant Vega."

"I was told there would be the Prothean with you," Luko said, staring harshly at James. Liara didn't say anything but it was strange for the matriarch to inquire on the subject. Javik's existence was not common knowledge.
"Good luck taking him out of the ship," Shepard shrugged. "I'm actually starting to consider a reward for this feat. Don't worry," she added, more serious, "Doctor T'Soni is the finest expert you can find in the galaxy." Liara felt her cheeks burn. Shepard rarely complimented anyone, making her praises even more valuable.

Luko's attention turned to Liara and stared at her for a few seconds. She probably was judging her too young and inexperienced for the job. Liara was only a hundred and fifteen years old, a child by asari standards. True enough, she had abandoned her post at the university to follow Shepard around the galaxy but it had been really good for her. She had learned so much in only four years! And she had met Javik, the last of his kind! He wasn't prone to talk in length about his people but, sometimes, reminiscences of the past were too heavy for him and he had to share them to lighten their weight. He usually shared with Shepard because she had been "enlightened" by the Beacon on Eden Prime, but Liara was an occasional confident too. It didn't happen often enough for her tastes though.

"We had a long drive," Shepard continued. "Do you mind if we take a break? Twenty minutes should be enough."

"At your convenience, Spectre," Luko replied and it was obvious the delay didn't please her. She turned heel and showed them the way to the inside. The temperature difference hit Liara hard but she didn't say anything and hoped it didn't show. Luko and her companions took them to a refectory for the workers. There was a majority of Vorchas but Liara noticed a few Krogans in their corner, a dozen Batarians, twice as much Humans and even a Quarian. "Have anything you want and call for me when you are done," Luko said before leaving them here, her companions following.

"And don't you dare mix apples and oranges," James snorted once Luko far enough. Shepard smirked, not Liara. "Welp, gotta take a piss. You coming, Garrus?"

"For the hundredth time, it's Vakarian, and why would I come?"

"cause you're a guy," James replied, pointing to his own crotch. That was classy.

"Turians don't give a fuck about gender," Shepard said, scanning the room while Garrus stared heavily at James. "Besides, this kind of place separates the bathrooms by species, I think. You don't want a Krogan to clog all the toilets. I'll come with you."

"No offense, ma'am, but, huh, I don't think I can tinkle with you around."

"Aw, you're actually shy," Shepard smirked, "that's cute." She grabbed him by the collar of his armor and pulled him to the exit. "Stop it, you're not a puppy. Stay together, you two," she added over her shoulder.

"Aye aye, Commander," Garrus replied. He seemed pretty relaxed for a man surrounded by a hundred strangers. Liara felt uncomfortable under the scrutiny of so many people. Her armor was warm indeed but too skin-tight for her. "We should sit," Garrus said and he invited her gently to an empty table near the exit. Most of the workers stopped staring at them. "So, it went pretty well," Garrus continued, keying on his omnitool. "We used less fuel than I anticipated."

"I sort of dozed off during the trip," Liara admitted. "The view was nice."

"It was." She raised a brow. Did he just acknowledge to not have paid attention to the road? Garrus looked at her for a second and smiled. "The autopilot is working really well on highways."
"You installed an autopilot?" Liara asked, surprised and amazed at the same time.

"Well, it's a VI I programmed when I was in the army," he explained. "It's used for some recon drones now but I kept the code. I adapted it for the Mako."

"Did you tell Shepard about it?"

"I will, eventually," Garrus shrugged. Liara shook her head gently, a little amused.

They were back under the dome twenty minutes after the beginning of the break, as planned. Luko waited for them near a gigantic truck with tires at least six times taller than her, made to transport kilotons of ice at once from the pits.

"The prothean site is at the bottom of the pit number four," Luko said. She pointed to a ladder leading to a cabin very high above ground. "After you."

"We'll follow you in the Mako, actually" Shepard replied, adjusting a strap on her armor. "We have a lot of stuff on board and I doubt we can take it up there."

Luko frowned, clearly annoyed this time. "At your convenience, Spectre," she said and she started climbing the ladder.

The ride to the bottom of the pit took an hour. The road was large enough for two trucks up front and only a few bumps made the Mako deviate a little. Liara saw the sky disappear slowly above them until they were in complete darkness, in the middle of the clouds following the truck.

They eventually stopped, Garrus maneuvering to be the closest possible to the ruins, put their helmet on and went outside. The few humidity on Liara's helmet froze instantly and she had to wipe it to see. Maybe it was just her imagination but she felt cold nonetheless. Luko joined them on the ground, now wearing a fur hat and some sort of mask to protect her face from the cold. Two Krogans followed her, both heavily armed. Liara felt uncomfortable again. Viantel was supposed to be a quiet colony so why Luko had bodyguards? Maybe it was normal, maybe someone as important as her had to be protected to reassure her investors, but Liara didn't like it nonetheless.

The bottom of the pit was of a small diameter compared to the top, maybe five hundred meters, and two giant excavators tall as buildings rested there, brightly lighted, waiting for work to start again. Several other excavators were visible all along the walls, some only little sparks of light in the distance, each on its own level. Liara was impressed by the machines. It was the first time in her life she saw something so big and it somehow amazed her.

"Over here, Doctor," Garrus called her through the radio. Liara jumped when she realized he was standing next to her, an arm open to show her the direction. She babbled an apology and followed him to the wall of ice.

The excavator had teared off a good part of what looked like a metallic structure, its pyramidal form easily recognizable despite the orange light coming from the sodium lamps placed all around. Liara first took a look but she couldn't see much considering the ice fallen into the structure and the lights. She keyed on her omnitool to activate a drone. It flew inside the pyramid, scanning and analyzing its surroundings. The drone disappeared once its sixteen seconds of autonomy consumed but it had been enough to create a decent map and give precious information to Liara.

"The structure has been damaged by the excavator but it still stands," she said to Shepard. "It's safe to enter."

"Seriously?" James asked. "This thing is buried under two kilometers of ice and you think it's safe
"Yes," Liara replied. "Prothean pyramids are layered with ultra-resistant composite materials. They are made to resist time and whatever can happen. I've seen one buried under kilometers of solid lava and still intact. I wouldn't worry."

"You're going in first, Vega," Shepard announced. The Lieutenant grumbled but obeyed nonetheless. Shepard jumped in next, followed by Liara then Garrus. Luko and her bodyguard stayed outside.

The visibility was limited to their flashlights mounted on their weapons and the occasional drones Liara activated, and it was enough until they reached the first room of importance ten minutes after entry. There, Shepard threw a flare on the ground to reveal a large room visited recently, probably by the workers. Crates had been opened everywhere. Liara took a look in one of them and only found a compacted dust with traces of organic molecules. A fifty thousand years old food supply.

"We're in a supply room," Liara informed. "I doubt anyone found anything of value here."

"Looters came nonetheless," Shepard commented, clearly annoyed.

"I found footprints over here," Garrus said. "They follow a corridor and it's going down."

Shepard signaled to Liara to activate a drone and they followed it in the corridor, keeping their formation tight and their weapons at the ready. The team was tensed, more than usually in this kind of mission. Liara had a bad feeling and she suspected Shepard to have the same one, even if the Commander looked as focused and quiet as ever. Garrus regularly turned to check behind them. Liara didn't know if it was normal for him, some sort of military habit, or if he was extra-cautious. It made her nervous, whatever the reason behind.

They eventually reached another level of the structure and they kept on following the traces of activity. The corridor gave on several rooms on each side behind windows, large laboratories with traces of rampage and loot everywhere. Everything was covered by a thick cover of dust and dirt. Water had leaked here and there despite the cold, and strange white mushroom-like forms of life had grown around, sometimes invading several rooms, to the point of filling them completely.

Liara had rarely seen a structure so well preserved, and this one was quite recent if she was to believe the writings on the walls – warnings to the employees of the facility about biohazard and slogans as dumb as the modern ones. She also saw skeletons of at least three different species, Protheans included, armors and weapons.

There had been a fight here at a time close to the Fall of the Protheans. Liara could barely believe it. It was a fantastic discovery! No one knew what had happened to the most advanced species of the galaxy fifty thousand years ago, not even Javik. All he remembered from his time was some minor conflicts in the Pylos Nebula, but otherwise the empire had been at peace for more than two thousands years. This site represented the first evidence of a violent conflict. Maybe it had been nothing more than an isolated incident but Liara felt deep down that this site was more than that. It was the first step to understand what had happened to the prothean galactic empire, she knew it.

Liara's attention was caught by a reflexion on a sign on the wall indicating a refectory. The footprints clearly went in that direction. A lot of footprints.

"Shepard," Liara whispered.

"I know," the Commander replied softly. "Everybody, stay sharp. Vakarian."
"I'm on it," he said, instinctively knowing what Shepard wanted. He took point until a corner of the corridor and switched for his sniper rifle. He then crouched and cautiously took a look, eye in his scope. Liara jumped as a bullet missed him. He went back behind cover and several followed. "At least twenty mercs," Garrus said calmly, in total contradiction with the panic overwhelming Liara, "a mix of everything, Asari included, and no cover for us." A few bullets pierced the wall in front of them. Garrus shook his head a little as he stood. "They knew we were coming."

"Of fucking course," Shepard grunted, absolutely not worried. "And I suppose we can't call the Normandy."

Garrus keyed on his omnitool as bullets continued raining on the opposite wall. James shifted his weight and looked around, a little nervous. "I can reach the Mako from here and use it as a stronger source of emission but the signal just ricochets on the ice walls of the pit. We're alone." Liara was pretty sure Shepard was rolling her eyes behind the visor of her helmet.

"Huh," James intervened, "what is happening exactly, and why are we chilling here instead of taking down the bad guys?"

Shepard and Garrus exchanged a look. "You do the talking," she decided.

"Alright," Garrus shrugged. "I don't know the reason why but it seems Matriarch Luko knows about Javik and is interested in him. This site was the perfect occasion to trap him and they were pretty annoyed when they realized he wasn't with us. But they had to roll with their plan nonetheless, because Shepard is an obstacle." The Commander snorted behind Garrus' back. She took something at her belt. "And regarding the mercs, they are prepared and they have the upper hand right now," he explained. Shepard threw what she had in hand in the corridor and quickly took cover. "So we're waiting for them to waste most of their ammunition." An explosion brightly lighted the corridor and the ground shook, the noise thankfully diminished by the helmet. Garrus looked behind him. "Or we can throw a grenade, yes, that works too."

"Of course it works," Shepard bragged, "it's my idea. I'll take point. Vega, with me. Liara, keep a low profile and focus on immobilizing every target you see. Vakarian, the rear. I want the biotics down first. Let's go ladies, we have an evil queen to take care of after that."

She immediately ran to the refectory, Vega just behind her. Garrus took a step but stopped when he realized Liara was hesitating, stuck against the wall. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her throat tight and her knees like jello. She hated that. She hated when a quiet, dull mission suddenly became a war zone. Her aim was terrible, her reflexes were too slow and her biotics weak. Usually, Liara waited anxiously while Shepard and Javik took care of everything, but this time the Commander was counting on her to immobilize mercenaries. That was insane! Liara wasn't a soldier, not even a fighter, she couldn't possibly jump in the middle of the melee and throw singularities left and right. Goddess, she couldn't even produce two singularities in a row.

"Vakarian, we could use a little help," Shepard said through the radio, the sounds of shooting in the background.

Garrus hesitated but eventually turned to Liara. "There is cover, just two meters left of the door. Reaching it will be easy." Liara nodded but her knees were shaking too much for her to move. She wanted to vomit.

"Vakarian!" Shepard shouted.

Liara hunched her shoulders and closed her eyes. A solid but gentle hand grabbed her upper arm. When she opened her eyes, Liara saw Garrus bended over to be at her level, the blue of his gaze
clearly visible despite his helmet.

"It's okay," he said calmly. "I'll be right behind you all the time, and since I'm a much bigger target than you, nobody will try to take you down." Liara hiccuped, bile burning her throat. "There is nothing to be afraid of, Liara," Garrus continued. "It's just a short run to cover. I'll take care of the rest, I promise." She inhaled deeply and nodded, shiver running all along her spine.

Liara turned the corner and ran without even thinking about it, fear burning her insides. She found cover sooner than she expected, a metallic table on its side, and crouched behind it. Garrus followed a fraction of second later, sliding on the cold floor as he came to a stop. He shot two rounds before taking cover and reloading.

"'bout time!" James roared in the radio.

"What?" Garrus teased as he scanned the room. "You need a Turian to save your ass, Alliance?"

He stood a second to shoot once and crouched again while James grunted.

"Hey!" Shepard protested. "I had this one!"

"Sorry, Commander. Old habit."

Shepard snorted. "Asshole. Take down that generator on my ten."

"Yessir." Garrus first damaged it with an electronic attack and finished it with two rounds. He took cover again to recharge. "Liara, there is a Krogan regenerating behind cover on our ten. Immobilize it."

Liara nodded and breathed in deeply. She jumped on her feet, muscle memory already activating her biotics, but she was suddenly pushed back, her head hitting the wall. Pain kicked in as she slid to sat on the floor, raging flames burning her right shoulder. She didn't have time to panic, scream or cry. Garrus grabbed her ankle and pulled her back to cover.

"He's charging!" James yelled. "Garrus!"

"On it!" the Turian roared as he sprang out of cover and started firing. "Shepard, move!"

Liara couldn't breath. She rolled on her side as she heard Shepard swear and emptying her clip, pain pulsing from her shoulder in all her body. She dared to touch the wound and her own blood froze on her glove. Liara gasped, white sparkles in her field of vision. She heard a crash and Garrus and James yelling, more shooting, more screaming. Liara pushed on her left arm and sat behind the table. The room started to spin but she managed to not throw up and stood on shaky legs. Garrus was trying to move a dead Krogan while James covered him but there was still five mercenaries standing and he couldn't possibly manage them all.

She needed air. Liara unsealed her helmet, removed it, threw it away, breathed in the freezing air deeply, her lungs burning, the skin of her face prickling, and for a formidable second, the pain disappeared. A warm wave of pure relief overwhelmed her. She rose her arm as she felt her burning blood flaw in her body and with it rose the remaining mercenaries, dead bodies, tables and empty clips. But it wasn't easy. Liara was shaking head to toe before James finished the job and she released her grip, falling to the ground, her head hitting the cold floor.

Liara didn't wake up instantly, like in a movie or a book. She regained conscientiousness slowly, first seeing vague blurry forms in front of her, which progressively became faces, worried and screaming. She tasted blood in her mouth and the burn of the cold on her lips. A spot on her forehead also radiated with pain but it was nothing compared to her shoulder. Then, she heard her
team calling her, the double rumbling voice of Garrus, the low baritone of James' and the powerful, commanding roar of Shepard. Liara moved her hand in a dismissing gesture, feeling too weak to speak.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Shepard swore, "you're alive." Liara barely managed to groan, noticing at the same time that Shepard wasn't wearing her helmet. Her lips were blue. Liara closed her eyes. "Hey, stay with me!"

"Not going anywhere," Liara whined. Shepard had a small laugh, the borderline crazy kind.

"Put your helmet back on, Commander," Garrus said nervously. "You'll both freeze to death, for fuck's sake."

"And you patch your shoulder while you're at it," James added somewhere on the left. "I'll take care of the Doc."

Shepard nodded and put Liara down on the floor slowly. "Be right back."

"Hm hm," was all Liara managed to answer. Garrus helped Shepard stand and they both disappeared somewhere at her feet but Liara could still hear their banters. James knelt next to her and lifted her head with great care to put her helmet back on.

"You got yourself a few cold burns, Doc," he said, "but it'll have to wait till we get back to the Mako. We sealed your shoulder wound with medigel. You're feeling it?" Liara nodded. "Sorry 'bout that. You think you can walk?"

"No," Liara whispered.

"No worries, I'll carry you. I lift heavier weights than you twice a day." There was a smile in his voice and it warmed Liara a little. A scream from Shepard made James turn his head. "If she's yelling, she's alive," he joked.

"Fuck you Vega!" Shepard yelled.

"Not against it!" James replied.

He then helped Liara to sit and the world spun even more. James maintained her against his chest to keep her from falling. Liara rested her head on his shoulder. Her wounds still hurt but she managed to push the pain away a little, focusing instead on her own breath. She felt exhausted more than anything else, to be honest, but somehow full of energy at the same time, all her body tickling, as if a small electrical current ran along her nerves. It was thrilling.

Liara felt before she could see the other Asari walking to them. She straightened in James' arms and looked at the door. Shepard's attention snapped in the same direction. Luko arrived shortly after, her two bodyguards with her. She had a gun in her hand.

"Oh please," Shepard grunted. "What are you going to do with your toy? Shoot me? Lady, you'll need more firepower than that to even scratch me."

"Shut your mouth, little girl," the matriarch replied. "You're in no position to..."

Shepard took a step and threw her left arm in the air. A fantastic wave of raw power beat back the two unprepared Krogans and even Luko had to protect herself with her arms. Quick like lightening, Garrus aimed and fired, one bullet for each target, but he didn't kill Luko. She fell on her knees, screaming, the hand she was holding her gun with pierced and bleeding. Garrus recharged and kept...
aiming at the matriarch. Shepard shook her hand, wincing.

"Damn, that hurt," she grunted. "Vega, take care of the lady. She's under arrest."

"How did you manage that?" Garrus asked as James gently put Liara against the table and jogged to Luko to incapacitate her.

"I have no fucking idea," Shepard replied, walking to Liara. "I just felt I could. It sorta happened before," she admitted but didn't answer when Garrus asked for more precision. Instead, Shepard held her hand out and Liara grabbed it to stand, her head still spinning a little. "You okay?"

"I'll be fine," Liara said but her voice wasn't convincing at all. She closed her eyes a second, hoping it would stabilize her spinning head. "Wrex' lessons paid off in the end." Shepard chuckled and held her close until Vega came back.

"Huh, Commander?" Garrus called. "We have one of those on the ship, right?"

Liara looked at the direction the Turian was pointing. Three iridescent black orbs mounted on small pillars were displayed in a corner of the refectory. One of them was damaged, a big chunk of it on the floor.

"It's prothean," Shepard said, "like, decoration or something. We found plenty in previous dig sites."

"There were three of them on Project Base too," Garrus added.

Shepard stayed silent for long seconds before taking her gun with her left hand. She emptied her clip on the orbs, shattering them into little pieces which fell slowly to the ground. "Let's get out of here," she said, sheathing her Carniflex and turning to the exit. "I have to fix my shoulder. Again."

TBC

Note
I've tried to write a chapter from Liara's POV before but could never decide which pronoun to use. Since Asaris refer to themselves as she/her in the game, I decided to follow their example (even if we can argue we follow Shepard in the game, therefore everything is translated to a language Shepard understands, that doesn't mean Asaris really refer to themselves with she/her, I know).
"Why do I have to do that, again?" Garrus asked, facing the door of Shepard's quarters. He turned to see Javik and Chakwas behind him, keeping a respectful distance to the door.

"Nobody can access the Commander's cabin without her explicit authorization," Javik repeated, hands in his back and squared shoulders.

"And you have it, as her protegee," Chakwas added.

"Shepard told me Javik had access too," Garrus remembered. "He can do it."

"I will not," the Prothean replied and his voice didn't leave any room for discussion.

Garrus frowned and turned again to the door to apply his hand on the red hologram. It turned green and disappeared, opening the door. The lights came to life slowly, growing in intensity as Garrus walked to the stairs. He did his best to not notice the mess on the desk or the clothes spread all over the room. At least there wasn't shattered glass all over the place anymore – he had spent hours on all four to retrieve them. Most of the model ships were even back in their showcase, though the glass hadn't been replaced yet. Garrus had offered Shepard some help to change it but she had said it could wait.

"The Commander cannot move her arm yet," Chakwas said from the corridor, "so you have to choose something large. And comfortable."

"And warm," Javik added.

"I know," Garrus replied as he turned to Shepard's wardrobe. "I'm sorry, Commander," he whispered for himself before opening it. That was a serious invasion of her privacy he was doing right now but she couldn't come back from the hospital bare butt either. He just hoped she would understand.

Garrus fumbled a little between the hanged clothes on the left but there wasn't much. Three clean Alliance uniforms, those she wore everyday despite being a Spectre or having cut all ties with the human government, a more formal version entirely blue, the kind Garrus had seen officials wore, two leather jackets, three dresses, two of them obviously for partying, skin-tight pants and half a dozen tops. Nothing large, comfortable nor warm in there.

He looked around and saw her sportswear on the back of her console chair. That would do, he decided. "Does anyone have a coat or something like that?" Garrus asked as he retrieved the clothes. A pair of underwear fell from the pants as he lifted them. Garrus looked away and pushed the undergarment under the chair with his foot. "And a large top too," he added, looking at the tight tank top she used for training. She couldn't possibly wear that now.

"I'm on it," Javik replied as he turned heel.

There also was one of those tight sport bra Garrus had seen Shepard wore a few times but this thing required to move the arms too much, he imagined. It didn't seem comfortable at all, but human women covered their chest with it nonetheless – contrary to Asaris who could go topless without a
care. Garrus had arrested a bunch on the Citadel during his first year in C-Sec, for his colleagues' great amusement. But Shepard hated to not have a bra. She had complained a lot about it when they had been stuck on Project Base, until Garrus had found one in some private quarters. He looked at the wardrobe, hesitating. He really didn't want to make a habit out of searching for bras but his mentor would complain if she didn't have one.

Garrus carefully put the clothes on the bed and looked at the series of drawers on the right of the wardrobe. "EDI," he called, "do you know where Shepard keeps her, huh, undergarments? I don't want to open everything." And find something he wasn't supposed to see, he added for himself, shivering. He never had been curious on the matter and was certainly not going to start now.

"Second drawer from the top," EDI replied, its voice as flat as if it had given him the weather. Garrus had trouble adjusting to this new voice. It wasn't EDI's, somehow. Not that he had made peace with the AI before the loss of its body, but it was strange to hear it talk like that nonetheless.

He opened the drawer carefully, just in case EDI had decided to fuck with him – that wouldn't be the first time – but he only found bras inside, a big pile of them with no apparent order. Why? he silently asked the Spirits. He didn't deserve that.

"You'd want to look for one without straps," Chakwas advised him. "It'll be easier to put on."

"No straps," Garrus agreed, resigned, and he plunged his hands in the drawer.

Garrus could have delegated the trip to the hospital to someone else, heck, he could have let Chakwas go by herself, but he felt he had to come with her. Solus had stayed planet-side and relayed news about Shepard and T'Soni every thirty minutes, so Garrus knew they both were fine, but he had to see it with his own eyes. Surgery wasn't a walk in the park.

Cortez landed the shuttle as close to the hospital as he could and promised to keep the cargo warm and comfy for the ladies. Garrus followed Chakwas in the building, carrying a bag containing the clothes for Shepard and T'Soni and large, warm coats. The hospital was small, only one story above ground and the staff didn't count more than five persons. Only one of them was an actual doctor, a Salarian.

Chakwas had been abhorred by the lack of equipment and the indolence of the doctor. It wasn't a hospital, she had said, but a deathtrap. They had nothing to treat serious injuries and their medication stocks were a joke. The loss of a limb, for example, could only result to the death of the patient, especially if they were Turian. Due to its very particular composition, their blood couldn't be stocked for a long time, even in optimum conditions. It degraded easily and quickly, and artificial blood killed as much as it saved people. Plus, there was all the pain medication addictions problem with the Turians. That didn't help either.

The doctor had shrugged. It wasn't his fault. They did what they could with what they were given. When it was cheaper to send a patient home than to treat them, the big boss didn't think about it for long, and too bad if the guy didn't survive the four days trip to Illium. That was the sad reality of this industry and many others. And really, he had insisted, their situation wasn't so bad. At least, they had a hospital and an actual doctor in this extraction site. Many didn't even have an infirmary.

Chakwas had had to transport supplies from the Normandy to the ground in order to use the operation room properly. Shepard couldn't take the ride back to the ship with her shoulder and ribs in little pieces. Garrus had seen her during the trip back to the facilities, her face livid, sweating, fighting the pain. She stayed silent most of the hour and he honestly didn't know how she had managed that wonder. But when the Mako finally stopped, Shepard had collapsed in his arms, still conscious but incapable of walking on her own. Chakwas and Solus were already there at the time
Shepard didn't even try to protest their decision to keep her planet-side for surgery.

T'Soni's injuries weren't so serious in comparison. Besides some minor frost burns, they had been shot in the right shoulder, through and through, between two reinforced plates of their armor. Garrus knew only luck had helped the mercenary to succeed that kind of shot. The Human had been trying to pin him down before – larger target and far more deadly than a shaking Asari behind cover. Garrus had played with him, taking down his friends around to show off a little and fuck with the guy's mind. The mercenary had fired just when the Salarian on his left had met his gods, and of course the idiot had moved and hit T'Soni. Garrus felt a little guilty about it. He shouldn't have played with a target, not with T'Soni around.

Garrus found Shepard in her bed, her cover up to her chin, while T'Soni coordinated the extraction of valuable artifacts in the ruins from their bed – Wrex, Zorah, Williams, Vega and Traynor where over there. The Asari was almost naked but for a pair of panties and didn't seem to care about it. Garrus promptly looked away and caught Shepard's gaze. She was clearly groggy and uncomfortable about the very naked Asari near her. He smiled at her to show a little support.

"Where is Mordin?" Chakwas asked, looking for the Salarian in the small room.

"Don't know, don't care," Shepard replied, turning to Garrus and smiling back at him like he was her savior. She looked... happy. Maybe not happy but relaxed, careless. That was awkward.

"Don't mind her," T'Soni said, busy typing something on the datapad with one hand. "She's like that since she woke up from the anesthesia. And Professor Solus went with the other Salarian for a consultation."

"Yep," Shepard giggled, "he followed the white rabbit."

"I'll assume he also was very generous with your pain medication, Commander," Chakwas smiled as she walked to T'Soni to check on her wound first.

"Yes he was," Shepard nodded thoroughly. "I both love and hate that beautiful bastard for that."

Garrus approached Shepard's bed with caution. She'd probably hug him or something like that if he was too close and he didn't want that to happen. "We secured the prisoner," he informed her as he put the bag of clothes at her feet. "Legion is keeping an eye on them, and we also took care of the orb. It's in a sealed box in the freezers for now."

"Like a giant Popsicle," Shepard chuckled.

"Huh, sure," Garrus continued, uneasy around a giggling Shepard. He would have paid a lot to hear her yell at him, for once. "I thought it'd be better to keep it for study than throw it by the airlock to watch it fall on Viantel." He opened the bag and took a tee-shirt from it, black with white letters and a stylized bolt on the front. "It's Joker's," he explained when he saw Shepard stare at it.

"I figured. How is Vega?" she asked, pulling out a bare arm to take the shirt. Garrus saw a glimpse of a naked shoulder as he turned his head to preserve his mentor's dignity. This day got worse by the minute. Something was wrong though. Her arm had been covered with tiny red spots all over her skin, not just freckles on her shoulder. Which he didn't see. Nope.

"Fine," he answered, "a little bruised here and there but fine. He asked to go back with Wrex actually."

"And you?" Shepard continued as she fought with the piece of cloth.
Garrus shrugged. "All good." He felt obligated to ask: "Do you need help, Commander?"

"Yes, please." Garrus took the shirt and passed it over her head, trying not to look at her. Shepard managed to push her valid arm in the sleeve and only his reflexes saved Garrus from a punch in the face. The red spots followed a pattern, he noticed, like lines, veins, something like that. "You know you called me by my name yesterday?" Shepard asked, putting her arm back under the cover to pull the shirt down. "Second time, by the way."

"Oh. Sorry," Garrus said. He hadn't paid attention to that yesterday actually and felt quite uneasy about it now that he knew – well, more than a second ago anyway. Shepard wasn't that bad of a mentor, and they actually were on a good path now, but something kept him from calling her by her name, especially now that he was pulling her bra out of the bad.

"Worst timing ever, Vakarian," Shepard laughed, grabbing the bra. "Help me out, would you?"

"Maybe Doctor Chakwas..."

"Can't," the Doctor replied from the other side of the room. "Busy here." She was indeed trying to keep T'Soni still for a minute to replace the bandage on their shoulder. Garrus frowned.

"C'mon," Shepard smirked, jiggling the bra in front of him, "you won't see my boobs, I promise." Garrus grunted, accepting his defeat. He moved to the side of the bed while Shepard fought under her shirt to put the bra in place. "It's a hook system, like on any of your clothes."

"How do you know how my clothes close exactly?" Garrus grunted.

"Not yours specifically, silly," Shepard rolled her eyes, "turians clothes in general. I know because I used to bang a lot with Nihlus, and by a lot, I mean a lot."

"Oh," Garrus winced. That was too much information – he had suspected it though so it wasn't a big surprise, just an unpleasant reminder. He hesitated a second but eventually came closer. He lifted the shirt, seeing the tattoo again and doing his best to not discover how low it went, took the two ends of the bra and hooked them together without even looking at them. "Done," he said, pulling the shirt down. He did not see her lower back. No. He didn't if he chose it to be that way.

"You did that like a champ, Vakarian," Shepard laughed. "You sure it's your first time?"

"I'm positive, Commander." Shepard chuckled a little more and dragged the bag to her now that her upper body was covered. When she retrieved and wiggled her shorties, Garrus decided to go wait outside.

He could still hear her laugh when the door closed behind him. Solus arrived just at that moment, another Salarian with him, in the white and red uniform common to all medics through Council Space.

"Ah, Vakarian!" Solus saluted. "Have to talk to you about Shepard."

"She's high on pain medication," Garrus sighed, "I know, and I hate you a little for that right now."

Solus chuckled. Garrus knew the Salarian had had to give a massive amount of medication to Shepard to diminish her pain – biotics needed more – but a less reasonable part of him supposed Solus just liked to drug everyone around him. "Have to talk about Shepard's biotics," he said and turned to his colleague. "Has seen similar case."

The other Salarian nodded. "We had a female Turian here a couple of years ago, a biotic." Garrus
frowned. The doctor noticed. "If a poor bastard needs to work on Viantel, it's better not to ask questions," he shrugged and folded his arms. "We didn't know this Turian was a biotic at first, she didn't tell and nobody sensed it. The Turian was actually concealing her powers by smoking human cigarettes."

"She wasn't allergic to levo amino acids?" Garrus asked. "That's pretty rare for us."

"It's actually common for dextro biotics," the Doctor replied. "It has to do with the eezo in the body, it kind of fucks everything up. Anyway, one day, her team got stuck in a gallery, everybody thought they were as good as dead because MTasa isn't the kind to look for buried workers. But suddenly, bam!" he said, mimicking the explosion with his hands, "the debris were thrown out of the gallery by a biotic wave and the Turian walked out of it first, her arm and ribs broken. Turned out the rush of adrenaline completely washed off her system from the nicotine and that's how she managed to use her biotics, but her nervous system was damaged, burnt from the inside. She never managed to use her biotics again and I had to amputate the arm."

"And in Shepard's case?" Garrus asked, turning to Solus. He didn't know how to feel about the news. Shepard wasn't exactly fond of her biotics from what Garrus had understood. She considered them like a weapon, not like a gift like Asaris usually did. Removing a weapon from Shepard's hands was going to upset her but maybe she wouldn't miss it so much in the end. Her arm was a bigger problem though. Implants and prosthesis could save a limb or replace it entirely but that still was a big hit for a soldier.

"Different," Solus shook his head. "Highly trained to use her biotics, nervous system actually capable of sustaining a powerful discharge, unlike the Turian biotic. Will need time to recover, no doubt, but should be fine. Will encourage smoking for a while, time for her body to heal."

"So I pressed her to quit smoking for nothing?" Garrus snorted, feeling relieved nonetheless.

"Still necessary if wants to use her biotics at all," Solus corrected him. "Can't function like that, breaking something for pain to temporarily clean her system. Risks of permanent damages, paralysis of limb, amputation at worst."

Garrus nodded as his omnitool lightened up. He excused himself, letting the two Salarians enter the room. "Vakarian," he said, opening the link between him and the Normandy.

"Your buddies arrived," Joker announced, "and they want to talk to whoever is in charge."

The Council had dispatched two vessels to Viantel to take care of the matriarch and the facilities. They were part of the larger fleet usually cruising in the Ismar Frontier. Half of the turian fleet roamed the Attican Traverse to keep an eye on the border with the Terminus Systems, even if the Council had a military non-interference policy regarding the Traverse. It was a zone for expansion, any species could search for new worlds to colonize and they were supposed to defend themselves. Officially, the turian fleet only protected the Hierarchy's interests in the region but everybody knew the Council had the power to mobilize those vessels if needed. Garrus, replacing Shepard while she was incapacitated, had had to coordinate the arrival.

"Yeah, that would be me," Garrus grumbled. "Shepard is still suffering from the anesthesia's side effects."

"No shit!" Joker laughed. "She's giggling and all? Like, for real?"

"Yes."
"Please record her, please, please, pleeeeeease!"

"I don't want to die prematurely," Garrus replied. "Connect me to the fleet."

"I don't recall hearing Shepard putting you in charge," Joker snorted, "but better you than Javik. Patching you through."

Garrus didn't really know how to proceed so he chose to be straightforward. "Spectre Vakarian here. To whom am I speaking, please?"

"You're Turian?" someone replied, surprised.

"Yes Sir."

"Where is Spectre Shepard? I was supposed to contact her."

Garrus winced. Better the truth than to deal with angry Turian. "My mentor is currently at the hospital so I'm in charge, Sir."

"You have a human mentor?" the Turian snorted. "There must be some kind of mistake."

"To whom am I speaking?" Garrus repeated, slightly annoyed.

"Captain Famir of the Heta Tung, with Captain Esho of the Heta Fer, Sixth Fleet."

"Well, Captain Famir," Garrus continued, staring at the wall in front of him and trying to dig a hole in it with his gaze, "if you have a problem with the Council's decision to put me under the tutoring of one of the best Spectres there is, a Spectre trained by a Turian and supported by the Hierarchy, I suggest you to directly talk to the Council. But for now, you have a job to do, and your job is to follow my orders." He let that sink for a second. "I suggest you to dock to the SSV Normandy SR2 currently in orbit and wait for me, I'm planet-side for the moment. I should be back within thirty minutes. Vakarian out."

Garrus was still a little shaking when he went back to the room. Thanks the Spirits everybody had clothes on and was ready to go. T'Soni was still scrolling through her datapad. Shepard was up but her legs didn't seem to cooperate much. Solus stood next to her, ready to catch her if she fell. Garrus was pretty sure he had offered Shepard a wheelchair or something but she had probably refused it.

"The fleet has arrived," he announced, "we better get back to the Normandy ASAP."

"The fleet?" Shepard asked, grabbing Solus' arm as if her life depended on it. "What fleet?"

"Right, I didn't tell you," Garrus remembered. "You told me to call the Council to give them an update yesterday."

"Yeah, I vaguely remember that," Shepard said, taking a few uneasy steps. Solus followed her submissively.

"Councilor Sparatus dispatched two frigates from the Sixth Fleet to take care of the situation here," Garrus explained. "He said we had better things to do than to pacify the zone."

"Another mission?" T'Soni interrupted. Garrus shook his head as the Asari walked to the door, followed by Chakwas. "Good, because we have to go to Thessia."

"We do?" Shepard asked. She was now at the end of her bed and she held her hand to Garrus. He
didn't hesitate and came closer to reach her. Shepard smiled at him and hooked her arm at his.

"We found fantastic artifacts in those ruins," T'Soni said, their voice full of excitement, "more than we can deal with on the Normandy. I have to go back to the university and organize an archeological excavation. There is work for years here, Shepard!"

"So, you'd leave us." T'Soni stopped and turned to look at Shepard. They bit their lower lip before nodding. "Alright," Shepard continued, shrugging it off. "Well, see the details with Mister Incharge. He's the boss while I recover."

Garrus straightened. "I'll do my best, Commander."

"Yeah, you do that," Shepard chuckled, patting his forearm absentmindedly, and she started walking to the door again.

The ride back to the Normandy didn't go smoothly for the two injured. The gravity shifts and the usual bumps were a bit too rough, even if they both had taken a lot of pain killers earlier. Shepard squeezed Garrus' hand during all the trip back and gritted her teeth. She was pale when she finally stepped in the shuttle bay, sweat pearling on her forehead.

"I think it's better to go lay down in the medbay for a while, Commander," Garrus suggested as they walked slowly to the elevator. T'Soni, Solus and Chakwas were already in front of it.

"Yeah, I think I'll do that," she agreed. "How did it go, with the Mako?"

Garrus looked over his shoulder at the vehicle. "Not bad, considering. Viantel's gravity is pretty low so I had to push the engines to their limit but I took off quite easily. Landing in the shuttle bay was tricky though."

"You'll have time to train," Shepard replied, patting his forearm again.

"The Captains are asking permission to board the Normandy," Joker announced when they were in the elevator.

"Permission granted," Shepard said before realizing it wasn't her decision to take. She looked at Garrus. "Sorry. Old habit."

"That's alright," he shrugged, fighting hard his smile. "Better on my territory than on theirs."

"My territory," Shepard corrected.


He took the time to take Shepard to the medbay before going to CIC. Alenko was waiting with the Captains, looking quite small compared to the two women, one with Pallin tattoos and the other with Magna's. They wore the Sixth Fleet uniform, a dark gray and turquoise armor with a white stripe on the cowl. Four soldiers waited near the airlock. Garrus saluted the Captains the turian way by reflex. They both had a greater tier than him and they all were very aware of that. His Spectre status technically voided his own tier and gave him full authority by Council law. That was precisely what made Turians looking down at Spectres. Tiers were earned. Spectre status was given. That made a very big difference to Turians.

"Captains," Garrus saluted them, "thank you for waiting."

"Did we have a choice?" the tallest with the Pallin tattoo asked, caustic.
"Please, excuse my colleague, Spectre," the other one intervened. "I am Captain Esho, this is Captain Famir."

"And I'm in charge," Famir reminded everyone. "What are we waiting for, exactly, Spectre? We have troops to deploy. Or maybe you forgot about the basics while you played with your human friends," she added, waving at Alenko.

Great, Garrus thought, a Relay 314 Incident veteran. A lot of Turians from this generation and before had hard feelings for Humans. The Earthlings' bad reputation had been spread in the population by those people. The young like Garrus born after the war didn't have the same perception of the situation. Humans weren't officially a threat anymore, the Hierarchy encouraged cooperation between their species, hence the Normandy or training programs in the army, but any kid in boot camp was taught to be more than careful around Humans. Garrus remembered it perfectly.

"Can you fetch the prisoner, Lieutenant Commander?" Garrus asked. Alenko gave a sharp salute, Alliance style, and walked to the elevator, his back straighter than usual. Garrus started to get fed up with military pride. He turned to the Captains. "I've learned to be patient, Captain Famir, and I thought it was a virtue needed for your rank."

"How dare you..." Famir growled but Esho stopped her.

"Is it really necessary, Toren? Spectre?" she asked, staring at them alternatively.

"This little shit..." Famir tried, pointing at Garrus, but Esho interrupted her again, her voice a little louder.

"...is a Spectre and he is in charge despite his young age and inferior tier. He obviously still has a lot to learn," she added, sliding a look in Garrus' direction, "but that's not your place to teach him." Famir grunted and folded her arms. Esho turned to Garrus. "Now, how can we help you, Spectre?"

Garrus felt very immature and stupid before Captain Esho. He had screwed big time but he had to finish the job nonetheless. "We have a team on the ground in contact with Doctor T'Soni, our expert on board. They are reviewing the most valuable artifacts in the ruins and they'll transfer them on the ship today. We don't need support for that. Your role is to secure the zone and take control of the facilities until the situation is cleared."

"How long are we talking?" Famir asked.

"The consortium owning this extraction site is based on Illium so they'll dispatch someone to take charge quite rapidly, it's a matter of days. But you have to stay to protect the ruins until the Council says otherwise. Doctor T'Soni wants to conduct researches here with the help of her university so it might take a while."

"Very well," Famir said, forcing a smile. "Can we deploy our troops now, Spectre?"

"Yes," Garrus agreed. "I'll send you the IDs of our team on the ground." Better safe than sorry, he thought. With a Krogan, a Quarian and three Humans, the team probably looked like a small mercenary gang more than anything else.

"And the prisoner?" Esho asked politely.

Ah shit, Garrus thought. "Right, the prisoner, matriarch Luko M'Tasa. We put them in custody and asked some questions."
"So they require medical care, I suppose?" Famir snorted.

"We took care of that."

M'Tasa hadn't been quite cooperative the previous day and Garrus had had to be a little persuasive to get some answers. He didn't obtain what he had wanted though. M'Tasa had hired the mercenaries to take care of whoever was with Javik but they wouldn't say anything else. They didn't tell why or if they were working for someone else. They just did it. Garrus didn't know what to do with that, honestly, but Sparatus had commanded him to transfer the matriarch to the Sixth Fleet. They would deal with the Asari. Garrus could only obey.

Alenko came back with M'Tasa a few seconds later. Two soldiers came to take them away. The Captains saluted Garrus and followed their men. Garrus waited for Joker's confirmation that the Heta Tung had retracted its footbridge before relaxing a little.

"I'll run a full analysis of the systems," EDI announced through the speakers.

"Yeah, good idea," Garrus approved, turning heel to go to the elevator.

"You think they left something behind?" Alenko asked, following him.

"If protocols didn't change in four years, they did." The elevator was still on second deck. Garrus entered it with Alenko and hit the button for crew deck. "I've been in espionage for a while," Garrus explained, folding his arms.

"I knew you were good with tech but I always assumed you were a sniper in the army."

"No, not at all," Garrus shook his head. "I applied for the tech divisions after boot camp, actually. The shooting range was just not for me."

"That's hard to believe," Alenko smiled. The door opened and they turned left, aiming for medbay. "You're going to check on Shepard?" he asked.

"Yes, and I have to talk to T'Soni. They want to go to Thessia but it might be impossible, even for us."

"Why that?"

"No alien ship is allowed to land on Thessia since the Preservation and Protection Act signed by the Republics in 7GS," Garrus recited. It was clear Alenko was a bit lost. "Right, you don't use the Galactic Standard calendar. Let's just say it was a very long time ago. Eezo has always been a precious resource and Thessia has the biggest stock in the known galaxy, so they forbid anyone to come near it."

"They want to protect their resources," Alenko nodded, "I get that."

"That and food and water contain traces of eezo too," Garrus continued. "It has an impact on visitors. Birth of biotics within the salarian population boomed after the foundation of the Citadel Council, especially in descendant of Salarians once invited on Thessia." When biotics gave you a clear advantage, you didn't want your new allies and possible future enemies to develop the same capacities.

"Something similar happened to us," Alenko smiled but there was something sad in his voice. "There was no human biotics before we discovered eezo on Mars and it took us a decade to understand its impact on people. By that time, we were already introduced to the galactic
community and the Alliance...” Alenko stopped in front of the door and looked at Garrus. “Sorry, I'll leave you to it. Call me if you need anything, Sir,” he added, mocking Garrus gently, and walked to the kitchen. Garrus looked at him for a second before entering the medbay.

He automatically noticed that Shepard was resting in the last bed on the right, the light above her shut. T'Soni was on the first bed on the left and Chakwas at her desk. Garrus hesitated a second but eventually went first to the Asari.

"So," he started, "you want to go to Thessia."

T'Soni took a second to rise their eyes from the datapad. "Don't I have to talk to Shepard about that?"

"Shepard is out," the Commander said from her bed. "Please leave a message to the spiky big guy after the beep. Beeeeeeep," Garrus frowned. At least Chakwas seemed amused.

"She didn't object with your project before putting me in charge so I'll roll with it," Garrus shrugged. "If you want to go to Thessia, we'll go to Thessia, whatever it takes."

T'Soni opened big, wide eyes and left the datapad on their knees. "Oh no, no no no," they mumbled, "I never meant on Thessia. You can't. I'll take a shuttle from the Citadel or anywhere, you don't have to take me to Thessia per se."

"Oh," Garrus replied while Shepard giggled in her corner. "But I thought you wanted to take some artifacts with you."

"Yes but transport can be arranged for that too. I can have a line of credits from the university, actually."

"Vakarian," Shepard interrupted. Garrus turned to face her. "Call the Council and ask for another Spectre to go with Liara." He nodded. That was wise, indeed. Prothean artifacts were valuable enough to require protection.

"I don't need a babysitter, Shepard," T'Soni sighed.

"Yeah right," Shepard snorted. "Dig site, prothean barrier, remember?"

"By the Goddess, it was ages ago!"

"Five years."

"I learned a lot since then!" T'Soni blushed. They hopped out of bed, took the datapad and walked to the door. "I need to concentrate. I'll be in my room if you need me."

"Teenagers," Shepard sighed dramatically. T'Soni mumbled something in Prothean Garrus chose to ignore as they got out of medbay. Silence fell on the room for a few seconds until Chakwas cleared her throat.

"I see Kaidan is making a fresh pot of coffee and I could use a cup." She stood from her chair and walked away too.

"Subtle," Shepard snorted once the door closed. She patted the bed with her valid hand but Garrus preferred to sit on another one next to hers. "How did it went, with the Turians?"

"I made a fool of myself," he sighed, "and I'm lucky it's a duty to elders to teach the young,
otherwise I'd be too mortified to even stand before you."

"Wow, that good, huh?" Shepard chuckled. "Don't worry, leading is something you have to learn, it's not natural. Even I had to learn."

"Oh, I thought you were still in training, you know, with correspondence courses or something like that."

"Mocking your injured mentor," Shepard laughed, "you have no shame, Vakarian! Aouch!" She winced and rubbed the ribs on her right. "Seems like the marvelous effects of my meds come to an end."

"I can call Chakwas or Solus if you want."

"No, it's okay," Shepard said. "Let's not give Joker an occasion to record me."

"He mentioned that," Garrus nodded, "but I'm sure it's for the greater good."

"How so?" Shepard asked, intrigued.

"You're pretty scary when you frown but I guarantee you you're even more terrifying when you laugh for nothing."

Shepard snorted, a smirk on her lips. "I scared you today?"

"Not scared, really," Garrus shrugged, lowering his eyes, "but you made me uncomfortable."

"I didn't notice," Shepard mocked. "You're always uncomfortable around me."

"Yeah, and whose fault is it?" Garrus grunted. "I certainly don't wiggle underwear under your nose."

"You don't have underwear."

"That's not the point," he replied, staring at her. She was smiling, definitively amused, and Garrus sighed. She knew how to push his buttons, that was for sure.

"C'mon," she said. "I wasn't quite myself earlier but it's no excuse. I should respect your boundaries, no matter what. I'm sorry, Garrus."

"Really?" he grumbled, folding his arms as her smile widened. "Now?"

"Well, you're in charge while I recover," she replied, "so technically you have the upper hand, therefore I can choose to use your first name or not. And I choose to."

"I definitively like you better when you're yelling at me."

Shepard smirked. "I knew you were a kinky bastard."

"I'm leaving now," Garrus declared, springing on his feet as Shepard laughed. She was asking for mercy by the time he reached the door.

Before Garrus knew it, five days had passed and they were docking on Illium. Garrus was watching the skyscrapers flash before his eyes, standing behind Joker in the cockpit. He could have enjoyed the sight of one of the jewels of the galaxy, its endless towers, its delicate suspended gardens and terraces, the eternal sunset bathing the pole with a generous warmth, but all he could
focus on was Shepard, in the corner of his field of vision, sinking in the co-pilot seat, mute like for the better part of the day. The Commander had slowly became herself again with the reduction of her pain medication during the trip but Garrus knew the imminent parting also had an impact on her. T'Soni had emptied all their room and packed their belongings in two crates now waiting for transport in the shuttle bay with the rest of the artifacts they wanted to take. T'Soni wasn't just leaving for a while.

They docked in the biggest spaceport of Illium, the Normandy looking small in the middle of freighters and commercial flights from all over the galaxy. Joker left the control of the ship to EDI and walked with Shepard and Garrus to the elevator. Everyone was gathered in the shuttle bay, saying goodbye to T'Soni. Some workers were already taking the crates away. Joker hugged the Asari and even kissed them on the cheek.

"I'll miss you, little one," he said, rubbing the top of their head. "Promise to write to your uncle, would ya?"

"It appears I have a lot of uncles," T'Soni giggled but they were on the verge of tears, their eyes darkened and puffy. They hugged Joker once more. "Be well, Jeff." When they turned to Shepard, she straightened.

"I'll walk with you," she decided, pointing the docks with a jerk of her chin.

T'Soni nodded and looked at Garrus, a sheepish smile on their lips. "I suppose we'll also say goodbye outside then?"

Wrex snorted because of the insinuation and Garrus frowned a little. He wasn't going to follow Shepard out of habit, he had to meet the Spectre accompanying T'Soni to Thessia. Zorah was sobbing behind her mask as the goodbyes kept going. Wrex reminded T'Soni to aim for the quad. Williams gently pinched their cheeks and told them to be proud and strong. Traynor thanked them for their friendship. Chakwas made them promise to regularly send news. Legion gave them a hardcover book, human poetry. Javik grunted and patted them on the shoulder.

There was a cool breeze on the docks. Garrus inhaled deeply the burnt smell of the ship reactors, his fringes catching the low buzz of the engines. It made him shiver more than the wind or the memories associated with the atmosphere.

Tela Vasir was an asari Spectre, tall only because they wore high heels. Their skin was of a deep indigo with darker stripes and dots on almost all their face. Vasir offered their hand to T'Soni when they reached them but only nodded to Shepard and Garrus. "So you're the Spectre I've heard so much about lately," Vasir said and Garrus jumped. "Not you, boy," they corrected, sliding a cold look in his direction. "Her."

"Give him some credit," Shepard smirked, knocking the front of Garrus' armor. "He kicked ass so far." The compliment warmed up Garrus' chest. He had to admit it felt good.

"I don't give credit to Spectres like you," Vasir replied, falling to a hip and folding her arms. That reminded Garrus of someone else. "You don't know what discretion and secrecy are. All you do is running around, yelling and blowing stuff up. We're supposed to be part of the secret services, and yet your face is on every goddamn holoscreen of the Citadel every time I go there."

"That's the problem with Asaris," Shepard snorted, "they live so long they can't deal with change." Vasir frowned and Garrus saw them tense. Shepard too, by her reaction, but that didn't stop her from continuing. "I've got news for you, grandma. Nobody gives a shit about you precisely because everybody looks at me and my big guns."
"And we all work for the Council," Garrus interrupted before the blue shimmer in Vasir's eyes degenerated into something more dangerous. "It's up to them to send us on missions accordingly to our specific sets of skills."

Vasir and Shepard stared at each other for a few seconds but eventually stopped. Shepard turned to T'Soni to hug them, which surprised both Garrus and the good Doctor. They timidly reciprocated the embrace.

"There will always be a place for you on my ship," Shepard whispered. "Be well, Liara."

T'Soni buried their face in Shepard's shoulder to hide their tears but Garrus heard their hiccups and thanks. He looked away to gave them a little privacy and met Vasir's gaze. They rolled their eyes and walked away.

T'Soni eventually wiped their tears off and released Shepard. They came in front of Garrus, smiling softly, their eyes still wet. "Take good care of her, please," they said, pointing at Shepard, which snorted. Garrus couldn't help but smile. He straightened and gave T'Soni a turian salute.

"I'll do my best, Liara."

They laughed, tears menacing to fall again. "Be well, Garrus."

Shepard took a cigarette out of her pack and lit it as they watched Liara walk with Vasir through the docks. She inhaled deeply, the tobacco crackling a little, and blew the smoke by the mouth. "She was so annoying with her helplessness and her crush on me," Shepard eventually said. Garrus was surprised by the sudden confession but he didn't dare to interrupt her. "And God, she's just dangerous for us with a gun in her hands," she continued, "but I'll miss her." She snorted, not out of mockery but to prevent her tears. Her voice was trembling a little. "God I'll miss her."

Garrus looked at her drawing on her cigarette again. He reached for her, stroking her hair softly as if he was comforting one of his kind. Shepard let him do it, maybe too busy fighting her tears to notice. Liara and Vasir disappeared in the distance.

TBC
Shepard was already in the mess when Kaidan arrived with Ashley and James for breakfast. She looked better than the previous days, hematomas fading and smile progressively coming back. The departure of Liara had hurt her more than what she showed, Kaidan knew it. They had a complicated past together. Kaidan didn't recall a time when Liara wasn't enamored with Shepard, but Shepard always had kept her distances with the young Asari. Liara was legal by galactic law but still a child for her species and it showed. She could have immature reactions sometimes – far less than Tali though. It grossed Shepard out but her problem with Liara was of another kind. Shepard felt obligated to care for Liara since she had killed her mother.

Kaidan was glad Vakarian was around to compensate. Shepard had spent a lot of time with him since she had put him in charge, following him everywhere and biting her lips to not say anything behind his back. Vakarian didn't seem to mind the extra pressure. He did Shepard's work with zeal, even her usual rounds. Kaidan had had the occasion to chat a little with him before – which hadn't been facilitated by their mutual shyness – but Vakarian was definitively more comfortable during rounds. Kaidan thought it was because of the clear hierarchy it gave them. Vakarian had always been sort of an outsider on the Normandy, under Shepard's command but nobody's superior or subordinate otherwise. With his temporary promotion, he knew where he stood in the ranks, therefore how to behave.

Kaidan made a mental note to talk about that to Shepard later, but for now she was sipping her cup of coffee, Javik next to her like always, his bottle of strawberry juice within reach. In front of him was Joker – Kaidan had heard him getting up around three AM – and Vakarian on his right, datapads spread all around him on the table.

"I'm telling you, you're complicating things," Shepard was saying. "Just pick two and be done with it."

"Yeah, just do it like Shepard," Joker mocked. "Close your eyes and point in a direction."

"One hundred percent efficient," Shepard confirmed, nodding. Javik snorted.

"This is serious," Vakarian grunted, scrolling on a datapad.

"What's the problem?" Kaidan asked, coming closer to the quartet as Ashley and James went to the counter.

"Garrus doesn't know who to take with him on Erinle," Shepard answered and Vakarian frowned, a reflex at this point. She gave him a smile back he probably didn't notice. Shepard had decided to use his first name after Viantel but he wasn't fond of the idea. From what Kaidan knew, Shepard was actually forcing their friendship. He understood Vakarian. There was nothing more irritating than people trying to befriend you when you didn't feel like it.

"I can come with you," Kaidan offered, out of good charity more than need of action. Vakarian turned his head to look at him.

"You're actually more likely to be in the team than most of the others," he said and looked back at
his datapad to confirm something. He scrolled a little more and seemed satisfied.

"Aren't you happy, Alenko?" Shepard mocked. "You're actually more likely to be in the team, yay!" Vakarian frowned again and this time caught Shepard's smile. He turned back to his datapads, mandibles flickering.

"I suppose I'm in the biotics pool," Kaidan replied, "but I'm the weakest on board. Javik and Wrex may be better suited than me."

"I've been on Ilos with Javik and I train with him," Vakarian explained, "or rather get punched a lot..." Javik didn't hide his smirk "...but I'd say he's not the best choice for this mission. Not... subtle enough. No offense," he added, sliding a look to the Prothean.

"Non taken," Javik said. "It is a wise decision for a primitive."

Vakarian's mandibles twitched. "And Wrex, well, I'm considering to take Tali'Zorah and I don't want them together in a mission."

"They're efficient and rather complementary," Kaidan told him. "With a sniper like you in support, it could be a good idea."

"They're involved," Vakarian winced, putting his datapads back on the table.

"You make it sound like it's something really disgusting," Shepard snorted behind her cup of coffee. James and Ashley arrived at the table with their trays and one extra for Kaidan. He thanked them with a smile.

"You know my point of view on the matter," Vakarian reminded Shepard. Kaidan had trouble picturing them talking about feelings, somehow. "Love is irrational, and their relationship is really disturbing."

To Kaidan's surprise, Javik took Wrex and Tali's defense. "What do you know about their love?" he asked. "And who are you to judge? You know nothing of them so let them live and enjoy their days together."

"Yep, E.T.'s right," James added.

"I know that reference, Lieutenant," Javik growled and James gave him a forced smile as an apology.

"I don't want their relationship to interfere with the mission," Vakarian continued. "Besides, they've been arguing lately and I don't want to be in the middle of it."

"They are both professional enough to put aside their problems when needed," Shepard insisted.

"Still," Vakarian replied, checking again his datapads, "I'd rather not have them both with me on a mission." His mandibles flickered a little. He seemed to do that a lot when under pressure, Kaidan noticed. It was probably a tic. "Alenko as support and Tali'Zorah as tech," Vakarian decided.

"Or I can be the sniper and you the tech," Ashley said, stirring her cup of tea. "That would solve your problem."

Vakarian visibly hesitated, looking alternatively to Ashley and Shepard but he didn't receive any help. He spoke with caution. "You're part of Shepard's team and I know she sees value in you. She is a better judge of character than me, by far. But, I'm in charge for now and I won't take you on
this mission, probably not on any other either, because having two snipers in the team is simply redundant." Ashley gave him a cold look in return. Vakarian noticed it. "It's my fault, really," he added, his tone calm. "My set of skills is actually a problem for this crew because I can virtually replace any tech, sniper or simple soldier in any given situation."

"Thanks for the simple soldier," James snorted.

"That's why you can play tech," Ashley insisted.

"I've made my decision," Vakarian said.

"Williams," Shepard interrupted before Ashley could speak, "that's enough. You wouldn't defy my authority or Javik's."

Ashley was stubborn enough to say something stupid at that moment but James prevented anything of that sort. He put his hand on Ashley's, shaking his head a little. Ashley frowned and eventually resumed her breakfast in silence, avoiding eye contact. Kaidan's chest tightened but he said nothing, sat at the table and started eating.

"I should have known Shepard was going to defend her Turian," Ashley said once the door of crew quarters closed behind her. She visibly didn't care about Chakwas, Adams and Cortez getting ready for their shift.

"You don't mean that," Kaidan replied, trying to temper her words. If the Commander heard anything from this conversation, Ashley would have to pack her things and go.

She punched her locker. "I mean everything I say," she roared.

"Hey hey hey," James intervened, putting gently his hands on Ashley's shoulders, "easy there, Chiquita." She rolled her shoulders to free herself but he didn't let her go.

"What is happening?" Chakwas asked.

"None of your fuck..." Ashley yelled but a glance from the doctor made her rethink her sentence. "None of your business," she eventually grunted.

"Ash wanted to go on Erinle but Garrus chose Kaidan and Tali, is all," James answered.

"I didn't want to go," Ashley corrected, pushing him clearly this time. "I'm useless here," she said, walking to the window giving on the reactor. James didn't follow her. "I didn't do shit since Ilos and it's killing me. Why the fuck do I even stay here, Goddammit?"

"Language," Chakwas reminded her.

"I understand your frustration but the Commander warned us about this," Adams said calmly. The chief engineer was a rather discreet man, a good man, very dedicated to his job. He was actually older than Chakwas and had seen more in his career than most of them. He didn't speak much, which gave him some sort of wise aura. His words carried weight. "Vakarian is an excellent soldier," he continued and Ashley snorted. "It's true," he shrugged, "and it's the reason why he's here with us."

Ashley turned to face Adams, anger deforming her traits, eyes full of tears. "Don't you think I know that?" she yelled. "Don't you think I'm aware of being a dead weight in this fucking crew? Everyday I wake up and wonder why I'm here and when Shepard will finally let go of me, this useless, redundant sniper I am!" Her tears rolled on her cheeks. "She needed me before because I
was better than her in that one domain she's not the best at, and then came that Geth. I can't compete with a fucking Geth but at least I am human, I have emotions and feelings and it gives me the advantage. But now, now there is this Turian, this incredible sniper with all his tech knowledge and fucking attitude!" Ashley hiccuped. "I've been replaced twice so don't you fucking think I don't know that!"

Kaidan took a step to reach her but James stopped him, a hand on his shoulder. "You gotta get prepared for the mission, you and Esteban. I'll deal with the lady." Kaidan hesitated. "Don't worry," James insisted, "I got this."

Kaidan nodded and went to his locker to take his under-armor suit, keeping an eye on James taking Ashley in his arms. She was crying for good on his shoulder when Kaidan got out of crew quarters and it hurt.

Kaidan had always admired Ashley for her determination. She was a strong woman, like Shepard, but with a softer, more fragile core, something she showed only in the darkest hours of the night, when they met in the utility room to share an enjoyable moment together. Kaidan had no illusion. They weren't a couple, they weren't in love, just friends and teammates. It was enough for them, or Kaidan had thought it was enough. Evidently Ashley needed more than a fuck buddy in those times, but it was a terrible idea to pretend to be in love with her just to support her. Besides, Kaidan already loved another. Ashley knew it. So, in some way, Kaidan was glad Ashley had found comfort in James' arms but it still hurt a little. Nobody liked to be replaced.

Tali was already in the shuttle bay when Kaidan arrived with Cortez. She was arguing with Wrex near the lockers.

"You're taking his side now?" Tali was yelling. "You're choosing the Turian over me?"

"I never said that," Wrex roared back. "I told you to stop being a fucking idiot and to grow the fuck up!"

"You're the fucking idiot who needs to grow the fuck up!"

"Raaaaaaaaah!"

"This is going to be a fun day," Cortez whispered to Kaidan before aiming for the shuttle.

Kaidan nodded, watching Tali and Wrex yell at each other. It was actually the first time they did that in public. Their relationship, even if weird, had been relatively unnoticed on board. They didn't show much – it was complicated for Tali to show affection considering her condition. Things had started to change from the moment Wrex and Garrus had worked together. Krogans and Turians were supposed to be enemies but those two were capable of recognizing a soldier's value and they worked great together. Tali didn't like her boyfriend's new favorite Turian.

She didn't like much Vakarian, actually, and Kaidan started to understand why, thanks to Ashley. It had a little to do with species but also with competition. Tali had been the best engineer on board for four years, the one Shepard always relied on and gave special assignments to. She hadn't been threatened by Legion despite its fantastic knowledge because Shepard was smart enough to alternate between the Geth and Tali in missions. But now that Shepard had to train Vakarian to be on his own, it didn't leave much room for any other sniper or tech. Though Adams was right. Shepard had warned them all and tried to be fair. It just wasn't easy to pick a third teammate with a guy like Vakarian always with her.

Kaidan suddenly understood Vakarian's dilemma this morning in the mess. He had known
someone was going to be unhappy with his decision whatever his choice. In a way, he had avoided Tali's fury, without knowing he had slapped Ashley instead. To be honest, Vakarian and Ashley had barely talked to each other since he had joined the Normandy. Shepard had commanded Ash to help Vakarian with his English learning but she hadn't followed that order. She hated Turians too much for that. Vakarian's shyness didn't help either. He hadn't tried to talk to her because he probably felt uncomfortable under her hard looks and condescending tone. Kaidan couldn't blame him, really. Even he had had problems befriending Ashley four years ago.

"You should fuck him while you're at it!" Kaidan snapped back into reality as Tali's voice rose. She was shaking head to toe from anger, pointing her finger at Wrex, which wasn't something a young quarian lady was supposed to do. Nor swear, but Tali swore as much as Wrex.

"I don't want to fuck him," the Krogan replied, "I want to fuck you!" That wasn't something Kaidan wanted to hear. He aimed for the shuttle too. Better get a scolding from Vakarian for not being ready in time than staying near those two.

"So why don't you fuck me?" Tali yelled even louder. "It's been two months, Wrex, two months!" Yep, definitively too much information. "You're not injured anymore but each time you say no! So what? I'm not enough? You fuck another one? Tell me!"

"This is none of your goddamned business, little girl," Wrex roared back. "I fuck who I want, when I want, and I certainly don't take orders from a larva like you!"

"And will you take orders from me?" Vakarian asked, his voice resonating in the shuttle bay. Kaidan hadn't heard the elevator arriving. He turned to see the Turian in his heavy armor, hands in his back, head held high. He didn't look like his quiet, shy but sarcastic nerd self at that moment, not at all. Wrex and Tali both shut up. "Tali'Zorah," Vakarian continued on a more reasonable tone, "get ready, we're leaving in ten. Wrex, you'll have the shuttle bay for training after." He looked at them for a second before aiming for his locker.

Kaidan had to admit he was impressed. He didn't know where Vakarian had learned to do that but it was efficient – brilliant even. Tali eventually snorted and left Wrex to his mumbled rants. She was the first to hop in the shuttle, long before Kaidan was done with his armor.

"Good job there," he congratulated Vakarian in a whisper. The Turian was taking forever to pick his weapons. He just nodded his thanks, mandibles flickering. Kaidan wasn't good when it came to turian facial expressions but that one was obvious. Vakarian was uncomfortable. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"Not wrong per se," Vakarian replied, stuffing his pockets with extra clips. "I just..." He gave a quick look to Kaidan. "I really sounded like my father."

Kaidan couldn't help but laugh.

Erinle was a dying garden world, once rich and welcoming but worn-out today. It had started to die long before the Salarians had colonized it. A planet's fauna always followed patterns alternating between luxuriant periods full of life and mass extinctions. Erinle had reached this state. Its fauna was dying regardless of the Salarians' efforts to maintain it, and its complicated floral system was starting to fall apart too. The planet looked green due to the toxic algae slowly asphyxiating every river, sea or ocean and it smelled like rotten corpses. Despite all of that, the soil remained rich enough to support agriculture. Erinle, due to its location between the Attican Traverse and the Terminus Systems, had become an important spaceport. It was a reliable source of fresh food, water and fuel, an oasis protected by the Salarians.
So, of course, there were mercenaries on this world.

The mission today wasn't the traditional cleaning of a mercenary outpost though. After months of silence, Cerberus had started to move again. Another Spectre, a Salarian who had taken refuge on Erinle after a hard time in the Terminus Systems, had heard rumors about the recent increase of the human terrorist organization activities on the planet. Shepard's team had to investigate and decide what to do after.

A lot of Humans roamed the galaxy in search for adventures outside of their colonies, but reality tended to rapidly hit them hard. Traveling wasn't free. They often arrived on a new planet or station, worked there for a while and continued their journey once they had enough money. Humans had become a strong working force in the last decade in all the galaxy. The image it gave to their species didn't quite please the Alliance or all the politicians back on Earth.

Quite generally, the introduction to the galactic community had been a big "meh". Humans had always wanted to discover the stars and meet extraterrestrial life, but they soon realized after the First Contact War that the galaxy was full of blazed people who didn't give a shit about Humans. They weren't the saviors they were supposed to be and nobody needed them to be extraordinary explorers opening new routes into the unknown. Humans were yet another species like half a dozen others, technologically very late, and kind of annoying to be honest, like kids in need of attention during a grow-ups quiet dinner.

And it hadn't pleased a good part of the population. Some Humans had started to militate to engage in more decisive actions, to be more aggressive in the colonial expansion. Some had even spoken of a war to boost the economy and show those damn aliens who was in charge. Those people had founded Cerberus, an organization dedicated to promote human interests no matter what. The group was full of ex-soldiers disgusted by the way the Alliance handled the expansion of their species, survivalists who liked to play war, idealists frustrated by the non-importance of Humanity, religious people incapable of dealing with extraterrestrial life or just bored kids who had needed direction at a time.

The Alliance had classified Cerberus as a terrorist organization the day of the Yandoa Incident, when eezo dust had rained on the colony after the explosion of a Eldfell-Ashland Energy vessel during its entry in the atmosphere of the planet in 2170, but it hadn't been Cerberus' first try. They had placed their people long before, assassinated obstacles, spread eezo dust in the population, abducted kids with biotic potential and so on. They had been very, very busy for more than two decades.

Until last New Year or so. Cerberus had launched an attack on the Citadel six galactic months ago, it was public knowledge, but what the good people of Council Space didn't know much about was that Cerberus had also attacked Omega at the same time. Granted, it had been an invasion on a much smaller scale. Only ten thousand Cerberus soldiers had attacked, but they had had the support of roughly twenty thousands mercenaries, Humans for the bigger part but also Krogans and Vorchas.

Too bad for them, the Normandy SR1 had been docked on Omega for the New Year. Cerberus' recruits and their mercenaries weren't much of a challenge for a well trained team like Shepard's. She had cleaned a whole level of Omega with her men before being noticed by Aria T'Loak. The two women had their differences but they had joined forces to retake Omega. It had been Javik's best New Year ever, though the fights had lasted three days. Plenty of time to discover the location of Cerberus' headquarters through their communications. Shepard had launched an attack right away and pushed the first Normandy to its limits to reach the Horse Head Nebula in a week.
Velocity had been the key. Cerberus had been worn-out so little time after their two defeats. Taking their base hadn't been easy per se but manageable nonetheless. Good soldiers had died that day, friends and teammates, but Kaidan wanted to believe they didn't die for nothing. Cerberus' head, the Illusive Man, had been killed that day, and the organization had lost a good part of its value. Without that man, Jack Harper, Cerberus had no coordination whatsoever between its different cells. No coordination and no funding either, no regular weapon deliveries, no plan in the long term. It had been a big victory for the Alliance and for the Council, but Shepard hadn't been fooled. She had seen each cell as a new potential threat, without a strong man to maintain them in check. "Cerberus will spread like a cancer," she had said as they waited for the station to crash into Anadius, admiring the supergiant star through the tinted glass of the commanding room of the station. She had had a sad laugh and added: "The great Commander Shepard fails again."

"Alenko?"

Kaidan almost jumped and turned to Vakarian on his right. "Sorry, what were you saying?" The Turian's mandibles flickered a little as he looked at Kaidan but he didn't say a thing and he turned to Tali.

"I said I don't want you to mess with my drones," Tali repeated, legs crossed and arms folded in front of them in the shuttle.

"We were reviewing the plan," Vakarian added. Tali shook her head in that little annoyed gesture of hers.

"I'll do my best," Kaidan said. Tali snorted. He wanted to remind her he had nothing to do with her problem with Vakarian, or with Wrex, but now wasn't the time for that. It'd come later, during the debriefing or when he could talk to her in private.

The shuttle landed two minutes later on top of a canyon running east to west, in the middle of a humid tropical forest. Fog blurred the lines in the distance and softened the sounds of the fauna.

"Nothing big with sharp teeth around, EDI?" Kaidan called through the radio as he took his assault rifle. Vakarian snorted.

"Turians," EDI replied.

"Hey," Vakarian protested, frowning.

"There are Turians near the facilities," EDI insisted. "They are bigger than Humans and have sharper teeth. Am I wrong, Spectre Vakarian?"

"No," he admitted in a grunt. Kaidan fought his smile hard. EDI hadn't lost her sense of humor apparently.

"Why would there be Turians in a Cerberus outpost?" Tali asked, already doing something on her omnitool.

"Mercs are mercs," Kaidan shrugged. "As long as the money is good, they don't care about species."

"I don't like it," Vakarian said, looking around through the scope of his Valiant. "Let's move, we'll see that later. If they are in our way, well, they'll be in our way," Kaidan took point, eye on his scope, methodically scanning the path as they progressed.

"You already proved you didn't care much about your people," Tali snorted behind him.
"What are you talking about?" Vakarian asked from the rear. "Of course I do." The track followed the south wall of the canyon. It had been cleared and didn't offer much cover for them so Kaidan decided to take it slow. He stopped behind a tree to check their surroundings before walking again.

"Do you?" Tali continued. "I saw you kill a man begging for his life."

"What man? When?" To his defense, Vakarian was showing a lot of patience. Kaidan knew Shepard would have told Tali to shut up and wait to be back on the Normandy to talk about that.

"The man you killed on Omega," Tali insisted, her voice clearly annoyed, "after the Blue Suns attacked us."

"I don't recall any... Oh," Vakarian realized. "It was a woman, actually, and no soldier should be left behind."

"What do you mean?"

"That means you don't leave someone breathing on the battlefield," Vakarian explained. "You don't let your opponents agonize slowly, out of respect for them. It's a turian thing, I guess."

"It's barbaric," Tali grunted. "We could have taken him or her or whatever to Solus' clinic!"

"She wouldn't have made it."

"How do you know?" Tali insisted.

"I've killed enough people to know," Vakarian simply replied. His voice didn't carry any regret or guilt but there was definitively something in it that made Tali shut up. But not for long.

"Is Magos a woman too?" she asked, still a little provoking but calmer than before.

Vakarian chuckled. "No, definitively a man."

Tali’s curiosity seemed satisfied and she stayed quiet until they reached the bottom of the canyon. The road was larger but a little curved there. From where they were, they didn't see much of the front door. Tali activated two recon drones which explored their surroundings for twenty seconds or so.

"It's strange," she said, double-checking her omnitool. "The Turians are not there anymore."

Vakarian knelt to set his sniper rifle on the ground and lay on his stomach next to it.

"Could they have moved behind cover to wait for us?" Kaidan asked, looking at the walls of the canyon above them. There could be secret passages and hidden rooms in the rock.

"We'd be dead already," Vakarian calmly stated, eye on the scope. Kaidan wondered what he could see with a line of sight so small and so much vegetation. "There's activity inside," the Turian added.

"How do you know?" Tali grunted, taking her shotgun out.

"Thermal scope," Vakarian said, still scanning their surroundings. "Fifty centimeters of solid steel is nothing for this baby."

"And what kind of activity there is inside?" Kaidan asked, trying to not deviate too much of the mission.
"A firefight," Vakarian answered, standing up and taking his rifle with him. "Don't you hear the gunshots?" Kaidan and Tali shook their head. Vakarian's mandibles flickered. "Must be a Turian thing then." He pointed to the left. "There is a few rocks big enough to take cover on the left. Alenko, you get there. Tali'Zorah, your shotgun's range of fire is too small so stay behind and hack everything you can, armors, weapons, doors, whatever."

"There is no cover for a sniper," Kaidan commented.

"I'll find something," Vakarian shrugged. "Get in position while they're busy. I'll cover you."

Kaidan jogged on a few meters with Vakarian but the Turian stopped in a ditch on the right of the road and let him continue. He ran for the rocks and took cover without anybody trying to shoot him, so he probably hadn't been noticed yet. Kaidan had now a clear view of the main door, the only opening on a high wall made of rusty steel panels. Now that he was closer, Kaidan could hear the faint sound of shootings inside.

"EDI?" he called. "Do you know what's going on inside?"

EDI didn't have time to answer. Kaidan felt a heat wave wash over him before a massive column of fire pierced the sky. The ground shook, the air was too hot to breath and the explosion made his ears ring. His cover barely protected him, pieces of rock and red hot steel flying everywhere in the canyon. When Kaidan dared to look around, there only was a boiling crater of melted metal fifty meters from him, so hot he had to protect his face with his arm. Holy shit, Kaidan thought as he searched around for Vakarian and Tali. An orbital strike.

The temperature of the air made it unstable, wobbly like on a hot summer day above a road. Kaidan didn't see much and his radio was only giving him statics due to the radiations. He got out of cover with caution, avoiding as much melted rock as possible, and reached Vakarian's position. The Turian was sitting on his heels, head in his hands, nose and mouth bleeding. Parts of his armor had melted but he didn't seem injured, only scratched here and there. Kaidan knelt before him and put a hand on his shoulders. Vakarian didn't raise his eyes to him.

"Vakarian, you okay?" Kaidan asked.

The Spectre screamed of dolor, bending as much as his armor permitted to protect his head, hands clenched on it.

"Turians hear with their bones," Tali said, limping in their direction. Her right tight was bleeding and her mask cracked. Kaidan sprang on his feet to come help her walk. "The sound is conducted by their fringes and resonates in all the skull. He's going to have a massive headache for days, if his brain hasn't melted."

"We gotta get out of here before anyone comes to see if there is any survivors," Kaidan whispered.

"An orbital strike usually does the work," Tali grunted.

"I don't want to take any risk. Cortez wasn't far from here. He'd have seen what happened and headed here. It won't take him long."

Tali nodded and walked with Alenko back to Vakarian. The Turian was still prostrated but Tali had the priority. Kaidan patched her up quickly, knowing fully she'd suffer from allergies and infections for a week or so. Kaidan then managed to find a dextro medigel in one of Vakarian's pouches and applied it with the lightest touch possible on the fringes. He didn't know if it would work but communications with the Normandy were still impossible and he didn't have a better idea.
He made a mental note to ask later a crash course on turian emergency cares to Chakwas or Solus as the shuttle approached. Tali helped Kaidan put Vakarian on his feet and, damn, he was heavy – bone and muscle densities twice those of a Human, Kaidan remembered. Tali couldn't support much with her leg so Kaidan let her take Vakarian's Valiant and he carried the Spectre, wincing and whimpering at each step he took. Blue blood was dripping on Kaidan's cheek and he could feel the burn of the alien liquid spreading in his wounds. That was just fucking great. A deadly allergic reaction was just what he needed right now.

The shuttle couldn't land in the canyon but Cortez was a good pilot and he didn't see a stationary flight as a problem. Kaidan, still holding Vakarian, helped Tali to hop in the cargo. He then sat the Turian on the floor and pushed him inside, Tali making sure he wouldn't fall on his back and break a fringe at the same time. Kaidan was about to jump in the shuttle when he felt the cold metal of a gun barrel on his temple.

"Don't play the hero, kiddo," a low human voice damaged by years of smoking told him loud enough to cover the thrusters. Kaidan just turned his eyes to see an old man on his right, with one gray eye and another pale blue, scars all over the face, gray hair and wearing a yellow, black and white armor. His right upper arm wasn't covered and showed tribal tattoos. Kaidan readied his biotics in his fist but the old man pushed the gun a little more against his skin. "What did I just say, heh? Get in, we'll talk on the way."

Kaidan heard the sound of a rifle being recharged and saw Vakarian aiming at the man with his Valiant, breathing heavily but steadily. He didn't have to talk. His eyes spoke for him.

The mercenary laughed. He held his other hand high enough for everybody to see what it contained. "See that remote, Ugly? It commands the salarian strategic defense satellite which made that big hole over there. If anything happens to me, we all go boom in the next second."

Kaidan didn't know if the merc was bluffing or not but he wasn't willing to bet his teammates' lives. "Vakarian," he commanded, praying for the Turian to hear him, "put that down. He's coming with us."

Vakarian didn't lower his rifle but Tali eventually put a hand on it and pushed it down gently. He let her do it, to Kaidan's surprise. The mercenary hopped in the shuttle and sat to have a view on the cargo and Cortez, gun still aimed at Kaidan. "What are we waiting for?" he asked. "Up we go my pretties."

The door slammed and the shuttle left the canyon. But, instead of lowering the shuttle's weight and going up, Cortez stayed near the ground, aiming east to the spaceport. Steve, you beautiful son of a bitch, Kaidan thought, keeping his face straight. They had no reason to go there and EDI would quickly notice that something was wrong, as soon as the communications were back. And the mercenary didn't know that.

The holoscreen in the cargo lightened up on Shepard maybe two tensed and silent minutes later. The merc aimed at it right away in order to shoot it but he didn't pull the trigger, baffled.

"What's going on?" Shepard asked, a slight frown between her eyebrows. The old man wasn't in the field of vision of the camera above the screen, she couldn't see him. "What happened? Why is Vakarian on the floor?"

"Jany?" the mercenary asked, standing up before the screen.

Shepard frowned for good as she studied the face of the intruder and Kaidan saw realization hit her. "Grand-pa?"
The rest of the flight was very awkward to say the least. Kaidan was more than glad to see the shuttle's door open on Shepard with Javik on her right and Wrex on her left, Solus and Chakwas nearby to receive the wounded, James and Ashley fake-working on the Mako. The mercenary, Zaeed Massani as he had told them during the ride, jumped on the metallic floor and opened wide his arms to hug Shepard. She let him and even replied with a pat of her left hand on his back, her right still immobilized.

"Christ," he said, taking a step back to look at her, still grabbing her arms, "aren't you a giant now, Love!"

"Thanks for reminding me," Shepard grunted and he laughed, a genuine laugh that quite didn't fit the character. She was indeed a few inches taller than him. Shepard's attention snapped to Kaidan and Tali helping Vakarian to get out. "Care to explain why your tried to kill my men?" she asked, jerking her chin to point them. To Kaidan's relieve, Wrex and Solus came to help carry the Turian. Tali went with them but Kaidan stayed behind. He didn't want to leave Shepard with that guy, even if Javik was still here.

"Didn't know they were with you," Zaeed replied, shrugging. "And I could ask why the fuck they were there in the first place, Jany. Your men almost screwed up my mission."

"Did the Council send you here?"

"No."

"Then you were interfering with my mission, Gramps."

"Arh, don't give me your Spectre bullshit, Love," Zaeed grunted. "I can still slap your shiny little ass to remind you whom you're speaking to."

"I doubt that," Javik commented, his low and grumbling voice perfect for this kind of threat. Zaeed looked at him with disdain.

"Boy, it's ugly. What is this thing?"

"This is Javik, my XO," Shepard replied. "A piece of advice: don't piss him off." Javik snorted, a little smirk on his lips. "Come on, let's talk somewhere more appropriate," she continued, pointing to the elevator. "Alenko," she called and she didn't need to give him an order for him to follow her. "How is Vakarian?" she asked once the button for crew deck selected.

"Not so good," Kaidan answered. "The explosion did something to his fringes from what I understood."

"He got LIB-ed," Zaeed smirked, folding his arms. Shepard frowned.

"What's libed?" Kaidan asked.

"Low Impulse Beam," Shepard explained. "It's a side effect of some kind of low energy lasers and Turians are really sensitive to those frequencies. That's why category F lasers are banned by Council Law."

"But Erinle isn't in Council Space, Love," Zaeed said. Shepard nodded, slightly annoyed. "Besides, what are you doing with a fucking Turian in your team?" Kaidan frowned as the elevator's door opened. So, Zaeed Massani was a veteran of the First Contact War. Having him for dinner would be fun.
"He's an excellent soldier," Shepard replied, showing the way to the mess.

"Don't tell me your one of those worthless alien bangers."

"That is none of your business." Shepard turned to Alenko. "You should head to medbay too. I'll come later to check on you guys." Alenko just nodded and exchanged a look with Javik. The Prothean blinked slowly in approval and kept on following Shepard.

Tali was leaving medbay when Kaidan reached the door. She had a small box of medical supplies for dextros under her arm.

"And your injuries?" Kaidan asked.

"I'll take care of it by myself," Tali shrugged. "I'd rather not be too much around the Turian if he's bleeding."

"Ah, yes," Kaidan understood. "Call if you need any help."

"Thanks, Kaidan," Tali replied and he saw a glimpse of her smile behind the cracked mask. She patted him on the arm and limped to the elevator.

Wrex was helping Solus and Chakwas removing Vakarian's armor when Kaidan entered. An absolute silence reigned in the room and it took him a second to realize EDI was probably broadcasting white noise in the medbay to cancel any sound that could have aggravated Vakarian's state. The Turian let the doctors and the Krogan strip him, occasionally wincing. Kaidan couldn't turn around. It wasn't the first time he saw a Turian naked – though Vakarian still had his under-armor pants, some sort of black leggings with a hole for the spurs – but it somehow was fascinating. All the right side of Vakarian's chest was mauled with scars expending on his lower abdomen to the left. The exoskeleton was there replaced by a pale grayish skin, flattening all his side compared to the other one.

Kaidan snapped back to attention when he saw Chakwas waving at him. She wanted him out. Kaidan nodded and stepped back to the mess.

"Saw your brother lately, Love?" Zaeed was asking. Kaidan slid a look in their direction – him leaning on the sink, Shepard on the kitchen counter, both sipping a cup of coffee, and Javik standing next to her, hands in his back. She had a brother?

"Not in a decade, no," she shrugged. "Why? What did he do this time?"

"That little cocksucker stole my ship."

"Oh for fuck's sake", Shepard sighed. "I ain't paying for him this time. Been there, done that."

"I ain't asking you to pay for him, Love," Zaeed replied. "You did enough for that little shit. No, I want him to pay me back to the last cent. With interests. A lot of interests."

"Well, good luck with that," Shepard snorted. "He's probably playing dead somewhere."

"Rats always crawl back to the surface, Jany, and I'm a patient man."

"Said the guy who slapped me each time I didn't get a kata right on the first try."

"You had to learn," Zaeed chuckled.

"Are you going to stand there all morning, Alenko?" Shepard suddenly asked, not even looking at
him. Zaeed smirked behind his cup of coffee.

"No, huh, sorry, Commander," he replied, cheeks on fire.

"Tell the others Zaeed is going to stay with us for a while," she ordered. "It appears we are both chasing the same dog."

Cerberus, Kaidan understood as he watched a vicious smile spread on Massani's lips. Something was telling him grand-pa would stay for a while.

TBC
Shepard put her book down and turned her head to look at the clock. Two AM. She sighed and drummed on her bed with her feet out of frustration. This day was officially going to suck. Not enough exercise led to sleepless nights and a terrible need to nap after lunch but Shepard couldn't do otherwise. Her shoulder had been weakened during the mission with Mandor and she hadn't quite followed Chakwas' order to rest after that. In consequence, that Krogan slamming her against a wall on Viantel had shattered her scapula, humerus and a few ribs. Chakwas had spent six hours to repair her shoulder with surgical pins and clips. Four weeks of immobilization was going to be a minimum despite Shepard various implants and biotics. It had been a week so far and she already wanted to blow everything up.

She had wanted to use that time to give Vakarian the opportunity to have control over the Normandy but he was himself out for a few days. That wasn't really a problem. Shepard could perfectly assume her commander role with a few broken bones, and Vakarian would just be team leader once he'd have recovered. Wrex could perfectly take charge of the next mission on Sanctum tomorrow – or today considering the time but whatever. He'd go with Zaeed since the old man had tipped them off about that operation, and probably take Javik too for the trip. Wrex and Javik loved to work together, especially if there was a chance for everything to turn to Hell.

At least they shared that with Zaeed. Otherwise, the old mercenary was the typical seventy-something First Contact War veteran. He was racist, sexist, homophobic, selfish, narcissistic, anarchist when needed and he hated aliens, all of them but especially Turians. Having him on board was going to be a real treat, Shepard knew it, but she also had to take his good side into consideration. Zaeed had a lifetime of experience on the battlefield and had connections everywhere in the galaxy. That compensated for his bad temper.

Zaeed had started his life as a troublesome kid and the military saved him from a life of petty theft and drug deals. He had served for Her Majesty for twenty seven years, most of them spent in Special Forces. Then came the First Contact War and his enrollment in the Alliance – the most powerful armies of Earth had been required to "give" soldiers at the time to create an international armed force. Zaeed did his job but eventually gave the middle finger to his superiors a few months after the end of the war, not wanting to work for "pussies who sucked alien dicks while being fucked in the arse by the Turians".

Shepard knew he had then roamed the galaxy and had engaged in mercenary activities until his return to Earth around 65. He was a regular electrician when she had met him, exception made for all the scars and attitude. She had been fascinated by all his war stories and the fear he inspired above all. Nobody fucked with Zaeed Massani. For the blossoming pre-teen she had been at the time, excluded from her group of friends and treated like their toys because she was a girl, Zaeed had looked like a God. And he had been for about three years, until he had realized life on Earth was too dull for him.

"People are going to give you shit all your life because you're a girl, Jany," he had told her the night before his departure. He had given her a bottle of cold beer before sitting with her on the edge of the rooftop. From there, they could see Manhattan's newest buildings shining in the night. They were so tall you could see them from anywhere in New York just by looking up to the sky.
"So give them Hell back. Don't let those fuckers dictate your life."

"Easier said than done," she had replied. The bitterness of the beer interacted strangely with the taste of her cigarette. Zaeed had rubbed her head and messed with her hair, his smile confident, but he hadn't given her some last wise advice or magic trick to ease her life. Shepard had wanted badly to ask him if he was ever coming back but she hadn't been able to speak. Her throat had been too tight and her eyes too full of tears for that.

"I've heard your name after Torfan," Zaeed had told her after their first dinner in forever. He had elected the observation deck as his quarters and invited her for a beer – beer bought with her funds but Zaeed was generous with others' possessions, one of his numerous charms. Dinner had been relatively quiet without Liara, Tali and Vakarian, and with Javik, Wrex and Alenko staring at Zaeed. "Second Lieutenant Jane Shepard saved the day', all of that, gracious glorification of a Hero like the Alliance knows how to do so well. At first, I thought it was another Jane Shepard because for me you still were that scrawny little girl with bruises and scraped knees, but then I saw a picture of you. It had been ten years but you still had those eyes, you know? So green it wasn't normal, and the 'I'm going to fucking annihilate you' look. God, that look. I could never forget that look." He had sipped his beer. "The hair was a surprise though."

"Ah, yes," Shepard had humbly smiled, playing with a lock. Her hair wasn't more than a centimeter long at the time. She had started to let it grow again after her graduation from the ICT. "I liked it. Very low maintenance."

"You look better now, Love," Zaeed had smirked.

"So you saw me on the news but you didn't try to contact me or something?" she had asked, embarrassed by the compliment. She had had no problem asking her question now and she even managed to not sound resentful about it. She wasn't a little girl anymore.

"To say what?" Zaeed snorted. "Hey Jany, I know it's been ten years but I saw you on TV and thought I'd say hi. By the way, I'm sorry to have ditched you kiddo, I was just being my usual prick, thinking I still mattered and all'? Yeah, you'd totally have welcomed me with open arms."

"You're probably right," Shepard admitted. She had been still pretty angry at the world at the time, especially after Torfan. Being treated like a hero because she had sent men to their death had infuriated her. N7 training had changed that. "So, what have you been up to all this years?"

"I became a bounty hunter, made myself a name again, sold my talents and soul to the most generous buyer, this kind of stuff."

"And you saw John."

"I did," Zaeed grunted. "It was maybe three or four months after you became a Spectre – I saw it on TV too. He was his usual self, a cocky asshole thinking he was smarter than everyone."


"I was on Omega for some business. I had to meet a contact. So I walk into that bar, you know, and I see my contact at the counter. Maybe a sit or two on his left, a woman, a true Goddess. Gorgeous ass, tits just the right size and a mouth made for blowjob."

"Charming."

Zaeed smirked. "And who was trying to bullshit her? John Shepard, that useless piece of shit you call a brother. I shit you not, the kid pissed his pants when he saw me." Shepard almost choked on
her beer. "He wants to get the fuck out but I catch him by the collar and pay a Krogan ten Ks to keep an eye on him while I do some business with my guy. Once that's done, I come back and see John trying to buy the Krogan to let him go. I put a couple other Ks on the counter to make sure the Krogan won't have a sudden change of heart and Johnny plays it cool, like we're pals since the beginning of times, he even buys me drinks and all. I let him talk and I swear to God I listened to his bullshit for an hour. At some point, he asked me something like 'you believe me, right?', so I looked at him right in the eyes," Zaeed said, leaning to do the same to Shepard, "and I tell him: 'no'.' He burst out of laughter. "Oh the look on his face, Jany! It was priceless, I tell you!"

"How did he manage to steal your ship?" she asked, amused by the story.

"Arh, he started a fight in the bar we were in and let me deal with those fucking aliens," Zaeed grunted. "By the time I was done reminding those Godless creatures who was in charge, Johnny was gone with my ship." He took a sip of beer. "He forgot to be an idiot, your brother, that's for sure. How he managed that though, I have no fucking idea."

"He was a mechanic in the army," Shepard answered, "a good one with a thing for hacking. Well, always had. His passion for those stuff started long before we enlisted."

"And why did you enlist, by the way?" Zaeed asked before finishing his beer. "Not because of my stories, I hope?"

Shepard hesitated a second but eventually spoke. "I was in serious trouble at the time and I was given a second chance. I didn't see it like that at the time though."

"What kind of serious trouble?"

"I killed a cop." Shepard met Zaeed's strange but serious gaze. She gave him a sad smile. "I was seventeen so I could go to prison for what I did, but I also was an unregistered biotic. That led the Alliance to learn about my case and a man came to my cell maybe two or three hours before the trial. He told me he could make all my problem disappear if I followed him." She rubbed her forehead and looked at the emptiness of space by the window. "I was ready to go to prison, you know? I had killed my rapist after all, and I was damn proud of it. But John was in this too and he was innocent. For once," she snorted. "So I told that guy in uniform that I'd follow him if my brother came along and he said yes. We stayed in a military school, some sort of training camp until our birthday and enlisted that day. John did his ten years and quit but I was in the middle of the ICT and I was fucking good at it. I was Staff Lieutenant at the time, just had a promotion, working with Anderson on the most advanced ship of the fleet, I had friends and comrades, I was part of a crew, part of something that mattered. So I stayed. John left and I didn't have news from him since then."

"You're better off without him, Jany," Zaeed had said seriously. "Look at you, captain of your own ship, first human Spectre and damn respected by your men. You couldn't have done that with your brother around. He would have dragged you down with him." Zaeed patted her awkwardly on her good shoulder. "I'm damn proud of you, kiddo."

Shepard had just nodded, incapable of saying anything at that moment.

There was no point in trying to sleep so Shepard abandoned her book, put on some pants and her hoodie, slipped into her old snickers and aimed for second deck. Solus was always awake at night and very rarely not inclined to talk, but Shepard still asked EDI to warn him of her arrival.

"Shepard," Solus greeted her with the usual joviality he saved for her, "trouble sleeping?"
"Like yesterday, the night before and basically all the nights of my life ever," she replied, walking to his desk.


Shepard winced, looking around her at all the shiny equipment the Council had bought for Solus. He did offer her pills and whatnot to help her sleep and she had refused everything so far. Medication made her sleep too long and too sound. She hated that. He was doing his best considering the terrible patient she was. Shepard decided to speak. "I did try a couple of times." And earlier but she didn't admit that. "When Vakarian had his panic attack on the Citadel and Joker couldn't reach me?" Solus' brow arched, a beginning of a smile on his lips. "Yeah, well, I was busy 'reconnecting with my body' or whatever," Shepard grunted. A waste of time that angered her more than anything. She had yelled at that petite and cute doctor obviously having the hots for Vakarian because of that. Not that Michel hadn't deserved it. Who was she to come in her way anyway?


"It's been months. I usually cope faster than that." Solus stopped typing to look at her. "What?" Shepard snorted. "You thought it was the first time something like that happened to me? You know nothing of people then."

"Difficult subject to handle for Salarians," Solus admitted. "Sex not a matter for us. No sexual drive. Different for women, of course, need to produce offspring, but men population largely asexual. Companionship possible, tenderness, passion, love even, but no desire. First heard of rape when introduced to Asaris."

"What?" Shepard stopped him. "How can they rape one another? They don't even have a cunt."

"Rape defined in Council Space as forceful action of sexual nature against one's will," Solus explained. "Unwanted donation of genetic print through biotics possible, equivalent of rape in asari culture."

"And I thought the galaxy was a nice place," Shepard sighed, sarcastic. Solus smiled, amused, and went back to his typing. His keyboard was set on a salarian language Shepard didn't know so she couldn't see what he was writing. "You guys reproduce with clutches of eggs, right?"

"Correct. Generally composed of a dozen eggs. Female if fertilized, male otherwise."

"And it's super complicated for a guy to actually fertilize eggs, right?"

"See your point," Solus nodded. "and yes, non-authorized fertilization happens, but not seen as rape. Ku'an-keppu. Roughly means 'betrayal by madness'. Old therm, not relevant to most situations. Punished by execution of culprits on public place, including the mother if proven accomplice, and destruction of resulting eggs or offspring. Can lead to mass killing. Ku'an-keppu actual cause of Fjitak dynasty's eradication in 12,508."

"Seriously?" Shepard asked, eyes wide open.

"Yep," Solus smiled. "Event well documented, can recommend you books and films for sleepless nights."

"I'm all for learning," Shepard shrugged and regretted it immediately. She rubbed her shoulder. "So even Salarians are capable of things like that. Damn, and I was just thinking about finding myself a
nice amphibious asexual boyfriend to cuddle with."

"Our love impossible, Shepard," Solus chuckled. "Both too handsome. Would create disturbance in
the Force."

"I know, I know," she sighed dramatically, making a big deal out of it. She continued, more
serious. "And your researches? Need anything?"

"Not yet," Solus replied for once, "but probabilities higher than yesterday."

"Something wrong?" Shepard asked.

"Genophage much more resistant than anticipated. Evolved on its own. Harder to decode."

"How can a gene evolve on its own?" Shepard frowned. "That's just molecules, right? They don't
gather and say 'hey, let's evolve to fuck with our creators'."

Solus gave her a quick look, a smile spreading on his face. "My fault, wrong use of words.
Genophage actually fought by krogan physiology and has been damaged over time, creating new
version."

"So basically the genophage 3.0 is harder to work on," Shepard understood.

"Genophage 2.1," Solus corrected, "but yes."

"The first one was starting to be ineffective, right? The Krogans fought it but it took them a
thousand years to change it slightly. The second version isn't even fifty years old. I'm okay
believing Krogans are tough motherfuckers but it looks like you guys fucked up somewhere
instead."

"Did a good job," Solus disagreed, looking at Shepard right in the eyes. "No, think overlapping of
genophage 1.0 and genophage 2.0 greatly underestimated." Shepard arched an eyebrow. "First
version not erased by spreading of second," Solus explained. "Cohabitation of two versions, but
shared bases, therefore Krogans already able to fight back genophage 2.0 when spread in general
population."

"So your second genophage was a waste of time and money." And lives, Shepard added for herself.

"Worked and still works," Solus shook his head. "Birthrate stabilized, one in a thousand like
before, but genophage still weakened. If actions not taken, could be completely useless in two
thousands six hundreds and forty years. Approximately."

"That's tomorrow," Shepard mocked.

"Birthrate's growth not sudden," Solus smiled, amused. "Slow but inexorable growth of krogan
population. Will be problematic by 2900 GST already. Twenty viable births out of a thousand."

That seemed far but it wasn't. Species with shorter lives probably didn't care about a war against
oppressed and angry Krogans because it was a very distant possibility, but Asaris lived longer. The
problem would emerge for their daughters or their grand-daughters. To them, the war was very
real, almost on their doorstep already. That's why it made sense to find a cure to the genophage and
make peace with the angry neighbors. Giving the Krogans their children back and helping them
controlling their population would pave the way to a durable alliance.

Well, if the Krogans were treated decently, Shepard thought. Krogans were seen as stupid beasts
just good to die as cannon fodder and, sadly, it was true. Krogans weren't smart. Wrex was an exception, one of a kind, and the only Krogan Shepard had ever seen read political essays. He knew his people had to abandon all hope of revenge or any sort of reparation for what the galaxy had done to them, and he was ready to bow and thank his tormentors because the survival of his species was simply more important to him than pride – a point of view shared by few. Wrex also knew an embassy would come for them, with the recognition it implied, but not for a hundred years, maybe more. He didn't believe the Council would ever give them a place in their high tower for their effort in the Rachni War but Wrex was a patient Krogan. Someday, he always said, the galaxy would need the Krogans again and then, they would fight with all the others and gain respect, even from the Turians.

Speaking of.

"Did you check on Vakarian?" Shepard asked, drumming on the desk with her fingers.

"Stopped calling him by his first name?" Solus asked back, still writing.

"It's a habit by now," Shepard winced. "Besides, it's better to not be too friendly with him while Zaeed's around."

"Noticed xenophobic attitude, yes," Solus nodded.

"I'll tell him to behave."

"No need," Solus smiled. "Can take care of myself." That meant something would be slipped into Zaeed's food or drink at some point if he was too much of an ass. Shepard should have cared more about this possibility than that.

"And Vakarian?" she insisted.

"Should wake up in ten minutes. Will be thirsty and hungry. Recommend vehenax cut in slices. Highly energetic and contains a remarkable amount of water. Used for its properties to regain forces quickly. Also common treat for Turian children in dried form, given during New Year celebrations."

"It's that yellowish cucumber purple inside that smells like rotten seaweed, right?"

"A fruit, not a cucurbit," Solus nodded. "Have to finish something, new modeling for synthesizing more aggressive vector, but will come later. Approximately twenty-eight minutes."

"I'll start the chronometer," Shepard snorted as she headed for CIC.

Ten minutes gave her time to smoke a cigarette in the lounge and Shepard found Legion there, standing by the window. She felt a pinch in her chest. Even if Geths were technically never alone due to their nature, seeing him by himself here hurt. EDI was usually with him, watching the endless universe in silence or either discussing whatever they talked about in her soft voice. Shepard had seen a lot of strange stuff in her career but watching two AI comparing notes on those damn illogical and frustrating organics was definitively in her list of most awkward moments of her life.

"Shepard – Administrator," Legion greeted her as she entered. "Everything runs at optimal capacities. We have not accumulated more than two point zero six GST seconds since our entry in the mass effect relay network and we calculated our delay will be of two point sixty-nine GST seconds. This delay is well within our tolerance margin."
"Awesome," Shepard smiled, coming to stand next to the Geth. She couldn't care less about this, it was Joker's job to deal with delays and seconds and margins, but she was the supreme authority on board, therefore Legion regularly gave her news. Not that she minded. Legion was doing his job and he was doing it right. She took a cigarette out of her pack – with only one hand but she was used to by now – and lit it.

"Shepard – Administrator," Legion intervened, his facial plates waving, "you are not authorized to smoke outside the confined area."

"Does the smoke bother you?" Shepard asked.

"No," Legion replied after a second of hesitation. "It cannot damage our body if the exposition is occasional."

"So where's the problem?"

"Your action is against the rules."

"And who sets the rules?"

"You do, Shepard – Administrator." Legion stayed silent for two whole seconds, probably interrogating his databases. "Shepard – Administrator," he said again, "we suggest a new version of the rules."

"Alright," Shepard sighed. She couldn't blame Legion, she had it coming. "EDI, take note, please. 'Commander Shepard may smoke in the lounge whenever no other organic is in said lounge or if the smoke doesn't bother whoever is with her.' There. Happy?"

"We do not feel happiness," Legion answered, facial plates waving.

Do not roll your eyes, Shepard commanded herself, do not roll your fucking eyes. "Is the new rule appropriate?" she asked instead.

"Yes," Legion replied after another second of thinking.

"New rule added," EDI said through the speakers, "but it seems unfair."

"Who said I was fair?" Shepard smirked, cigarette between her lips.

"Good point," EDI replied. Talking with her was a lot less frustrating.

Shepard gave a look at the clock and finished her cigarette quickly. "Can I ask for your assistance, Legion?"

"Yes, Shepard – Administrator."

"There should be vhenax in the fridge or in the reserve. Can you prepare one in slices for Vakarian and bring it to me in medbay when you're done?"

"Yes, Shepard-Administrator."

"Thanks, buddy," she smiled, patting him on the shoulder.

She threw the butt of her cigarette in the trashcan and headed for medbay. The room was mostly dark but for some dim lights here and there and Shepard could hear the sound of her feet on the ground now. EDI had done a great work with her white noise the other day but Solus had advised
Shepard found a stool under Chakwas' desk and took it to Vakarian's bed. Her protegee was on his side, in a fetal position, his cover up to the nose, breathing steadily. A little square of sterilized gauze slightly tinted in blue rested on the side of his head, under the second fringe from the bottom. Solus had to pierce a hole to dissipate the sound waves caught in the skull – Shepard hadn't quite understood the explanations but Chakwas was okay with the treatment so she had green-lighted it too. The hole had been repaired with medical bone powder but that product was more than often rejected by Turians, so they had to keep an eye on him.

Turians weren't easy patients, from Chakwas had said. It came from their immune system, very efficient, therefore rejecting a lot of substances. Plus, the thulium in their skin tended to have weird interactions with, say, metallic plates to solidify a broken leg or something like that. It often provoked hydrolysis and other chemical reactions. And there was the addiction problem. Turians easily fell into drugs or alcoholism and it wasn't even considered a problem by their society, as long as it didn't interfere with one's job or someone else's rights. Nihlus was the perfect example of a functioning addict. Shepard had seen him pass out quite often during the first months of her training. Sure, it always was in a secured place and with trusted people around but it had worried her nonetheless. She hated drunks and addicts. You couldn't trust them.

Where was this idiot now, Shepard thought as she mindlessly brushed Vakarian's fringes. She was still a little angry at him for his scene but she worried, deep down. Nihlus was a better Spectre than her and knew how to get out of any situation, but he had weaknesses, like everybody. He had to rely on his translator, first of all. He couldn't speak something else than Etherian, even to save his sorry ass. His eye implants could also be a problem. He couldn't see shit without them and they needed regular calibrations he often forgot, which led to terrible migraines. Shepard had found him a pair of glasses adapted to his deplorable eyesight but he had to tape them on his face to use them. Though Nihlus' biggest flaw was his pride. Attacking it was the best way to infuriate him. Nihlus' reputation as one of the best Spectres of the Council was well earned. Saying otherwise was very dangerous, especially if you were Turian.

A hand came out of the cover and gently pushed Shepard's wrist away. Turians' hands weren't as hard as they seemed. Sure, the talons could reap your throat without effort, but the skin on the palm and on the under side of the fingers was actually quite soft. It reminded Shepard's of cat's paw, minus the hairs.

"You're awake?" she whispered. Vakarian replied with a grunt that made her smile. He opened an eye slowly and focused on her. "How are you feeling, big guy?" He just sighed, too groggy to speak yet, and closed his eye again. Shepard checked the time. Solus would arrive in fifteen minutes or so but she kind of wanted to summon him immediately. She resumed her brushing without even thinking about it, keeping an eye on the door. Vakarian grunted again.

"Stop it," he mumbled, pushing her hand once more but this time he pinned it to the mattress and didn't let it go.


"No," Vakarian said. "Not now."

"What? What is it?" Shepard pressed, a little anxious. Vakarian shook his head. " Seriously, tell me."

"I'm a little too good," he grumbled, his head sinking in the pillow.
"Oh. Oh," Shepard realized, taking back her hand.

The door opened in her back and both of them jumped, like kids caught doing something really not innocent and cute. It was only Legion coming with the vehenax slices in a bowl. He gave it to Shepard, patted the cover above Vakarian's shoulder as he would have done with a frail animal, and walked out of medbay. Shepard's heart was racing in her chest.

"Huh, you hungry?" she asked with a big fake smile to hide her discomfort. Vakarian stared at her. "Yeah, I, huh, will... do something elsewhere," she said, standing up and leaving the bowl nearby. "Solus should be there in ten minutes, by the way," she still warned him before walking away.

She was smoking in the lounge, listening to Legion reading nineteenth century French poetry without translation – the horror –, when Solus came to find her half an hour later. She put her cigarette in the ashtray before the Geth could remind her of her own rules and waved in the air with her good arm to dissipate the smoke. The ventilation started running faster, thanks to EDI.

"Appreciated," Solus said both for Shepard and EDI as he walked in.

"How is Vakarian?" Shepard asked.

"Good," Solus replied, sitting in the sofa in front of hers. "A bit groggy and will probably have recurring headaches for the next few days but nothing worrying. Helped him get back to sleep. Will wake up in the afternoon."

"Good, good," Shepard nodded, playing with her lighter.

"Noticed arousal," Solus smiled.

"Of course you did," Shepard smirked, unamused. She rubbed her forehead and sank a little more in the couch. "Nihlus often suffers from headaches and brushing his fringes usually calms him down. It's a habit. I never intended to... you know, make Vakarian happy or whatever." She wouldn't admit it to Solus but it actually made her somehow proud of herself. She had managed to arouse Garrus-Humans-Are-Disgusting-Squishy-Creatures-I-Wouldn't-Touch-For-The-Sake-Of-The-Galaxy-Vakarian. It was stupid, and an accident, but it made her feel good. She still got game.

Solus nodded but his amused smile didn't disappear. "Gesture deemed pleasurable by Turians, intimate even in nowadays culture. Often used in foreplay or after..."

"I know," Shepard interrupted, "and I'm sure Nihlus talked left and right to you of his prowess in the bedroom."

"Yes," Solus said. "Should see a dermatologist for your mole on your left breast by the way." Shepard made a mental note to kill Kryik slowly and painfully next time she saw him. "Vakarian's behavior interesting on the subject."

"How so?" she sighed. She wasn't interested in pursing this conversation but she had driven the previous one and bothered Solus while he was working. Since she wanted to keep their relationship friendly, she had to politely endure his theories. But, to be honest, the Salarian was interesting most of the time. He was just a little nosy and seemed to have no shame, whatever the subject.

"Doesn't want to bound with you, his mentor."

"I kinda told him to go fuck himself," Shepard admitted, scratching her chin, "and he said I was a passionate dangerous lunatic threatening the balance of the galaxy, so, there is that."
Solus laughed for good, something he rarely did. It made Shepard smile a little. "Definition very accurate," he said between two hiccups.

"Nope," Shepard snorted. "I'm not passionate." Solus laughed even more and it triggered coughing which shook him head to toe. Shepard came to sit next to him and rubbed his back while Legion fetched a glass of water. Solus declined it.

"Fine, fine," he assured, his voice hoarse.

"Wow, that sounded serious," Shepard said.

"Not part of your mission," Solus reminded her.

"Maybe not, but I wouldn't mind taking a detour by Sur'Kesh to find you a specialist for that cough or something."

"Nothing can be done at this point," Solus shook his head. He breathed in deep and looked at Shepard. "Old Salarian. Exceeded average lifespan and already survived three cancers, two heart attacks and kidney failure. Resigned, Shepard, and at peace."

"And your daughter?" she dared to ask. It kind of was a taboo with Solus. Speaking about his daughter was the best way to shut him up and see him withdraw in his lab for days, but Shepard wanted to believe Solus loved her. She was the reason the Salarian had installed his clinic on Omega and decided to finish his life there instead of a comfortable house with a view on an ocean on a warm and luxuriant planet. It wasn't nice of Shepard to use Solus' daughter like that, but she wasn't a nice person anyway. "Don't you want to be there for her a little longer?"

Solus stared at Shepard for several seconds before leaning against the back of the sofa. He looked at the emptiness behind the window. "Talked earlier about unwanted donation of genetic print, yes?" Shepard nodded, guessing where this was going. "Happens with unwilling partners from other species too," Solus sighed, and he didn't need to tell more for Shepard to understand.

"Well it certainly bit Aria in the ass back," Shepard tried to joke. "Your daughter seemed to be a problem for her."

"Yes," Solus smiled. "Very bright child. Wish could study on Sur'Kesh." He winced. "Thessia also a possibility."

"We can make that happen," Shepard offered.

"Would jeopardize your relationship with Aria," Solus shook his head.

"Aria can't stand me," Shepard corrected, easing herself on the sofa, "but she can't show it publicly because Omega loves me. Everybody saw me, the first Human Council Spectre, fight against Cerberus to take the station back. I killed soldiers of my own species, soldiers hating aliens, to protect Omega. That made me pretty popular," Shepard snorted. "Aria couldn't antagonize me anymore after that. I'm not her friend. I'm a pawn in her power game." Shepard scratched her nose. "But that's fine for now. I can dock on Omega whenever I like, I don't have to go there undercover, I even have discounts in some shops, so, you know, not complaining." Solus smiled and let the silence fill the room for a minute or so.

"Can prepare a plan," he conceded, "but must be executed at the right time." After his death, Shepard understood as he looked at her in the eyes.

"You can count on me and everyone on board," she assured him. Solus nodded. "You're sure we
can't find you a doctor?"

"Wouldn't be able to find someone agreeing to treat me," Solus replied, standing up with some difficulties. He usually hid the signs of his advanced age pretty well but that wasn't for now. He looked tired.

"Why that?" Shepard asked. "Did you do something super illegal?"

"Yes," Solus nodded, "but too old for any treatment. Would be 'terminated'," he quoted with his fingers.

"So we better avoid Sur'Kesh."

"Under your protection, but would be preferable, yes." Shepard nodded. "I'm curious though. What super illegal stuff did you do that prevents you from seeing any doctor from your species, exactly?"

Solus had a wicked little smile. "Story for another time. Too tired now. Will rest for an hour or so. Suggest you do the same."

"Yeah, I'll try," she sighed. "Good night, Mordin."

"Shepard," he saluted her with a smile as he walked out of the lounge.

Shepard really didn't feel tired. She lit the last cigarette of her pack and turned to Legion. "You know how to play Skyllian Five, buddy?" The Geth's facial plates waved in response.

Shepard was slowly dozing off in the copilot chair, listening to Wrex, Javik and Zaeed's banter through the radio with Joker, when Vakarian showed up half a day later.

"Welcome to the world of the living!" Joker saluted him, spinning his chair, arms in the air like a zombie and voice shaking.

"Hm," Vakarian replied, "thanks."

"Slept well?" Joker asked, his natural self back.

"Enough for a week." The radio transmitted gunshots and a comment from Wrex saying that was the kind of negotiation he liked, followed by Javik's laugh. Shepard snapped to attention. "Huh, what's going on?"

"Three old men on a mission," Shepard replied, keeping her eyes on the view of the planet she had through the cockpit. She couldn't see the building her team was in but it didn't matter. She just wanted to avoid Vakarian's gaze to spare him some embarrassment. He wouldn't look at her in the eyes for a while anyway but it was better to show him she was doing an effort.

"Three?" he repeated, curious.

"Yeah, Wrex, Javik and Zaeed, Shepard's grandpa," Joker answered. "You know, the guy who shot at you and your team with a defense satellite two days and a half ago. He's part of the team now."

"Awesome," Garrus said, sarcastic. "I'm sorry Commander, but I owe the guy a punch in the face, family or not."

"You can try," she snorted. The sound of a grenade exploding woke her up for good. Joker spun his
chair back to focus on his panels. Calling now the team on the ground would only distract them but
darn, Shepard wanted to know what was going on. One minute they were joking and exchanging
very xenophobic remarks at each other – the beginning of friendship for men like that –, the next
they were in a firefight. They had fallen into a trap, obviously. Cerberus had known they were
coming. Or maybe they just were prepared. One of their outposts in a nearby system had been
blown up a few days ago after all. This kind of news traveled fast.

"They seem to have fun," Vakarian noted.

"Ooooooh Baby-Spectre is jelly," Joker mocked. Shepard smiled when Vakarian only grunted.

"Don't worry," Shepard continued, "you'll soon be back on the field."

"I don't know," Vakarian mumbled. "I kinda fucked up the last mission. Maybe I'm not ready to
lead a team."

"Did everybody come back alive?" Shepard asked.

"Huh, yes, sort of, Commander."

"And was the objective reached?"

"Not by us but yes."

"So I don't see why you wouldn't lead the next mission," she said.

"It was a fiasco, Commander."

"Not until Zaeed arrived," she contradicted him. "I was here, Vakarian," she continued, turning her
head to look at him, "in that very same spot, listening to you guys on the ground. You were relaxed
and in control, focused on your objective, and you managed to not shoot Tali in the head for her
insubordination, which is an exploit on its own. You couldn't have imagined the outpost would be
blasted from orbit by an old mercenary hunting down Cerberus cells." She turned back to the
window. "All good by me."

"Very well," Vakarian replied after a second of silence and it meant "I do not agree but you're in
charge". At least he had learned to shut up when he wasn't supposed to defy her authority. Maybe
he'd try to talk her out of her decision later. That would be fun, Shepard smirked, considering what
had happened last night. "May I ask for more details on your grand-father, Commander? If he's part
of the team now, I'd like to know a few things about him."

"Sure," she shrugged – damn, when would she learn! "He's a First Contact War veteran," she said,
rubbing her shoulder, "so don't expect nice talks and smiles from him. He's hella sexist, and I know
how Turians hate that but please keep your mouth shut. He's been a merc for most of his life, a
soldier before that, an electrician in another life. You don't want to piss him off."

"Duly noted. Why is he targeting Cerberus?"

"Zaeed is a bounty hunter, the Alliance offers big money for Cerberus' leaders' head, you do the
math." It was a little more complicated than that in fact. Zaeed had worked for Cerberus for a
while, from what he had told Shepard, precisely because they had paid him good, but he had
figured out it wouldn't be smart to be too friendly with them once their organization down. Plus,
Zaeed could use his inside knowledge of Cerberus to easily collect bounties. He was an opportunist
like that and that was why EDI kept an eye on him at all times. Shepard didn't want to end up with
one of his bullet between the eyes. She believed they loved each other like family even if they
weren't related, but the right price on her head could lessen Zaeed's remorse.

"Wrex to Normandy," the Krogan called through the radio.

"This is Normandy," Joker replied. "How are you doing down there?"

"Fine, fine," Wrex grunted. "We got a few guys to interrogate. Might want to turn the comms off until next contact."

Joker checked with Shepard who nodded her approval. She didn't want to hear any of that. "Alright. Waiting for next contact. Normandy out."

"I'll be in Lab1 if you don't need me, Commander," Vakarian told her.

"Take it easy today," she replied, "and don't hesitate to take a break if your headache comes back."

"Yes, Commander."

Shepard heard the door of the cockpit open and close behind her before noticing the puppy eyes Joker was giving her. "What?" she grunted.

"Why aren't you that nice with me?" he asked, faking being butthurt.

"I like to torment my crew," Shepard replied. Joker laughed and focused again on his panels, knowing when to stop fooling around. Shepard smiled for herself. It hadn't been a bad day after all.

TBC
"And don't forget to brush your teeth!"

Javik snorted as the Turian grumbled something, closing the Mako's main hatch behind him. Wrex, in the copilot's seat, turned to look at him from under.

"What's funny?" he asked. Krogans didn't have the best of hearings.

"The Commander is treating the Turian like a child," Javik answered.

"He's her Baby-Spectre after all," Wrex smirked.

"I am neither a child nor a baby," Vakarian replied as he squished himself in the cockpit. "I'm young, granted, but I have fifteen years of military training behind me, and four as a C-Sec officer." He fell in his pilot's seat more than he sat and had to wiggle a little to find a comfortable position. It wasn't easy considering his armor and the human design of the seat.

"You're what? Thirty-five?" Wrex asked, turning back to the windows.

"Thirty-four."

"If I remember correctly," Wrex continued, scratching his throat, "you need something like fourteen years on Palaven to make one on Tuchanka." Vakarian frowned, probably doing the maths himself. "That means you're not even two and a half from my point of view. So shut up, kiddo."

"I remember Shepard telling me you were over six hundred," Vakarian replied, clipping his harness carefully. "So, from my point of view, you're an old thing, gramps."

The Krogan laughed and punched the Turian in the shoulder. Javik smiled a little from his turret seat above them. He liked Vakarian, to be honest. He was a well educated young man, respectful of his superiors, peers and the rules, and dedicated to his work. Shepard could have had a protegee far worse than him. Vakarian was true to his words and his feelings – well he was now and it made it easier to trust him. Javik had been a bit reluctant to know him when the Turian had shielded himself behind what he wasn't, but he was more honest now and it wasn't a problem anymore. Of course, nobody was truly honest at all time, not even Protheans, but his inner contradictions had practically disappeared since he had cleared his heart and talked to Shepard. It was definitively a good thing. Javik couldn't stand liars.

"And you, Javik?" Vakarian asked as he started the engine, bringing the Mako to life. The question surprised Javik and he focused on the Turian. "If I may ask," he added quickly, breaking eye contact. "Maybe it's inappropriate. Sorry."

"It is inappropriate," Javik confirmed but he wasn't angry. It was normal for the young to be curious.

"Sorry," Vakarian repeated.

"That's a complicated question," Wrex said, scrapping a mark on his armor. "Do you have to count
all the years he spent in a freezer?" Javik grumbled and kicked him on the back but it only made
the Krogan laugh. "No, seriously, you never even told me. How old were you when they froze you?"

"Not old enough," Javik replied and with that the conversation died, as planned.

The Council had called the Normandy just an hour before their departure from Sigurd's Cradle for
the Omega Nebula. A salarian ship on a scientific mission had disappeared in the Micah system,
Vallhallan Threshold. It was no secret the system was plagued with pirates and the Council
shouldn't even have cared about a single ship missing, but this one had sent reports of confirmed
intelligent life forms over the past few weeks. Which was strange because the last exploration team
sent there only a hundred years ago had made no mention of anything more evolved than a lemur
on Dumah's numerous moons. This was worrying enough to send a Spectre investigate and
potentially rescue survivors.

Since Shepard couldn't go due to her broken shoulder, Vakarian was to replace her and he had
decided to surround himself with the two most powerful and experimented warriors of the crew. It
was a wise decision but it also relieved a lack of confidence. Vakarian's last mission on Erinle
didn't turn out as planned and he was resentful about it – Javik had sensed it during training but he
could have just looked at the kid to notice. The Turian wasn't the kind to blame it on his
teammates, at least, but his self-incrimination wasn't good either. A leader had to know how to
handle any situation and show the direction, even in shame and defeat. Shepard had asked Javik to
keep an eye on Vakarian for her. Their mission was supposed to last three days and
communications with the Normandy would be sparse due to the electromagnetic interferences of
the gas giant Dumah.

Three isolated warriors on an unknown world populated by mysterious creatures which shouldn't
be there. It was the premise for a good time.

Kasbeel was the second biggest moon of Dumah, big enough to be considered as a small rocky
planet. Its gravity was half as strong as the Normandy's and its atmosphere was breathable, as long
as you didn't fall into a pool of denser and deadly gases. Kasbeel was far enough of its planet to
keep its oxygen, but Dumah sucked lighter gases away, creating filaments of matter between the
giant and its satellite through space. The planet influenced the tectonic of its several moons, lifting
the hard rock crust where it was the weakest and triggering massive volcanic eruptions. Dumah
was also responsible for the monstrous tide flooding the low lands once a day and almost drying
the oceans on the other side of the moon at the same time. Fortunately, the signal from the salarian
ship came from high plateaus far from any ocean but only two hundred kilometers south of an
active volcano chain. Javik could see them with the scope as the Mako descended through the
atmosphere of Kasbeel. The volcanoes seemed calm for now but Dumah's influence could awake
them any day.

Landing wasn't a pleasing experience but they didn't explode or break anything so Javik took that
as a victory. The Turian checked a few instruments, which gave time to Javik to observe what he
could of the perimeter. In the north, the volcano chain, striking the horizon on a hundred degrees.
It was high enough to have snow but few remained because of the volcanic activity. On the far
west, other mountains but too far to be of any interest. The plateau extended south and east but the
visibility wasn't good enough to see anything relevant. They had landed in the large bed of a
seasonal river, on a shore made of dark scoria, gigantic rocks creating a desolated panorama in
between the dense forest on both sides. The trees were tall, fifty or sixty meters high maybe,
typically the kind of tropical forest to have a high canopy and more sparse vegetation at its feet, but
it didn't seem to be the case here. The forest was dense, a green wall from its feet to its top, and
home of countless bright red spots in the thermal scope.
"The VI picked up the position of the crash site when we were descending," Vakarian said as he poked a holographic screen between him and Wrex. "It should take us a day to reach it."

"It would be wise to follow the river as much as possible to get closer," Javik advised, eyes back in the scope. Bird-like creatures took off in the distance and the trees under them moved slightly. The wind?

"I thought the same thing," Vakarian replied. "We'll have zero visibility once in the forest. It's better to stay on open ground as long as we can. Besides, I want to try a few things."

"What few things?" Wrex asked and there was tension in his voice.

"I've heard a lot about the Mako since I'm on board the Normandy," Vakarian explained. "I'm curious of what it's capable of."

"No," Wrex strongly disagreed, fighting his harness. "No, no no no, you won't go all Shepard on me, Vakarian!"

The Turian replied with a dangerous smile and slammed the accelerator.

It turned out Vakarian was a driver far more reasonable than Shepard and the new Mako seemed to be a machine more reliable than the previous one. Vakarian had greatly improved its stability and the additional thrusters to take off were of great use when the Mako was stuck somewhere. Wrex didn't vomit once during the drive that took them to their supposed entry point in the forest. Vakarian stopped there a moment, leaning on the wheel to look at the green wall in front of them.

"A straight line is the shortest route on paper but I'm for finding an opening, like an animal trail or something, even if it takes us half an hour or so," he said.

"If we find a trail big enough for the Mako, we don't need to bother with the Salarians," Wrex snorted.

"Not all big animals are predators," Vakarian replied.

"You obviously never went to Tuchanka."

Javik rolled his eyes. Youth. "I am for finding a path," he interrupted before the Turian could add something certainly not relevant to the situation. "Wrex?"

"Yeah, yeah, let's find a trail or something," the Krogan shrugged. "Imma take a nap. Wake me up when it's time to shoot stuff."

Vakarian shook his head as he repositioned himself in his seat and the Mako soon marched along the border of the forest. They both were careful, watching closely the vegetation, but they didn't find a path big enough for the machine. Going on foot to the crash site was not an option. First, it would take them far more time than with the Mako. Secondly, they needed the vehicle to extract possible survivors. Finally, the environment wasn't safe. Surely warriors like them could handle animals, as big and as fantastic as they could get, but they weren't explorers either. Their equipment wasn't made for this kind of trip. It was too heavy and it couldn't carry enough food, water or oxygen to cover all kind of situations.

Besides, Kasbeel was a dangerous world. When practically all known satellites were tidally locked to their planet, always presenting the same side to their master, Kasbeel rotated on its own axis. It meant Kasbeel had days and nights like any planet, but this cycle was disturbed by Dumah. When the satellite was facing the star of the system, Micah, the planet behind it reflected light on the part
That was something the team wanted to avoid because the research would be a lot more complicated in the absolute darkness of Kasbeel's night. It wasn't wise to stay anyway. The satellite had an electromagnetic field but it was weak and encased into its planet's. Due to solar winds, the part of the electromagnetic field opposed to the start was deformed, elongated, and it captured deadly cosmic rays, allowing them to penetrate a celestial body's protection. The meeting of those rays with the lower levels of the electromagnetic field created the phenomena known as aurora borealis, the sign nothing harmful was reaching the ground. Kasbeel's nights should have been a marvelous display of endless and colorful auroras, a delight for the eyes. They weren't, which meant the satellite was fully exposed to cosmic rays during the night. That was a reason good enough to not stay on Kasbeel too long.

"That's when EDI would be of great help," Vakarian sighed. Javik blinked and looked at the Turian. He had stopped the vehicle to study a map of the area made by the instruments on board. It didn't cover a large portion of their surroundings. There were too many disturbances for that.

"Never trust an AI," Javik replied dryly, which caught the Turian's attention. Javik cursed himself. Now he had to give that primitive an explanation. He spoke reluctantly. "The Empire was born in blood and ashes during the Metacon War. We faced a hostile intelligent machine race that threatened our survival. We had to unite all known species through the galaxy to fight those AIs, and thus the Empire rose."

"I can relate to that," Vakarian nodded. He looked at Wrex for a second before speaking on a lower tone. "It's not something a lot of people know but Turians had to face an AI uprising. It was just at the beginning of our expansion out of Palaven, a hundred years before we even reached Trebia's relay, but it happened."

"It was so long ago all you probably had to do was to unplug your AI," Javik snorted, a ball of cold anger forming in his stomach. "We fought for three centuries. Worlds were destroyed. Tens of billions died."

"You're right," the Turian agreed, "it's not comparable. Sorry." He keyed on a panel. "The Normandy is out of reach anyway. Well, we have to create our own way." He turned to Wrex, his fingers drumming on the wheel, then looked at Javik.

"This is puerile," the Prothean grumbled.

"But amusing," Vakarian replied.

"The Commander has a bad influence on you, Turian." Javik grabbed the controls of the turret and fired a few rounds of the smallest caliber they had. The Mako shook a little as the sound echoed all around them. Wrex woke up, jumping in his seat, shotgun already in hand.

"What's happening?" he barked, recharging his weapon. "Who's attacking?" The Turian didn't contain his laugh for very long but Javik managed to keep his face straight, even if he was indeed a little amused. Wrex grumbled as he put down his shotgun. "You're wasting perfectly good ammo, idiots. Wait till Shepard hears about that."

"She'd approve the joke," Javik warned. Wrex grunted, knowing it was the truth, and sank in his seat.

They had to use the main canon to open their way through the forest and it took them the better part
of the afternoon to pierce the green wall. Its wideness was the result of a multitude of broken trees and debris covered by vine-like plants as thick as a leg, nested with rocks as big as the Mako, probably carried there by the river. No wonder they hadn't seen any significant trail on the shore. Nothing bigger than a rabbit could easily go through that green wall.

The interior of the forest was much more passable. There was enough space between the huge trunks for the Mako to navigate easily, even if a variety of luxuriant grass-type plants grew up to six meters on the soft ground. The Mako was soon covered in multicolored pollens and the windscreen wipers worked at full capacity for the rest of the day. Plants got caught in the drive shaft of the front wheels twice, which made them stop and repair, Javik standing guard outside while Vakarian swore a lot under the Mako.

They eventually stopped near an enormous volcanic rock covered with mosses, ferns and young trees to take some rest during Kasbeel's short night. It was the occasion to move a little around and stretch stiff limbs. The air was saturated with strong foreign smells and the buzz of insect-like creatures. Javik looked up to the sky. He could see the distant bright stripes of the gas giant in between the trees and menacing clouds. It would rain tonight.

A terrible roar made him jump and concentrate energy in his hands but he only saw Wrex when he turned. The Krogan emitted another roar, shaking head to toes. The Turian chuckled, sheathing his gun.

"Looks like Krogans can be allergic to something after all," he mocked. Wrex roared again, bending to rest his hands on his knees. So it was a sneeze, Javik understood. He had never seen Wrex do that before. It was kind of impressive. And terribly efficient to invite any predator in their surroundings to come join them.

"Krogans are not allergic to anything!" Wrex defended himself. "Even your dextro shit you call food can be... can be..." Another sneeze shook him but he continued as if nothing had happened. "... processed by our stomachs!"

"Really?" Vakarian asked from the inside of the Mako.

"What do you think, kiddo?" Wrex grumbled, breathing heavily. "When it comes down to adaptation, Krogans are the best. That's why the Council used us for their war against the Rachnis, and that's why we ended it on Suen in blood and fire. Dextro-amino acids are just a poison like any other for a Krogan. Have you ever heard of a poisoned Krogan?"

"No," Vakarian admitted, hopping out of the vehicle with food and drinks.

"That's right!" Wrex snorted and it triggered another sneeze. He grunted this time, a hand on the middle of his abdomen. Javik noticed the gesture but didn't say anything about it.

"Aren't the Vorchas better than Krogans at adaptation?" Vakarian continued, throwing a ration bar – a levo one – to Wrex.

"Did the Vorcha's threaten the galaxy by their power?" Wrex asked, catching his dinner.

"No, but..."

"Vorchas are like varens," Wrex interrupted him. "You starve them, you beat them, you train them and then you send them to their death. They don't have millennia of history behind them, they didn't conquer shit, they are barely more evolved than animals."

"Krogans were barely more evolved than animals once," Javik reminded him. Wrex gave him a
cold look back but Javik couldn't care less. He took the ration bar and the bottle of water Vakarian was handing him over and sat on an old stump to eat. The Turian squatted next to him and it annoyed Javik a little to see he was still taller than him.

"What was your policy regarding primitive species?" he asked, unwrapping his dextro ration. "You said Protheans hunted Turians for sport and domesticated Asaris. That's interfering with a species' destiny but what was the limit? What made you decide to stop that and just let them evolve on their own?"

"We had scales."

"Scales?"

"You ask too many questions, Turian," Javik grunted, annoyed for good. He had had the same problem with the Asari. "Do you know everything there is to know about your people? Are you able to explain every historical event, every technological advancement, every belief and superstition from your people?"

"Huh, no."

"Neither do I," Javik continued, munching on his ration. "I was a warrior, not a man of knowledge."

"Sorry," the Turian apologized.

"Turians and their questions," Wrex mocked from his own stump.

"What's wrong with being curious?" Vakarian asked.

"You talk too much, is all," Wrex snorted. "Oh, speaking of, I have a good one. When do you know a Turian is done talking?"

"I don't know. How?"

"It's when the Asari falls asleep," Wrex laughed, apparently very proud of his joke but neither Vakarian nor Javik found the logic behind it. "It's funny because your two species talk a lot," Wrex tried to explain. He stared at them for a second then waved at them. "Forget it. Your sense of humor sucks."

They finished their flavorless dinner in silence, looking around and listening to the birds and other animals. Some sort of flat furry lizard with six legs maybe ten centimeters long came to them, stopping its rapid walk every meter or so to look at the strange creatures Javik and his companions surely were to the small animal. It approached without fear, climbed on Javik's foot as if it was yet another plant, and continued his trip to Vakarian. There, the lizard found crumbs in the grass and ate it before the Turian could intervene. But, to their surprise, the lizard didn't die of food poisoning on the spot. It licked its eyes and ran to Wrex who shooed it away. The lizard clicked and disappeared under the Mako.

"I thought the reports said this place bore levo-amino life," Wrex said, standing up.

"They did," Vakarian confirmed, following his example. "Maybe we found the new Krogans," he joked. "In a million years, some people will recall that moment and say: 'if only they had known they had witnessed the first of its kind!'" Wrex snorted.

"There are others," Javik informed. When the Turian arched a brow, he pointed to colored spots in
the grass around them. There were maybe a dozen lizards now approaching to find food. Vakarian was quickly surrounded by them. He stepped carefully out of the circle as Wrex laughed.

"Afraid the little beasts will eat you in your sleep, Garrus?"

"Well I certainly represent a large amount of dextro proteins for them," the Turian replied, moving back to the Mako. He was followed by a couple lizards.

"They'll be disappointed," Javik said. "Turian meat is of no interest for any delicate palate."

"Ha!" Wrex snorted. "You taste like shit!"

"How do you..." the Turian started but a look from Javik made him change his thoughts mid-sentence. "No, you know what? I don't want to know." He shook his head as he hopped in the Mako. "I really don't want to know."

Javik followed him, hiding his smile, and Wrex patted him on the shoulder when he was in reach.

"Good one," he said, a wild smile spread on his face.

"Krogans taste like chicken," Javik replied dead serious and Wrex laughed. It triggered his sneezing again and Javik saw his friend wince and rub his abdomen once more. He knew what caused that pain, even if Wrex paid close attention as to keep his secret for himself. He didn't have to touch his friend to know, it was pretty obvious. The Krogan was still hurt despite his regenerative abilities and time. More than two months had passed since his encounter with the black creature in the strange spacestation. Wrex should have healed by now.

Javik stopped Wrex from getting into the Mako with a hand on his forearm and the Krogan was smart enough to obey the implicit order.

"I will ask once, friend, and only once," Javik said seriously, looking at Wrex straight in the eyes. "Do you need help?"

The memories inscribed in the armor distorted the present, flashing before Javik's eyes. A bar, red lights, exotic dancers, a glass of ryncol and the smells of sweats, smoke, alcohol and sex all around. A blurred figure in the distance. The Human. Wrex turned to him, mouth slightly open, his red eyes trying to focus on something too close for him. The smell of the Turian that once followed her had faded. It had been replaced by numerous others, all humans. Shepard. Wrex. How was Virmire? Hot. He looked at him and his emotions were strangely easy to read on his foreign features. He would lie. So, what is it like to work alone? I'm not alone. I have a ship now and a crew of thirty. Humans. Yes, Humans, all from the Alliance. Good men and women but they're soldiers. I need more than that to get the job done. He breathed in deep and Javik saw the words he didn't want to hear on his lips. What do you think about working with me, Wrex?

"I'm fine."

Javik released his friend with a nod and let him hop in the Mako. He used the last of his water to wash his hands before following the Turian and the Krogan inside.

They chose to stand guard even if they were in security in the Mako for the night and Wrex took the first shift. A game of rock-paper-scissors decided Vakarian had the second and Javik the third. When he woke up, the rain drummed on the plating of the Mako. It would have been a nice lullaby if only Wrex hadn't snored. It proved difficult for the Turian to find some rest and he eventually abandoned all hopes after an hour or so.
"And I thought Shepard's snores were loud," he mumbled, trying to find a more comfortable position against a crate. Javik frowned. Vakarian noticed it. "I slept in her quarters when Mandor was on board," he explained, a little agitated and uneasy. Javik remembered but the reaction of the Turian was intriguing.

"Is it forbidden by your culture?" Javik asked, keeping his voice low enough to not awake the Krogan.

Javik saw Vakarian's mandibles twitch in the dim light of the cargo. "I slept on her couch," he mumbled, "and it's not forbidden per se, it just made me really uncomfortable."

"But you slept next to her several times before," Javik insisted.

"I did," the Turian agreed, brushing his fringes, "but it wasn't the same." He gave him a quick look from under. "On Project Base," he continued reluctantly, "I was... standing guard, I guess. But when Mandor was on board, it kind of was the other way around."

"It is normal for a mentor to provide security," Javik nodded.

"I know," Vakarian sighed, "it's just..." He stopped his sentence to give Javik another look, more anxious this time. "It's complicated."

"It is not," Javik replied. "You are afraid to like her because it would make you a worse son than you already are in your father's eyes."

He could have slapped the Turian, it would have had the same effect on him. Vakarian looked at Javik, pain and fear written all over his face. The Prothean scratched his neck. His abilities were normal fifty thousands years ago but nowadays they were a source of problem. In a galaxy where privacy meant so much and was one's most precious treasure, being able to reach someone's darkest secrets just by the touch was a gift. Betrayal was all people had in mind when they realized Javik could access their thoughts. It had taken a long time for the Normandy's crew to trust him, to understand he would take those secrets to his grave. Only Shepard had trusted him from the beginning but she was special. She had been enlightened by a Beacon, therefore she knew a Prothean would rather die than use those secrets against someone.

That didn't mean he couldn't use that knowledge to help a primitive figure out their inner contradictions.

"You cannot fight your affinity for her forever," Javik continued, focusing on the rain on the windshield. "But it's a good thing. A son must overcome their father at some point and such time has come for you."

"You know nothing of my father," the Turian said, his voice full of anger and reproaches.

"It is true," Javik agreed. "I only know what you remember of him, what your mind has distorted over time. Memories are a trap, young one. Memories lie and deaden one's will. They are not to be trusted."

"That doesn't make my father a great guy."

"The loss of a child would affect anyone."

"My sister didn't die," the Turian replied coldly.

He then shut up and stared at Javik for a long, tensed minute. Javik didn't let it affect him. He let
the Turian stare all he wanted and he eventually got tired of it, standing to walk to the cockpit. Vakarian fell in the pilot's seat and stayed there, silent for a long moment while Wrex continued to snore. The rain intensified as the wind started to blow and rustle in the trees. Soon thunder joined them, drumming its lower notes in the distance. Javik listened and didn't fight the memories the storm was triggering. It reminded him too much of the march of his warriors on the wooden floor of the Great Hall, all in unison, one body, one mind, the finest you could find in the Empire. Javik always felt proud when he saw his well trained students execute a perfect stance but his greatest joy was to see them returning victorious from the battlefield. Whenever one of them came back to his humble house after years of bloody battles and everlasting fights, his body and mind were one. There was no greater joy than to see a beloved child come back alive from the war.

"Something's watching us."

Javik opened his eyes and dismissed his memories to look at the cockpit. The Turian was very still, a shadow within the shadows, and focused on something behind the rain. Javik came closer, walking carefully and slowly, and sat next to Vakarian. It took him a few seconds even with his superior eyesight to find the intruder. It wasn't on the ground, rather hanging from the trees, very still despite the storm. Rain slipped on its dark fur and thunder flashed over its body. Javik counted six limbs, probably two of them arms, and one tail as long as the rest of the creature. Its head was conic, four eyes, and teeth big enough to crush a Krogan.

Anxiety grew on the Turian while the creature watched them, and he started to get agitated. After ten minutes or so, he woke up some instruments on the dashboard, and the sudden light in the cockpit made the animal move from a tree to another on the left, probably to get a better view. Javik kept an eye on it while Vakarian checked his holoscreens.

"It's emitting on high frequencies," he eventually said, brows frowned. The creature moved. It could hear them apparently, even with the plating, the distance and the storm.

"Did you hear it?" Javik asked.

"Not really hear it, no, but it was like tinnitus, you know?"

Javik nodded. "Many animals use sounds to locate their preys. We must be a very strange one for this creature to be so cautious with us."

"I don't like it," Vakarian said, leaning on the wheel to scrutinize the dark.

"We can only wait and defend ourselves if it attacks."

Vakarian nodded and the waiting game started. The creature stayed there for a long time, watching without blinking nor moving, and Javik and Vakarian did the same. When the storm calmed down and the sky started to brightened, the creature climbed back in the trees and disappeared with a surprising speed. Javik exchanged a look with Vakarian. They didn't need words or touch to figure out they knew the same thing. That creature would wait for the night to attack.

"We have eight hours of sunlight," Vakarian explained as they were eating their breakfast. Javik had woken up Wrex and resumed what had happened to him moments earlier while Vakarian had anxiously reviewed the Mako's protections and weaponry. "That's eight hours to find the crash site and look around. We're getting out of there before sundown, no matter what."

"But there is the rendezvous with the Normandy," Wrex said before emptying a bottle of water. "It settled for tomorrow evening, not tonight."
"I can put the Mako on a lower orbit around Kasbeel until the Normandy picks us up," Vakarian replied, checking on his omnitool. "The Mako can deal with outerspace conditions, as long as we keep it pressurized."

"We can also abort the mission right now," Wrex snorted.

"We have to find the crash site," Javik replied.

"Alright," Wrex grumbled. "But, I said it and I'll repeat it: you're paranoid, both of you. It's just a big animal, so what? We can kill it. You, Garrus, you took down Rachnis on Ilos and that stuff on that fucking spacestation. You're making a habit of killing beasts and I wouldn't be surprised if you added a theresher maw on your list before the end of the year."

"It's not that," Vakarian replied, rubbing his face with both hands. He leaned on the cargo's wall and stared at the ceiling. "It's a feeling I have. Something's not right, I know it. I feel it."

"You're a psychic now?" Wrex mocked.

"It was listening," Javik intervened because he knew Wrex would pay more attention to his words than to Vakarian's.

"We're an unknown object on its territory," Wrex sighed, annoyed. "Of course it had to come check on us, and we're lucky it didn't try to have a taste of the Mako yet."

"It should have, right?" Vakarian realized, rising anxious eyes. "But it stayed at a safe distance and it watched us, Wrex. Just like the phax before we had to run for the door."

Wrex stayed silent for a couple of seconds, studying the tensed traits of the Turian, then exchanged a look with Javik. There was more than just a big scary creature on the line. Vakarian was also afraid to fail his second assignment. That wasn't good. Javik opened his mouth to take control of the situation but Wrex shook his head.

"Garrus," he said, his voice carrying enough authority to shake the Turian to attention, "listen to me. You're gonna take a deep breath and stop being a fucking wimp." Vakarian frowned but Wrex stopped him, raising his hand between them. "You got all you need to finish this mission: training, experience, ammo, a freaking tank, an angry Prothean and a badass Krogan. So much awesomeness should be illegal. So get your skinny ass in that seat over there and let's go make your mama proud."

Vakarian looked at him for a couple of seconds before standing up without a word and heading for the cockpit. Javik saluted Wrex with a prothean sign, a movement of his finger from his forehead in the Krogan's direction. Wrex smiled back, showing all his teeth, and they followed the Turian to the front of the vehicle. He started the engine soon after and drove as fast as he could in the vegetation. The ground started to go up, slowing down their travel. They had to stop three times that morning to remove plants stuck under the Mako and this time Javik and Wrex were much more careful of their surroundings, especially what could be up in the trees. Javik didn't see the creature following them but it didn't have to stay close to them considering all the noise the Mako made.

The sun was at its zenith when they finally reached the crash site. A ship the size of the Normandy had inexplicably fell from its orbit. It had ravaged a large zone half burned, half covered with debris, rocks, broken trees and parts of the ship. It took an hour for Vakarian to maneuver to reach the main part of the hull. The Mako's instruments were all in the red and several alarms rang.
"The drivecore isn't here anymore," Vakarian said, shutting off the alarms, "but there are eezo residues all around."

"So we know what happened," Wrex snorted.

"We do?"

"Yep. Pirates. They shot the ship to ground it and steal the core. Happens all the time in remote systems like that. The scientific team probably died during or after the crash and the survivors are already en route for their new lives as slaves." He turned to Javik. "Sorry Love, no Salarian for dinner."

"I'll survive," Javik replied on his usual formal tone but he was a little amused. Wrex' scenario was convenient and also probably true. Element zero was a natural resource of great importance. It was needed for drivecores and faster-than-light engines. Without it, space-travel was nearly impossible. Eezo had had its importance during the Empire too but the Prothean hadn't depended on it as much as the people of the age. The new dominant species easily went to war to take possession of a freshly discovered worlds with only traces of eezo instead of focusing on research. Eezo was important, sure, but Protheans had found other ways to conquer the galaxy and rule it for over a hundred thousand years.

"But the reports said there was intelligent life on this satellite," Vakarian insisted.

"Did you see anything capable of shooting down a ship in orbit so far?" Wrex asked.

"No, but that doesn't mean there isn't anything like that here."

"Then write that in your report. Advise the Council to put this world under quarantine and they'll send a few of your turian ships to secure the system, maybe even disable the relay. They did that for the Yahgs."

"They did?" Javik asked, intrigued. "During the Empire, the Yahgs were used in illegal animal fighting rings."

"They're a pre-spaceflight species now," Wrex told him, "and that's gonna be ugly when they'll reach Council Space."

Javik snorted. "They do not know what await them."

"Anyway," Vakarian interrupted as Wrex threw his hand up in the air for a high-three that Javik reciprocated. "I want to see if we can find any data left in the wreckage." He undid his harness as he continued. "Salarian ships aren't the best when it comes to plating but you can be sure everything has been made to protect the onboard computer. Intel is too precious for them." He squeezed himself out of the cockpit. Javik and Wrex exchanged a look.

"He forgot," Wrex said.

"He forgot," Javik confirmed.

"What did I forget?" Vakarian asked from the cargo.

"Youth," Wrex shook his head.

"Youth," Javik sighed.
"Quit it, old men," the Turian dared, which made Wrex chuckle – Javik stayed impassible. "What did I forget?"

"Giving us orders."

"Oh." Vakarian realized. "I thought it was pretty obvious." He cleared his throats. "Well, let's go check the wreckage all together then, and we'll all hold hands and pick nice bouquets of flowers."

"See?" Wrex asked as he got out of his seat with some difficulties. "No humor."

The area smelled like ozone and ashes. Javik put on some gloves to not enter in contact with contaminated material and took his Particle Rifle before following Vakarian and Wrex. The Krogan rapidly became last, as his size and lack of agility slowed him down. When they reached the hull, Wrex decided to stand guard and catch his breath while Vakarian and Javik entered. A fire had destroyed most of what the crash hadn't, which didn't leave much for their curiosity. It took them the better part of an hour to find their first harddrive. It was heavily damaged but Vakarian was confident enough to be able to restore a few data from it.

They suddenly heard gunshots outside and Wrex swearing in his native language. Javik didn't wait for an order. He turned heel and ran, helped, for once, by his smaller size. When he reached the exit, he jumped down in the burned rocks, biotics at the ready, and looked around. Wrex wasn't at his position anymore. Instead, he was near the Mako, waving and shooting in the air to beat back the creature from last night. It was much bigger than Javik had anticipated, its fur striated with a lighter gray. It was turning around the Mako, avoiding Wrex, sometimes opening its enormous mouth to try to overawe the Krogan. Javik ran as fast as he could but, by the time he reached Wrex, the creature had hopped on the Mako, indifferent to the badass Krogan yelling at it, and had extended a long blue appendage which function was pretty self-explanatory. Javik stared, mortified, as Wrex sat in defeat on the ground while the beast had its way with the Mako.

"Which frequencies the onboard radar uses again?" Wrex grunted.

Javik snorted and folded his arms. "It is amusing. A story the crew will like."

"Yeah, and Shep will just love to see her precious Mako covered in alien cum."

"This is the Turian's problem."

"He's in charge," Wrex confirmed, nodding thoroughly.

"Oh no," said Turian yelled from a distance. "No, no, no!"

He ran past them, yelled, waved, even shot a few rounds but the creature was too busy to care about the tiny agitated Turian. Vakarian eventually came back to Javik and Wrex and sat, defeated.

"Shepard is going to kill me," he mumbled.

Wrex patted him on the shoulder, which shook him head to toes. "'could be worse, kiddo."

"I don't see how."

"'could be inside."

Vakarian looked at Wrex, horrified, and it was enough to make the Krogan laugh. Javik didn't hide his smile. A story to tell, indeed, but a painful one.
Note#1
The publication of this chapter has been delayed for several reasons I won't explain here. If you want to keep track of the publication schedule, read sneak peeks of the next chapter or all the stuff I write related to Semper Fi, hit the tag on my tumblr (the link on my profile is still broken, thank you FFnet, but I have the same nickname here and on tumblr).

Note#2
While I appreciate to see Semper Fi's statistics grow each week (I do, I really do), I'm stricken by the lack of feedback I receive. I don't want to beg for reviews and I don't want people to feel obligated, but it would be nice of you, readers, to give me a sign from time to time nonetheless. Especially those who binge-read the story in a few days. That means you enjoyed it, right? Well I'd appreciate to know why, what you liked, what you didn't like, etc. I put a lot of efforts on writing this story and sure, I do it mostly for myself, but it would help to know my readers enjoyed the read. It would really, really help.

So, if you binge-read Semper Fi, if you added it to your favorites stories, or in your followed stories, if you're just a casual reader just here because the lights were on, please make the extra-effort to write a review once in a while. Thanks.
The sun never set on this part of Illium and it reminded Nihlus of what he had once called home, a godforsaken small town on a dry planet used as base camp for a lot of mercenary groups between the Terminus Systems and the Attican Traverse. Only the poles were habitable due to the dying star the planet orbited, inflated and burning any rock around. Water had to be extracted from underground with kilometers-long pipes. All this industry kind of looked like Illium's towers, now that he thought about it. Vegetation was sparse outside of the plantations and hydroponic cultures, nothing taller than a bush, but the horizon was stricken by towers made of pipes and engines to dig deep beneath the surface. And they made a lot of noise, you could hear them kilometers around at any moment of the day or the night.

Nihlus had hated that noise as a child, but he had learned to not complain about it. His father had worked on those damn pipes and was proud of it so his son couldn't say anything about it. Junadus Dorinas, proud pipe builder and renown mercenary, chief of a gang of a hundred, famous for his regular attacks on turian ships and the raids on the nearby asari colonies. Nihlus had never really managed to connect to the guy. He had been his father, sure, but Nihlus never loved him. Junadus had been too absent for that, and too strict with his only child when he was around. Nihlus believed his mother when she told him his father was a good man, a loving man, but he never had had a proof so far.

That didn't have much importance now anyway. Junadus had been killed in action by one of his own men seeking power when Nihlus was fifteen. His mother had had to leave their home because her life was on the line and she had sent her son to boot camp on Palaven. They had stayed in contact so Nihlus knew she was alive somewhere, still doing mercenary jobs, but he hadn't seen her since then. It had been thirty-six years but it didn't bother him that much, to be honest. Nihlus smirked for himself. Such a lack of emotional bounds would assure him a series of long talks with a psychiatrist if he had pursued a career in the army, in the best of case. Fortunately, Saren had saved him from this terrible fate a long time ago.

The old man was still on Arcturus Station to help Ambassador Memniris deal with the Alliance, for his greatest joy. Last time Nihlus had had him on the line, Saren had spent more time bitching than actually giving him news. Things were settling down for the Alliance after a few months of political nightmare. Earth Ambassador Udina was still in charge, replaced on the Citadel by Anderson, but elections would be held soon to create a new government. Nihlus knew a lot about how Humans worked but their political system really didn't make sense to him. Choosing a person to represent all the others was kind of romantic, in some way, but also crazy. Nothing guaranteed the Chosen One would be able to do the job since the campaign was all talk and no action.

The worst thing was that the current candidates didn't have much experience with the army or how the galaxy worked in general. Nihlus had kept an eye on the list because those elections could deeply impact Shepard's life. Hackett was probably the most capable man to do the job but the Union of Nations, some sort of international parliament back on Earth, had refused his candidature due to his role in this mess. The next best choice was Anderson, who had publicly announced he wouldn't be part of the race. "I'm a soldier," Nihlus had heard him say on the news, "not a goddamned politician. I wouldn't know what to do." And Anderson was right. He wasn't the kind to lick butts and search for compromises. It would be foolish to put him at the head of the Alliance.
Of course, the Council had their favorite, the first human Ambassador Anita Goyle. They had worked with her for many years and knew she would do anything possible to keep her species in the game. Goyle was a smart woman, not a soldier, but she knew how to rule and get out of dangerous situations. And it was no secret she listened a lot to the Hierarchy. All attempts of cooperation between their species, like the Normandy SR-1, Gagarin Station, joined military training programs, trades and the all of that, had been developed thanks to Goyle. She had also heavily insisted to place her precious first human Spectre under turian protection. Goyle certainly was the Council and the Hierarchy's ally in that matter.

But Udina had his chances to keep the crown for a while. Humans would probably choose him over Goyle because he was known for his numerous strong oppositions to the Council. Goyle was all for cooperation, while Udina was all for pushing Humanity on a greater path or something. Humans would see someone composed and reasonable against a hot head making a lot of noise, and they'd probably choose the loudest. A lot of Humans wanted more recognition for their species, preferably now or even yesterday. They lacked patience, patience Goyle knew was necessary. The Council shouldn't have granted them an embassy so fast after the Relay 314 Incident. Now the Humans wanted a place in the Council, even if they didn't do shit for the galaxy yet. Turians didn't get their seat in the Council right after the Krogan Rebellions. They had had to wait a century before the Asaris and the Salarians thanked them and gave them power. Humans weren't there yet and probably never would.

Goyle was definitively the best choice and Nihlus wouldn't be surprised if Udina had a tragic accident in the next months, especially with Saren on Arcturus Station.

"Spectre Kryik?"

Nihlus blinked and realized he was staring at the window instead of focusing on the meeting. He cleared his throats and turned to all the blue, gray, white and other faces looking at him with more or less annoyance. Contracts, yes, very important contracts. The Council had sent him on Illium to make sure their interests would be protected in this new merger. A full platoon of asari and salarian lawyers was actually doing all the job but Nihlus' presence served to remind the corporations that the Council was seriously invested in those matters. It was no secret Nihlus was the most decorated agent of the Council, one of their most trusted Spectres. They often sent him as their representative, even if he didn't know the first thing about contracts and big money – well that wasn't true, signatures were involved in all of that, but, yeah, he didn't know shit about the Law. It tended to happen when your job authorized you to ignore it and do what you want.

"Yes?" he smiled as if nothing had happened.

"You can't be serious," Nassana Dantius said, their cute little nose wrinkling in their fury. "You didn't listen to a word we said, did you?"

"Come on," Nihlus replied, certainly not impressed by the company, "we all know I'm here to look pretty, not to make decision. Those guys, in the other hand," he continued, pointing to the Council's lawyers, "have been sent to do the talking and make sure nobody will screw with the Council. Is it the case?" he asked, turning to Shaun Oken, the Salarian in charge of the delegation, a brilliant lawyer and also a fellow Spectre but that wasn't common knowledge. Shaun was officially the head of legal department working for the Council. His Spectre status authorized him to access any file, legally or not, which was clearly cheating but the Council didn't care much for rules when their interests were on the line. Shaun couldn't blow his cover though, so he often worked with another Spectre doing the dirty work for him on the ground. Nihlus liked the guy. He couldn't use a gun to save his life but he was as ruthless as the next mercenary and a hundred times smarter.
"They want to screw our client," Shaun confirmed, his enormous eyes fixed on Dantius, "but we won't let that happen."


"The Council helped you take over Noveria," Shaun replied, "it is only fair that you give something back."

"Our clients come to Noveria because Council Law doesn't apply there," another Salarian raised his voice. "They search for more flexibility and discretion in order to work free of all restraints. They take risks investing in cutting edge technologies that will, one day, benefit all Council Space. Those risks must be taken and Noveria exists for this purpose."

Nihlus snorted, amused by the passionate speech. How did the guy dare talk about taking risks? "Did you forget what happened on Noveria or are you deliberately avoiding the subject?" he asked. Some people exchanged anxious looks. Dantius was one of them. Nihlus smirked. The Council had also sent him here because he had personally cleaned the mess on Noveria five years ago.

"Dantius," he continued, "you're going to accept the Council's terms without discussion and place Noveria under Council Law, unless you want your investors to learn what happened in Peak 15's labs."

"You cannot..." Dantius hissed.

"Oh I can," Nihlus replied. "I'm a Spectre. I can do whatever I want." The Asari gave him the most hateful look of his week, their fists clenched on the table. Nihlus wasn't an idiot. He may have been a Spectre but his title wasn't a magical shield protecting him from assassination. He could walk out of that building in ten minutes and take a bullet in the head right after. Illium was this kind of place, a place far more dangerous than Omega from his point of view. At least, people on Omega were honest. They tried to kill you themselves, they didn't pay someone else to do the job. Nihlus relaxed in his chair and drummed on the table with his fingers. "And, just in case you have something really stupid in mind, I'd like to remind you I'm not the only one holding evidence of what happened. My protegee was with me all along this mission."

And his mentor had had interests in that damn laboratory, but Nihlus didn't say a word about that. Saren's Spectre status had been on the line when the Council had realized he had money involved in Benezia's dirty little secrets. He had claimed having no knowledge of that investment since he trusted a volus banker named Barla Von to deal with his comfortable savings. Nihlus had investigated with Shepard on the matter and they hadn't found any proof of Saren's implications in Benezia's Rachni grooming business. Nihlus had gladly announced to the Council that his mentor was in the green, but an absence of proof wasn't proof enough. It was strange, at best. Nihlus had kept all of that for himself, just in case. He loved Saren, truly, and could do anything for the old man, but that didn't mean he had to trust his every word either.

Dantius was boiling of rage when they finally signed the papers half an hour later but Nihlus didn't celebrate his victory or relax then. He'd be a potential target as long as he was on Illium, and even after. A lot of Spectres finished their career with a bullet in the head due to a bounty, especially those like Nihlus who were well known. A guy like Shaun had no worries on the subject. He could walk free out of the building without looking at the windows around, as long as his secret was kept. Nihlus, in the other hand, wished he had taken his helmet with him when he set foot outside.

"They won't try to kill you now, Nihlus," Shaun stopped and smirked while all the delegation kept on walking. "It's a little too obvious."
"People do stupid things all the time for less than that," Nihlus replied, looking around. Spirits, he should have brought a heavier armor for this trip. To be honest, he hadn't thought he'd threaten one of the most influential Asari of the decade during his visit on Illium. Who was stupid now? he thought, keeping an eye on a particularly shady bush. "The Council screwed them good. Nobody will invest in Noveria now, the corporations will withdraw and the planet will be abandoned to colonization in a century or so. We know it, they know it," he pointed at the twin towers behind him, "everybody knows it, and I'm the one who made it obvious. It'll be a fucking miracle if I live till tomorrow."

"So you're leaving before us?" Shaun asked, leading the way. The lawyers still had paperwork to do. They'd stay on Illium as long as it took.

"I'm tempted to disappear somewhere for a while, yes," Nihlus nodded. Usually, in this kind of situation, he called Shepard and asked her to pick him up somewhere, but he couldn't do that. Well, maybe he could, she must have calmed down by now, but Nihlus had no desire to see Vakarian's smug face at the moment. The only contact he wanted with that face was which of his shotgun breaking its bones.

"I've heard Palaven is quite nice in this season."

"Yeah, if you ignore all those Turians," Nihlus grumbled and Shaun laughed at that. Palaven was indeed the safest place he could find after the Normandy. The planet was dangerous for pretty much all species, except the Krogans, but no Krogan had ever dared walk on Palaven, which proved they had indeed a brain. Even Turian mercenaries would think twice before following him there. They could land and kill him, sure, but they wouldn't get out of the planet. Bounty hunters didn't like this kind of jobs. They preferred to stay alive to enjoy their money. "I don't know," Nihlus sighed. "Maybe it's time to retire or something. I've made more enemies in my life than friends, and I'm only fifty-one."

"I'm thirty-two," the Salarian replied. "I'd kill to live till fifty-one."

"It's not the same and you know it," Nihlus whined. "I've reached a third of my species' lifespan. I'm officially not a young adult anymore and my peers will just start to consider me as someone reliable. Actually, no, I'm a Spectre so forget about that. I'll be an outcast until I die."

Shaun turned to the Dantius Towers and waved at them. "You can do it now, he's ready!"

Nihlus glared at the laughing Salarian. "Asshole."

"Eh, part of the job my friend," Shaun smiled and warped an arm around Nihlus' shoulders, pushing him to the street. "Now, can I buy you dinner to celebrate our victory?"

Nihlus snorted. He had offered to take Shepard to a nice restaurant just after her nomination, to talk and learn a bit more about her, even start their relationship on a positive note. She had stared at him with those piercing green eyes and a slightly disgusted wince on her face before declining. She had joined the crew of the Normandy instead to celebrate her promotion that evening and Nihlus had learned months later that what he had proposed her was the lamest excuse a human guy could use to get sex as a retribution. Which was disgusting and illogical, but Humans weren't known for their social skills.

"Pass," Nihlus shrugged. Shaun probably didn't know about that human custom, and he certainly wasn't the kind to try to fuck him, but Nihlus didn't want to bet on it either. Party ing with the lawyers was not a good idea. Nihlus knew himself quite well. He'd drink too much or use whatever drug was on the table, therefore be exposed and in danger. "There must be a turian ship somewhere
around leaving this planet soon. I'll ask them for a ride, I don't even care where they're going.”

Shaun nodded as they joined the rest of the group waiting for cabs. Nihlus followed them to their hotel, not wanting to draw attention on his departure, and used the employees' back corridors to get out of the building discreetly. Illium had a pretty efficient public transportation system for the commoners. Nihlus jumped in the first train he found, not even caring for its destination, waited for the next big hub and took another one, going wherever the crowd went. After a good hour of commuting and keeping an eye on his rear, he found himself in a denser part of the city with a lot of activity on every level he could see. Buildings were lower but closer, barely allowing the sun to shine. Nihlus entered the first bar he found and sat there for another hour at a table with a good view on the room, a wall in his back.

Nobody tried to kill or poison him but Nihlus didn't take that as a good sign. He let his untouched beer on the table and left the bar by a backdoor. He didn't plan to find a turian ship at all, not tonight anyway. Instead, he kept on walking here and there, enjoying the crowd but always aware of his surroundings and his shotgun within reach. Not a lot of people around carried weapons or wore armors. It made Nihlus easy to spot but he didn't care. Better safe than sorry.

A glimpse of red hair and green eyes made him stop in the middle of the street. Someone bumped into his back and Nihlus' heart missed a beat, hand already on his shotgun's handle. He was about to unsheathe when he realized it was only an angry Asari telling him to be more prudent. Nihlus let them pass without a word before checking his armor. No damage.

Idiot, he thought as he looked around, frowning. There wasn't many Humans around and he would know if Shepard was on Illium since he kept track of her – officially for the Hierarchy, officiously for himself. No sign of her. Nihlus grumbled and started walking again but he stopped when a flash of red caught his attention from across the street. There, on a holoscreen, was Shepard's face in an ad. Nihlus stared, incapable of reading the asari language but understanding what the ad was about since it displayed alluring bodies and the universal symbols for money.

That wasn't possible. That wasn't Shepard but someone who looked like her. A lot, granted, but that wasn't her. She wasn't so pink and plumped. Her nose wasn't that straight or her skin so smooth. The real Shepard had a scar striking her left eyebrow and a lot of marks on her face. She definitely didn't wear this kind of fancy lingerie and she wouldn't expose herself on an ad for a brothel. Shepard was the kind to pay an exotic dancer to get off a table and get angry when women were treated like objects. It couldn't be her. It wasn't her.

Nihlus crossed the street nonetheless and found the brothel soon enough. Prostitution was legal on Illium and it was a very lucrative industry. Anyone could start a career as long as they were of legal age, and since the galaxy was full of weirdos, anybody could find something suitable, even if they got their kick out of strange niches like being licked by pregnant Elcors or something trashier. Of course, if an asshole wanted to fuck a kid or way worse, that was possible. There wasn't a week without a news related to Illium's darker side. Some people were really fucked up and truly despicable.

As a Turian, Nihlus didn't think much of prostitution. It was a job like another, as long as everybody was consenting. Turians didn't often pay for sex, considering it was quite easy to fuck for them. Sure, it required friends, but the typical Turian was well acquainted. Nihlus had himself a bunch of friends with whom he felt comfortable enough to fuck, but they were scattered all over the galaxy. He regularly paid for sex when his hand wasn't enough anymore, and his preferences clearly went to human women. It had started long before he had met Shepard, and since then he often searched for redheads, preferably with green eyes. Even him found that sad.
The brothel was like any other: a bar with loud music and colored lights where pretty bodies would try to get a client. They'd take a room upstairs or something like that once they'd agree upon the price. Nihlus looked around but didn't find the redhead of the ad. He walked to the bartender, a turian woman who seemed bored to death by her job. Turians rarely worked in this industry either. They usually preferred the thrilling life of mercenaries because they were used to weapons and the rush of adrenaline provoked by a good fight. But they were all officially well balanced and not traumatized at all by their years in the army, of course.

"Hi," Nihlus saluted as he leaned on the counter. "I'm looking for someone special."

The bartender gave him a cold look before pointing to his shotgun. "You can't use that here, understood? It ain't that kind of place."

Nihlus frowned. He had seen a lot of shit in his life but knowing there were places on Illium where you could shoot prostitutes for a decent price made him nauseous. "I'm an asshole alright, but not that kind of asshole."

The bartender gave him a look that clearly indicated she had seen what a sentient being could do to another, the kind that gave shivers all along the spine. She slid a datapad in front of Nihlus with a list of the brothel's employees. It took him a minute to find the human girl and damn, she really looked like Shepard. A more naive and careless version of her. This was really disturbing but he wanted to see her in the flesh.

"Her," he pointed. "Is she available?"

"She's with a client for now," the bartender checked. "Grab a drink and take a sit, I'll tell her to come to you when she's ready."

It was a classic tactic to get the clients to spend a lot of money on booze but Nihlus played along. He paid for the most expensive dextro drink he could get here to show his good intentions to the bartender and moved to a table with a good view on the room. Girls, boys and others tried to get his attention but Nihlus sent them away each time. He wasn't interested in them and he didn't want to miss the redhead girl.

She appeared maybe an hour later, wrapped in white lingerie, her long hair floating behind her, and went straight for the counter when the bartender made a sign for her. Nihlus watched her move in the crowd, gracile and not as assured as Shepard. This one moved around people, while people moved before Shepard. She looked in Nihlus direction and was smart enough to catch his gaze and smile. Nihlus gulped. That was Shepard's smile, strong and confident, knowing fully she was charming in her own way. He watched her come to his table, a drink in her hand, not breaking eye contact once. She sat next to him, her heavy breasts bouncing in the process, and Nihlus couldn't not stare. Shepard had smaller breasts. She was skinnier in general, hard muscles everywhere, while this one was round and voluptuous.

"Hi," she said and damn her voice was Shepard's. The make-up wasn't though. It was discreet but too much nonetheless, strange even. Shepard only allowed herself a black line on her eyes – eyeliner, that was the word – and her colored nails. This one had lipstick on and stuff all over. It hid her freckles a little. "You okay?" she asked.

"Yes," Nihlus replied, snapping back to reality. He smiled and leaned in her direction, whispering in her ear. "I'm just startled by your beauty."

She smiled of that smile that said he didn't need to woo her with sweet words. All he had to do was to put credits on the table. "So, what did you have in mind, Handsome? I can do everything there is
on the menu, as long as we keep it safe for both of us."

Nihlus blinked. What did he have in mind, exactly? He had walked in without thinking, like pulled by gravity. He wanted to confirm that girl wasn't Shepard, and she wasn't, but at the same time she was. How could it be possible? Okay, Shepard was an orphan and Nihlus knew she had a brother, but could it be possible that she also had a sister? A sister that ended up in a brothel on Illium? It was too big to be true. It was something else. A trap? A trap. Spirits, he was dead but he wanted answers.

"You're sure you're okay?" she insisted, standing back a little.

"What's your price for an hour?" Nihlus abruptly asked, looking around anxiously. Fuck, he had seen that Human outside, in the street. What was she doing here now? She was looking in his direction. Did she have a weapon?

"It depends on what you..."

"What's the most expensive item on the menu?" he interrupted her, standing up. "I'll pay twice as much if we go now." The girl gave him an unsure look before turning to the bartender. Shit, Nihlus thought. He'd be thrown out if he kept acting like that. "I'm sorry," he lied, "I'm not used to this and if my boss catches me here, I'm dead. I'm asking for an hour, full price up front and the same amount after."

"And what do you want to do, exactly?" she asked, still uncertain.

"I'm a boob kind of guy," he replied, giving the room a new anxious look. The woman had disappeared. Where was she? "Anything you want, as long as your boobs are involved."

"You're crazy," she said.

"Yes," Nihlus smiled back forcefully.

She stared at him a little more, her green eyes not as intense as Shepard's, and stood up. "Alright," she agreed. "Go pay Tacia at the counter but don't tell her about the second part of the payment, okay? That's between us."

Nihlus didn't complain and paid the heavy price to the turian bartender, then followed the redhead girl to her room upstairs. There was a large bed with fresh satin sheets, a pole, mirrors and lights everywhere, a fridge, and a collection of dildos and other toys. Nihlus made sure the door was properly locked before heading for the bathroom. Nobody inside. He returned to the main room and noticed at least two cameras.

"It's for my security," the redhead told him. "Why don't you sit down and relax a little, hm? Maybe we could talk for a bit and make you comfortable?"

"Yeah, let's talk," Nihlus agreed. He grabbed a chair in a corner and put it in front of the bed. He sat there backward, facing the girl who tried to look at ease around his crazy self. "What's your name?"

"What do you want it to be?" she smiled back, playing with a lock of hair.

"Give me a name," Nihlus replied, annoyed. "Lie to me, anything, I don't care, but give me a name." He didn't want to give her one because he knew exactly how he'd call her. And then he'd try to fuck her and he didn't really have time to do that. He had to get answers fast and disappear by yet another backdoor.
"April."

"April. Okay, great." Wasn't April the name of a month for Humans too? Nihlus kind of remembered Shepard telling him she was born the eleventh day of that month. "I'm Nihlus."

"Hi," she teased.

"Hi. So, where are you from, April?"

She shrugged and gave him an apologetic smile. "Does that have any kind of importance?"

"Yes," Nihlus sighed and decided to play the species card. "I'm a Turian, woman, in case you didn't notice. Fucking with strangers is weird, at best, so I gotta know you a little before anything can happen, okay?"

"Fine," she calmed him down, raising her hands up in the air. "I was born on Horizon, in the..."

"Yeah," Nihlus interrupted her. "I know where Horizon is. Any family? Siblings maybe?"

"Nope," she shrugged and her breasts wiggled. Spirits, not now. "I'm an only child and my parents are dead." That should have been a relief but it didn't feel like it. Something wasn't right. Nihlus felt it.

"You're sure?" he insisted, staring at Not-Shepard straight in the eyes. The girl looked at him back, not impressed at all, but there was something in her posture that indicated she wasn't comfortable. She was hiding something, if not lying completely. Nihlus took his gun swiftly and aimed at her. The girl opened wide eyes and whitened but she didn't scream. She gave a quick look on her left. There must have been a panic button nearby. Someone would come quickly anyway because of the cameras. "Are you sure?" Nihlus asked again.

"It's what I've been told," the girl said, her voice trembling a little.

What she had been told? Nihlus frowned but his next question was interrupted by a loud alarm wrecking his brain and screams from the other rooms. That was too much noise for his translator to pick anything up but the meaning of all this became suddenly clear when it started raining in the room. Fire. Nihlus laughed. Of fucking course.

Not-Shepard sprung out of the bed and ran for the door. Nihlus tried to catch her but her skin was wet and she slipped out of his grip.

"Don't open the door!" he yelled as he stood up, trying to cover the alarm. "It's a trap!"

"You're crazy!" she screamed back and she opened the door.

A blue flare stroke her and threw her back, right on Nihlus who caught her by reflex, red blood raining on his face. There was a human woman in the corridor, her arm extended in his direction, biotics underlining her slim figure, looking at him. Nihlus let the girl fall on the ground and aimed for the woman but she pushed him back with her biotics. Nihlus fell on the bed, and by the time he was on hit feet again, the woman had disappeared in the crowd. He followed her in the corridor, pushing aside the screaming employees and their clients, occasionally shooting in the air to make way, but he couldn't catch the woman. Nihlus saw her in the hysterical crowd trying to get out of the brothel. She looked over her shoulder and he caught her gaze, blue and cold. She was going to escape.

Nihlus raised his gun and aimed for her head. A punch hit him right in the face when he pulled the
trigger, deviating his shot by a few centimeters and aggravating the general panic. Nihlus automatically aimed for his aggressor and saw the turian bartender ready to give him another punch.

"Not that kind of asshole, huh?" she yelled as she threw another punch.

Nihlus barely avoided it, pushed by the crowd. "That woman killed the redhead!" he defended himself. "Go upstairs and see by yourself, she took a direct biotic hit!"

"Shut the fuck up, motherfucker!"

She kicked him right in the stomach and Nihlus plowed, his breath lost for a second. He didn't have time for that, so he shot the bartender in the knee and let her fall on the ground. Nihlus pushed the remaining clients out of his way to get in the street. There was people everywhere, panicked clients of the brothel and their prostitutes, curious passer-by and other merchants, police officers running in their direction. The woman had disappeared. Nihlus yelled his frustration out loud in the middle of the crowd.

"I strongly suggest you to disappear this time," Shaun said as they got out of the police station three hours later. It was now the middle of the night but the sun was still above the horizon, messing with his internal clock. Nihlus rubbed his face. Damn, he needed a drink.

"I'm a Spectre," Nihlus replied, "I shoot who I want."

"This isn't true," Shaun contradicted him. "Spectres can do what they want during their missions but you weren't on official business when you started to shoot at people in that brothel. You're lucky few people know that, Nihlus, otherwise that cop would have had your head. And they'd be right. You injured seven people and killed two others."

"One," Nihlus corrected. "I killed one guy. The redhead girl's not on me. I told you, a human woman came in and blasted her with her biotics."

"You're the only one to claim that woman exists," Shaun growled.

"You don't believe me?" Nihlus asked, grabbing the Salarian's upper arm. "Look at the video surveillance, you'll see I'm not lying!"

"Everything burned," Shaun said, taking back his arm, "there is no evidence."

"Oh that's just convenient," Nihlus snorted. "Just like that fire, by the way. I've had time to think in there," he continued, pointing to the police station in his back, "and the only logical explanation is that the redhead had a contract on her head. Baby Blue didn't try to kill me..."

"Baby Blue?" Shaun interrupted.

"The biotic woman. She had blue eyes." Shaund rolled his. "She could have killed me too but she just pushed me back. Her target was the redhead."

"So what?" the Salarian replied, annoyed. "It's not your problem Nihlus. She probably had debts or one of her clients was unhappy or whatever. It happens all the time here. It's Illium, for fuck's sake! A thousand prostitutes die or disappear every day between those towers."

"Not all of them looks like my protegee, Shaun!" Nihlus yelled, making the lawyer jump in surprise. "The redhead looked exactly like Shepard, dammit!"
"People have look-alikes," Shaun replied. "Heck, she could have used plastic surgery to look like your damn protegee. I imagine some guys would pay a lot to fuck the first human Spectre."

Nihlus punched Shaun in the face, anger burning his insides. The Salarian rammed in a kiosk, spitting blood and saliva, and Nihlus caught him by the collar, lifting him from the ground even if the lawyer was taller than him. "Don't talk about Shepard like that," he barked, "ever!" He pushed him against the kiosk before releasing him.

"Or what?" the Salarian asked. "You're gonna kill me, Kryik?"

"With pleasure."

Shaun wiped the blood off his face with the back of his hand, looking at Nihlus straight in the eyes. "The Council will be notified of your behavior," he said, keeping his distance.

"Oh, I'm terrified," Nihlus chuckled. The threat made him want to laugh for good, actually. How many times the Council had closed their eyes on his behavior? Nihlus was too useful of a tool to them to be discarded because of a dead prostitute and a threat to a fellow agent. Spectres often had strong personalities and got into a fight with a comrade on a regular basis, especially the Turians. One like Shaun who never saw action had no idea how this kind of problem was smothered. The Council was going to give Nihlus a lecture by email, maybe even convocate him to the Citadel to tell him face to face how a bad boy he'd been, then they'd keep him there for a while, probably inform Saren of his protegee's behavior, and that would be the end of it. Nihlus really wanted to laugh at that moment.

Shaun didn't reply. He stared at Nihlus for a few seconds before leaving him here, in the middle of the street and the whispering crowd. Nihlus couldn't care less. He turned heel, without really knowing where he was going. He couldn't go back to the brothel in hope to find clues. The Council would never allow him to investigate on the murder of a prostitute anyway, even if she was the spitting image of one of their Spectres. Of course, Nihlus could do this on his spare time, but he'd get another scolding for wasting time and resources on something that really didn't matter on the galactic scale.

No, Nihlus couldn't investigate. He needed someone to work on this case for him then. He knew just the guy for that. Nihlus just hoped he was on Illium at the time.

And he was, glory hallelujah! Nihlus thought as he watched the Drell walk in the fancy club they had elected as their rendezvous point. Thane Krios was a small green man covered with shiny little scales. He wore some sort of black leather head to toe, exception made for his chest window, which Nihlus had always found ridiculous but it seemed to please the women around him. His bad boy look might have helped too, or the calm and confident aura surrounding him. Thane could be confident. He was one of the best assassin you could find on the market.

"Nihlus," Thane saluted him as he hoped on the stool.

"Thane," Nihlus nodded. He made a sign to the asari bartender, a matriarch that looked pretty angry all the time, and they ordered drinks before anything else. Drells didn't drink alcohol – it tended to dry them, which wasn't pretty to look at – so Thane sipped a fruit juice while Nihlus enjoyed his dextro beer, the kind you'd find outside of Hierarchy-controlled space. "I have a job for you," Nihlus said.

Thane had a very precise smile that didn't reach his enormous black eyes. "You're not even going to entertain me with your stories before talking business?"
"It's always the same with me," Nihlus shrugged. "People try to kill me, I kill them, in between I save the galaxy and I fuck a marvelous creature in the end. Nah, it's boring." This time the Drell was a little amused. "You're working on something lately?" Nihlus asked before taking a sip of his beer.

"I was thinking about retiring, actually," Thane replied, playing with the little umbrella that came with his juice.

"Retiring? You?" Thane nodded, keeping his eyes on his drink. "Well shit," Nihlus snorted. "Won't be the same without you, Krios."

"Hm," Thane agreed. They stayed silent for a minute which Nihlus used to look around, just in case. "I'm sick, Nihlus," Thane eventually said. "I won't walk the earth for long and I would like to use this time to save my son from the Darkness."

"I didn't know you had a son," Nihlus replied. He couldn't care less about that but Thane was an old friend, he owed him some small talk, even if it was a waste of time.

"I had to dissociate myself from him for his own sake." Nihlus nodded. He perfectly understood that. Family and friends were liabilities in Thane's line of work.

"Maybe I can help," Nihlus said.

Thane gave him another smile which didn't reach his eyes again. "You're not the kind of person to do something out of goodwill."

"I'm not," Nihlus confirmed.

"This must be important."

"It is." Sort of, he added for himself.

Thane looked at his glass and Nihlus let him do that patiently. Drells could be quick as lightening during a fight, but otherwise they took their sweet time in everything. They were a contemplative people. They liked long walks in the sunset and endless philosophical discussions embellished by poetry. Some species were just meant to disappear, if you'd asked Nihlus.

"I want you to find my son," Thane eventually said. "This should be easy enough for a Spectre like you."

"That's it?" Nihlus asked, surprised. "That's your price? That's something you can do by yourself, you know?"

"I can find my son but I cannot reach him in the Darkness." Nihlus did his best to not roll his eyes. Drells and their mystical bullshit!

"Alright," Nihlus sighed. "I'll find him and drag his ass out of trouble or whatever hole he's in."

"His name is Kolyat. He's a Drell."

No shit. "Don't worry," Nihlus said, patting Thane on the shoulder, "I got this."

Thane nodded. "What can I do for you, then?"

"I want you to find a human woman."
"This is something you can do by yourself," Thane gently mocked.

"My bosses won't allow it."

"I'll take care of her," Thane agreed.

"That's the thing," Nihlus ticked, "I don't want you to kill her."

"You don't?"

"No," Nihlus shrugged, playing with his bottle of beer. "I want to kill her myself."

TBC

Note
Thanks for all the reviews last time guys! I really appreciated it!
Zaeed wasn't playing nice with the crew, especially with the aliens on board, and it resulted in some tensions that Shepard saw growing a little more every day. She had done her job and talked to Zaeed about his behavior, but the old man was stubborn and didn't recognize her authority. She was his little girl after all, his spiritual daughter – even if he probably had children of his own all over the galaxy. Shepard loved the guy but she'd have to tell him to fuck off, depending on his value. For now, she needed his contacts and his expertise regarding Cerberus, that's why she tolerated his bullshit, but his luck wouldn't last forever.

To ease the tensions, Shepard had decided to authorize the crew to blow off some steam on Omega for the night. Shore leave for a delayed Christmas was already programmed on their next stop on the Citadel, but the crew couldn't wait for another week. They needed a break as much as she did.

But she had work to do first. They didn't come to Omega just to have fun one night. One of Zaeed's contacts was feeling chatty. From what Shepard knew, Jacob Taylor was an ex-Alliance Marine who had joined Cerberus like many others because of the slowness of the system. His job was mostly which of an informant for Cerberus, so it hadn't been hard for him to hide during the fall of the organization. Taylor had since then been a double-agent, selling information both to surviving Cerberus cells and outside. A guy had to eat after all.

Shepard was checking her emails in CIC during the final maneuvers for docking when Vakarian approached her as discreetly as he could – which wasn't much considering all the people around waiting for docking and his size. He was wearing a comfortable set of civvies that Shepard hadn't seen on him a lot. They were looser than his usual clothes, some sort of commando pants with a shorter jacket, all in deep blue and black, nothing with flashy white, yellow or orange lines for once. Shepard saw a glimpse of her colors on his shoulder and she couldn't help her smile.

"Commander," he saluted her while falling in parade rest on her right.

"Vakarian," Shepard replied, vaguely curious of his behavior.

"Don't look at me," he told her and she kept her eyes on her terminal. "Act normal."

"You're suspicious as hell," she mocked, "you know that?"

"I have something for you but it's better if nobody knows about it."

"If it's your dick, I'll pass." She heard him click, not amused, and the next thing he did was slipping a hand under her right arm. Shepard immediately blocked his hand under her arm, fuck the pain, and turned to him. "What the hell are you doing?" she hissed but still managed to keep her voice low enough to not alert everybody.

"We're supposed to trust each other," he replied, looking around while his hand searched for something.

"That's not a reason for... Hey!"

"Ha, got it," he interrupted her and she felt the weight of her hidden Carniflex slip out of her
holster. He took the gun and replaced it with another one, much lighter. Vakarian then took a step back, put her gun in his back under his top and played it cool. "The fire rate and the capacity aren't great, the clip only contains three shots, but it has a better accuracy than your usual Carniflex," he explained. "Plus, you won't find a gun with this much power for its weight. And I customized it for you."

Shepard stared at him coldly before looking under her jacket. She had no idea what that gun was, but knowing Gunaholic there, it probably was the good stuff. Shepard grumbled as she accommodated it under her broken arm. She wasn't supposed to bring a weapon with her to that meeting but fuck it. Without her biotics and her armor, she was just a sitting duck and she hated that feeling.

"Thanks," she eventually said, "but you could have given me your present elsewhere and without touching my boob."

"Sorry," Vakarian replied, clearing his throats. "It's not a present though, it's a lease," he continued, faking interest in something on the desk. Of course it was, Shepard thought. He loved his toys too much to share. "And you've been avoiding me lately."

"Now you sound like my jealous ex-girlfriend," Shepard mocked to avoid the subject. Vakarian gave her one of those piercing looks he had when he wasn't in the mood for playing.

"I'm not an idiot, Shepard," he said, leaning in her direction and pointing something on the terminal, "I know it's because of your grandfather." That and she had given him a boner. Shepard was nice enough to not remind him that fact, but, the truth was she didn't want to talk about it at all. Sure, it had made her feel good about herself for a moment, but the guilt had chewed her ever since. She felt bad for not listening to him when he had asked her to stop brushing his fringes. She hadn't meant it, but it was still wrong.

"And I'm mad at you for the Mako," she reminded him, even if it wasn't true. She had been a little angry to see her precious baby soiled by an adventurous creature, but she had laughed like everybody else during dinner when Wrex had told them the story. Vakarian had spent practically all the trip to Omega in the shuttle bay to clean and repair the Mako. She didn't even have had to give him an order.

He straightened his back, hands behind him, and took a step on the side. Zaeed was approaching. "I thought we were on a good path, Commander."

"We still are," Shepard ensured him, lowering her voice.

"Everything all right, Jany?" Zaeed asked, staring at the now very straight and stiff Turian behind her.

"Show some respect, Massani," Vakarian growled.

"Fuck off, mate," Zaeed replied. Shepard sighed, not amused by the buckets of testosterone thrown over her head.

"He's right, you know?" she intervened, pointing at her protegee over her shoulder. "I'm in charge here. I told you, you can't call me Jany in front of everyone. I'm not asking you to call me Commander but use my last name, goddammit."

"Ow, you're embarrassed by your old man," Zaeed mocked, pinching her cheek.

Vakarian grabbed Zaeed's wrist and twisted it without warning nor mercy. The mercenary yelped
and had to follow the movement to not let it get worse, slowly bending on the side. Shepard should have intervened and stopped Vakarian but she didn't. Wrex and Javik didn't hesitate to verbally assault Zaeed when he crossed the line but they didn't get physical with him, Shepard didn't know why. Vakarian hadn't hesitated a second. It was oddly satisfying.

"I'm coming with you, by the way," Vakarian said casually.

"Okay," Shepard shrugged it off. "Shall we?"

"On your six, Commander."

He released Zaeed to follow her to the airlock. Most of the crew had taken the opportunity to spend the night out, exception made of Joker, Chakwas, Adams, Kaidan, Javik and Legion – the last two rarely left the ship alone anyway. Shepard waved her good arm in the air to get everybody's attention.

"It's now seven PM on the Normandy," she announced, "and I want everybody back on board for eight AM tomorrow. Let me remind you I'm not nice with latecomers and don't forget Omega doesn't have the same time so be careful of your omnitool resynchronization. You're free to go. Have fun, but not the kind that requires me to save your ass, thank you very much."

Solus let everybody pass before him, waiting for Shepard. She gave another few words to Javik and Joker before walking out of the Normandy with Solus, Vakarian and Zaeed. The Salarian led them through the crowded docks to a rendezvous point. There waited his daughter, a pale Asari not even two decades old, who had slightly darker blue dots on her face. She was tall and slender, impression reinforced by her skin-tight clothes. Shepard had never seen an Asari so young. They were usually raised on Thessia or any asari colony, far from the rest of the galactic community – you'd never see an asari child run around on the Citadel, whereas human, turian and salarian kids were fairly common. It seemed odd that Aria had taken the risk to raise her child on Omega.

Solus embraced his daughter with affection Shepard hadn't thought possible from him and kissed her several times on the forehead, making a big deal out of it. The girl laughed at it. Shepard felt uncomfortable watching the family reunion and she wasn't the only one. Vakarian did his best not to look. Shepard didn't know much about his family situation but it seemed pretty bad considering his behavior.

"You'd think the girl'd be uglier than that with a father like him," Zaeed snorted and Solus magically produced a Carniflex out of nowhere, aiming at the mercenary.

"Will not tolerate such behavior around daughter," the Salarian warned him.

"Good," Zaeed replied, not impressed at all, "cause I'm leaving. I'll wait for you in Afterlife, Jany."

And he left, walking through the crowd like he owned the place.

"I'll give you some space too," Vakarian announced but Solus shook his head.

"Can stay," he said, sheathing his gun behind his back. "Shepard, Vakarian, my daughter, Tuccio."

Shepard waved at the girl and Vakarian preferred a more formal salute, fist on his heart and all. It amused Solus greatly.

"I've heard a lot about you, Commander Shepard," Tuccio said in a thin voice, still in her daddy's arms. "You saved Omega last New Year."

"I helped," Shepard corrected. She was curious about what Tuccio could have been told about her
but she didn't know the child enough to ask. And she didn't want Aria to think she had any kind of interest in Omega's little princess. Having Solus on board against Aria's will was bad enough.

"Didn't think knew humility," Solus chuckled and Shepard smirked. Asshole. Solus planted a kiss on his daughter's forehead before continuing. "Was on Omega too, know all the story. Care to hear it?"

"No offense dad but you're not exactly easy to follow," Tuccio replied and Solus laughed at that.

"Sorry," he chuckled. "I can make the extra-effort for you, my dearest." And he kissed her again.

"So you are capable of speaking normally," Shepard snorted. "That's a surprise."

"Capable, not willing," Solus replied. "Huge waste of time, especially when talking in Sessentak. Language overly complicated, thirty-two different ways to say 'I' for example, mostly depending on social ranks and situation."

"That's why you never say 'I'," Vakarian realized and Solus nodded.

"Yes," he smiled. "Counterproductive. Now, have a lot to talk about with daughter."

"Yeah, we better get going too," Shepard admitted, scratching her nose. "Eight AM tomorrow, don't forget."

"Never forget," Solus ensured and there was something serious and a bit worrying in his voice. Shepard didn't really have time to linger and figure out why so she waved goodbye to the Salarian and his daughter before turning heel, followed by Vakarian.

The Afterlife wasn't the biggest nightclub nor the most frequented on Omega, but it was Aria's lair, therefore where most of the merc business was done. Shepard walked in with her protegee slightly behind her without even looking at the bouncers or at all the people waiting in line outside. That was a good sign. As long as she wasn't stopped on her way in, she could consider herself Aria's friend. That didn't protect her from harm thought. The cold presence of the gun under her arm reassured her a little.

The music was as loud as ever in the club and Vakarian winced like a scary gargoyle. Which was a good thing because people made way before the seemingly angry Turian behind her, therefore nobody touched her broken arm as they walked through the crowd to the counter. Zaeed wasn't difficult to find considering his yellow and black armor and the empty space around him. The regular people on Omega had a sixth or seventh or even eighth sense for trouble, depending on the species. They just knew how to avoid it, and Zaeed was clearly trouble.

That hadn't stopped an Asari from talking to him. Or maybe Zaeed had decided to try his chance with her – his hatred for alien tended to disappear when he could fuck a pretty one. The Asari was taller than him with her heels, in a red armor of some sort so light it couldn't possibly take any damage and with a huge opening on her chest. Shepard stared at the boobs window, frowning. That was pretty stupid, in her opinion, but she changed her mind when she met the Asari's eyes. They were old and serene, gentle with the child she was. A matriarch, Shepard understood. She didn't need a proper armor alright. Her barrier could probably withstand a nuclear explosion.

Like every time Shepard had been near a matriarch, she felt compelled to come to her, like pulled by her own biotics, and so did she, without even fighting it. The matriarch welcomed her with a gracile nod of the head before presenting her hands. Shepard could only offer her one in return but the Asari didn't mind. Her touch was warm and powerful, so much it overwhelmed Shepard. She
felt burning tears fill her eyes and her throat tightened as she tried to breath. It was suddenly too hot for her in the club and also strangely silent, as if the music had stopped. She could only look at the matriarch in the eyes and feel her warmth embracing her, excited and terrified by so much power at the same time.

The music came back and a cold wave hit Shepard as the matriarch's touch left her hand. The Asari smiled at her while she wiped her tears out then focused on Vakarian. She stared at him for several seconds before turning back to Shepard.

"You shouldn't fight your gift, child," she said, and her voice was gentle and wise. Shepard was incapable to talk at the moment so she just smiled nervously and nodded. The matriarch smiled back before turning to Zaeed. "Your confidence was refreshing." And with that she left, walking through the crowd like Moises opening the Red Sea.

Shepard leaned on the counter and asked for the strongest levo drink they had. She was shaking a little when she searched for her cigarettes and it took her longer than usual to light one. A large hand touched her back. Three fingers. It surprised her enough to forget the cold in her chest for a second.

"You're okay?" Vakarian asked. He didn't look good either. "You're pale and your heart rate is elevated. Should I call Doctor Chakwas? Wait, I have a lollipop if you need sugar."

"I'll survive," Shepard smiled back to reassure him, and also a little because he was helplessly searching for the candy in his pockets. "Just a biotic thing."

"What biotic thing?" Zaeed asked from the other side. He pushed Vakarian's hand from her back. Shepard laughed nervously. Now wasn't a good time for their alpha male bullshit.

"You have no idea how powerful that woman was," Shepard replied. One of the bartenders put a glass of green liquor in front of her and she gulped it without even thinking. The alcohol burned and prickled enough all the way down to her stomach to make her eyes tear again. Ryncol. God bless the Krogans for that marvelous invention. Shepard asked for another one.

"Don't care," Zaeed shrugged. "That ass though."

"You probably encountered one of the most powerful matriarch alive and all you noticed was her derriere?" Vakarian asked, clearly upset.

"What man wouldn't?" Zaeed replied. "Oh right, ugly birds like you prefer to fuck with their buddies. That ain't disgusting at all, fagot."

"Hey, stop it," Shepard interrupted. "And apologize, Gramps."

"I ain't apologizing to queens," Zaeed snorted.

"Keep that in mind next time you have to say sorry to me then," Shepard said, and she raised her second glass of ryncol to him before gulping it.

Zaeed lost his smile. "You're kidding."

"Nope," Shepard smirked but she really didn't feel like it. "I fuck men, women, Turians, Asaris, I even made out with Wrex once too." The look on Zaeed's face shook off the rest of her overwhelming encounter with the matriarch. That'd teach the old bastard a lesson. He stared at her for several seconds before talking.

"My contact is in the VIP section. You know where it is?" Shepard nodded, drawing on her
cigarette. "Then join us when you're done being a smart ass."

"That probably cost you a lot of sympathy points," Vakarian commented once Zaeed gone. He gave her the lollipop.

"Yeah, well, fuck him," she said as she took it and put it in her pocket. "I mean, I love the guy as if he was my grandfather but that doesn't mean I have to agree with all his bullshit and hatred."

"As if?" Vakarian repeated. "I thought he was your grandfather."

"No, I'm an orphan."

"I didn't know." That surprised her, to be honest. People talked a lot so she had assumed he knew. Shepard finished her cigarette and paid for her drinks.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I turned out alright."

"That's debatable," Vakarian joked and she poked him in the ribs with her good arm. They were heading for the VIP section, going down stairs, when he spoke again. "I'm sorry, I have to ask. Wrex?"

"Yep," Shepard smirked.

"Oh."

"Usually people ask for details at this point."

"That's enough for now, thank you." Shepard laughed.

The VIP section was where all the serious business took place, therefore the music wasn't as loud and the atmosphere was a lot more tensed. Shepard asked a waitress almost naked where was Zaeed and the girl took her to a semi-circular booth with a good view on the dance floor. Shepard sat in front of the black guy wearing what certainly was the latest fashion trend on this rock, and ordered beers for her and Vakarian. Taylor stared at the Turian.

"Who is he?" he asked, pointing at Vakarian.

"My bodyguard," Shepard smirked and her protegee snorted. "Got a broken shoulder and I'm not stupid enough to come without backup."

"I didn't agree to that," Taylor replied.

"Then feel free to get the fuck out," she shrugged. She looked at him right in the eyes and Taylor frowned.

"We should all calm down and take a deep breath," Zaeed intervened. "Cocksucker here is also a problem for me, believe me, but you'll have to do with him." The informer didn't reply. "You called me, Jacob," Zaeed insisted.

"Fine," Taylor grunted.

"So," the old merc continued. "what can you tell us about Cerberus?"

"Doorway is down, thanks to you Shepard," Taylor smirked, "Trapdoor and Overlord too, but the organization survived that. Massani took down a few survivors since New Year but nothing of importance."
"I just needed a few bucks," Zaeed shrugged.

"I know all of that," Shepard said. "You're of no use to me, Taylor."

Taylor looked at her, seemingly relaxed but Shepard knew he was bluffing since he had agreed to let Vakarian join them. Taylor wanted something, otherwise he would have fled.

"I was on Eden Prime, you know?" Taylor eventually said. "The day you arrived for your first official mission with those two Turians. Me and my team were securing the Beacon." Shepard arched an eyebrow. She had an idea on where Taylor's story was going. "Everything went to Hell that day."

It had, Shepard remembered. It should have been a simple pick up of the Beacon but mercenaries had raided the dig site before Shepard and Nihlus could arrive – Saren had insisted to come but the old Turian had slow them down, ranting about the mountains, telling her to be more careful, and so on. And he didn't help at all during the fight with the mercenaries, arguing he was just there to evaluate Shepard, since he didn't trust Nihlus to be objective on the matter. It had been a pretty epic fight. The Alliance's presence had helped, because even her and Nihlus couldn't take down over fifty mercenaries by themselves, not in those conditions. The chieftain of the group had been a Krogan in red armor, Wrex himself, and Shepard had fought him with all she had, even her biotics. But Wrex had six hundred years of experience and mastery behind him, whereas Shepard only used her powers occasionally and she really wasn't good at it at the time. Wrex had eventually pinned her down. Saren had shot him in the head shortly after. A Krogan needed more than that to die but at least they had managed to put him in a cell before he could regenerate. Meanwhile, practically all the platoon had died. It didn't really matter at the time. The Beacon had been secured.

"So?" Shepard asked.

"That Beacon was ours," Taylor replied, frowning. "Eden Prime was ours, everything we found there should be ours, even prothean technology. The Asaris, the Salarians and the Turians keep everything they find for themselves, which help them keeping their leader status, but Humans can't and the Alliance is an accomplice of that reaping. They don't care about Humanity, they just want to please their alien masters." He gave a cold look to Vakarian over the table. The Turian didn't move a muscle. "I understood that that day and I quit the next."

"That's touching, really, but why would I care about your sad story, Taylor?"

He leaned on the table. "You were supposed to be Humanity's proof of our power, Shepard," he said. "You were supposed to be on our side."

Shepard wanted nothing more than break that guy's face at that moment and tell him it was more complicated than that, but she kept her anger in check. She didn't have to explain a thing to that asshole.

"I want full immunity."

Shepard shouldn't have let surprise show on her face but she knew she did. She hated herself a little for that, but it helped her realize what game Taylor had played so far. He had wanted to anger her, which had worked, to destabilize her. Shepard smirked. He was better than she thought he'd be.

"I see," she replied. She took a cigarette in her pack and lit it calmly. Full immunity meant he was in trouble. Maybe Cerberus knew about Taylor's double-agent activities. He wanted a way out. That made sense, she decided. Taylor couldn't go to the Alliance and ask for protection like that, even with all the information he possessed. After Cerberus attacks on the Citadel and Omega, the
Alliance had been pretty clear: no mercy. They didn't help Cerberus agents to get out anymore, so Taylor had no other option than to seek help from someone with a greater power. It would have worked a few months back, before Project Base, before Shepard had flipped the finger to the Alliance.

Now things were a little more complicated. She could take him to the Citadel and place him under surveillance but the Council didn't like this kind of method. Informers often had crazy expectations of what their life should be and they didn't hesitate to sulk and keep their mouth shut if they didn't get what they wanted. They were a waste of time, men and money.

Wait, Anderson was on the Citadel, Shepard realized.

"You'll have your full immunity," she eventually said. It was a lie but Taylor probably didn't have the kind of information worth his request anyway. He'd have to deal with Anderson directly and the old Admiral wasn't the kind to gently swallow the bullshit you fed him with.

"But?" Taylor asked and it made Shepard smile.

"But you'll be my prisoner till we reach the Citadel. I don't trust you, Taylor, and I don't want you to give my position to your buddies, or any intel on me and my crew either."

"Works for me. I'll just get a few things and..."

"No, you won't," Shepard shook her head. "Zaeed will take you to the Normandy right now and make you comfy in brigs."

"But I have proof of..."

"Don't worry about that," Shepard interrupted him.

"You can't be serious," Taylor replied.

"It's either that or your Cerberus buddies will probably get you in the next couple of weeks," Shepard shrugged. She looked at him in the eyes and he didn't dare lie to her. "Good," she said, "I'll see you on board later."

Taylor and Zaeed stood but Vakarian stopped them. "Give me your weapons."

"I don't have..."

"Yes you do," Vakarian replied. "We all do." Taylor grumbled and put a gun, a submachine gun and a knife on the table before leaving, Zaeed on his heel. "Not even the good stuff," Vakarian mumbled, removing the clips. "You played him like a violin."

Shepard laughed. "Where did you learn that?"

"I've been around Humans lately," he shrugged. "No but seriously, you impressed me there. I didn't know you were capable of that."

"I'm terrible at negotiating," Shepard shook her head before taking a sip of her beer. It was lukewarm now.

"I shoot before asking questions," Vakarian said. "Anyone capable of doing the opposite has my admiration."

Shepard hid her smile behind her cigarette and noticed someone coming in their direction. To her
surprise, it was Magos, beers in hand, wearing a bright orange human overalls which let his back, shoulders, arms and a part of his chest visible. It would have been comic in some sort of way to see a Turian wearing human clothes if it hadn't been hella sexy on him.

Shepard frowned. That was unexpected.

"Shepard!" Magos saluted. "What a pleasant surprise!" He sat at the table and slid a levo beer in her direction, keeping the other to himself. Magos only nodded to Vakarian who replied the same way. They didn't know each other enough to be more friendly.

"Hi," she smiled. "Interested in that crap?" she asked, pointing at Taylor's weapons. "Free of charge."

"I never say no to free guns," Magos said as he took the weapons. "So, what brings you to Omega?"

"Business."

"I thought so," the Turian smirked, sipping his beer. "I saw you with Crazy Ass Massani."

"Crazy Ass Massani?" Shepard chuckled.

"He's well known on this rock. A good client of mine too. Don't mess with him."

"I'll keep that in mind," Shepard said. Magos didn't need to know what her relationship with Zaeed was. "Thanks for the warning."

Magos nodded before pointing to Vakarian. "You can go play elsewhere, boy. Leave the grownups alone." Vakarian frowned and turned to Shepard.

"It was the deal all along," she confirmed. "Business, then fun."

"Maybe he wants to have fun with you," Magos smirked behind his beer. That pissed Vakarian off.

"I would never consider Shepard as fun," he declared and he leaned to her to whisper in her ear.
"Don't show him the gun." Then he stood up and left, disappearing in the dancing crowd.

"What was that supposed to mean?" Magos chuckled. Shepard gave him a forced smile back and decided to push that weird feeling far away for now. Fuck, she deserved some alone time and to be selfish for a few hours. "Feeling naughty tonight?" Magos teased, lasciviously leaning on the bench.

"Urh, not anymore," she winced and her honesty surprised herself.

"Oh." Magos straightened. "I, huh, interrupted something, maybe?"

"No, God, no," Shepard frowned. She rubbed her forehead and looked at the ceiling. "It's complicated."

"I won't lie to you, Shep," Magos said, playing with his bottle of beer, "I'd love to have sex with you. I've seen you on the battlefield and my blood boils just thinking about it. Spirits, you were so..." He gave her a quick look, his eyes flashing red in the dim lights of the booth. It made her shiver. "I'd love to, really, but it's not important in the end. I meant it when I called you my friend. I know I only fought by your side for two days but you made me remember what it was like to be a Turian. For that, I am grateful. And for that, I'll forever be in your debt." He took a deep breath and
lost a part of his seriousness. "So, if you wanna get drunk and say shit until the morning because it's what you need right now, I'm your guy."

Shepard couldn't help her smile, even if she fought it. She hid it behind her bottle of beer. "Thanks," she eventually said. Magos simply nodded.

"So, any lead on that sniper rifle I sold to your pup?" he asked.

"We lost it, actually," Shepard winced.

"Lost it? How? The kid seemed glued to it."

"He was," Shepard chuckled. "I suspect he even slept with it, but we got our asses handed over to us during a mission and our weapons were stolen."

"Did you have a Black Widow with you that day, by any chance?"

"Yeah, why?"

"A Batarian sold me one a couple months ago," Magos said and Shepard's blood froze. "It's a Spectre weapon, you don't see a lot of those. Might even be the first ever on the black market. The fucker didn't know what he had in hands though. I gave him fifty thousands credits and he thought it was a good price." He chuckled and sipped his beer. "Idiot."

"Did you sell it?" Shepard asked, trying to hide her discomfort.

"No, I kept it. A Black Widow for fifty Ks? You don't sell it, you worship it." Shepard smiled. "You want it back?"

"No, I've got another. Keep worshiping her."

"Or I can sell it to your pup," Magos smirked. "He'd die for one of those."

"And thus the worship of Shepard's Black Widow would continue," Shepard mocked but she didn't fell like it and it showed on her face. Magos came closer to her on the bench, leaving his new acquisitions and his beer on the other side of the table.

"Did I say something or..."

"I got raped during that mission," Shepard said and she didn't have any control on her words or her body at that moment. Tears filled her eyes again and her hands were shaking a little. Despite the fear, the pain and the anger still locked inside of her, it felt good to say it out loud. She wiped her tears with her good hand and took a sip of beer after. "The sad part is," she gasped, "it's not even the first time it happened to me, but I'm still here, wanting to cry like a baby because some assholes put their dicks in my cunt. It's so fucking frustrating! I'm stronger than that, dammit!"

Magos wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she let herself fall in his embrace. His exoskeleton was hard but warm, his scent of old leather and gun oil. "You are strong," he said and it was a statement, not some words to make her feel better, "the strongest Human I've ever met. Believe me, I fought against you crazy monkeys during the war." Shepard snorted. "But one can only take so much. Even the strongest eventually breaks." His voice carried something profoundly sad and painful. Shepard snorted again, her nose running a little. Magos spoke from experience, she felt it.

They stayed silent for a few minutes, watching the dance-floor absentmindedly. Shepard registered
Vakarian speaking to an Asari in black at the counter, but there was too many people between them for her to keep him in sight. She closed her eyes. That was none of her business anyway.

"Did you kill the bastards who did that to you?" Magos asked moments later.

"No," Shepard sighed, sinking a little more in his warm embrace. God, she wished Nihlus was here, for once. She needed his smell, his voice, his warmth. She missed all of that. "They left me for dead on an asteroid en route to a fucking relay."

"And you survived that," Magos chuckled, the sound resonating in his wide chest. "Spirits, you're something."

"Vakarian saved the day actually," she felt obligated to correct, "not me."

"Vakarian?"

"Pissed off Gunaholic."

"I knew his face was familiar," Magos mumbled.

"You've heard of him?" Shit, Shepard thought. She was kind of famous for a Spectre thanks to the Alliance but so far Vakarian's status had been a secret – more or less. She always presented him as part of her crew, not as her protegee. Nobody had to know.

"Not heard, no, but he looks like a Vakarian I once knew, during the war. Major Argoth Vakarian. Huge piece of shit. Got court-martialed because of him."

"What happened?" Shepard asked, curious. Magos reached for Vakarian's beer, which hurt a little Shepard's shoulder but she didn't say anything, and let him take a sip.

"My platoon got decimated so we joined his. We weren't his men, see, so he always sent us do scoot shit and all. Ten days later, the Council intervened and the war was going to end. We were supposed to release the prisoners we had but they were in a pretty bad shape. Post-torture shape. We couldn't send them back so Vakarian commanded us to execute them. I refused and his pal Fedorian did the job. Huge asshole too this one. He's the Primarch of Palaven now. Murder gets you places, you know?"

Shepard stayed silent. She didn't want to think about assholes and potential betrayals now, she had enough on her plate as it was. Fedorian was the least of her concerns.

Magos respected her silence and only sipped his beer, watching the dance-floor and gently brushing her arm. Her tears eventually dried out and she calmed down, rocked by Magos' strong and regular heartbeat. Shepard loved him a little for that moment of peace.

"Oh, your pup is leaving with an Asari," Magos said at some point.

"Good for him," Shepard replied, refusing to open her eyes, and she meant it. The guy needed to relax, seriously.

"Pretty thing." Magos took a sip of beer and chuckled. "You think he knows about Asarins?"

"Not my problem."

"He's gonna have a surprise." Shepard sighed and left Magos' embrace. There went her moment of peace.
"Don't you guys have alien sex ed or something?" she asked, reaching for her levo beer.

"Yep, in boot camp, but by the time you can actually fuck an alien, you don't remember much and the only thing you can think of is how bad it can turn if you ingest anything. A lot of Turians doesn't even try because of that."

"He's not allergic."

"Lucky bastard." Shepard shrugged. Being allergic never stopped Nihlus to go down on her. He'd have stomachaches after but he didn't care. He'd even top that with a lollipop.

Shepard took the candy Vakarian had given her earlier from her pocket and sighed. Why did he suddenly change his mind about squishy aliens? Well, nothing was telling her he was going to fuck that Asari either. Maybe she had only lured him with the promise of a shooting range. Shepard snorted. He'd run, no doubt about it.

A chill made her notice the crowd giving way to the matriarch she had met earlier. The Asari came straight to her, standing tall and proud, her face as stern as ice.

"Matriarch," Shepard saluted her with a respectful nod of the head. "What can I do for you?"

"Your companion is in great danger, child," the matriarch replied. When Magos pointed to himself, she shook her head.

"Of fucking course," Shepard sighed. It seemed like she couldn't have a break since Vakarian had boarded her ship. He may have been a lucky bastard but he certainly wasn't her lucky charm.

Shepard stood and noticed the Asari was taller than her with her heels. That was a surprise. Liara and her meter seventy was seen as tall for her people. "What kind of danger, exactly?"

"He has been lured by an Ardat-Yakshi."

Shepard had no idea what an Ardat-Yakshi was but the "oh shit" Magos dropped behind her told her it wasn't a good thing. He stood and took the weapons and the clips left on the table. "You don't have time to go back to your ship and gather a team. I'll come."

"I will fight with you too," the matriarch said, her tone as regular as it could be. "Quick, this way."

Shepard nodded and followed the Asari with Magos through the crowd.

The corridors of the dense habitable zone the Asari was leading them through were much cooler than the club and Shepard shivered a little.

"So, what's an Ardat-Yakshi, by the way?"

"Such is the name of a carrier of a rare disease," the matriarch explained. "It condemns the carrier to kill its mate at the apotheosis of intimacy."

"You bang, you die," Magos simplified.

"Awesome," Shepard grunted, turning at a corner. "Just fucking awesome."

"I came to Omega to find that Ardat-Yakshi and put an end to its life," the matriarch continued. "But it managed to escape my vigilance so far and it killed three times already. This atrocity must be stopped."

"And why do you need me, exactly?" Shepard asked. "I have a decent aim on the left, sure, but I
can't use my biotics and you know it."

"Fear not, child," the Asari replied. "The beast will be distracted by your companion. I will incapacitate it and you will only have to pull the trigger."

"You can't do it yourself?" Shepard insisted.

"Morinth may be a monster but I welcomed it to this world."

The Ardat-Yakshi was the matriarch's daughter. Shepard clenched her fist. That was a reason good enough alright.

It became painfully obvious the Asari couldn't kill her child as Shepard followed her. The matriarch knew exactly where she was going, she didn't hesitate once in the maze of Omega. Shepard easily imagined her following her daughter and her pray over and over again and being incapable of killing her, thus condemning three innocents to die.

The lair of the beast soon appeared before them. Magos downed the door on his first try, rolled in the room but was thrown out of the apartment by a biotic wave soon after. Shepard took her gun and shot a few rounds to cover the matriarch while she entered. Her daughter's attacks bounced on her barrier. Whatever the force of the attack, the matriarch didn't even slow down. When she raised her hand, Shepard could feel the warmth of her grasp and she was pretty happy to be on the good side of the room. She entered the apartment once sure Magos was okay, changing her clip, and found cover behind the matriarch. A quick look gave her the position of Vakarian, on the coach, not moving, and of the Ardat-Yakshi, up in the air, immobilized by her mother. Shepard aimed and emptied her clip.

The body fell on the floor and Shepard made sure to keep aiming at it as she circled it to go behind the sofa. There, she took Vakarian's pulse under his jaw. He was alive. Shepard breathed again.

"How is your companion?" the matriarch asked. She was standing a few meters from her dead daughter, looking at the body but her face didn't show any emotion.

"He'll live," Shepard ensured. She put her gun down for a second and slapped him. Vakarian growled. "You're growling at me now?" she snorted.

"What happened?" Vakarian asked, trying to lift his head from the sofa.

"Your first alien girlfriend tried to kill you," Shepard replied.

"Awesome," he grunted and closed his eyes again. Shepard patted his cheek, too happy to still have a protegee to care about his protestations.

"A Paladin, huh?," Magos said from the cracked door. He was hugging his ribs. "You Spectres have the nicest toys, it's unfair."

Shepard opened wide eyes. A M-77 Paladin! That thing was worth two hundred thousand credits in Spectre requisition. She had never dared buy one because a customized Carniflex was almost as good, and she couldn't spend all her money on weapons since she had salaries to pay, but she had dreamed of it for a while. She bended and put a quick kiss on Vakarian's forehead. "Thanks for the gun."

"It's mine," he reminded her.

"I just saved your ass."
"Mine," he insisted and it made Shepard smile.

The matriarch turned to Magos. "Is there a way to dispose of the body?"

"It's Omega," the Turian simply replied, limping to her, and it was an explanation good enough. "I can take care of it, if you want."

"Thank you," the Asari said and it was a relief for her. She then turned to Shepard. "And thank you, child."

Shepard shrugged it off. "You probably should get the fuck out of Omega now though. Aria doesn't like competition. Need a ride?" she asked genuinely. "I'm heading for the Citadel in a few hours."

The matriarch smiled, probably amused by Shepard's candor. "I will gladly join you in your journey, child. My name is Samara."

Shepard smiled. "Welcome on board, Samara."

TBC
The weight was resting on his ankle, making his leg shake a little under the effort. A hundred and twenty-three seconds. Garrus inhaled deeply to regain a bit of control and kept the position, standing on one leg while the other supported the leather ball, his torso inclined on the side and his arms in check, ready to strike. Practicing alone sucked, but Shepard wasn't authorized to train yet – that didn't stop her from doing some push-ups and stuff like that every other day – and Javik didn't show up this morning. Wrex was sleeping in a crate nest near the access to the utility rooms but Garrus knew better than to wake him up. So there he was, alone in the shuttle bay thirty minutes before docking, trying to focus on his stance and the diffuse tension in his legs. A hundred and twenty-four seconds.

Garrus exhaled slowly and closed his eyes, listening to the hum of the reactor and the creaks of the hull. Shepard had arranged for the delivery of their prisoner to be the first thing they'd do in the morning. Admiral Anderson was probably already waiting for them on the docks with a bunch of soldiers. Garrus anticipated a little the meeting considering Shepard's reaction last time she had seen Anderson, before Bekenstein. She'd probably be angry, and sleep-depraved this morning. Too bad, because she had been pretty relaxed during the trip back to the Citadel.

The presence of the matriarch on board had helped greatly. Garrus had thought having a thousand years old Asari with them would be a source of anxiety considering her powers but it had in fact been quite the opposite. Samara was powerful, even Garrus could feel it, but they weren't a threat. Their old age made them wise and patient. They listened to the children they all were compared to them with a gentle smile on their lips. They didn't fake interest in people, even if they had probably heard the same kind of stories a hundred times in their very long life. Samara listened and talked calmly, slowly, carefully.

Solus had tried to engage a conversation with the matriarch several times, since they were a formidable source of knowledge, and had abandoned shortly after. To the contrary, Wrex had stayed very late in the mess with the matriarch practically every evening, talking about events in history books they had both witnessed – which had infuriated Tali'Zorah. Shepard had often stayed with them, just listening, and Garrus had figured out the presence of the matriarch was kind of soothing for his mentor. Their first contact on Omega had been overwhelming, no doubt about it, but since then Shepard seemed to enjoy Samara's company each chance she could get.

It was "a biotic thing", she had told him, good vibes and the all of that. Wrex and Javik were also sensible to this effect, and Alenko too in some sort of way. The Lieutenant Commander was often caught staring at the matriarch but he usually stayed as far as possible from them. Alenko was the only one on board that Samara treated almost coldly, even if he was quietly minding his own business, contrary to Massani constantly hitting on them. Garrus didn't know why and he didn't really want to know anyway. Curiosity killed the cat, like Humans said. He had a vague idea of what a cat was but there was no doubt he had been a metaphorical one a few days ago.

A hundred and twenty-five. That would teach him, he thought, lifting his leg with the weight a little more. Curiosity had pushed him to accept the drink offered by that Asari, Morinth, but stupidity had certainly taken over his brain after that. There had been something not quite right about Morinth from the beginning but Garrus hadn't been able to corner what it was. He should
have thanked them for the drink and forget about his idea right then but, no, he had only seen the opportunity in front of him. Asaris may have been squishy aliens with a vague resemblance with Humans but that wasn't a reason to try his hand on one of them. That was disrespectful of them, first of all, and pretty disgusting of him.

Garrus threw the ball in the air with his foot, swiftly regained his balance and punched it as it fell to the ground. The ball flew in the shuttle bay and eventually rolled under the Mako. Garrus inhaled. It wasn't like he had wanted to force Morinth or anything like that. They had been willing to have sex with him and pretty explicit about it after all, so Garrus could live with being a selfish asshole, but he had done worse than that that night. He had stupidly let his guard down. On Omega! He should have known better. He should have refused that drink and kept an eye on Shepard like he had intended to from the beginning. But no, he had ruined shore leave once more and be an embarrassment for his mentor. Again.

"Already in armor?"

Garrus jumped as he heard Shepard's voice behind him and turned to see her walking to him in her sport wear. The elevator was still wide open behind her. He hadn't heard it. Great fucking job, Garrus, he thought, rubbing his face with both hands.

"You okay?" Shepard asked, stopping at his level. She had dark circles under her eyes.

"Yeah, fine," he lied. "Just a bit tired. Didn't get much sleep last night." She looked at him right in the eyes and bought his bullshit. It aggravated his mood.

"Where's Javik?" Shepard asked, looking around.

"Didn't show up," Garrus shrugged.

"EDI?" Shepard called.

"Javik is his quarters, Commander," the AI replied through the speakers.

"With a guest? Tall, blue, huge boobs?"

"Yes."

"Thanks, EDI," Shepard replied. "I suppose it had to happen," she grumbled.

"Some people are trying to sleep here!" Wrex roared from his corner.

"Some people are not supposed to sleep here!" Shepard yelled back before turning to Garrus. "What the hell is he doing here?"

"I don't know," Garrus shrugged. It had to do with Tali'Zorah but that was none of his business. Shepard gave him another look as serious as the precedent. Garrus knew she would eventually ask him if he was in a bad mood or something. He didn't want to go there so he spoke before her. "Can I help you with something, Commander?"

Shepard kept staring at him for a few seconds before pushing her hair behind her ear. "Actually, yes, but you won't like it."

"I'll grab my weapons," Garrus grunted, starting to walk to his locker.

"Shore leave's not canceled," Shepard stopped him, grabbing his arm. "Not yet anyway. Is that
"why you're already in armor?"

"It's a precaution," he confirmed. He couldn't feel the pressure of her hand on his arm through his light armor but seeing it hooked around his elbow made him uncomfortable nonetheless. Garrus freed himself and crossed his arms. "So?" he asked. "What do I have to do that I won't like then?"

"I need to get dressed," Shepard replied, dead serious.

"You're dressed," Garrus said, looking at her head to toe.

"I need my uniform," Shepard sighed, annoyed. "I can move my forearm and my hand," she explained, showing him, "but putting on clothes is a nightmare. I usually ask Kaidan or Chakwas when I want to get out of my training suit but I don't wanna wake them up just for three buttons and laces on my boots."

"You could ask Solus or Legion for that," Garrus argued, "even Joker I bet."

"All busy. Besides, you saw me naked a bunch of times so..."


"Yeah, well, I'm not overjoyed by the idea either, just so you know. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Fine," Garrus growled. "Lead the way."

"Thank you," Shepard replied, exasperated.

"Still trying to sleep here!"

"Fuck off, Wrex!"

Garrus followed Shepard to the elevator, as annoyed as she was, and wondered for an instant if their respective bad mood would aggravate the situation between them. They were supposed to be honest with each other but discussing now wouldn't do any good. Garrus tried to calm down a little. They would deliver Taylor to Anderson, have breakfast, then shore leave would start. With a bit of luck, he'd have two days for himself. Maybe he'd call his ex-C-Sec colleagues and go for a drink with them tonight. Vinus might still be interested in him. Garrus didn't know if they still were friends considering his lack of communication since he had left the Citadel, but he'd try anyway. He definitely needed to blow up some steam.

Vinus would ask questions though. Garrus had left C-Sec one evening, sure to come back to his desk the next morning, but Executor Pallin had stopped him in a corridor to tell him he had to report immediately to Councilor Sparatus' office. A bad night of sleep later, he had been on the docks, waiting for the Normandy with his luggage. Garrus didn't know how Pallin had explained his sudden disappearance. He had been told to keep his personal correspondence with his ex-colleagues to a minimum and Garrus had obeyed. He couldn't tell anybody he was a Spectre. Heck, he couldn't tell any of his friends. They already thought he was barely holding himself as a Turian, but now that he was a Spectre, above the law and not answering anymore to their strict social hierarchy, he'd be an outcast for good.

Fuck, Garrus thought, exiting the elevator on first deck. There went his chance to fuck his brain out. Well, he could still hit the arenas and shoot holograms all day long, but it wouldn't be as cathartic. Shooting people was his job, after all. That would focus him on something that wasn't his own stupidity, but not relax him fully.
The door opened on Shepard's quarters, neatly tidied and clean. Even the desk was spotless, no papers scattered everywhere, no model ship half finished in a corner, no underwear on the floor. Garrus arched a brow but didn't comment. He followed Shepard to the lower floor and stayed near the stairs, hands in his back and eyes on the wall. He could see reflections of the bright dust clouds surrounding the Citadel in the room through the window.

"Here's how it works to minimize our discomfort," Shepard said, removing her hoodie. She was wearing her usual white tank top under and nothing else. Garrus kept looking over her head. "I'll put my bra on and you'll have to hook it in the back, like the other time. We don't have to look at each other in the white of the eyes during the process."

"Agreed," Garrus nodded.

"Then I'll need you every time pushing or pulling is required, so pretty much till the end, and, unfortunately, you'll have to look."

"I'll survive."

By the look Shepard gave him, Garrus knew he had crossed the line. She didn't say anything thought and he turned on his heels before she could. He waited until she gave him the green light, staring at the door. Then began the slow process of dressing his mentor and Garrus gladly let his mind review his latest progress on Ilos' VI. Maybe a week or two of work and he'd be able to start it. So far he had only started independent softwares, not the whole VI, and it had worked pretty well if you didn't pay attention to all the warnings EDI had given him each time. The VI seemed to search for a connection to the local network and it didn't please EDI, not at all. Garrus wasn't stupid enough to allow such connection but the VI tried nonetheless. He could shut down those process, they'd reappear moments later, each time hidden by something new. That VI was smart, no doubt about it, and that was why Garrus hadn't started it entirely so far. He needed to be sure the VI wouldn't be a problem before anything else.

"ETA five minutes, Commander," Joker announced through the speakers.

Garrus' attention snapped to Shepard's green eyes in front of him. He was finishing to buckle some sort of leather harness under her armpit, on the right, which wasn't facilitated by her broken shoulder.

"I'm almost done," he told her, passing to the left buckle.

"Take your time," Shepard replied. "Anderson can wait."

Garrus nodded and finished his duty. He then took the arm sling on the bed and helped Shepard immobilize her arm.

"Your hair?" he asked.

"Ah, yes." She retrieved a colored elastic band in a pocket of her training suit and presented it to him. She then turned to let him brush locks of hair with his fingers. Garrus was a bit annoyed at the shorter locks, which wouldn't stay put, and locked them together with the band. He had done that often lately but he didn't get any better.

"And done," he said, taking a step back.

"Thanks," Shepard replied, checking the tail with her good hand.

"Anything else?"
"Nope. Let's deliver the package and go back to our respective bad mood until breakfast."

"Sounds like a plan."

Shepard had a small smile and Garrus followed her to the shuttle bay while Joker maneuvered the Normandy to dock. Brigs were two small cells a couple of stairs lower than fifth deck, near the utility rooms. The comfort was minimal and you could barely take a few steps to stretch stiff limbs in there. Taylor had been here for six days. His cheeks were dark with the beginning of a beard, his eyes were circled and red, and he didn't smell good.

"Commander Shepard," he saluted with a faked confidence. "It's a pleasure to finally see you."

Wrex had been in charge of the prisoner all week. Taylor was a biotic, from what Zaeed had told them, so Shepard had decided to be careful. Drops of a solution of liquid nicotine, courtesy of Solus, had seasoned Taylor's food and drink to prevent any use of his powers.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Shepard replied. "Keep your bullshit for someone interested. Get up and turn around."

Taylor obeyed, shaking a little. He was sweating, Garrus noticed as he opened the door. That was a side effect of the lack of nicotine. The next days wouldn't be fun for Taylor.

"Hands in your back," Garrus told him.

"You know I don't have any value without proof of my intel, right?" Taylor asked, doing as he was told. Garrus handcuffed him swiftly then put a hand on Taylor's shoulder, made him turn and pushed him out of the cell.

"Don't worry," Shepard shrugged, "my team dealt with that before we left Omega. See, I have some pretty good hackers on board, and Zaeed went to your place to retrieve what we couldn't access from the ship. We have all we need." Taylor lost a bit of his confidence. "This way," Shepard commanded and Taylor walked, head low.

The ramp took forever to go down, slowly revealing Admiral Anderson and half a dozen soldiers in armor waiting for them on the docks. Taylor suddenly straightened and turned to Shepard.

"The Alliance? Wait, you can't deliver me to the Alliance!"

"Well I could keep you under my jurisdiction," Shepard replied.

"Yes! Yes you could! I'll work for you!" Anderson and his men started to approached. "I'll do anything you want!" Taylor pressed.

Shepard took a pack of cigarette in a pocket and took her time to lit one, ignoring Taylor staring angrily at her. From what Garrus knew, Taylor had been an Alliance Marine but had quit before the end of his contract, therefore unable to collect the big fat check he had been promised and having nothing left. He had joined Cerberus shortly after for a reason or another. That was something the Alliance punished severely since the attack on the Citadel. Every Cerberus agent they could put their hand on faced prison or forced labor on colonies. The Alliance didn't cut deal with ex-Cerberus soldiers anymore.

"You didn't tell me anything of value so far, Taylor," Shepard continued, exhaling her smoke.

"You're kidding me?" Taylor hissed. "You have everything I had!"
"We took it from you," Shepard replied, "big difference. I can't trust you, Taylor. How can I help you in this dire situation if I don't trust you?"

"You fucking bitch," Taylor laughed. "You're enjoying this, aren't you? I bet you waited all week for that moment. That's why you didn't come down to see me, right? You wanted me under pressure to tell you something you couldn't figure out."

"Yes," Shepard smirked, "and that'll work because I'm the only one capable of saving your ass from the Alliance."

The prisoner gave a quick look over his shoulder. "Alright. What do you want?"

"You opened an encrypted message before our meeting," Shepard said. "It was on a server that disappeared shortly after, we couldn't retrieve it but so many precautions mean it was pretty important. What was it?"

Taylor stiffened. Anderson called Shepard from the bottom of the ramp, asking for permission to board. It helped Taylor to talk. "A message from the head of the Lazarus Project," he said. "Lazarus had the Illusive Man's top attention, the biggest budget and the best people working on it. It's the strongest cell left since your coup. They act like the new boss. If I give you that person, you can do a lot of damage to Cerberus again."

"I'm listening," Shepard nodded.

"You'll keep me with you, right?" Taylor insisted.

"I give you my word."

Taylor looked at Shepard for long seconds before talking again. "Miranda Lawson. That's her name. She's on Horizon."

"Alright." Shepard drew on her cigarette and turned to Anderson. "Permission granted."

Realization hit Taylor. "You bitch!" he hissed, trying to escape Garrus' grip. "We had a deal!"

"I don't make deals," Shepard replied and she turned heel, leaving Garrus to deliver the prisoner. Not good at negotiating his ass.

Garrus stayed in the shuttle bay until breakfast, busying himself with cleaning his locker and Shepard's weapons. Wrex eventually got up and pushed him in the elevator. Garrus frowned when the door opened on third deck. There were colored garlands hanging between the walls, some made of plastic, some made of paper, and some with aggressive blinking lights. All the mess was decorated with stuff of that sort, colored balls, human figures, plastic stars and trees. And everybody already in the mess had a long red bonnet on the head, with white fur on both ends. Even Shepard had one, sipping her coffee as if everything was normal.

"First Christmas, huh?" Wrex smirked, leading the way to the counter. "It's a silly human tradition. They love it so much, they do that sixteen times a year."

"Once a year on Earth," Shepard corrected from the table.

" Whatever. That's too many anyway. No wonder you Humans are so spoiled if you get presents so often."

"I didn't see you complain when you received said presents for the last four years."
"You ate a varren this morning or what, kiddo?" Wrex joked.

"Nope, toasts, eggs and bacon," Gardner said, "and a dozen special Christmas pancakes topped with sirup."

"Ah," Wrex mocked, "I knew you had gained weight lately." Shepard stared angrily at him behind her cup of coffee, which made the Krogan laugh.

Garrus waited for his tray patiently and sat in front of Shepard, watching the rest of the crew walk in with more or less enthusiasm. They all had a bonnet, even Tali’Zorah and Joker, respectively over her hood and his cap. Legion eventually showed up with hats in its hands. Wrex let the Geth put a bonnet on his head without complaining but Garrus moved when the AI turned to him.

"Don't fight it, Vakarian," Shepard said. "Resistance is futile."

"Yep," Wrex confirmed. "Even Javik abandoned all hopes."

Garrus grumbled as Legion proceeded – there even was a hole in the back for his fringes – and ate his breakfast in silence. Discussions went on, Massani glared at Javik, Tali’Zorah ignored Wrex and Solus showed up at some point. Garrus watched him enter the mess with the mandatory hat and a fake white beard, carrying his duffel-bag on his back. That made a lot of people laugh but the joke was lost on Garrus.

"We didn't pick the Secret Santas yet," Shepard reminded him as Solus put his bag on the table.

"Not my participation," Solus replied, playing with the zipper. "Giving presents full of meanings, in all societies through time and space," he continued. "Sign of friendship for Salarians from my ethnicity. If rejected, symbolizes strong animosity."

"I don't think now's a good time for that," Shepard argued, straightening on her chair.

"Perfect time," Solus contradicted her. "Both wanted one for Christmas."

"Both?"

He opened the bag to reveal two brand new heavy gravitational singularity weapons, glowing red to fit the theme. Miniature black holes guns. Wrex laughed. He jumped on his feet to join Solus at the end of the table and took him in his arms. For once, the Salarian didn't seem comfortable as he patted awkwardly Wrex' shoulder. Wrex then took one of the weapon and checked it with admiration and awe. Garrus felt a little jealous, to be honest.

"For you, Shepard," Solus said, pointing at the second gun.

"You chose a present you knew I could hardly refuse," Shepard snorted. "That's cheating."

"I'll take it if you don't want it," Garrus said, which made the crew laugh.

"It's mine, Vakarian," Shepard replied, frowning, but he could see she was a little amused. "Mine," she insisted. Garrus smirked at the reference. "Alright," she said, turning to Solus. She presented him her left hand. "Friends."

"Friends," Solus nodded, shaking her hand. "Will keep it from eager hands," he added, patting the gun and looking at Garrus. Shepard smirked.

"Should we pick the Secret Santas now and be over with?" Joker asked.
"Sure," Shepard shrugged. "Legion?"

"Yes, Shepard – Administrator," the Geth replied, producing a big red sock from behind the counter. It came near the table and presented the sock to Chakwas. The doctor put her hand in it and took a piece of paper out of it. Legion moved to Adams and so on.

Shepard stood up – she looked small compared to Solus and Wrex. "Alright," she said loud enough for everybody to hear her, "let me remind you the rules, or explain them for those who joined us recently. The traditions command you to pick a name in the Sacred Sock and to keep it. No exchange. Then you have to find a present for that person, a hundred credits maximum, and tonight we exchange gifts while eating Chinese take-out, or the dextro equivalent, in front of a terrible movie about Christmas and all the good feelings that we are supposed to have at this time of the year. Getting drunk is mandatory, no excuse, and we never talk again of the events of that night."

"I thought we had shore leave," Garrus frowned.

"You had plans?" Shepard smirked.

"Why yes, Commander," Garrus replied, "I have plans. I intend to spend the night at the Armax Arsenal Arena."

"You shoot people for a living and you want to shoot holograms on shore leave for fun?" Joker asked, not believing him. "Could you be more turian?"

"Actually, you shoot people at night," Garrus corrected. "It's all blank bullets and lasers but it's still more entertaining than the VIs. Once you know their patterns, the matches are a bit boring."

"That shouldn't surprise me," Joker shook his head.

"You can do that after the movie," Shepard told Garrus, "traditions first. Besides, if you're drunk, the Arenas will be even more fun." Garrus nodded. She had a point.

Legion arrived at Samara's level but they declined. "I won't stay for the festivities," the matriarch said. Garrus was as surprised as the others. Only Javik didn't seem to care about it.

"You won't?" Zaeed asked, frowning, while Legion moved on.

"Yeah, about that," Shepard intervened, "Samara and I had time to talk a little during the trip to the Citadel. Turns out she's a Justicar. Her job is to protect the weak and the innocent, and that's just not my line of work, so we decided to part away before her code forced her to kill me or any of my teammate."

"But I am in the Commander's dept," Samara continued, "and I intend to honor that dept. I will help her when time comes."

"As long as I don't ask her to kill innocents," Shepard concluded. Samara nodded. "Alright people, pick a name and get the fuck out of my ship. I don't want to see any of you until tonight. Especially you," she added, staring at Garrus.

"Aye aye, Commander," he replied. He shared the same feeling, to be honest.

Garrus was already out on the docks when Joker, bonnet still stuck on his head contrary to Garrus, called for him from the airlock and he waited patiently as the pilot walked to him, helped by a crutch. Joker gave a look to the ship over his shoulder before talking.
"Who did you get?" he whispered.

"Williams," Garrus replied, showing him the paper.

"I got Tali." They looked at each other for a second before exchanging their respective paper. They nodded once and moved on. "So, I could not notice some tension this morning." Joker continued as they headed for an elevator. "You guys argued again?"

"You mean, Shepard and I?"

"Yep."

"No, we didn't. We're both in a bad mood but it's unrelated."

"Wanna talk about it?" Joker asked. Garrus frowned.

"Shepard told you to talk to me, right?" he grunted.

"Maybe," Joker smirked. "And maybe she'll let me choose the movie tonight, any movie I want, so definitely not something about Christmas. I may even be influenced."

"Bribed, you mean."

"Your word, not mine." Joker seemed pretty proud of himself on this one. Garrus smiled a little.

"Did you hear about what happened on Omega?" he asked, calling for the elevator.

"I know Shepard had to save your ass from an Ardat-Yakshi, yeah. So what? You're angry because your mentor helped you in a situation you had no control over?"

"No, I'm fine with that," Garrus replied. Joker stared at him. "More or less," he admitted. "I kind of feel guilty for ruining her shore leave once more." The elevator arrived and they let surprised Alliance Marines out – a Turian in their part of docks was unusual. Garrus stayed on his guard, just in case.

"You gave her the opportunity to use her gun," Joker said, entering the elevator. Garrus followed him and pressed the button for the customs level. "Believe me, you didn't ruin her shore leave. That's the kind of surprise she likes. Seriously, I never saw her more happy than last New Year on Omega when all those Cerberus goons came out of nowhere, shooting at everybody. You should have seen her, kicking butts in her dress and laughing like a maniac with Javik and Wrex!"

"Killing is not a fun activity," Garrus replied coldly, straightening his back.

"It's a competition for you," Joker reminded him as the elevator came to a stop. "Don't tell me otherwise, I monitor every conversation during missions."

"I have my pride," Garrus admitted, walking out. Some soldiers were leaning on the rail to admire the ships, otherwise Humans were walking around and minding their own business. Some of them looked at Garrus and he stared at them back.

"Right. So it's a pride problem," Joker continued, heading for customs on their right.

"Not really." Garrus gave a quick look to Joker. Spirits, he couldn't believe he was actually talking about that with him. They weren't even friends. "It's more of a cultural problem," Garrus eventually said. "I, huh, made a pass at a stranger with ulterior motives." Joker laughed.
They arrived at customs and Garrus shut up, not willing to talk in front of so many Humans. The procedure was just a formality for him thanks to his Spectre status but it took a few minutes for processing Joker. He had partial immunity because he worked for a Spectre but he still needed to go through the scans and all. Garrus waited patiently for him.

"Those assholes didn't like my bonnet," Joker grumbled as they walked to the taxis – public transportation were out of the question considering his condition. "So, where were we? Ah, yes. You tried to fuck an Asari you didn't know."

"That's one way to put it," Garrus grumbled.

"Man, give you a break! What you did is, like, super normal for half the galaxy. Even the pure and innocent Alenko did that at least once in his life!"

"I told you, it's cultural. Turians don't hook up with strangers."

"No offense but you're not the average Turian, buddy," Joker replied.

It hit Garrus harder than he thought. He said himself he wasn't a good Turian but hearing it from somebody else, an alien nonetheless, had a deeper impact on him.

"I know," he mumbled. They reached the taxi station and he keyed on the command terminal.

"That's not a bad thing," Joker continued, waiting for the car. "It brought you here, for example. Your independence made you a Spectre and one who kicks serious ass so far. Shepard's pretty proud of you, you know?" Garrus' throats tightened. She did? "She probably never told you that, though," Joker snickered. "The woman has a serious problem with feelings and opening up. Sure, if you do something good, she'll tell you so, but that's the Commander talking, no really her."

A taxi stopped at their station and they hopped into it. "Is the Presidium okay with you? I wanna check the libraries near the Human embassy."

"Yeah, that's fine. I'll go to the wards later." Joker entered their destination and the automated car started.

"Anyway," the pilot said, "you did nothing wrong. Even I fucked with an Asari and God knows I'm not interested in the matter."

"What do you mean?" Garrus frowned. "You're the first to talk about sex, even if the occasion doesn't present itself."

"Should I remind you my nickname?" Joker asked, smirking. "I joke about sex and, sure, I talk about it but it's because I lived most of my life in a hyper masculine and competitive environment. It's some sort of adaptation, you know, to not be bothered by dudes who think with their dicks. But, honestly, I couldn't care less about sex. It's overrated, if you want my opinion, and I'm not saying that because of my disease. It complicates things but doesn't make it impossible either."

"I, huh, don't quite understand what you're saying," Garrus admitted.

"I have no interest in sex whatsoever," Joker said, "which doesn't prevent me from falling stupidly in love and actually having sex once in a while but I'd rather not. In short, I'm one of those rare unicorns called asexual."

"Oh," Garrus replied, scratching his scars. "I didn't know such things existed." Joker arched a brow. "Unicorns, I mean." It made the pilot laugh.
"Well, I suppose you don't have a lot of those in your society. Sex is kind of important for Turians, right?"

"It is," Garrus confirmed. He honestly couldn't recall any case of asexuality around him, but since sex was the manifestation of a strong bond between friends, people didn't really have a choice.

"So it's the idea of having sex with aliens that troubles you?" Joker asked. "But, wait, you tried to woo that Asari before she tried to suck your soul," he realized. "So that means you're actually considering being friend with aliens, am I right?"

"Something like that," Garrus admitted, suddenly very interested by the view.

"That's nice," Joker nodded, "but you're applying your turian conception of the world to everybody and that won't work. Wrex will probably bite your head off if you offer him to fuck. Mordin won't be interested either but he's the kind of guy to experiment on you anyway. I'm not interested in sex, like I told you, and anyway it's not common for Humans to fuck with friends. Besides, I'm not into hot dinosaurs. And Shepard, well, with what happened... you know..."

"Yeah, I know," Garrus simply replied.

"So you better forget about banging your friends and take it easy. Nobody on board will be angry at you for being a bad Turian. Actually, it'd be quite the opposite, believe me."

Garrus snorted to hide the blow. "So what? I'm not allowed to proudly represent my kind?" he joked. "That's just racist."

Joker chuckled. "So, did our little talk help?"

"I guess," Garrus shrugged.

To be honest, he didn't feel angry anymore but fairly uncomfortable. He had started to defy authority the day he had realized his Sargent had no idea whatsoever of what was going on on the field. It hadn't been an exercise against holograms on a well secured colony. His platoon was knee deep in bloody water somewhere in the Traverse, fighting against a mercenary gang a hundred men strong, and people were dying left and right. Garrus knew his Sargent's orders were bullshit, the result of panic and hurt pride, so he had ignored them and done his job as an engineer, sabotaging mechs and weapons on the fly.

Ironically, he had been noticed that day by Major Fori for his sniper skills – thirty-four kills just by himself, of course it had drawn attention on him. She had had to punish him for his selfish behavior but she had encouraged him on this path afterward. Garrus had never turned back since then but he had respected most of the conventions dictated by society. And now he had to forget them as well. Garrus snorted. Each mentor he got wanted him to cross the line, apparently.

"What's funny?" Joker asked. He was typing a message on his omnitool, probably to tell Shepard his mission was a success.

"Nothing," Garrus replied. "So, what movie are we watching tonight?"

"A classic," Joker smiled and he refused to say more.

Garrus followed him for a while and consequently visited most of the human libraries of the Presidium, in which Joker was a regular customer – at least, that explained all the books in the ship. Garrus knew Williams liked poetry and he would have found her some compilation if he hadn't exchanged her name for Tali'Zorah's, but Joker didn't go in that direction. Too obvious.
Instead, he bought a pile of fantasy novels, plus forty-something other books for his own satisfaction. Garrus appreciated the delivery option because hardcover books were heavier than conventional artillery. The weight of knowledge, Joker had called it.

Garrus had just left Joker to head to the wards – he wanted to find something tech-related for the Quarian because he honestly had no idea whatsoever about what she liked other than that – when a shop caught his attention. He hesitated a second before it. That probably was against the rules and it was way over the budget limit but it could be considered as a sign of good faith. Garrus shifted nervously his weight from one foot to another. He was going to ridicule himself because it was the last place a Turian would go but fuck it. He was a bad example anyway.

The crew was sharing their last meal before re-entering stasis, chit-chatting after the strange events of the day, when Kane started coughing. It should have been nothing, a hiccup in this careless scene, but the cough soon revealed a choke. Garrus stiffened. Kane was choking right in front of him, obviously in pain, the crew gathered around him and tried to help, laid him down on the table as the poor man violently shook, his chest deformed by his efforts. Blood spurted and soaked his shirt and suddenly it burst open. Garrus jumped on his chair as an enormous white worm with teeth appeared, screeching and hissing. Joker laughed.

The reactions around Garrus went from clearly amused, to scared, with a variety of different levels of curiosity and disgust in the middle. That movie really wasn't about Christmas and nice feelings – though the title was a bit xenophobic if you were to ask him.

"I think I lost my appetite," Tali'Zorah said, pushing her take-out as far as she could.

"Me too," Traynor mumbled.

"Come on, that's fun," Wrex chuckled.

"And we're trying to watch," Shepard reminded them, the stray of her enormous cup of soda between her lips. Garrus gave her a quick look. She definitely was in the curious part of the spectrum, and her mood seemed better. That could work, he thought as he focused on the rest of the movie.

It was well pass midnight when Garrus arrived on first deck. Everybody had agreed to stop the movie marathon after the second part – everybody except Wrex, Javik, Solus and Chakwas who were currently watching the third movie of the pentalogy – and Shepard had retreated to her quarters. Garrus had lingered in his room for a while but eventually decided to blame it all on the alcohol for his rude intrusion. He knocked on the door a first time, balancing the package with one hand, didn't get any answer and insisted a little.

"Wha'?' Shepard yelled from the bathroom.

"It's Vakarian, sir!" Garrus answered by automatism. Well that was just stupid, he thought, but that'd help him in his scam.

The door opened on Shepard half out of her uniform, her arm out of the sling but pressed against her tank top. Her hair was a mess. She was brushing her teeth, her mouth full of white foam.

"Wha' you wan'?" she asked, turning heel to go back to the bathroom.

"I, huh, have something for you," he said, following her but he stopped near the desk. He waited for her to finish before presenting her her gift.

"What's that?" she frowned, staring at the box wrapped in craft paper. "You're not my Secret
"I know," Garrus hesitated. "It's, huh, a token of my gratitude."

"Wow, it's too late to use this kind of words, Vakarian." She raised her eyes to his. "We have rules for a reason: prevent this kind of situation. Well, several reasons, because it's also to make sure everybody has something and I don't end up with suckers trying to get a favor or something."

"Solus gave you something."

"And did I look happy when he did it?"

"Not really," Garrus admitted. "But we already know you like me, so it's not an attempt to kiss your ass."

Shepard snorted. "I don't have anything for you," she said as she took the box to put it on her desk. "That's, huh, not a problem."

"It is because Christmas is about exchanging gifts and all that crap," she replied, removing the craft paper with one hand. The box under had a thin cover of grainy black leather. Shepard stared at Garrus. "This looks expensive as fuck."

"No," he shook his head. "Under a hundred, I swear." Well, under a hundred thousands for sure.

Shepard didn't buy his bullshit but she let it pass. She opened the box to discover a handmade violin with glassy wood. Garrus didn't know the first thing about music instruments but he had found this one esthetically pleasant, and the sound it had produced when the clerk had given him a demonstration had been simply fantastic. It had resonated to his core like nothing before. From his point of view, the violin was worth its price.

"I can't accept," Shepard said, closing the box.

"Yes you can," Garrus replied. "Well, you can't play it now because of your arm but..."

"I don't know how to play."

"It's okay, you can learn."

"It's freaking difficult."

"And if there is one person capable of the impossible, it's you," Garrus insisted, folding his arms. Shepard glared at him and it made him smile a little. "You once told me you regretted not having learned to play an instrument. I stopped counting how many times we almost died this year but it made me realize I don't want to have regrets, and I don't want you to have regrets either, Shepard. If I can help you a little to shorten your list, that's enough for me."

Shepard stayed silent for a long minute, looking at the box. She eventually sighed. "Thanks, Garrus. I appreciate it."

Garrus simply nodded. "I'll let you rest. Good night."

"Good night," Shepard replied.

She had a smile on her lips when he left.
TBC

**Note**
Thanks to Ashitarimai for her help!
The lights were already shut down for the night in Tali's quarters. Only the faint shimmers of the force fields could be seen from the shuttle bay. Wrex sighed and tried to find a more comfortable position between his crates. He had slept for a while in Javik's quarters but the Prothean had asked him to move out after Kasbeel. Since then, Javik was a little cold with him. It didn't surprise Wrex. He had lied to Javik when asked a direct question. That was the prothean equivalent of a middle finger – well, a human one because Krogans expressed their disrespect with a lot more blood. Wrex could only blame himself on this one.

A sting in his abdomen made him growl. Luckily for him, Vega wasn't there tonight, punching his bag of sand, otherwise he would have asked questions. Vega was a good kid, a good soldier from the little Wrex had seen, but he had the bad habit of helping people. He had been helping Ashley a lot lately. She smelled like Vega every other day and Wrex had heard them going down to the utility rooms in the middle of the night quite often. Maybe he'd tell them, one day, that he could smell their sweats and other body fluids from a kilometer. That'd be fun.

Wrex was kind of sad for Kaidan though. Ashley didn't smell like him at all now. Their relationship never had been serious, mostly because the handsome idiot had the hots for Shepard, but they were good to each other nonetheless. Ash had the balls Kaidan lacked. She forced him to get out of his shell while he calmed her temper. Not that Vega didn't help Ashley in his way but it was obvious Ash had nothing to offer him in return. Not that it was any of Wrex' business.

"Wrex," EDI gently called through the radio, "Shepard would like you to join her on first deck."

"I thought she was into Turians," Wrex snorted.

"I have noticed too," EDI replied. It should have been a joke but its dead flat tone killed it. "But," it continued, "this invitation is for a meeting. You're not the only guest."

"Yay, an orgy!" Wrex said, faking enthusiasm.

The AI shut the communication in response. Tough crowd, Wrex thought as he got up. The sting came back and he had to wait a few seconds for the pain to go away. Dammit. Maybe one of those acid bleeding aliens from the movie was eating his insides after all. Wrex snorted. That'd make a tolerable death.

It was actually the first time Wrex stepped into Shepard's lair. He had never been invited before and he knew Shepard too much to try to come without her permission. Her cabin was pretty big, with its own bathroom, sofas and an aquarium where only plants grew. There was a window above the bed and a bit of the Citadel was visible. It smelled like her, mostly, and gun oil, powder, leather. The ventilation was on though, which meant Shepard had thought too many odors would bother him, or she was trying to hide the tobacco smell. Otherwise, it was pretty much like Wrex had imagined it: neat and tidy. Shepard didn't like it any other way.

Wrex was the last to join the meeting. Garrus was sitting on the sofa, near a console. On his left, in the corner, Javik. Left to him, Mordin. Shepard was still standing, in her uniform, and she invited him to take the last spot left to the Salarian. Wrex sat without a word. Garrus immediately stood up.
to take the console's chair and pushed it next to his mentor. Shepard gave him a somewhat annoyed look as he went back to the sofa but sat nonetheless.

"Thank you all for coming."

"Sure thing," Wrex shrugged. "What's up, Shep?" If it was an intervention to know what was wrong with him, he'd wreck the place and get out by the window. Javik would be a problem, he was a much more powerful biotic than Wrex, but he could still be defeated.

"We have a bit of a problem."

Wrex tensed. Well, he had had some good years on the Normandy but everything came to an end.

"Have to go to Tuchanka," Mordin continued.

"What?" Wrex said, surprised. "Why?"

"Mordin is in an impasse with the cure of the genophage," Shepard explained and she invited him to talk.

"Not everybody familiar with project so might take time to explain everything," he warned them. "First version of genophage implanted into krogan population a thousand years ago but has been deteriorated over time by krogan physiology. Genophage not as efficient as before, therefore new version created. Was recruited by STG," he said, a hand on his chest, "and worked on genophage 2.0. Took us years but new version eventually dispersed on Tuchanka."

"Only on Tuchanka?" Garrus asked.

"Yes," Mordin confirmed. "Krogan population off world negligible, two percents, mostly mercenaries not focused on reproduction and short life expectancy due to line of work. Not worth the effort."

Wrex snorted and folded his arms. "That'll bite you in the ass someday."

"unlikely," Mordin shook his head. "New version heavily based on first. More aggressive but same transmission vectors and shared a lot of similarities. Therefore, Krogans able to fight second version with more ease, fastening mutation process. Second genophage still managing population growth but transmission completely different now. Made my work more difficult, even with Maelon's data."

"Who's Maelon?" Garrus interrupted once more.

"A crazy Salarian who wanted to cure the genophage," Wrex explained. "Shep and I found him on Tuchanka a few years back."

"Was also former student of mine," Mordin added. "Brilliant mind, very talented but lacked personality. Brought him along to work in STG. Thought would be a good addition to the team but disagreed on ethic and eventually left the project. Worked on his own on a cure on Tuchanka for years, killed dozen of test subjects with very few results. Sloppy work," Mordin snorted, "taught him better than that."

"And what does it have to do with going on Tuchanka?" Wrex asked, scratching his neck. "There is nothing left there but wastelands and radioactive dust."

"Can't work on samples collected," Mordin said. "Need originals of genophage, both first and
second versions. Currently held on Sur'Kesh. Since operation a total secret, cannot use those. Only other option..."

"The Shroud," Garrus realized.

"Yes, the Shroud," Mordin smiled.

Wrex winced. The Shroud had been a gift from the Salarians after first contact two thousand years ago, an attempt to repair the damaged atmosphere of Tuchanka by hundred of years of nuclear wars. Towers had been erected here and there on the planet and their first role had been to launch the components of the Shroud in the atmosphere, on low orbit, but the project had been abandoned because of the Krogan Rebellions. All but one tower, located in an ancient shrine dedicated to Kalros, the mother of all threshers maws, had been destroyed by the stupid Krogans and people had started to call it the Shroud over time. The lone tower still dispersed chemical and whatnot in the atmosphere nowadays, to try to control the climate.

It had also been used by the Salarians and the Turians to spread the genophage.

"And you want me to go with you and Baby-Spectre," Wrex understood.

"No," Shepard shook her head. "I'll go with Mordin and Garrus but I have to take a detour in Hell first." Wrex frowned. Shepard pushed a lock of hair behind one of her funny little ears. "I can't use my biotics now, you all know that. It's because of my addiction to nicotine. Mordin has some sort of cure for that but it takes three days to work. I want you to go on Tuchanka alone and scout for us during that time. Taking down a Krogan is not easy. Taking down a whole pack is not manageable with my resources. I need reliable intell."

"Take Javik and me and you won't need it," Wrex smirked.

"The Normandy will stay in orbit around Tuchanka while you're on the ground," Shepard replied, "and I'll need Javik here to take care of everything. I won't be able to do anything but puke and sweat, if I understood correctly." Mordin confirmed with a nod of the head.

Wrex sighed, considering the offer. Going back to Tuchanka didn't please him at all three years ago and the idea wasn't better now. Wrex didn't like his kind. Krogans off world were tolerable but those stuck on their planet were dumb and had no idea how the galaxy worked. All they cared about was their petty wars between clans and so called republics, and their dicks. The worst part was the location of the Shroud. It was in clan Urdnot's territory. Wrex would probably have to deal with those assholes again.

He could also seek the Shaman's help, he thought as a slight pain warmed his insides. Krogans weren't known for their medicine but better him than anybody else.

"Alright," Wrex agreed, "I'll do it."

"Thanks," Shepard replied but Wrex brushed it off. It was important for his dumb people too after all. "I also have to send someone on Horizon and I can't decide."

"Why Horizon?" Wrex asked.

"Miranda Lawson, the head of Project Lazarus. She's a Cerberus agent, potentially the new Timmy. Taylor told us she was on Horizon but over a million Humans live there, the Council can't send any alien Spectre or spy on the colony without being noticed."

"A second human Spectre would be welcome in this case," Garrus commented.
“Won’t happen any time soon,” Shepard sighed. “I know Williams has been complaining about her lack of action recently so I thought I’d send her but I don’t like the idea. She’s too blunt for this king of job. Alenko isn’t cut for that either, plus I don’t want to be down of another biotic.”

“There is a high probability Cerberus knows them anyway,” Javik added. “They both raided their headquarters with us last year.”

“Which takes us down to Vega,” Wrex resumed, “but you don’t know if he’s capable of doing the job.”

“He’s a soldier,” Shepard confirmed. “A good one, no doubt about it, but he’s young and he didn’t see much of the galaxy yet.”

“Dossier mentioned Fehl Prime,” Mordin said. “Lived situation similar to Torfan. And noticed by N7 program, yes?”

“Yeah but I don’t know.” Shepard rubbed her face with her left hand. “Pairing him with someone more experienced is a solution but sending him with Williams on Horizon is a terrible idea. Damn, if even I noticed their flirt, everybody on board already knows.”

“Yep,” Wrex nodded and he saw realization hit Garrus. Not everybody knew apparently.

“Would recommend Lieutenant Steve Cortez,” Mordin advised.

“Cortez?” Shepard frowned. “He’s our shuttle pilot.”

“The shuttle can be set on autopilot or controlled from a distance,” Garrus intervened. “I bet I can also pilot it.”

“And I’m sure the seat will magically broke and be unmovable after,” Shepard grunted, staring at him. Garrus played the innocent. “So, we don’t actually need Cortez but why him? He’s been a pilot all his career.”

“Good fellow,” Mordin shrugged, “much more relaxed than Vega, older too, used to lie due to sexuality and military record exemplary.”

“He’s not a bad shot,” Wrex confirmed, “and he kicks ass in hand-to-hand combat. Yeah, I think it could work.” Shepard wasn’t convinced. “You’d prefer Traynor?” Wrex smirked. “The kid is smart and she knows the colony, granted, but put a gun in her hands and she loses her shit. Donnelly and Daniels? They talk too much. Adams is too old for that. We can send Gardner but we’ll all eat rations for a month.”

“Westmoreland and Campbell are not ready for this kind of mission either,” Javik continued. “The Salarian is right. Vega and Cortez are the best choices available considering the situation.”

Shepard took a few seconds to think and eventually agreed. “Very well,” she said, standing up. “I’ll inform them right away and they’ll leave tomorrow before we head for Tuchanka. Dismiss.”

The trip to Tuchanka didn’t take long from the Citadel and the Normandy was in orbit around the planet a day and a half later. Wrex waited for everybody to be back to work during the afternoon and left with the shuttle controlled by EDI without a word. He had decided to travel light, only taking with him his shotgun and a submachine gun, plus enough rations and water to last a few days. He could go without, his hump was round and full, but he preferred to have a little food on him. He could trade it for intel or clips if needed, it wouldn't be dead weight.
The shuttle ride was a little more bumpy than usual due to Tuchanka's tortured atmosphere. Wrex watched it all from the co-pilot seat, contemplating the storms at first, then the desolation of the surface. The landscape didn't change in the last couple of years. It was the same deserted lands, ruins of a glorious past that nobody remembered, sand, blood and ashes mixed together in thousands of shades between yellow and red. Adaptation had done its work on the Krogans and they could now distinguish them all better than any other species, even the Salarians. In return, their eyes had lost the ability to see all the variations of blues and greens. There were no oceans nor forests to contemplate on Tuchanka anyway.

Wrex jumped on a large rocky plateau and knocked on the hull by habit to indicate the shuttle could leave. It was better that way. Any Krogan seeing a shuttle would try to hop in it to get the fuck out of Tuchanka and Wrex wouldn't even blame him. There was also a high chance the shuttle would be dismantled and its parts used somewhere else. Wrex was pretty sure Shepard wouldn't like to see her pricy Kodiak in pieces. He raised his eyes to the clouds where a dim white circle could be seen, wondering how the kid was doing. She had gulped Mordin's medicine right after their departure from the Citadel and had spent the trip in her cabin, indeed puking and sweating between other fun activities. Wrex wasn't really worried, she was tough. Besides, Garrus was with her and Mordin and Chakwas were monitoring her. She'd live.

Wrex brought his omnitool to life to have a map and a compass, even if the tower was visible from where he was. He wasn't far from the Shroud and wanted to check on it before anything else. Since it had been built on sacred ground, nobody respecting the traditions would be there to bother him. The only serious problem was the thresher maws roaming the region. The shrine was an old arena used for the Rite of Passage, a place where thresher maws were summoned for a boy to prove his worth. It also meant easy preys for the gigantic worms, which was the reason why the region was infested with them. Wrex had to be careful. A single Krogan walking on the ground wouldn't attract any thresher maw with a bit of luck, but too many vibrations and he'd be in for a deadly fight. As fun as killing a giant worm with teeth bigger than him was, he wasn't on Tuchanka for that. Besides, it would only bring attention to him, which meant potentially hostile Krogans and more thresher maws joining the party. Wrex could do without.

He walked carefully for a dozen kilometers before reaching the surroundings of the arena without a problem but short breath – Wrex blamed it on the high temperature, the pressure of the atmosphere and its low percentage of oxygen. It wasn't the first time he visited the place. The kid he had been an eternity ago had came here with his friends to prove he was a Krogan. They had visited the ruins even if it was forbidden and written their names on top of a building now shattered on the ground. Many parts of the complex were down and it wasn't difficult to figure out it had been the handy work of a thresher maw – the giant holes in the ground were a pretty good clue. Maybe some kids had been less lucky than him and his friends.

The tower was still there, behind the octagonal arena, five kilometers of concrete and steel two thousand years old. It didn't look krogan at all, with its arches and polished surfaces. The Shroud was something impressive. The sheer height of the tower could shame any architect on Tuchanka. Krogans built more grounded structures before the nuclear wars, pyramids, enormous pillars, thick walls, nothing that high. Nowadays they dug tunnels under the surface to try to escape the radioactive dust and the storms. Wrex sighed and entered the complex. He didn't come here to be depressed and take pity on his dumb cousins.

Wrex took his time to explore the lower parts of the shrine, that once housed many activities, shamans, priests, shops and whatnot. It always amazed him, somehow, that his people had built a great civilization on a planet so hostile to life. Tuchanka had had silty seas and a rich tropical vegetation before the nuclear wars but the soil was poor enough for the plants to feed on the fauna. Most part of said fauna had rapidly evolved to an omnivorous diet, creating a lot of competing
species for few resources. Krogans had had to eliminate several sentient creatures to become the apex species, whereas most aliens just had had to sit and wait for evolution to do their job. At some point, they had almost driven the thresher maws to the verge of extinction, when thousands of young Krogans passed the Rite every year. It had helped their cities to expand, their towers to grow and their mad scientists to develop the nuclear weapon.

Nowadays, cities both topside and underground needed costly vibration cancelers or para-seismic systems to avoid being attacked by thresher maws. The worms had known a great booming period for their population in the last thousand years. At least young Krogans would be able to test their virility against the worms when the genophage would be cured. Heck, they'd even have several thresher maws each! That would be glorious, all those young in the arena, fighting for their lives, proving they were Krogan. It would happen, someday. Maybe in a thousand years but it would happen. The Great Hammers of the arena would call the thresher maws for the Rite of Passage again.

Wrex had no intention to climb the Shroud, not even to admire the view from so high, but he roamed the lower floors for several hours nonetheless, ever so careful. The tower stood still and its basements were solid, Shepard wouldn't have to worry about a possible collapsing. Electricity was still working here and there, by some kind of miracle. The bad news concerned the elevators. They were dead, all of them. Wrex checked the stairs between a few floors. They weren't in mint condition but it would do. The climb was not going to be fun but nothing Shepard and Garrus couldn't do. Mordin, in the other hand, was old for a Salarian. He was ex-STG and had a shiny new heart but certainly not the training for this kind of exercise. Wrex wrote a note about that on his omnitool. Maybe the shuttle could land on top of the Shroud.

Days were shorter on Tuchanka and the sun already had started to set. Wrex didn't have time to go to Urdnot, the cleverly named capital of, that's right, the Urdnot clan, so he settled down for the night on hard rock in the ruins. Thresher maws preferred to hunt on looser ground like sand, especially the little ones. Besides, he was still alone with no sign of any Krogan around, so no big worm would try its chance with a poor dinner like him. Wrex didn't start a fire, even if the nights could be cold on Tuchanka, to not alert anyone or anything hostile. He watched the sun set and his homeworld get as dark as it could get without moons and stars to embellish the night sky, and waited for the morning with the pain in his chest for company.

It took him half a day to reach the capital and he could easily have missed it if he hadn't known where it was. Urdnot was located under the ruins of a large and devastated city whose name was long forgotten. People lived in bunkers and tunnels deep under the surface. The only sign of activity was a few watchtowers around the ventilation wells. Those were hollow towers piercing the ground down to the city, with gigantic fans used to keep the atmosphere of the tunnels breathable. The humidity coming out was used in combination with the poor light to grow gardens because the hydroponic cultures weren't enough to feed the citizens. Not all cities had those systems, only the more populated and richest. They also were a good indication of the average intelligence of a random Krogan. The more sophisticated the city, the smarter its tyrant. And by the look of the capital, Urdnot Wreav was far from an idiot. Wrex snorted. Smart ran in the family anyway.

Finding the main entrance turned to be pretty easy once the guards were alerted of his presence. Wrex didn't know them, the two of them were recent additions to the clan by their accent, and he decided to keep a low profile. He was an Urdnot, no doubt about that, but he wasn't necessary welcome on the land of his ancestors. That tended to happen when you killed a Warlord like his father, on sacred ground no less. That's why he kept his mouth shut during the long process of admission – he even let those idiots drool on his weapons. Wrex had been tempted to take his Christmas present with him, just in case he needed to kill something big, but it had been a good
idea to let it on the Normandy. His beloved Black Hole Gun would have been "temporarily confiscated for security reason" or something like that, and Wreav would have grabbed it in the end. Wrex would die before that happened.

The underground city was large enough to house fifty thousand Krogans – it was currently the second largest city of Tuchanka – which meant the smell in those dark tunnels was an abomination. Wrex regretted not having taken his helmet and its precious filters. The place simply reeked of people, shit, animals, rotten food, testosterone and despair. Wrex just knew Tali would rant about it for days when he'd be back.

No, Wrex thought, frowning for himself, don't go there. He focused on the wobbles in his chest to think about something else as he walked through the tunnels, avoiding eye contact as much as he could. Unfortunately, his facial scars were pretty noticeable and some people recognized him on the way. Wrex ignored them, even when they called his name, and walked faster. He shouldn't have come. He should have stayed at the Shroud and keep an eye on the tribes' movements to make sure Shepard's operation would go well. Walking in those damn tunnels was the stupidest idea he had had in a long time.

"Where do you think you're going, kiddo?" someone called from his back. Wrex didn't recognize the smell but he knew that voice. Fortack. The closest thing to a krogan scientist on this planet, a genius by their standards. An old friend. Maybe.

"You're just a year older than me for Christ's sake," Wrex grunted, turning to see the Krogan. Fortack had changed over the eighteen years of Wrex' absence – three centuries for the rest of the galaxy. His head plates were thicker now and had darkened with time, but his eyes were still bright and full of life. Fortack was thin otherwise, when he once was a stocky Krogan barely fitting in any large armor. He now wore regular clothes, dark gray and dirty white. He looked good for a Krogan his age despite his weight loss.

"Christ's sake?" Fortack snorted. "The fuck is that?"

"Been too much around Humans recently," Wrex shrugged. "Good to see you're still alive."

"I could say the same," Fortack replied. "Eighteen years, Wrex, and no postcard. Not that we have a post office anymore or that Krogans care about writing or reading, Imma right?" He patted Wrex on the shoulder with a smile. "You smell like aliens, brother."

"I've got a gig on a human ship for the last four standard years," Wrex explained, happy to be called like that. They didn't share the same mother but they had had enough blood together on the battlefield to be brothers.

"That's why you're so fat," Fortack mocked.

"It's all muscle," Wrex grunted.

"Right, and I'm the prettiest Asari of the galaxy," Fortack smirked. He pushed Wrex forward. "Come on, I've got some stuff cooking at home. It's not much but I'll share it with pleasure if you have a few stories to tell."

Fortack lived near a ventilation well in the nicest part of the city. Still, his two rooms cave was smaller than what Wrex had on the Normandy, electricity cables ran everywhere from the ground to the low ceiling, dust and sand could be found on every surface and it was barely spacious enough to fit two Krogans and a bit of furniture. Fortack had a small kitchenette, a luxury by Tuchanka's standards, with imported spices, oils and herbs – probably bought on the black market.
The two rooms were filled up to the roof with electronic parts, wires, chemicals, weapon parts and, surprisingly, books from all around the galaxy in their diverse forms. Wrex even discovered an English edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the leather hardcover not even too damaged. Joker had one back on the Normandy, Wrex had read it to practice.

"Grab a bowl and dig in," Fortack said, placing the pot on his small table. There wasn't much inside indeed but it smelled good. It smelled like home. Wrex took enough of it to not offense his host but felt like shit nonetheless. He took all the ration bars he had on him and put them on the table.

"It's not much," he said, "but I didn't exactly plan to visit you."

Forlack pushed the wrapped food away from him. "Keep it," he replied. "I'm not a fucking beggar. If you want to pay for your meal, speak."

And so did Wrex. He spoke about his first years far from Tuchanka as a mercenary, his time on Omega, great raids he had participated to, the beauties he had fucked, the big names he had killed. He spoke freely but didn't say a word about Shepard or the genophage, nor his short come back on the planet a couple of years ago to hunt down Maelon. When Fortack asked about his current job, Wrex simply said he trained a multi-species crew on board of a human ship, which was exactly the truth. He just let his friend think his boss was a mercenary.

"And why did you come back to this shithole?" Fortack eventually asked.

"For intel. My boss is this crazy human woman who thinks she can take down a thresher maw on foot like a Krogan," Wrex lied but he was pretty sure that was the truth. "She heard of Kalros' arena and of course she wants to kill a thresher maw there. Question of pride."

"She got balls, your boss," Fortack frowned. You have no idea, Wrex thought but he just shrugged. "So she's coming here despite the embargo?"

Ah shit, he had forgotten that. The Krogans had lost their rights regarding spaceships or any kind of planetary unified army after the Rebellions, and since then turian ships roamed the system – they also had a few stations. They monitored the relay activities and didn't hesitate to open fire if an unauthorized flight was noticed. The Normandy had had no problem coming thanks to Shepard's Spectre status.

"She plans on stealing an Alliance ship and get here before anyone notices," Wrex lied. "Humans and Turians are still at each other's throat, the Alliance won't alert the Fleet about a missing ship right away."

"She's fucking crazy," Fortack said, eyes wide open.

"Yep," Wrex confirmed. "Great kid though, and she pays well. Speaking of, who can I buy to know the whereabouts of the tribes around the arena?"

"The Chief Scout would be your guy," Fortack answered, scratching his neck. "His workshop isn't far from my lab, I'll take you to him later."

"Your lab?" Wrex repeated, surprised.

"Yep," Fortack straightened and smiled, proud of himself. "I am the Lord High Researcher of the Urdnot clan now. Been a couple of years, actually."

"How did you manage that?"
"I killed the previous one, duh."

Wrex genuinely laughed, something he hadn't done in a while. It woke up the pain in his chest again but he managed to not cough and barely winced. Fortack noticed it nonetheless but his question was interrupted by a knock on the door. Krogans weren't prone to respect the privacy of the others so it was a big surprise.

"What is it?" Fortack barked.

"I need to talk to Urdnot Wrex," an old and tired voice replied.

Wrex frowned. At least the surprise didn't sound ready to barge in and fill his chest with bullets. Fortack wasn't so sure of that though and he grabbed a shotgun along the short way to the door. He opened it abruptly and looked around, ready to fire.

"What do you want, Shaman?" Fortack asked.

Wrex automatically straightened. Every shaman was a well respected man, sometimes more than warlords. They were the keepers of the traditions, the wise nameless men to seek advise from. Most of them still knew how to read and write and they often practiced a little medicine on the side. Wrex had no difficulties recognizing this one, with his dark skin and his arched back. He looked like shit but, to be honest, Wrex hadn't known him in a better shape, even when he was himself young and careless. That Krogan probably was a thousand years old, if not older. It was a freaking miracle to see him still alive.

"Let him come in," Wrex said, trying to make room for the old man. There wasn't another stool around so he gave his to the Shaman who sat with a grunt and a lot of clicks from his old bones. Fortack took another look in the street before closing his door and locking it up. "So," Wrex eventually said, "you found me."

The Shaman smiled and nodded. He waved at Wrex to come closer. Wrex obeyed and even knelt to let him put his old hand on his forehead. The Shaman closed his eyes and inhaled deeply several times, studying carefully every smell on Wrex. He mumbled for himself during the process before opening his eyes. He probably didn't see much with that cataract, Wrex realized.

"It is really you, young Wrex," the Shaman said. "I'm happy to welcome you back on Tuchanka like I welcomed you back from your Rite of Passage."

"Thank you, Shaman," Wrex humbly replied, head bowed to the ground.

"You have grown strong," the Shaman continued, "and have traveled with many companions. A lover, even?"

"Huh, yeah, kinda."

"A lover?" Fortack snorted. "You didn't tell me about that!"

"None of your business," Wrex growled, which made his friend chuckle. The Shaman gently smiled at their childishness but he became grave the next second.

"There is also something in you I never sensed before," he whispered, "something alive and hungry."

"I came in hope you'd know how to cure it, holy man," Wrex said.
"I do not know of that sickness but I still have books of the Ancients. Tell me more about your curse."

"It has nothing to do with magic or voodoo," Wrex replied, standing up. He had to lie again. "We were raiding that spaceship we found, really old and never seen before. Everything went well till we met the maintenance guys. Huge black creatures with tentacles and gooey skin that could create harpoon-like spikes. It wasn't all organic, more like a mix, with synthetic parts. The Turian in my team called it a *phax*."

"The fuck is that?" Fortack asked.

"Nightmarish creatures from the turian mythology," Wrex explained, "but we don't know if those things in the spaceship were actual *phaxren*. The kid just got scared, if you want my opinion, and he named it with the first monster name he remembered in his panic."

The Shaman nodded. "And this creature wounded you."

"Yeah," Wrex admitted, "got pierced through and through. We have a crazy Salarian doc on board, the kind of guy who believes the end justifies the means. He opened me up from the neck to the dick to scrub my insides and remove every little bit of that creature. Took him hours but it wasn't enough."

"I will study the books and question the Ancients for you tonight," the Shaman eventually said. "Unfortunately, I didn't just come to welcome you, young one. Words travel fast and our Warlord, Wreav, heard of your return. He awaits your visit and expect your gratitude."

"Gratitude for what?" Wrex snorted. "I don't remember Wreav doing anything for me."

"Well," Fortack intervened, "he didn't order his men to kill you when you showed up at his door. You spread blood on sacred ground, Wrex, that's not something we forgive."

"You were with me, remember?" Wrex grunted.

"Yeah, but I didn't run and abandon my people right after," Fortack replied coldly. The pain in Wrex' chest wasn't all the creature's doing this time. Fortack shook his head. "I'm sorry, brother. I'm happy to see you but your stories don't compensate the eighteen years of your absence. You were a good tribe leader, you would have made a good Warlord for the clan, but instead Wreav took the power. He made up a story about the day you killed Jarrod and became his legendary assassin. He spared the lives of those who agreed to spread that story."

"You took the deal," Wrex realized.

"Of course I did!" Fortack continued, louder. "I wanted to live! I did it and I witnessed the civil war which killed nearly half of the clan to decide who would become our next Warlord. For two years, I fought alongside Wreav and I bowed to his feet the day he took the throne. And I watched him rebuild the city, make it better, build alliances and fight other clans to expend his territory ever since! Wreav is the biggest asshole I know but he stayed and fought for us! He fought for the survival of our people!"

Wrex couldn't help his smirk as he tried to keep his anger in check. You gotta love the irony, he thought, looking at Fortack straight in the eyes. He couldn't tell his friend he was actually on Tuchanka to save the dumb Krogans. Wrex had worked his ass off to made the cure of the genophage a possibility. Sure, he hadn't thought for a second about the fate of his people for the first couple centuries spent off world. He had been busy finding contracts, fighting everywhere he
could, making money because everything revolved around money in this fucking galaxy. He had been busy surviving on his own for more than two centuries, regretting to have left, fearing to come back. So when Saren had offered him a gig related to the cure fifty years ago, Wrex had said yes.

Wait, Saren? Wrex shook his head. That was new. He had forgotten about that job, a consequence of an unlucky and quite violent encounter with a car a few weeks later, to the point of not knowing how his quest for a cure had started. But it was coming back now, he could feel it. Saren had contacted him, yes. He was a young Spectre at the time, less than thirty, a prick proud of himself for a bareface. The Turian had said Jarrod's lineage was more fertile than the average and someone wanted his genes for analysis. But who? Wrex couldn't remember. The Council? No, they hadn't cared for a cure before they had heard of Maelon's work. Wrex focused. Who was it, dammit?

A sudden bolt of hot pain struck his brain and Wrex took a step back, a hand on his head, hit by a marvelous epiphany.

"What is it?" Fortack asked, his anger forgotten.

Wrex pushed the helping hand his friend was offering him. So that was how it worked. The thing growing in him could reactivate long lost memories and the price to pay was his life. Wrex chuckled for himself. That was just fucking perfect.

"Nothing," he said, clearing his throat. He turned to the Shaman. "Forget about the phax. I don't need your help. And tell Wreav to go fuck himself, with my gratitude." Wrex then turned heel and walked to the door.

"What are you doing?" Fortack asked, following him in the dark and smelly street.

"Going back to not caring about my people," Wrex replied but the sarcasm was lost on his old friend.

"What about the Chief Scout?" Fortack insisted. "We can go talk to him now."

"I'll find another way."

Fortack's heavy footsteps stopped but Wrex didn't wait for the lord.

"You're leaving us again."

"Yep," Wrex said out loud. "Good luck surviving in this shithole!"

He needed to get out of here and fast now. Wreav may have authorized the Shaman to come to him alone because the old Krogan was a holy man but he'd quickly know that Wrex had decided to leave. It left him maybe twenty minutes, fifteen if communications worked properly around here. Wrex couldn't reach the city's main entrance in so little time but that wasn't really a problem. Contrary to most Krogan, he knew how to use his brain. That's why he aimed for the ventilation well while testing the communication network with his omnitool. It was pretty good so he accelerated a little as he wrote a quick message, just when two heavily armored guards called his name behind him. Wrex looked at them over his shoulder, smiled and ran.

The pain in his chest was barely tolerable but Wrex hadn't feel that good in ages nonetheless. The chase and occasional shooting made his blood boil of excitement, and the rush of his biotics through his body electrified him. Finding the ventilation well wasn't difficult, he just had to follow his nose, and soon he felt the fresh and humid air on his face. Wrex accelerated, slamming a Krogan against a wall with his biotics on the way, and shot the next one in the head with his
shotgun. He didn't bother recharging and switched for his submachine gun, a M-25 Hornet he had grabbed during the raid on Cerberus' headquarters. This thing was not made for a Krogan but its maneuverability was fantastic. With incendiary ammo, the Hornet became a serious weapon against heavy armored assholes. Wrex decided to stop being selfish and made sure to share his bullets with everybody coming his way, hostile or not.

He rammed into heavy grates at the bottom of the well, shook his head to clear his vision and kept on running through pillars supporting the structures. The gardens were vertical, on metallic grids along the walls, and a complex system of stairs, ladders and catwalks around the central fans permitted to access it all. Wrex climbed the first he encountered and didn't hesitate to throw anybody on his way over the hedge, or the precious plants. He was an easy target as he climbed the tower but his barrier was strong – as long as he didn't get shot at close range.

Wrex was almost at the top, the hot dusty air of Tuchanka falling into the pit, when he heard his name being called from the bottom of the tower. Nobody was following him anymore at this height and he made the mistake to stop. Wrex first gave a quick look to the sky but eventually turned. There, maybe fifty meters under him on the other side of the tower was Wreav, a Krogan with red skin, in a heavy silver armor, eye in the scope of a M-98 Widow. Oh shit, Wrex thought and the bullet hit his chest, throwing him against the wall.

It took him a few seconds to get back on his feet and by that time Wreav's men had climbed several levels. Wrex kept on marching, checking the hole in his chest. He could tell the bullet had hit his primary heart by the quantity of blood he was losing and the dizziness. Damn, his armor was ruined. Wrex discharged his clip, vaguely aiming, and climbed the final steps, a warm wind welcoming him on top of the world. He embraced the desolated view one last time and said his goodbyes to his beloved Tuchanka as the soldiers approached. He then jumped into the void.

And landed on top of the shuttle waiting for him a few meters below. Wrex laughed as it put some distance with the tower, watching the stupid Krogans trying to shoot at him. Once far enough, the shuttle slowed down enough for him to jump safely inside and the door closed behind him, sealing the cargo. Wrex sat, for once, and sighed. He fumbled in his new chest hole but didn't manage to reach the bullet with his fingers – it stung at each heart-beat.

"Doctors Chakwas and Solus have been notified of your injury," EDI announced. "Now heading for the Normandy."

"No, not yet," Wrex contradicted the AI. "Aim for the Shroud. I wanna see the area from above and make sure nobody's around."

"You forgot the magic word."

"Pretty please," Wrex snorted and even gave his best smile to the nearest camera.

"Heading for the Shroud now," EDI replied.

Wrex felt something wiggle and push inside of him. He gritted his teeth until the bullet eventually fell from the wound, rolling on the ground in a trail of blood. A little black tentacle pointed out of his chest. Wrex smirked and pushed it back inside. There, there, little guy, he thought. You're not going anywhere.

TBC
Shepard - 9

Semper Fi
Chapter 30
Shepard – 9

Shepard woke up in a haze, fought with her cover to get out of the bed and staggered to the bathroom, pressed by a dangerously full bladder. Getting rid of the pressure felt amazing and she was kind of glad to use her bathroom for something else than puking, for once. Mordin hadn't joked about the three days in hell. Shepard had lived through what reminded her of a malaria episode. High fever, sweating, migraine, dizziness, myalgia, vomiting, quivers, she had had it all. She had seen better days.

Shepard felt shaky and famished. The cold water she splashed on her face over the sink didn't help to ameliorate the situation. She looked at her reflexion in the mirror and saw her red eyes, livid face and dirty hair. Time for a shower, she decided and she removed her tank top. Her right shoulder reminded her of its existence. Shepard gritted her teeth. Damn, she'll have to pop pain killers like candies during the mission. She started right away with some pills she had in her bathroom for emergencies and munched them as she wiggled to get rid of her sport bra, her shorties following right after on the ground.

The hot water felt amazing on her skin. Shepard stayed under the shower head for several minutes, not caring at all about water restrictions – screw them, it was recycled anyway. As Shepard relaxed, head low and eyes closed, breathing slowly, she started to feel the energy running through her veins. She focused on her breathing and her heart beat, like Javik had taught her, and let the flow circulate through her, from within to the very end of her limbs, slowly, without pressing anything.

"You're a powerful biotic, Shepard," Samara had told her. It was late. Most of the crew was already asleep. Wrex and Javik had both abandoned a while ago but Shepard was too full of energy to go to bed now. Samara didn't sleep much either due to her age. They were in the lounge, a tantalizing asari music discreetly playing in the background. Shepard shifted, uncomfortable on the sofa.

"For a Human, you mean," she replied. Not that she wanted to avoid the subject but she could do without.

"No, child, for a biotic," Samara smiled in front of her. "You have a lot of element zero in you. It is rare for an alien organism to support this quantity."

"Been exposed twice," Shepard said, scratching her nose, "shortly after birth and the second time when I was a teenager. Ironically, I owe my powers to Cerberus."

"How so?"

"They were just terrorists at the time, on Earth," Shepard explained. "In 54, when I was born, we'd been using the Sol relay for five years only and the First Contact War would occur three years later." Samara nodded. "We didn't understand much of eezo, we just knew it was vaguely radioactive. It altered people and not in a good way under certain conditions so of course it was used to make dirty bombs. What was Cerberus at the time used those for their terrorist attacks. The orphanage I grew up in wasn't far from the first massive attack on the subway. Eezo dust probably rained on all the building." A lot of kids had died in the next couple of years, from what she knew.
"And the second time?"

"Something similar," Shepard said, trying to find a comfortable position on the sofa. She removed her snickers and put her feet on the coffee table. "I was fourteen." Zaeed had left Earth a few weeks before and she was so angry. "I was with my brother." Roaming the streets with some other kids from a gang he wanted to join. That idiot. "The bomb exploded maybe a hundred meters from us." Shepard remembered the hot wind of the explosion and the burned smell more than the noise, the screams and the sirens. People were running everywhere, bleeding, wounded, panicked. "I was covered with eezo dust when I was found." Shepard had stood there, in the middle of the rumble and the smoke, watching it all, her ears ringing. John was on the ground, unconscious, his forehead bleeding, just next to another kid cut in half by a steel panel from a bus. It had been the first time she had seen people actually die in front of her.

"Can you close the door, please?"

Shepard opened her eyes and turned her back to the door, hands on her breasts by reflex. Shit. She had forgotten about Vakarian – Garrus, whatever. He had been sleeping on the sofa now that she was thinking about it. Shepard fumbled along the wall to find the button and the door closed in a rapid whoosh.

"Thanks!" Garrus said from the other side.

Double shit. She didn't have any clean clothes with her in the bathroom.

"Can you do me a favor?" Shepard asked loud enough to cover the sound of the running water.

"Depends for what."

Shepard snorted. "I need clothes."

"I am not searching through your drawers again," Garrus replied and he sounded pretty determined. "I'll just... leave and let you find your own clothes. Unless you need help to get dressed."

"I took a couple of painkillers. That should do." And fuck it if it hurt. She was fed up to ask people for help for every little thing. "What time is it?" she asked, squishing her bottle of soap to get some.

"Three o four." His voice sounded closer.

"Can you check on Mordin for me, please? The sooner we leave, the better. The days are short on Tuchanka."

"Yes, can do," he replied, very military like, and she heard the door of the cabin opening.

It took her twenty minutes to dry herself off and put on her reinforced leggings, her sport bra and her usual tank top – she had abandoned the idea of tying her hair up after a while and would have to ask Garrus to help her at some point. It smelled like coffee, eggs and bacon when she arrived in the mess. Her stomach made so much noise it interrupted Garrus and Mordin in their discussion. Shepard blushed like a little girl for the first time in ages. There went her ruthless Commander Shepard, Hero of Torfan reputation. She waved at the aliens and sat at the table, avoiding eye contact. A datapad was already waiting for her and three seconds later a cup of coffee appeared in her field of vision.

"There," Garrus said, "breakfast is on the way."

"No offense but I'd rather eat rations than breakfast made by a dextro."
"I eat meals prepared by a levo three times a day and I'm still standing," Garrus replied.


"That's Wrex' report," he added, pointing at the datapad. "Read it while I heat up some pancakes."

"Yes mom," Shepard mocked. Garrus shook his head and went back to the kitchen.

Shepard sipped her cup of coffee while reading the report, typed in a minimalist style directly in English – Wrex didn't have a translator and probably knew more languages than Mordin, Traynor and Garrus united. Wrex explained in few words that the Shroud was located in a sacred area of clan Urdnot's territory, surrounded by a vast desert. No tribes would bother them because of their belief and the rather frequent thresher maw attacks. A fourth of the complex around the arena was nothing but ruins but the tower itself was solid, the electricity still ran in most areas but the elevators were dead and the roof wouldn't allow any kind of landing. That meant climbing the five kilometers of the tower by foot. Shepard slid a look to Mordin coming her way with his own breakfast and a tall glass of something thick and vaguely pink with little black grains in it. That was a lot of steps for an old Salarian.

"Good morning, Shepard," Mordin said as he sat in front of her. His plate contained some sort of gruel with vegetables and meat in a mustard sauce. It smelled kind of good, to be honest. Mordin put the glass on the table and pushed it in Shepard's direction. "For you."

"Huh, thanks," she hesitated. That looked very thick. She had to ask. "What is it?"

"N'zasa," Mordin answered with a smile. "Mixed fruits with fish eggs and algae. Added proteins, carbohydrates and minerals to help your organism recover. Equivalent of smoothy in human culture, more or less." Shepard did her best to not wince – fish eggs? Suddenly, the idea of eating a breakfast made by Garrus was much more appealing than that. "Oh, forgot something!" Mordin said. "Your hand, please."

Shepard obeyed, slightly worried, and jumped on her chair when Mordin stuck a syringe just in the soft junction above her forearm.

"What the fuck?" she yelped, taking back her arm and ready to test her powers on the salarian asshole.

"Heavy painkillers and anti-inflammatory," Mordin answered, putting the syringe back in his pocket. "Should work for the next twenty-four hours. Won't make you euphoric though, paid attention to that."

"Thank you!" Garrus said from the kitchen.

"And you couldn't say so before sticking it into me?!!" Shepard growled.

"More efficient that way," he shrugged. "Less argumentation."

"You know he's right," Garrus intervened as he brought breakfast to the table while Shepard stared angrily at Mordin. She rubbed her arm and sat back, keeping an eye on him. Garrus did another trip to the kitchen before settling down at her right, for once. "Bon appétit," he said and started digging in his own plate.

"Oh, learning French?" Mordin asked, too enthusiastic for somebody who had just stabbed her, if you were to ask her.
"Huh, no, it's just something the crew often says."

"Who knows French?"

"Alenko. He's Canadian," Shepard replied, testing the consistency of her eggs with a fork. "Well, from Vancouver actually but yeah, he speaks French. Ukrainian and Russian too and a bit of Korean if I remember correctly."

"I didn't know the Alliance offered language classes," Garrus commented. He pushed a plate full of pancakes in her direction. Shepard looked at all the food made for her. Okay, she was hungry, but that was a lot.

"You're kidding?" she snorted. "They teach us to shoot and obey orders, period."

"School then?"

"Nope, night shifts," Shepard explained. "Alenko is kind of a shy and quiet guy, he doesn't like when there is too many people around, or too much noise. When I met him, we'd been working on the same ship for three months already but he always took the night shifts – it was my first, I kind of needed the money. There isn't much to do during those shifts so we all had our books and video games and stuff. A guy I knew kneaded, another wrote porn." She shrugged and for once it didn't hurt. "Good smut, I have to admit."

Garrus choked on his cup of cafinex.

"Type of literature quite difficult to write, actually," Mordin said.

"Do Salarians even have porn?" Shepard asked, curious but not forgiving.

"Can we talk about something else?" Garrus grunted. "It's breakfast, people, breakfast!"

"It's the best time ever to talk about porn!" Shepard argued. Garrus shook his head and stood up, abandoning his plates on the table. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'll take a shower while you finish your fascinating discussion."

"Huh huh," she replied on a knowing tone just to tease him. It worked very well considering his angry monologue as he aimed for his room. Shepard smirked and dug into her eggs. Not bad, not bad at all.

They all were in the shuttle bay ready to leave less than an hour later – Wrex wasn't and nobody seemed to know where he had crashed for the night. Garrus had elected his new heavy armor for the mission, nothing fancy, the same model as the one ruined on Erinle. That wasn't a bad idea considering what they could face but he'd have to support the extra weight added by Tuchanka's gravity. He had mounted a piercing mod on both his Valiant and Valkyrie, and also upgraded his Paladin resting on his hip. Shepard had seen him grab a couple of grenades and incendiary ammo to top it all. Garrus was ready to take down some Krogans, no doubt about it.

Mordin hadn't bothered to put on his armor. He only had his usual semi-armored everyday outfit on him but he carried a heavy pistol and a submachine gun, plus his duffel-bag. No surprise in it this time, Shepard had checked – Mordin didn't need the extra weight —, only food and drinks for the both of them. The tower was located under the actual shroud so the temperature on the ground would be around thirty-three, thirty-five degree Celsius. That was hot for them, they'd need to drink a lot. Garrus, on the other hand, was well used to this kind of temperature and seemed pretty happy to not land on yet another block of ice.
Shepard was checking one last time a strap on the side of her armor, pretty happy her shoulder didn't protest, when Javik arrived by the elevator, in his sport wear – which was the regular gray and blue Alliance sweatsuit in the smallest size possible, nothing else. Shepard knew he was coming to ask her how she was doing so she removed a glove and presented him her hand without resistance. Javik nodded as he touched her delicately, his fingers as cold as ever. Shepard didn't fight his intrusion and let him satisfy his curiosity all he wanted.

"You should rest for a few days before going on any mission," Javik eventually said as he put his hands behind his back. Shepard did her best to not sigh – she was in for a lecture. "It is foolish to think you are capable of using your biotics like before after what you've been through."

"Time is of the essence," Shepard quoted, putting her glove on again. "Mordin needs the originals of the genophage, it's my job to deliver."

"It can wait," Javik insisted. "You need to rest and train."

"I will," Shepard ensured, "after the mission. I'm sure you've read Wrex' report, there is nothing alarming in it. We go in, we go out and that's it. It's a matter of a day, two tops. Then we head for Horizon and that's nine days of travel from Tuchanka. Nine days for me to rest." She put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it a little. "I'll be fine."

Javik looked at her in the eyes for long seconds before turning to the shuttle. "Vakarian!" he barked. "If anything happens to the Commander, I'll skin you alive and use your head as a lamp, is that clear?"

"Yes sir!" Garrus replied, saluting and all. Shepard chuckled.

"And you, Commander," Javik continued, pushing her hand away, "why did you take your Black Widow? You don't need it in close quarters and you have a better sniper than you in your team."

"Because I'm in charge and I take the weapons I deem necessary with me," Shepard reminded him, folding her arms. She wasn't mad at Javik, even if he was an overprotective dick at the moment. He usually didn't act like that for nothing, Shepard knew it. He must have sensed something pretty worrying in her to be this insisting. Shepard felt fine but she'd be careful during the mission. "The ship is yours," she said on an even tone and she headed for the shuttle. She didn't hear him answer.

The shuttle landed fifteen kilometers from the Shroud, between the dunes. Shepard waited a moment, laying on the sand, studying the surroundings with her scope, before giving the green light to move. It was still pretty early in the morning for Tuchanka, the cloudy sky was just starting to lighten up, and the temperature wasn't bad at all – her omnitool indicated eighteen degrees. That felt good, Shepard thought, switching for her Valkyrie. She hadn't been on the ground for ages and she was glad to be able to move around – Omega didn't count, it had been a short parentheses during a long recovery.

The visibility was good enough to see the tower from the landing point and it grew more and more as they walked. Few words were exchanged during the walk and nothing particular happened. Shepard was on point, Solus behind her and Vakarian last, all as discreet as possible. A soft soil like the sand of the desert was the perfect hunting-ground for thresher maws. It was a bit risque to walk around but Shepard didn't want to land directly in the Shroud's arena. It would have been a little suspicious. Despite the Council's embargo on the Krogan Demilitarized Zone, and particularly on the Aralakh system, mercenaries and contraband landed on Tuchanka once a while. Any sentinel around would think they just were stupid mercs not aware of the dangers of the planet.
It was the middle of the morning when they arrived at the shrine. They were a kilometer from the
feet of the tower, on a high wall half destroyed by time and other cataclysm, low buildings in an
orderly fashion all along the central road leading to the arena, a vast octagonal raised structure with
more walls and gigantic hammers on two sides. Many sculptures of naked aroused Krogans were
still standing along the way. Shepard wasn't surprised. Krogans were too proud of their dicks to not
erect monuments for them every chance they could get. Besides, the arena had been used for the
Rite of Passage celebrating boys becoming men. Huge phallus everywhere undoubtedly were a
requirement.

The highest building back on Earth was not even half the size of the Shroud and even Illium's
endless towers weren't that tall. The Shroud probably was the highest tower of the known galaxy,
five kilometers of concrete and steel made to catapult loads off world with electromagnetic
accelerators. Shepard wondered why the Salarians had build mass-drivers so expensive in term of
energy on Tuchanka – and not only one but several of them. Sure, electricity was easy enough to
produce with solar panels but it didn't make much sense to erect those towers and launch hundred
of loads to space over a long period of time. Even two thousand years ago, Salarians had had the
technology to directly deploy the Shroud at Lagrange points around Tuchanka, and rather quickly,
she'd bet. The only logical explanation was that the Salarians, and the Asaris with whom they
formed the Council at the time, had had no intention whatsoever to complete the project.

"Quite a view, huh?"

Shepard gave a quick look at Vakarian arriving on her left and searching in his pouch. He handed
her a lollipop. Shepard took it, a little annoyed, and popped it in her mouth before going back to her
watch. The sky was less cloudy than earlier and a bit of grayish blue was visible here and there. A
warm, regular breeze came from the east, lifting dust and sand from the ground.

"Solus knew about the Shroud since he worked on the second genophage," she said as she looked
at the old Salarian resting in the shadows, "but how did you know?"

"It's in all History books," Vakarian shrugged. He looked at her and smiled, mocking. "I thought
you were supposed to call him by his first name now?"

"We're on a mission," Shepard replied, "friendship can wait."

"Aye aye, Commander," Vakarian smirked. "I'll keep watch, go drink something."

"You know, I'm supposed to be your boss," Shepard complained, "not the other way around. I'd
like you to remember that."

"Well I'm quite fond of my boss," he said, checking something on his rifle to avoid eye contact.
"I'd like to keep her alive and hydrated."

"Yeah, right," Shepard snorted. "You just don't want to finish on Javik's bedside table."

"That too, yes," Garrus admitted but he was still smiling.

Shepard smirked and knocked on his chest plate as a thank before climbing down the wall. Solus
welcomed her with a thermos full of the cold smoothy thing with floating fish eggs. Shepard
whined as she sat on a big block of rock. That again. She thanked Solus nonetheless – she hated to
waste food.

"You're doing okay, Doc?" she asked after a long sip of the thick liquid.

"Can't complain," he replied. Shepard studied his traits without making it discreet. A little pressure
always helped. "Not used to stronger gravity," Solus eventually admitted. "Will get better in a few hours."

"We have to climb five kilometers of stairs," Shepard warned him. "It won't get better."

"Did worse in the abandoned spacestation," he reminded her.

"Me?" He nodded. Damn, he could use pronouns once in a while, that'd help. "Gravity was three times lower than on the Normandy. Climbing required little effort. Besides, I'm in a much better shape than you." Solus chuckled. Well, okay, maybe not at the moment. "Why did you insist so much to come, by the way?" Shepard asked. "I could have sent Vakarian, Wrex and Javik and we'd've been done for days already."

"Had to be me," Solus shook his head. "My responsibility."

"It's mine, technically." Solus didn't reply. He looked at her with his usual affable smile. She had to attack from another angle if she wanted an answer. "You never questioned my request," Shepard said and she gulped another mouth full of pink molasses. It was sour and acid, like many salarian drinks. "I told you the Council wanted to cure the genophage and you followed me, even if you had settled down on Omega for your retirement."

"And?"

"I'm just being curious, is all", Shepard shrugged. Solus stayed quiet a long minute but eventually talked.

"New genophage a great challenge for someone like me," he said, playing with his own thermos. "Worked on project without thinking. Only interested in the process, not the consequences. Had time to think since then." He took a sip of his drink.

Solus felt guilty. Shepard wouldn't have bet on that. "So my little speech about Valern didn't move you?"

"No. Not motivated by revenge or petty rivalry between clans." He looked at the tower behind Shepard. "Krogans often described as the galaxy's greatest threat, Batarians as most barbaric species, Humans," he pointed at Shepard, "quite dangerous themselves but worst bastards of them all? My people." He closed his thermos and put it back in his bag. "Never intended to finish the Shroud. Chemicals released in Tuchanka's atmosphere? Water vapor, nitrogen and ozone."

"Ozone stops UV light, right?"

"Yes, but concentration not high enough to be efficient." He jerked his chin in the tower's direction. "Biggest scam of the galaxy." That confirmed Shepard's intuition. Solus sighed and stood up. "Strangely came to like Urdnot Wrex," he said, stretching his back, hands on his narrow hips. "Good fellow, quite humorous, impressive knowledge and kin intellect – for a Krogan. Didn't hesitate to put his own life in danger to spare mine despite xenophobia. Wouldn't pardon myself if discovered truth about the Shroud." He shook his head. "Had to be me."

Yep, guilt all the way, Shepard thought as she gave him her thermos back. Well, there were worse reasons to work on a project like that. The problem was that Solus would probably never see his cure finished and/or used. He was just a link in a long chain. Maybe that could demotivate him on the way. Shepard would have to pay attention to that.

"Hello hello my pretties," Joker called through the radio. "How are you today?"
"We're already at the Shroud, lazy ass," Shepard replied.

"It's seven AM on board, Commander," Joker said on the same tone. "You left earlier than planned."

"EDI kept an eye on us." Shepard checked her pocket for her packet of cigarettes by reflex and realized she didn't have one. She didn't even feel the need to smoke, actually. "Any update?"

"There's a storm five hundred kilometers east of you and it's coming in your direction but the weatherman said you should be fine for the next twenty hours." Shepard rubbed her eyes. That meant the next morning, approximately.

"Alright, I'll keep that in mind. Shepard out."

"Have fun down there and bring me back a souvenir! Normandy out."

They checked their equipment and aimed for the tower. Shepard took her time despite the storm coming and progressed carefully in the ruins. It was the kind of place varrens liked but they didn't see any, not even dried excrements. Shepard didn't know what to think about that but she was kind of glad to not have to fire any bullet at the moment. They needed to be as quiet as possible.

They had to cross the arena to reach the tower. A large and damaged stairway leaded to the upper level. They climbed swiftly and took cover behind the plinth of a statue on the ground. Vakarian switched for his Valiant, a sniper rifle much more compact and lighter than her Black Widow, and inspected the area with his thermal scope. Nothing.

The arena was full of debris of all kinds: rock, armor plates, weapons pieces, bones and exoskeletons, mostly Krogans by the size but also from different species of animals. Shepard kept on advancing, impressed by the size of the hammers on each side. They were enormous sculpted blocks of metal mounted on heavy pillars maybe twenty meters high. Those things probably produced mini-earthquakes when they hit the rock bed of the arena. No wonder Kalros' shrine was used to summon only the biggest thresher maws.

A clear change of architecture happened when they reached the Shroud. The buildings there were long, low, and without any sharp edge, covered by that strange shimmering green patina, definitely salarians. They were in a much better shape too, no heavy damages but for traces of landing in the central courtyard. The Salarians had to send people here once in a while to maintain the illusion, Shepard supposed.

"This way," Solus called, checking a map on his omnitool. He took point and Shepard signed to Vakarian to stay close to him. She took the rear, following them in the shadows.

Solus led the way to the basement through massive doors. There had been attempts to open them with explosives but they still stood, not even scratched. The rooms they came across still had functioning electricity and ventilation but nobody was around. It was kind of strange. Shepard had the impression the restrooms, laboratories and stocks had just been evacuated for whatever reason. Everything was quiet and still, spotless even. As if nobody had ever used the equipment but still came once in a while to clean it up.

Solus eventually stopped at a console and keyed on the keyboard. The system was all holographic and quite recent, from what Shepard could see. Solus frowned.

"A problem, Doc?"

"Thought originals of genophage could be kept in underground vaults," he replied, "would have
spared us the climb, but no trace of them in the catalogs."

"I wouldn't keep a trace of such items in a catalog," Vakarian said. "It was kind of easy to come here."

"Because know the codes," Solus shook his head. "Facilities very difficult to penetrate otherwise, and vaults even worse to access. Would have been a problem for us, actually. Don't have the codes for that."

"The plan was and still is to go to the top of the tower," Shepard shrugged. "The samples you want are up there anyway."

"Should be," Solus nodded as he left the console. "Worst case scenario, have to come down to search the vaults."

"Which are impenetrable," Vakarian reminded them. "Awesome."

"With your knowledge and mine, have good chances to succeed," Solus said. Vakarian obviously agreed and Shepard felt stupid, useless and a bit annoyed.

"Let's go ladies," she grunted as she turned heel. "We ain't got all day."

"Huh, technically, yes," Vakarian joked. The look she gave him over her shoulder made him shut up. Solus chuckled.

The stairs Wrex had checked could be accessed from the basements, after a series of heavy doors. The team started to climb a tight spiral chimney with a hole at the center. A diffuse light ran all along thanks to little lamps under every other steps. They didn't hurry things, and soon found the first gap Wrex had talked about. The stairs had been dynamited on four meters or so. Luckily, the edge was just above them.

"I can't reach that in those conditions," Vakarian said, looking up.

"I can," Shepard smirked. "What does a man have to do to please a woman?" she asked, locking her Valkyrie in her back.

"What?"

"Drop on his knees." Vakarian clicked, slightly annoyed by the overtone. "Chop chop," she mocked.

"It's the second time you use me as a footstool," he grumbled but he complied nonetheless.

Vakarian sheathed his rifle before putting a knee to the ground. Shepard used his leg as a step and then stood on his shoulders, careful as to not put too much weight on the ridge of his collar. She kept a hand on the wall as he stood up. The edge of the stairs was withing reach. She grabbed it, pulled on her arms without feeling any pain and Vakarian helped by pushing her feet up. Shepard sat on the stairs and looked around. There was a hook in the wall, which didn't surprise her much. The tower had been sabotaged but Salarians probably came here once in a while – the dead elevators were their handy work too, she'd bet. They had to have access to the top. Shepard took a thin steel rope in one of her pouches, attached it to the hook and threw the other end down. She and Vakarian then helped Solus to climb and the Turian followed effortlessly.

The climb continued like that for hours and Shepard was actually kind of glad some parts of the stairs had been destroyed because it interrupted the monotonous rhythm of their steps in the spiral
chimney. She made them stop each hour for a few minutes, to drink and eat a little. The temperature inside the tower was a nice twenty-six degrees but there was no fresh breeze from anywhere – there wasn't any window to the outside – and the gravity of the planet didn't help either. Solus showed signs of fatigue quickly. He first sweated, then he started to breath heavily and soon he missed a step or two. Vakarian encouraged him from the rear and eventually caught him when he whacked on a step. Shepard stayed silent. The ascension wasn't easy for her either.

There was absolutely no door or opening on a room in the chimney so they stopped in the middle of it for their lunch break, sitting on the stairs and munching their ration bars in silence. Shepard saw that Solus visibly needed to rest more than fifteen minutes so she told him to take a nap. They had all day and night after all, it wouldn't kill them to spend an hour or so resting. Solus fell sleep within minutes.

"How's your shoulder, Commander?" Vakarian whispered after a while.

"Good, good," Shepard replied on the same tone. There definitely was a sting the last couple of times she had pulled on it but she was perfectly able to ignore it. "You good?"

"I've seen worse."

"Right. Special force training." She had read that in his dossier an eternity ago. "Why did you quit the army to go to C-Sec?" she asked.

"A lot of Turians do that," he shrugged.

"A lot of Turians join C-Sec after their mandatory years in the army but you enlisted for another three years and quit a few months in," Shepard contradicted him. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

Vakarian kept his eyes on the wall, arms folded, one of his leg hanging over the edge of the step he was sitting on. He obviously didn't want to talk about the subject and Shepard was about to tell him to forget it when he answered. "My mother died. Corpalis syndrome." Shepard didn't know what it was but she nodded nonetheless. Vakarian scratched his scars, something he often did when he was uncomfortable. He didn't say another word. Shepard suspected it was more complicated than that but she didn't insist.

"I didn't thank you for your support those past few days," she said to change the subject, leaning her head against the wall.

"You don't have to," Vakarian replied. "I wouldn't say it was my pleasure," he added with humor, "but I'm kind of glad you let me assist you."

"Because being my squire is so much fun?" Shepard snorted. Vakarian gave her a quick amused look.

"That, and I'm proud of the trust you place in me." His mandibles twitched. "It's good to have a friend."

"It is," Shepard approved. She didn't try to fight her smile and she let a comfortable silence fall on them. Only Solus' incoherent mumbles interrupted it from time to time.

Shepard dozed off at some point but woke up before Solus – Vakarian didn't comment. Once everybody ready to leave, the climb started again. It was practically the middle of the afternoon already and they were half-way to the top. Shepard didn't press her team for the second part either. She even slowed down every time she saw Solus in difficulties. As a result, they arrived at the top
of the tower well after sundown. There, a level had been arranged in actual laboratories, stocks and quarters for a team of four or five, and it had been used frequently. Shepard didn't take her chances and cleared the zone with Vakarian before anything else.

Once sure they were alone, she allowed Solus to explore the area in search of the genophage strains. Vakarian went with him, Valkyrie still in hand just in case. Shepard called the Normandy to give their status and hear news about the storm – still coming their way, they had ten hours to get down and EDI would pick them up in the arena since discretion wouldn't be so much important then. If they found the strains here, that is. Shepard looked at Solus and Vakarian in a laboratory behind a thick wall of glass. She hoped they wouldn't have to cut their way through the vaults. That would take a lot of time and they didn't have the proper equipment for that. She sighed and turned to the large windows offering her a view of Tuchanka. Javik was right. She shouldn't have rushed this mission.

Her teammates came back in the main room fifteen minutes later and, judging by their good mood, they had found what they wanted. Solus proudly showed her several cryogenic canisters in his duffel-bag. Mission accomplished. Shepard checked her omnitool. Eight hours before sunrise, nine and a half before the storm hitting the Shroud. Going down would take far less time than climbing the tower up so she decided to have another one hour break. Her boys had earned it.

"It's strange to not see a single star in the sky," Garrus said moments later

Shepard turned to him – he had been stuck to the windows for a while now. "We're under the Shroud," she reminded him.

"I know," he replied as he came back to their little improvised camp in the middle of the room, "but it's still strange."

"You grew up in Cipritine, right? With all the artificial lights, it's hard to believe you saw any star before boot camp."

"They are few lights at night in the streets actually," Garrus said. He sat uncomfortably on a chair they had found earlier – the furniture was designed for Salarians, not heavier and wider Turians. "And star gazing is something quite popular among Turians, for your information. If you have a terrace or a balcony large enough, you always end up with friends coming at your place to chit-chat and enjoy the night."

Shepard thought Solus would comment on that since he had been studying turian societies for years and wrote a few books about them, but the old Salarians was struggling to stay awake, even if she had told him to sleep as long as he wanted during the break. "Seems like a chore for a loner like you," she half-joked.

Garrus removed an imaginary spot on his armor and gave a nervous look to Solus – he wouldn't talk now. The Salarian didn't even notice it. His eyes were wide open and focused on the few light tubes they had put on the ground but Shepard suspected he was actually asleep. Or dead. She gently patted his knee and Solus jumped on his chair. Not dead. Good. She hated to carry cadavers.

"I could have told you," Garrus whispered, poking his visor, as Solus was falling back asleep, this time with eyes closed. Shepard shrugged. "You're awfully curious about me today," he remarked.

"I asked you, like, two questions," Shepard chuckled.

"That's a lot compared to the usual none."
"Well, you're supposed to know your friends a little," she shrugged. "I know stuff about you but it mostly comes from your dossier. Our usual banters are not really personal."

"I suppose, yes," Garrus replied and became silent. Shepard didn't want to see him all closed up again so she insisted a little.

"So, two-zero in my favor. What will the challenger do?"

"What?"

"Ask me two questions and we'll be even," she translated.

"Oh. Right." Garrus scratched his scars once more. "What's your favorite food?"

"Wow," Shepard laughed, "super personal! I can't answer that, we don't know each other enough for this kind of intrusion in my private life," she mocked. Garrus' mandibles twitched.

"Alright," he grumbled. "Humans don't have to join the military depending on their place of birth, if I remember correctly, so why did you enlist in the Alliance?"


"You... killed a guy," he repeated slowly.

"Hm hm," she nodded and she let him wonder how and why for long seconds because it amused her greatly.

"You can't let me hanging like that, Shepard," Garrus eventually complained.

"I was involved in a street gang with my brother," she explained, "and it turned pretty badly for us. I was offered a deal: joining the Alliance or spending the next twenty years in prison."

"Wait, you have a brother?"

"Is that your second question?" she teased.

"Huh, yes."

"Yes, I have a brother," she nodded. "John. We're twins."

"Oh, the John from your tattoo?"

"Who knows," she smirked. That was his third question. Garrus frowned a little but accepted the rule nonetheless.

"I have a sibling too," he abruptly said, looking away. "A sister. Five years older though."

"A good sibling or a sibling like mine?" Shepard asked, bitter-sweet.

"I wouldn't know," Garrus admitted. Shepard arched an eyebrow. "I didn't see her in years."

Shepard wanted to ask more questions since he seemed pretty open at the moment but she was interrupted by Joker on the radio.

"Commander, you have a call from Councilor Sparatus," he said.
"What does he want?"

"No idea. He said it was super duper urgent. Patching it through."

The sound only transmission wasn't good and lagged a little. "Spectre Shepard, are you still on Tuchanka?" he asked her before she could say anything.

"Yes sir." Shepard confirmed. "Our mission is a success, sir." She didn't want to say too much, even if the line was secured, and deep down she feared that Sparatus was calling to order her to destroy the originals of the genophage for good – though she had been very vague with him and Tevos about why she needed to go to Tuchanka. Of course they knew it was related to the genophage but they didn't know about her plans to raid the Shroud to retrieve the strains. "What can I do for you, Councilor?" she asked.

"Spectre Shepard, Spectre Vakarian," Sparatus said with his most authoritarian voice, "you are to immediately assist Lieutenant Victus of the Ninth Platoon actually deployed on Tuchanka. This mission requires the greatest secrecy, Spectres. It's a question of galactic peace. Am I clear?"

"Yes sir," Shepard replied, rubbing her forehead – so much for a quiet mission. Javik was going to kill her. "What kind of assistance does Lieutenant Victus need, if I may ask?"

"Retrieve him and help him finish his mission. I'm sending you his coordinates."

"We're on our way, sir," Shepard confirmed as she stood up and the communication was cut short. "Joker, you're still here?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Tell Javik we'll be late for breakfast, would you?"

"Huh, does it have to be me?" Joker hesitated. "I'm too handsome to die."

"I'll make sure it's engraved on your urn, soldier."

"Thanks, Commander," Joker grumbled. "Normandy out."

Vakarian was already ready to go when Shepard received the coordinates – they'd need the shuttle, damn.

"Today was kind of boring anyway," he joked, Valkyrie on his hip. Shepard snorted, amused.

"Let's go. We have a whole platoon of turian asses to save."

TBC
The storm was visible on the live-feed video screens of the shuttle, an enormous sand wall hundreds of meters tall, marching on the desolated landscape of Tuchanka and crossed by frantic lightening bolts. The shuttle was keeping a respectful security distance with it as a pale morning rose. The drop location was south of the path of the storm. They’d only experience strong wind, Garrus supposed.

"ETA five minutes," EDI announced.

Shepard stood up and grabbed a handle. She looked tired, he noticed, and there was nothing surprising in that. She had barely slept since she had woken up on the Normandy the previous day. She was running on stems and whatever Solus had injected her with the second shot of painkillers once they had reached ground level a few hours earlier. Javik had been right. Going on a mission right after her purge had been a stupid idea.

But it wouldn't have changed much, Garrus thought. The Council knew where the Normandy was and would have called Shepard nonetheless. Well, "the Council", figure of speech. It wasn't surprising that only Councilor Sparatus had called about a platoon of Turians on a secret mission on Tuchanka. Garrus was ready to bet a lot that the other Councilors didn't know shit about what was going on. An order from Councilor Sparatus alone was just an order from the Primarch through the official channel, nothing else.

The shuttle landed in the middle of ruins, rocks and metal everywhere, and Garrus automatically recognized the smell of burned fuel he had come across so often on docks. It took only a second to find the source: a column of black smoke was visible maybe two hundred meters on their nine. Awesome. They’d have to evacuate the platoon too.

The shuttle left with Solus inside – EDI had to take him and the genophage strains back to the Normandy before coming back and staying around. Garrus took his Valiant to observe their surroundings with his thermal scope but the blocks of rock and metal were too thick to spot anything relevant. He didn't know where they were but it kind of looked like a city – after several civil wars, atomic bombings and two thousands years of erosion. Just like training, he thought to relax. There was nothing to worry about.

Or maybe there was. The ground shook and dust and blocks of rock fell from the walls. Gunshots were fired in the distance as a column suddenly sprang in the air. Not a column, Garrus realized when it wiggled and opened a large mouth with claws. A thresher maw.

"Now we know what happened," Shepard grumbled. Garrus knew she hated to go blind on a mission. Councilor Sparatus hadn't given her any details and had blocked every request she had sent to Spectre Requisition about Lieutenant Victus. She was pissed, to say the least. Shepard took her Valkyrie in hand. "Let's go," she said and she didn't need to remind him to be careful.

They heard another attack a few minutes later but Shepard didn't accelerate. If they didn't want to be noticed before reaching Victus, and therefore probably be eaten by a thresher maw themselves, they had to keep it quiet. The less vibrations, the better. Garrus kind of hoped the giant worm would think, if it thought, that a whole platoon of Turians was a better target than the two of them.
There was a hole in the ground, three meters in diameter and who knew how deep, right in the middle of the path. Shepard clicked and she started to climb the ruins around. Garrus followed her, careful as to not disturb the fragile balance of the blocks. They had to climb quite high to find a path and another attack happened, this time much closer. They soon reached an antic rooftop of some sort. Shepard took cover behind a block while Garrus lain on his stomach, eye in the scope of his Valiant. The situation was pretty bad downstairs. Whatever shuttle or dropship the platoon had used was in pieces scattered all over the place – a large flat circle of soft ground. Just the kind of place thresher maws liked. Garrus counted no less than ten cadavers all around and the survivors were currently holding their lines at different levels of a pile of rocks thirty meters from them.

"Aww, they all have the same armor," Shepard angrily mocked, "that's cute."

"It's the standard uniform of the Seventy-ninth flotilla," Garrus replied, searching for the Lieutenant. "I've had one like that. Good stuff, but not my color." Shepard snorted. "See the guy with Pallin tattoos on beige skin behind the third line? Two stripes and a circle on the left shoulder. That should be the Lieutenant."

"Yeah, I see him. Contact him."

"Yessir." Shepard took her Black Widow from her back and set it to cover Garrus while he keyed on his omnitool. The encryption of turian transmissions changed randomly but there always was the universal emergency frequency. "This is Spectre Shepard and Vakarian for Lieutenant Victus," Garrus called, eye still in his scope, "do you copy?" He saw the Lieutenant put his hand to his temple and look around.

"This is Lieutenant Victus," he confirmed. "What the fuck are you doing here, Spectres? This is a secret operation, stand back!"

Garrus exchanged a look with Shepard. She signed him to transfer the communication to her.

"This is Spectre Shepard speaking," she announced, "and we're here to save your sorry ass so shut your fucking dick trap and call back your men. Your operation is now mine by Council order."

"Negative," Victus replied. "I don't take my orders from the Council."

"It's up to you, Lt," Shepard continued. "I got you in my scope right now and I'll shoot if you don't cooperate. You have five seconds to call back your men." And she shut the communication down. Garrus saw Victus search for them but he was too pressed by time and stressed to be efficient. He eventually called his men back and they hastily climbed the pile of rocks. "You think they'll shoot us on our way down?" Shepard asked, switching for her Valkyrie.

"That'd be a stupid move but who knows. I'll cover you and follow when you'll be done spanking him."

"Might take a while," Shepard chuckled with a dangerous grin.

She progressed as fast as she could to not trigger another attack and reached what was left of the platoon in a few minutes. She commanded Victus to cover Garrus before giving him the green light. Garrus sheathed his Valiant as he stood up and carefully followed the steps of his mentor. The only problem was his weight – he was much heavier than her. Old concrete cracked and broke under his feet as Garrus stepped on it and he fell with it. He managed to catch a rusty rebar to stop his fall but the block of cement bounced several times before hitting the ground. Well shit.

Garrus felt the quake immediately and he didn't need Shepard to tell him to hurry. He pulled on his
arm to reach a more stable block where to put his feet. He had just found his balance when the
thresher maw sprouted out of the ground, roaring, its mouth wide open, droplets of sand melted in
acid splashing all around. Garrus ran but he was in the shadow of the worm and it grew around him
despite the covert fire. He took a grenade from his belt – if he was going down, he'd take the beast
with him.

A biotic wave exploded the rocks on Garrus' left and the thresher maw fell back, screeching.
Garrus took his chance to throw his grenade at the base of the worm, then jumped behind a pile of
debris to take cover. The explosion hurt the thresher maw, its blue blood raining on the wreckage
around, and the worm slid back into the ground.

Before Garrus knew it, Shepard was next to him, emptying her water gourd on him to wash off the
acid and scolding him at the same time. He tried to protest but she pushed his hands away. He let
her finish, then stood up and climbed the ruins with her. A few Turians helped them, grabbing his
arms and pulling him up. Garrus rose his head to thank them and his eyes caught a glimpse of a
deep burgundy coat floating in the wind. He had seen a similar coat only once in his life, when a
very special guest had joined his platoon for an infiltration operation. It was the color the Cabal
wore to distinguish themselves from the rest of the troops when needed. The Ninth platoon had a
turian biotic with them.

The biotic turned their hooded head and took their distance with the rest of the men. Garrus shook
himself up. A member of the Cabal was with them and so what? He knew how useful a biotic
could be and the stigmas imposed to turian ones were based on historical events and superstitions
anyway. He had nothing against this guy and was determined to treat him like any other asset.
Besides, Shepard just had had her powers back and there was no telling how it would turn out.
Having another biotic with them was actually a good thing, Garrus decided.

"Why the Hell did you land on soft ground when you know Tuchanka is plagued with thresher
maws, you idiot?" Shepard shouted at Victus.

"It was the only option to..."

"We landed two hundred meters from here in a perfectly safe zone!" she cut him short.

"This was..."

"Do not fucking interrupt me!" Shepard yelled even louder and she continued lecturing him.

Garrus stayed silent because he knew anything he'd say now would draw the hire of his mentor on
him. He exchanged a few looks with some of the survivors of the platoon, which amused him.
They might have heard of Commander Shepard, first human Spectre, but they probably didn't
expect such a fury treating their Lieutenant like a kid. Garrus frowned and double-checked on
Victus. He was barely taller than Shepard, slender, and his fringes were quite short. Oh shit, Garrus
thought. The Lieutenant really was a kid.

Garrus cleared his throats. "Commander?"

"What?" she barked, turning to him.

"A word?" Shepard's eyes were throwing daggers at him but Garrus stayed at parade rest,
impassible. "Please?" he insisted and she rolled her eyes, throwing her hands in the air even. Garrus
opened the path but Shepard suddenly turned to Victus, pointing his finger at him.

"You better get your shit together before I come back, Lt," she threatened him, then passed cross
Garrus and walked on point. He gave a look over his shoulder to Victus. If Turians could cry, the kid would be in tears by now. "So?" Shepard asked when they were as far as possible of the platoon on their pile of debris. She sat on a block of rock and searched her pockets for her cigarettes. When she realized she didn't have any, she grumbled. Garrus took another lollipop from his dedicated pouch. It was a little damaged but it would do. Shepard clicked when he handed the candy over but she took it nonetheless, unwrapped it and popped it in her mouth. "We're gonna have a long talk about that, Vakarian, because it's freaking annoying."

"Joker told me Humans often relied on candies when they quit smoking," he shrugged, "and the sugar is a welcome boost when you're tired."

Shepard rolled her eyes. "So?"

"We might have a problem." Shepard opened her arms wide to show him the mess around. "Yeah, huh, not that. Victus is young, not even twenty-five I'd say, too young to be a Lieutenant in charge of a secret operation, whatever it is." Someone had probably helped him get his tiers. That was unusual and could have catastrophic consequences.

"Your point, Vakarian."

"I doubt he's capable of doing the job and be respected by his men."

Shepard played with her lollipop as she studied the situation in silence, moving the plastic stick left and right on her lips. Garrus found himself incapable of looking away. She eventually ticked and turned to bark her order. "Victus! Come here!" Garrus cleared his throats.

"I didn't thank you for your intervention," he said as the Lieutenant, panicked, ran to them.

"Thanks the other biotic," Shepard grunted. "I couldn't do shit."

"Oh." That sounded bad.

"Yep," Shepard angrily sighed. "Javik is so going to kill me."

"It'll be an honor to die with you, Commander," Garrus joked while Victus arrived. She smirked.

"Commander," Victus snapped as he saluted her.

"What are you doing on Tuchanka, Lt?" Shepard asked, her anger half-faked now. She stayed seated and didn't look at him.

"There is a bomb, Commander," Victus spitted out without hesitation. "We were sent to disarm it."

"Is your explosive specialist even still alive?" Shepard mocked.

"Huh, no, Commander."

"Fantastic," Shepard grunted, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Tell me you know how to disarm a bomb, Vakarian."

"I'm afraid not, Commander."

"I'm disappointed."

"I'm sorry," Garrus played along, "but there is a Cabal agent with us. They're trained for infiltration and sabotage."
"You're not serious," Victus interrupted. "You can't trust her!"

"I'm in charge, Lt," Shepard reminded him, "and I say bring me the Cabal agent. Regroup your men, tend to the injured, check your ammunition and give me a report." Victus hesitated. "Yesterday, Lt!" Shepard barked and the kid ran again. "Seriously, I'm disappointed," she added as she turned to Garrus, hand on her knee, "but that'll make some people pretty happy back on board."

Garrus snorted. Yes indeed.

It apparently took some convincing and yelling from Victus for the biotic to descent to Shepard and Garrus' level. She was a little smaller than average, which was usual for a turian biotic, and made sure to keep her hood low enough to cover her face. She probably didn't have any tattoo. Her skin, from what Garrus could see, was rather fair. Shepard had a better view though and she frowned a little.

"What can I do for you, Spectre?" the biotic asked roughly, looking away.

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Kan."

"Alright, Kan. I'm Shepard, this one is Vakarian," she said, pointing at him. "He told me you guys in the Cabal know about bombs. Is that true?"

"It is." A guts of wind lifted her hood but she swiftly caught it before Garrus could see her face. "I was sent with the Ninth Platoon to make sure the bomb would be disarmed, whatever the cost. The whole area is a mausoleum. It's sacred for Krogans, they'd never come around, that's why the bomb has been placed here, underground."

"But there is only ruins on the surface and you made too much noise searching for the entrance," Garrus understood. Kan made an annoyed little movement of the head but confirmed nonetheless.

"Can we access the tunnels?" Shepard asked.

"The entrance is on the other side," Kan answered, pointing at the shuttle's debris. "We had to get on higher ground when the thresher maw attacked."

"Is that bomb really so important?" Garrus asked. "Can't we just shoot at it with an orbital strike and be done with it?"

"The bomb has been implanted here for a reason," Kan replied abruptly. "We're not far from ancient uranium mines. The veins run along all this rift," she said, opening an arm to show them around. "This bomb is powerful enough to trigger a chain reaction that would destroy half the continent. So, yes, that bomb is kind of important, and no, we cannot just shoot at it with an orbital strike, you idiot."

"Okay," Shepard calmed her down, "so we go in, we disarm the bomb and we go out. Easy peasy."

"Except for the part with the thresher maw," Garrus reminded her, sarcastic. Shepard shot a 'not helping' look at him.

"Alright," she said, "it could be worse. Kan, you're with us?"

"I didn't come just to watch," the biotic snorted.

"Drop the attitude lady, I'm not in the mood," Shepard calmly but firmly said as she stood up. Kan
twitched nervously. "Get ready. We leave in five. Vakarian, with me." The agent turned heel before Shepard could move. She and Garrus looked at the turian biotic taking her distances. "What's wrong with her?" Shepard asked.

"Cabal agents are segregated due to their powers and their activities," Garrus explained. "It's not surprising if she's nervous around normal people."

"Normal?" Shepard repeated, offended.

"Well, I mean, regular people," Garrus rephrased and Shepard frowned even more.

"Keep digging," she grunted and she aimed for Victus and his men. Garrus followed her.

"Come on," he tried, "you know I have nothing against biotics. Besides, I'm not a regular Turian myself."

"Too handsome?" Shepard mocked.

"Exactly." It made her laugh.

Victus gave them his report as expected, spluttering a little and his back very straight. Out of the thirty men of his platoon, twenty were dead and three injured. The six remaining fortunately were older than the Lieutenant and probably more capable than him. Shepard ordered Kan to approach before starting to give her speech.

"I won't lie to you soldiers, the situation is pretty bad," Shepard clearly announced, arms folded. "We have a bomb to disarm in undergrounds yet to access via the entrance on the other side of that soft ground the thresher maws like so much. Kan here is our new explosive guy. Anyone I hear bitch about her biotics from now on will be left on Tuchanka and I'll personally make sure nobody comes to the rescue, not even your buddy all around the system. Understood?"

"Yes sir," the valid men replied at once.

"Who has the highest tier here?" Shepard asked.

"That'd be me," a woman with Enedas tattoos said, rising her hand.

"Congrats, you're in charge now." Victus opened his mouth to protest but a single look from Shepard made him reconsider his determination. "One of your men will be the liaison between our team, yours and my ship. Coordinate an evac and keep me posted. Stay here and protect the injured."

"What about the kid?" the lady asked, jerking her chin in Victus' direction. Yep, no respect for him whatsoever.

"He'll come with us," Shepard said, coldly staring at an offended Victus to keep him quiet. "Vakarian, put them in contact with the Normandy."

Garrus obeyed as Shepard, Victus and Kan started to climb down the ruins. He gave the necessary information to Anthis, the new boss in town, before carefully following his mentor. She was on the last block of importance before the soft ground, discussing something with Kan. Victus was completely ignored.

"What did I miss?" Garrus asked as he stopped behind Shepard.
"Not much," she said over her shoulder. "We have to reach the other side and go underground. Either we go fast and make a lot of noise, or we got slow and pray for the thresher maw you injured to be scared of you."

"I can cover you from over there, I think," Garrus said, looking around, "but I can't do much on my own with my current artillery. You don't kill a thresher maw with a sniper rifle."

"Come on, Vakarian," Shepard smirked, "you did way more difficult than that. There," she said as she took her Black Widow from her back, "take that. It's more powerful than your Valiant."

"But slower," Garrus nodded as he received it, "stronger recoil, and it weights a ton, I know." The handle was weird, made for Shepard and her five fingers, but the rifle felt amazing in his hands regardless. No wonder Shepard loved that weapon so much. It was a beauty. Garrus wondered how much it cost – though he had to stop buying the most expensive weapons he could find, that wasn't reasonable.

"It's a lease," Shepard warned him with a smirk. She knocked on his chest plate and Garrus climbed back to a better position. He quickly transferred the thermal scope from his Valiant to the Black Widow and settled himself on a platform large and strong enough to support him. Garrus placed his grenades on the ground next to him to be able to reach them easily. Once ready, he gave the green light to Shepard, Kan and Victus.

They chose the slow and pray option, keeping their distances with each other to not all end up in the thresher maw's stomach if it decided to attack. Shepard was on point, Victus second and Kan on the rear. Garrus kept his eyes on her to calibrate his scope. He didn't like the idea of leaving Shepard with those two but he didn't trust Victus enough to cover them. Besides, Garrus didn't fool himself. He knew he couldn't do much, even with the Black Widow in hands. Luckily, he'd piss off the thresher maw enough for it to turn on him. He'd have a few seconds to abandon his position and throw a grenade or two.

A cold gust of wind moved Kan's hood, distracting Garrus. The ground shook at the same time. Kan fell back, she was closer to Garrus' side than the other, but Victus started running, pushing Shepard out of his way. Fucking kid. He hit her broken shoulder in his panic and Shepard lost her balance. Garrus' blood froze as he watched Shepard fall.

The thresher maw sprang out of the ground, throwing debris and sand everywhere around. Garrus emptied his clip without thinking, recharged and fired again, holding his breath. The giant worme screeched and turned in his direction but Garrus didn't move. He engaged his third clip and fired, ignoring the ever growing shadow around him.

An incredible force suddenly pulled him on the right. Garrus grabbed the Black Widow by reflex and protected his head as the thresher maw fell on his position. Garrus escaped being smashed by a few meters only but he was showered with sand and small rocks. The pull disappeared and he bounced on a few meters in the middle of the debris. Everything hurt and spun when he finally stopped. His first reflex was to check on his rifle – nothing bent, only scratches – and he aligned his scope on the worm raising from the ruins. It lifted debris with it and a particular one made Garrus laugh like crazy. He aimed for the grenade and shot.

The explosion triggered the other three remaining grenades in the wreckage. Garrus protected himself as best as he could as debris, blood and acid rained on him. The thresher maw shrieked and twisted, half of its body reaped off by the explosions. Its head was too heavy for what was left of its muscles and the thresher maw fell backward in its panic, lifting sand and dust all around.

Shepard. Garrus shook himself up and climbed down the ruins as fast as he could. His in-suit
computer kicked in and injected him medigel, helping him to ignore the aching pain in his back and head. Garrus ran along the convulsing body of the thresher maw, searching for Shepard. He was sure the worm didn't fall on her but she had been close of its exit point. Too close, Garrus thought, panicked. The dust didn't help his search but it rapidly became evident that Shepard wasn't near the thresher maw. Garrus looked around and his attention was caught by a glimpse of red. He ran to the wrecked shuttle and fell on his knees when he reached Shepard. She was covered in sand and blood – red blood. She was bleeding from a large cut on her scalp but she still breathed. Garrus called for her, even dared to pat her cheeks, and begged the Spirits and all the gods he had heard of. Shepard opened her eyes after what felt like an eternity. Garrus couldn't help but laugh, relief flooding his body. Holy shit. They were alive.

"For fuck sake's, Garrus," he heard as a gourd fell in the sand next to him, "wash off the acid before it disfigures you even more."

That wasn't Shepard's voice. Garrus looked over his shoulder, uneasy at the idea of being called by his first name by a stranger, and saw the biotic approaching – how did she know his name anyway? Shepard hadn't used it once during all the mission. Kan kept a respectful distance but Garrus was on the ground this time and he saw her face as he rose his eyes to meet hers. Garrus' heart skipped a beat as he watched the spitting image of his mother standing maybe three or four meters from him. Not his mother, he realized, out of breath. His sister.

Garrus closed his eyes. He had to secure Shepard, put her somewhere safe, far enough of the wreckage. His sister was alive. He had to find Victus and kick his sorry ass for what he did. His sister was standing right next to him. He had to finish the mission, make sure the bomb was disarmed. His sister was an agent of the Cabal. He had to press Anthis for an evacuation before another attack could happen. His sister, Solana, was a biotic. That explained so many things. That explained everything.

"Garrus!"

"Fuck off." Garrus opened his eyes, breathing slowly and deeply. One thing at a time. He reached for his radio. "Liaison, this is Spectre Vakarian," he said, keeping his focus on Shepard. She looked pale but she fought hard to stay conscious. Atta girl, Garrus thought and he gave her a smile. "Spectre Shepard is injured. I want three men to take her to your location. And ask Joker to hurry up with the evac, we need it ASAP."

"Copy that, Anthis is on her way," the liaison replied.

"Garrus!" Solana shouted once more.

"I said fuck off!" he roared, turning in her direction. "We have a mission to finish so get your ass down those tunnels now, soldier!"

Solana stared at him, a blue shimmer in her eyes, her fists shaking a little, but she eventually obeyed. Garrus then waited for Anthis and her men. He wanted badly to go with them and wait for the shuttle but he knew his mentor would be furious after him later. The mission first. Garrus stood up as the three Turians fell back to their position, supporting Shepard as they could, and he headed for the entrance of the undergrounds.

It took the biotic fifteen minutes to disarm the bomb and the shuttle was just arriving when Garrus got back on ground level. Victus had reappeared somehow but Garrus couldn't care less at the moment. He jumped in the shuttle last and stood next to the door in silence during all the ride back to the Normandy. Chakwas and Solus were waiting for them in the shuttle bay. They immediately took care of the three injured Turians and Shepard. Garrus let Javik take care of their guests and
went straight to the communication room, still carrying his weapons and his face starting to itch. He called the turian Councilor and stood at parade rest while the communication was established.

"Spectre Shepard," Sparatus anxiously answered.

"This is Spectre Vakarian, sir," Garrus corrected. "My mentor is not able to give you her report at the moment."

Sparatus looked at him for several seconds before asking: "Did you handle our problem, Spectre?"

"We did, sir," Garrus confirmed. "Twenty men dead, three injured, seven still standing. Lieutenant Victus is one of them. The Cabal agent is also alive."

"Very well," Sparatus nodded. "You will go to Palaven now," he continued. "Your load must be kept secret, is that clear? No one can ever know about this."

"I understand, Councilor."

"I'll send you the coordinates." Sparatus shut the communication down the next second.

And fuck you too, Garrus thought as he left the room. He walked to the cockpit, his body starting to ache all over, ignoring Traynor, Campbell and Westmoreland and their worried looks. Joker was waiting for him.

"I took the liberty of heading for the relay," he announced over his shoulder. "We'll be there in thirty minutes, but I can deviate to any turian ship around if you want."

"No, the relay is fine," Garrus said. "Set route for Palaven."

"Palaven?" Joker asked, spinning his chair a little. "Not the Citadel?"

"It's on order from Councilor Sparatus."

Joker looked at Garrus for a second before turning back to his console. "Alright. Setting route for Palaven." He keyed on his screens with the rapidity of habit. "I don't suppose you brought me back the souvenir I asked for."

Garrus snorted. He jumped up a little. Sand and bits of rock fell on the metallic ground, bouncing everywhere. "That should do."

"Not cool, dude, not cool!" Joker ranted, spinning again. "If I fall and break something, that'll totally be on you!"

"You better teach me how to pilot the Normandy before it happens then," Garrus forced himself to joke.

"You evil dinosaur!" Joker yelped, falsely offended. "That was your plan all along!"

"And I have no other choice but to eliminate you now that you know everything," Garrus continued, "but I'll take a shower first. I reek."

"You should visit medbay too," Joker advised him. "That thing doesn't look good," he said, waving his hand behind his head. Garrus frowned before realizing Joker was mimicking his fringes – they didn't move, it was mostly bones. Garrus hesitantly touched them and gritted his teeth when a violent sting pierced his skull. A broken fringe. Awesome.
"Yeah, I'll do that," he said, turning heel.

"Hey, Garrus," Joker called him back. "I, huh... I'll show you how to handle my baby, you know, if you wanna hang out here and stuff."

Garrus closed his eyes. Joker could hear everything during the missions, he remembered. Fuck. "Thanks," Garrus said over his shoulder nonetheless, "I appreciate it." And he did, deep down, but he had to keep his emotions in check for now. The less he'd feel, the better. So Garrus headed for the elevator, busying his mind with what he had to do until Shepard could take command of the Normandy again. He vaguely noticed EDI joking about him not capable of handling its body before the elevator doors closed.

People were arguing in the mess when he reached third deck. Garrus rubbed his face, not caring at all for the blood he was smudging all over. He was tired and he wanted nothing more than getting out of his armor, taking a hot shower and the strongest sleeping pills Solus could formulate on the spot, but he walked out of the elevator and endorsed Shepard's commander role. Anthis and her five men on the left, near the door to Liara's ex-quarters, Victus a few steps before them, arguing about something, Javik in front of them all, so small compared to the Turians but determined to show that little prick who was in charge, Wrex, Alenko and Williams on stand by in case something went wrong, Solana – Spirits, Solana! – sitting on the stairs leading to the canon room.

Garrus walked straight for Victus, grabbed him by the collar and headbutted him out of nowhere. The kid screamed and staggered back, hands on his broken nose, while the rest of the crowd looked at Garrus, silent.

"What the fuck, Spectre!" Victus shouted.

"That's right," Garrus replied, folding his arms, "I'm a Spectre, therefore it's your lucky day. I'd personally drag you to martial court for what you did today if I still were in the army. You ran and abandoned your teammates under attack, Victus. I don't even know why anyone bothered to evacuate you from Tuchanka, honestly."

"How dare you speak to me like this? You're nothing!"

"I'm in charge of this ship for now and you'll end up in brigs for the trip back to Palaven if you don't shut your mouth and behave."

Victus hesitated. Wrex cleared his throat. It was enough for the Lieutenant to fall back in line. "The biotic is not sharing our space," Victus warned nonetheless.

"The biotic'd rather fuck the Krogan than share your space," Solana replied from her stairs. Wrex chuckled.

"I doubt she wants to stay with you anyway so that'll solve the problem," Garrus added, frowning. "Now, if you'd excuse me, I have better things to do than lecturing a child."

"We have to talk," Solana said as he walked by.

"Not now." She opened her mouth to protest but Garrus repeated his order and practically ran for medbay. Chakwas and Solus were both busy with a Turian in the back. A lot of blood was involved so Garrus didn't bother them with his own injuries. It could wait, with the help of a little more medigel. Once his auto-medication completed, he checked on Shepard, laying on the first bed on the right, still in her armor. Her face was covered in dried blood, scratches and bruises. Her lips were all cut too and her hair all dirty and messy. She opened her eyes when he tried to touch her.
"Hey," he whispered. "How are you feeling?"

"My translator is dead," she warned him, "and I have a massive headache so please, no words longer than three syllables."

"I can speak in English," he tentatively said. He'd rather not, he was the kind of person who needed to master a subject before using it, but he could make the extra effort. "Would you like me to help you remove your armor?" he asked. Shepard smiled a little but didn't openly mock his phrasing.

"I think my armor is what holds my ribs at the moment so, no, thanks," she replied. "Is Javik pissed?"

"The Lieutenant is an easier target than us, I think."

Shepard chuckled. "You should speak English more often. You're not bad at it."

"Just wait until I have to explain a concept that doesn't exist in your language. That should be fun." Shepard smiled and squeezed Garrus' hand.

"You okay?" she asked. Garrus would have paid a lot to not hear that question. He managed to keep his fatigue and emotions in check nonetheless. He nodded but Shepard knew him better than that. "Wanna talk?"

"No, not now," he told her and he stood up. "I'll check on you again later."

Shepard let him leave. He was at the door when she spoke again: "Where's my Widow?"

Garrus' hand reached for his back but only touched the butt of his Valiant. Oh shit, he thought. He had left the Black Widow on Tuchanka.

Garrus did what he had planned once he had promised Shepard to replace her precious sniper rifle: he got out of his armor, took a long, burning shower, grabbed something to eat and drink in the kitchen and locked himself in his room. He slept most of the afternoon and only woke up because Solus tried to hack his door. Garrus wasn't really overjoyed at the idea to have a guest but he suspected Solus to be able to knock him off to tend to his injuries if he didn't cooperate, so he let the Salarian in. Solus administrated him a strong painkiller before anything else. Garrus spent the next hour in chemical ecstasy as the professor worked on him, speaking and humming like usual. Garrus didn't pay attention, too happy to let his empty mind drift away from the pain and his problems.

He slept again and skipped dinner with the crew, not caring much about it either. Hunger woke him up at some point and Garrus limped to the kitchen in his sport wear, bare feet and perfectly fine with it. Some Turians were still chatting at the first table, the one with the holoscreens. Joker and Alenko were with them, breaking the ice or something. They saluted Garrus and he replied politely but he didn't join them. He took whatever leftovers he found in the fridge and sat at his usual spot at the other table. Wrex and Massani weren't far from him on his left, Traynor, Donnelly and Daniels at the other end.

"I heard you took down a thresher maw on foot, kiddo," Wrex said, a bottle of something smelling really bad in hand. "Told you you'd kill one."

"I got lucky," Garrus shrugged – bad idea.

"No, really," Wrex insisted, "I'm impressed, son. You'd be a man now if you were Krogan. And that headbutt you threw at that stupid twat earlier? Loved it."
"Thanks," Garrus replied and he meant it. Wrex' words kind of warmed him up. Garrus was a little uneasy, he wasn't used to be praised, but it felt good nonetheless.

"Yeah," Massani grumbled, "you did good for a fucking bird." He took a sip of his beer while Garrus frowned. A praise and an insult in the same sentence. That had to count as a progress, somehow. "Just to be clear," the mercenary continued, "I'd've killed you if anything serious had happened to my little girl."

Garrus nodded – message received. "How is Shepard, by the way?" he asked. He had yet to check on her again.

"Went straight for first deck once freed of Chakwas," Wrex said. "Alenko brought her dinner earlier and told us she was fine."

"That means leave her rest," Massani commented. Garrus didn't say anything and ate his dinner in silence.

He knocked on her door maybe thirty minutes later and entered when she gave him permission. She waved at him from the sofa and Garrus found her with a book on her very naked laps – she only had her top and underwear on. And less hair, to his surprise. The left half of her head was shaved, and the other half shorter than before. It now reached her jaw line, when it had been almost touching her shoulder the previous morning. She had gauze stuck on her shaved scalp, on the cut from Tuchanka and behind the ear, where her translator probably was.

"Like it?" she asked with a grin.

"That's, huh..." he hesitated but couldn't find the word in English. He switched for his usual Kaladran. "Yes, I like it." The shape of her skull was a little alien but there was something definitely appealing in the curve of her neck. Keep it together, Vakarian, he scolded himself.

"I needed a haircut anyway," she smiled and she patted the sofa next to her. Garrus took it as an order to sit and he obeyed without resistance. "No need for a report, Alenko told me pretty much everything there is to know. You headbutted a Turian, huh? Wrex must have been so proud of you!"

"Yeah, he was." Shepard laughed. She seemed terribly relaxed for somebody who had almost died twelve hours earlier. She must have been high on painkillers again. Garrus didn't complain. He was a little buzzed himself. "How bad is it?" he asked, pointing at her wounds.

"Better than I feared, actually," she answered. "Nothing broken. Turns out my barrier worked. I'm just bruised and cut all over, and my shoulder is still in one piece, thanks to all the metal plates screwed on it. And you?"

"Stapled and stitched but alive. I have a couple of vertebra crests cracked though."

"The things under your exoskeleton, in the back?"

"Yes. It's okay, it happens more often than you'd think."

Shepard nodded and put her book on the coffee table. "Wanna talk seriously now that the formalities are out of the way?"

"Talk about what?" Garrus asked, pretending to not understand the undertone.

"About Kan calling you by your name, for example, or the fact that she looks exactly like you."
She caught his gaze and he felt his throats tightening. If she was Turian, he'd lean on her touch and let her comfort him. He'd nuzzle her neck and lick the relief of her skin. He'd caress her arms and her waist, come closer to her to rub his chest against hers, let his hands go south and brush her legs. He'd share a delicious moment of intimacy with her and forget about everything. But she was Human and Humans didn't do that with their friends.

"Her name is Solana," he said barely louder than a whisper, afraid anyone would hear him. "She's my sister." Shepard didn't say a word. She just encouraged him to talk with a caress of her thumb on his cheek. She was soft and cool. "It explains everything," Garrus continued, lowering his eyes. "Why she was 'sent in a special boarding school' at thirteen, for example. I woke up one morning and Sol was just not there anymore. She had disappeared over night and my father told me she wouldn't live with us anymore. Mom didn't leave her room for days after that. She was always anxious and nervous around Solana," Garrus remembered. "She must have known, and she kind of protected me from my sister. Solana hated me for that. It wasn't just jealousy between siblings, she really hated me. And the more she made it obvious, the more mom isolated me from her, of course. But I think she loved Solana nonetheless, and when Sol left, mom fell into depression. She developed the Corpalis syndrome a few years later."

"I don't know what it is," Shepard said.

"A neurodegenerative illness. It's rare and it mostly affects people in frequent contact with eezo. Mom was Chief Engineer on a dreadnought for years before the war." Shepard nodded. "Embryos collect most of eezo residues during a pregnancy," Garrus sighed. "And thus Solana became a biotic." He took Shepard's hand in his and gently pushed it down. "Did you know that eezo immunizes a dextro from levo amino acid poisoning?" he snorted. "I learned that on Viantel. And Samara must have sensed something in me too. She always looked at me as if I was a curious little insect under a microscope."

"Samara is powerful enough to sense the tiniest traces of eezo, yes," Shepard confirmed. Her thumb was now brushing his own in a relaxing way. Garrus wanted her to continue and to stop at the same time. He wanted her to continue because she was his friend. He wanted her to stop because she was Human. "Did you talk to your sister?" Shepard asked.

"I avoided her all day," he admitted, looking away. "What am I supposed to say anyway? I was eight when she left and I feared her most of my life before that. She's my sister but she's a stranger to me."

"Then tell her that," Shepard advised him. "It's better than to let her think you hate her because she's a biotic. Besides, she saved your ass twice today. The least you can do is thank her for that."

Garrus breathed in deep. "You're right. I'll talk to her."

"Before we reach Palaven."

"Before we reach Palaven," Garrus agreed with a nod of the head. "Yes. I'll do that." Shepard smiled and squeezed his hand. Garrus reciprocated the gesture. "I should probably head to bed now."

"Or you can stay," Shepard shrugged.

"Do we have something else to discuss?" Garrus asked, uncomfortable.
"No but we could watch a movie or get wasted or both, you know, to unwind after yet another life threatening mission."

"We'll become alcoholics before the end of the year if we make it a post-mission tradition," Garrus snorted, "but I'm in, yes."

"Cool." She stood up and stretched her back, arms up high. Garrus looked away. "I'll sneak into the reserve to grab some ice cream and whatever you want, you're in charge of the alcohol. The stronger, the better."

"Works for me."

"Then operation Shepard and Vakarian Get Wasted is a go," Shepard shouted, fist in the air. Garrus couldn't help his smile as he followed her to the elevator.

TBC
No matter how strong a force field was, there always was an atmospheric exchange between the interior of a ship and the exterior when the ramp went down. Shepard looked at the thousands of little sparkles produced by whatever floated in the atmosphere of Palaven and barely noticed the Turians on the dock as a consequence. She knew who was coming anyway: the team who had to take care of what was left of the platoon, a few guards and Primarch Fedorian. Shepard actually counted on it.

The Primarch did respect protocol and asked for permission to board the ship. Shepard allowed it, regretting to not be able to fold her arms – her right was back in the sling for another week or so, Doctors orders. Garrus, Anthis and her valid men straightened and saluted the Primarch like they had to. Shepard used her injury as an excuse to not do it.

"Garrus," she said once the salutations done and Anthis on her way out, "show the way to medbay to the medical team." He looked at her, a little tensed, but obeyed nonetheless and left. Shepard opened her arm to invite the Primarch to take a few steps. He followed her without his guards, looking around with interest. "So," Shepard started again, "an escort?" Two frigates had been waiting for the Normandy at the Trebia relay and had indeed escorted the ship until atmosphere entry. Then no less than six fighters had showed Joker the way to this military base in the mountains north-east of Cipritine.

"It's the normal procedure for military ships," Fedorian shrugged. "Your flight path was close to our capital after all."

"I'm a Spectre," Shepard reminded him, "and I came on official business to Palaven."

"Fair enough," Fedorian chuckled. "You won't be escorted on your way out of my system and I can even grant you safe passage in the future, if and only if you come by Council order." Shepard nodded. "I have to thank you, Spectre," Fedorian continued, hands in his back. "You did a great job on Tuchanka."

"Garrus did," Shepard shrugged. "He's really good on his own, actually. A bit suicidal if you want my opinion but which Spectre isn't a little crazy anyway?"

"So I've heard," Fedorian smirked. "You did the job nonetheless. For that, the Hierarchy is grateful. It won't be forgotten, Spectre." Shepard nodded. She knew the order had come from Fedorian, not Councilor Sparatus. She didn't like the method but what could she do about it anyway? "Speaking of things I don't forget," Fedorian said with a cocky smile, "I've arranged everything." Shepard raised an eyebrow. Ah, yes, Bekenstein. "As long as the people you chose to vouch agree to a background check and a bit of paperwork, your recommendation should be valid and taken into consideration. Just see the embassy on the Citadel, they have their orders."

"Thank you," Shepard simply replied. "That'll help."

Fedorian agreed with a nod of the head. "So," he carried on, "I couldn't help but notice you're calling Garrus by his first name now."
"I do," Shepard confirmed.

"This is good news," Fedorian nodded, "because I have a favor to ask you, Spectre."

"Does someone else need rescuing?" she viciously asked. Fedorian had a wicked little smile.

"My eldest child is committing tomorrow," he said. "I believe it's the equivalent of your weddings, yes? Since Garrus is practically my own son, he has to be there."

"You want me to force him to go?"

"I want you to come to force him to go," Fedorian corrected.

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not." Shepard stared at the very serious Primarch for a few seconds. Oh shit. "You may have understood that Garrus and his father, Argoth, are not in the best terms, I presume? Well that's why I'd like you to come. You're Garrus' mentor, that means you hold more authority than his father towards him, and your job is to protect him."

"I don't know," Shepard said, rubbing the shaved part of her head. "A human Spectre from the Alliance in a turian assembly? I know I can seem pretty suicidal myself but that's a bit much, even for me."

"I'm asking you for a favor, Spectre, but we both know I can make it an order," the Primarch reminded her.

"I'd go rogue," Shepard replied. Fedorian laughed but quickly stopped when he realized she was serious. He cleared his throats.

"Then name your price, Spectre."

A hundred ideas came to Shepard's mind but she chose the reasonable option: "I'd rather keep that for another time."

Fedorian had a dangerous but appreciating smile. Shepard didn't like it at all but she didn't say anything because the elevator opened on the three wounded, the medical team, Garrus and, surprise, surprise, Solana in her burgundy hood. The Vakarian siblings didn't talk during the travel back to Palaven and Shepard didn't insist. They had avoided each other without causing any trouble when she had imagined there would be arguments and screams and fights – she could do without anyway. It was too bad for them but, like Garrus had said, they were strangers for one another now. Maybe one day, Shepard thought as Solana walked by the Primarch, hood low on her face. Fedorian didn't seem to notice the Cabal's agent. Maybe he didn't recognize Solana or maybe he didn't even know she had been sent on this mission. The taboo on turian biotics was too strong anyway for him to say or do anything in public.

"What have you two been plotting this time?" Garrus asked as he stopped near them. Shepard clicked. He should show more respect than that to the Primarch, even if said Primarch banged his father.

"I'm glad you asked, my dear," the Primarch answered with a smile, "because we indeed have been plotting." He then gestured for Shepard to continue. Asshole.

"Shore leave," she said.
"Starting tomorrow morning until the next," Fedorian added.

"Huh, why, exactly?" Garrus inquired, suspicious. Shepard slid her hand in her pocket and turned to Fedorian. He forced a smile for her.

"Well," he started, enthusiastic, "I am pleased to inform you Uder is committing to her partner tomorrow evening," – Garrus straightened – "and you have to come. But don't worry, little one, your mentor is joining us."

"Right," Garrus snorted. "She's not that suicidal."

"I'm going," Shepard confirmed. Garrus stared at her as if she had betrayed him. Well, she kind of did. "It's no big deal," she shrugged. "We go in, we salute a few people, we drink all the booze, and we're out."

"You know nothing about commitment ceremonies, do you?" Shepard winced. She might hop by Lab2 to have a little chat with Mordin tonight.

"Does it involve any human sacrifice?"

"No, but..."

"So we're set," she decided, "and I don't want to hear any protestation."

"Great!" Fedorian clasped in his hands with a big smile plastered all over his smug face. "There is a problem though," he added, more serious. Shepard rolled her eyes while Garrus angrily stared at his uncle. "Nobody except Argoth knows you're a Spectre, Garrus, and it has to stay a secret, so we'll have to be inventive on your current situation."

"You want me to lie," Garrus translated.

"Well, not really. We'll just say you quit C-Sec to follow Spectre Shepard in her adventures," the Primarch said, "which is true. Kind of. It's true enough for people to believe it since you're seen as an impulsive and rebellious young man."

"And how are you going to explain Shepard's presence?" Garrus asked, pointing at her.

"She'll be your girlfriend."

"Of fucking course," Shepard sighed, head dropping.

"That's also something Argoth's friends and mines will believe," Fedorian said. "I'll send you the time and location of the ceremony. I leave the details of your relationship to your good care."

"I didn't say I was going," Garrus insisted.

"The choice is not yours, little one," Fedorian replied, pinching Garrus' jaw. "And regarding your improvised shore leave, Spectre," he continued, turning to Shepard, "your crew is welcome on Palaven, even the Krogan, with the exception of a certain Zaeed Massani. He's a war criminal so I can't allow him on my ground."

"Zaeed will do whatever he wants because he's under a Council Spectre's authority and protection," she firmly replied. Though she doubted Zaeed would want to go on shore leave on a planet infested with Turians.

"Very well," Fedorian agreed with a forced and quite irritated smile. "Then I'll see you two
tomorrow." He patted Garrus' cheek gently and left, his guards following him on his way out.

Shepard kept her eyes on the Primarch until he was far enough of her ship. She then authorized herself a short sigh and rubbed her neck. Damn, she was too tensed. She needed a good fight or something but training was still not an option with her shoulder and all Javik agreed to do with her was breathing exercises. Shepard slid a look on her right to Garrus. He was as tensed as her.

If he was Nihlus, the problem would be easily solved.

"I'll go tell the crew about shore leave," Shepard said, pointing at the elevator. "Don't sweat it too much, Garrus," she added with a knock on the chest plate of his armor. "No Shepard without Vakarian, remember?"

Garrus snorted. "What if, and I emphasize on if because it's only a theory, what if I were to be sick tomorrow?"

"I'd leave you on Palaven and make sure you'd stay here at least for a month," Shepard replied very seriously. Garrus stared at her for a few seconds.

"You're a monster."

"Yep," Shepard smirked as she aimed for the elevator, "and you love it." Garrus grumbled behind her but he didn't contradict her either.

Shore leave was enthusiastically accepted, contrary to what Shepard had thought. She had expected people to rant because Palaven wasn't exactly a safe place for any species but Turians – and Krogans, Wrex had remarked – but most of the crew was actually excited to spend the day in Cipritine and around. As suspected, Zaeed refused to leave the ship, as did Legion – a Geth on Palaven? Ha ha, no, Tali – too many pathogens, Javik – urh, primitives, Mordin – too much work – and Williams – urh, Turians. It even turned out that Chakwas and Joker knew a few people in the capital and they managed to contact them in time for an unexpected visit.

Shepard arrived in CIC a bit late. She had had troubles putting on the envirosuit alone. That thing was skin-tight to fit under clothes but it felt like one of those latex bodysuit fetishists liked so much to her. EDI used to wear one when she still had a body, mostly because Shepard couldn't stand to see her walking around naked – that body was really distracting, which was probably the point of an infiltration unit. Shepard had managed to put her uniform's trousers over the envirosuit, the only trousers she had large enough for that, and she had elected an old tee-shirt Joker had offered her for a Christmas. It was black with a Stormtroopers helmet on it. Since it was a bit strange to see the sleeve of the envirosuit under the shirt, Shepard had also put her leather jacket on and slid her right hand in the pocket to maintain her shoulder. It certainly wasn't a conventional outfit for a wedding but Mordin had assured her that a commitment ceremony didn't require anything special but flowers and patience. Shepard intended to buy flowers on her way but the patience was another problem.

Garrus was waiting for her next to the airlock, in his loose dark blue and black set of civvies. A discreet bulb under his left arm indicated the presence of a small gun, probably his Paladin. Shepard smirked. It was a smart move considering his bad luck with shore leave.

"Hello again, Handsome," Shepard saluted him as she walked through the airlock. Garrus growled in response, following her.

"We have to play pretend in front of my relatives and their friends," he reminded her, "not all day."
"What about practice?" Shepard asked over her shoulder with a smirk. "You need it, Hun." More growls answered, which made her laugh. Garrus fumbled in a pocket of his jacket and took a baseball cap out of it, one of Joker's numerous.

"For your precious head, my darling," he said sarcastically. "We wouldn't want you to get a sunburn on your adorable and so delicate porcelain skin." Shepard couldn't help but laugh even more.

The Normandy was docked quite far from Cipritine but the rail network was pretty efficient – and, sadly, underground. Shepard let Garrus guide them through the connections and they arrived in Cipritine's central station an hour later. She automatically became the center of attention but she didn't care much. If people stared at her, the infamous Human, they weren't noticing Garrus' scars on the spot. The only thing a little irritating was her size. Shepard was used to be taller than a lot of people but she was no match for Turians – except kids. She had to stand on tip-toes to see past the ocean of shoulders in front of her, which, at least, amused Garrus greatly.

Turian architecture was all about straight lines, more often vertical than horizontal, with bright whites and grays everywhere. Shepard took a pair of shades from a pocket of her jacket and put them on to spare her eyes from all the reflections on the buildings. The plaza in front of the central station opened on a large avenue leading to an impressive building looking very official far in the distance. Two canals with emerald waters shared the space with patterns of grass and plants under enormous trees with silver leaves. There was no sign of roads or cars or anything because all the traffic was underground.

"What happened to the fortifications?" Shepard asked. She had always heard Cipritine was an impenetrable fortress but this big avenue seemed counter-productive in case of an attack.

"They're around each districts," Garrus replied, checking something on his omnitool. "But don't be fooled, we're in the most secured part of the city. See that building over there?" he asked, pointing at the end of the avenue. "That's the Parliament. If you want to quick Deon's ass, that's your target, but you'd be dead before reaching it."

Shepard chuckled. "I was more thinking about museums and stuff like that before the ceremony, actually. I've never been to Cipritine before, so it's the occasion to play the tourist."

"I thought you lived on Palaven for a few months," Garrus said.

"I did," Shepard confirmed, "but I was sent to a military base with Nihlus and Saren. The whole complex was underground, I didn't see a thing." Garrus looked surprised. "I'll tell you, one day," she smirked.

"Of course," he sighed. "Well, the Natural History Museum isn't far from here, if I remember correctly, but we should reserve that for the afternoon. It's quite early so the temperature is bearable for now but it'll get hotter and more humid around noon, and it always rains at the beginning of the afternoon in this part of the planet."

"What are you suggesting then?"

"We go back and get the fuck out of here," Garrus replied very seriously, pointing at the station over his shoulder. Shepard laughed. "I thought we could just wander around for a while, to the waterfalls for example, then head for the Guests District for lunch because you won't find anything levo anywhere else, then the museum, if you want."

"Sounds like a plan." She presented him her left hand, just to annoy him. It worked perfectly.
"I might abandon you here if you persist, Commander," he warned her and it made her laugh again.

There were few activities for tourists in Cipritine considering Turians rarely spent their days off sight-seeing but they managed to see a few interesting things in the morning. The Central District was built on a plateau abruptly ending with gigantic waterfalls. The view from the top was nothing but impressive: the city ran to the horizon in a mosaic of smaller, irregular districts surrounded by walls, their feet bathing in canals originating from the lake under the waterfalls, with far more parks, trees, and green roofs than Shepard would have imagined. It kind of looked like an irregular honeycomb, only in a multitude of grays and silvers.

The lower part of the city had been a mangrove a very, very long time ago, Garrus had explained, and the Primarch who had decided to expend Cipritine five millenniums ago had wanted to keep it that way. The water could be used as moat, which was a good idea when Turians couldn't float, but the system was a bit archaic nowadays.

The sky was of a limpid, vivid blue with no sign of pollution whatsoever. It amazed Shepard who had spent her childhood in the fog of New York. Turians actually never developed an industry based on coal or petroleum, which were massive source of pollution whatever the planet. They had started using the energy from their sun early in their History, and never had to endure a war for strategical energy sources – contrary to Earth and her Third and Fourth World Wars. There were no high voltage lines anywhere, no nuclear centrals, no chimneys under dark, heavy clouds of dirty chemicals.

The Turians had it quite easy during their evolution, to be honest. Palaven was a luxuriant world providing them with more than they could ever need. Hunting was quite easy, therefore it gave them time for other activities, like being social. Packs formed early on, nomad for a long time from what Shepard had read in Mordin's books, and avoiding the cooler parts of the planet. The first villages and cities appeared during a small ice age that lasted three thousand years – Cipritine was one of them and considered the oldest City and State. Turians also developed agriculture at the time and their first armies to protect their resources. Cities grew, extended their territories, became States and wars happened on a frantic rhythm for a couple of millenniums, during which the tier system was developed.

Once stability established between continent-wide States, time came for innovations. The world was once again generous with them but Turians remembered the ice age through their legends and sagas, which encouraged them to be smart about their resources. Thus started, very early in their evolution compared to other species, a remarkable eco-friendly system mostly based on solar power. No need to cut trees and burn wood to cook a meal or boil water: the sun could do that. No need to tame rivers to generate power with dams either. No need to destroy forests to make fields for extensive farms with thousands of animals in them, local, small solutions were favored.

It resulted in an astonishing pollution-free environment and a relatively slow rhythm for progress, but it worked nonetheless. Turians had mastered electricity, chemistry, flight, the atom, computers, space, colonization of satellites and other planets like any other species before finding the Trebia's relay and expending outside of their system. They had had several colonies by the time the Asari reached the Citadel but they wouldn't be in contact before the Krogan Rebellions, seven centuries later.

No wonder why Humans were seen as stupid little bullies too impatient for their own good, Shepard thought with a sigh. Earth was still plagued with war and pollution, half of the planet was always on fire, people were fighting over the last drop of petroleum instead of focusing on green energies, the riches lived on the poor's hunger and the powerful only cared about their popularity. Humanity hadn't been prepared to meet the galactic community, not at all.
"Is something wrong?"

Shepard raised her eyes to Garrus, sitting in front of her in their little booth in an asari restaurant. The place was pretty nice, quite different from the asari restaurants Shepard had been to on the Citadel – "asari" was the wrong adjective considering the diversity of cultures the species had, but Shepard didn't know enough of the differences to be more accurate. The food was good, spicy and crunchy, with sweet sauces and drinks – Asaris made their alcohol from fermented fruits only. They had chosen this place for its dual menu, part levo, part dextro, and it seemed to be a pretty popular restaurant for multispecies couples. At least seven turio-asari couples seemed on a date around them. Shepard forced a smile to reassure Garrus.

"Just thinking about how dumb my people are."

"Ah, I see," he humored her, "you're amazed by my kind. Well, don't worry, yours will get better in a ten thousand years or so."

"Very funny."

Garrus smirked and took a sip of his drink.

The weather was menacing when they descended in the subway and the first raindrops hit them as they reached the Natural History Museum later. Shepard removed her sunglasses and her baseball cap as they entered a vast triangular hall made of something similar to marble. At the other end was a statue maybe twenty meters tall of two turian women, clearly warriors. The tallest had a spear and an ovoid shield almost as tall as her in hand, a golden crown of flowers on her head and around her shoulders. She was naked otherwise. The second Turian had the same flowers but different weapons: a smaller, rounder shield and a small sword – Nihlus used one of those sometimes but Shepard couldn't recall its name. Menae and Nanus, Champions of Light. Shepard knew the saga.

"They were on the spaceship we boarded," Garrus suddenly said, staring at the statue. "I didn't tell you at the time but it was them, in the flesh, breathing and alive." Shepard remembered Garrus' hesitation while they were searching for EDI, Mandor and Été in the spacestation. He had stopped and stared at a cage, as she had done with the Prothean woman in her yellow veil. "They were banging on the glass," Garrus confessed, looking down. "They were screaming. I couldn't hear them but I... I just know what they were asking for."

"There was nothing you could have done," Shepard firmly replied. She had figured out that much on her own a long time ago, even if it hadn't been easy. Garrus stayed silent for a moment.

"I know," he eventually whispered. "Did you hear about Mandor?" he asked after a few seconds of silence.

"Nope." The sincerity of her answer made him frown a little. "It's not my job to check on her," Shepard shrugged.

"But don't you wonder what happened to them or what the Council decided?" Garrus insisted.

"I do," Shepard admitted, "but Mandor's not a friend, just a colleague I worked with once. If she dies, she dies and it won't affect me. And regarding the Council's decision, that's none of my business, unless they call me and tell me to go up there again."

"And the prothean woman?"

Shepard sighed. She couldn't just brush it off, it seemed to be important for him. "I told Javik about her," she said, "right after the mission, because that wasn't something I wanted to hide from him –
or that I could hide anyway. I even told him I’d be willing to go back and try to rescue her if he wanted. He told me no himself, without hesitation. He knew there was nothing we could have done anyway."

Garrus looked at her and eventually nodded. End of discussion. A group of kids and their professors caught Shepard's attention. It made her smile to see the children look at her and whisper between them. She pulled out her tongue, which made some of them laugh. The adults didn't appreciate it as much though. Garrus saw all of it and quickly pushed her on their way.

The visit turned out to be very interesting despite Garrus evident lack of knowledge on everything not related to computers or killing people. But, like Shepard, he liked to learn and they spent their afternoon walking through the evolution gallery, the biodiversity permanent exposition and the geology department – unfortunately, they didn't have time to wander around the space section.

It was still warm and humid outside when they got out but it had stopped raining. Garrus wasn't particularly eager to go to the commitment ceremony but he didn't try to get away either. Duty first. Shepard was pretty pleased with his behavior. Garrus was still young by turian standards, he basically had just been released of the mandatory army service, and it was kind of expected of him to not already be a valuable member of society. Sure, he wasn't seen as one yet, he was too selfish and hotheaded for that, but him not running away when duty called was a clear sign a maturity for Shepard. It comforted her in her idea. She just had to take a detour by the Citadel to pick-up the paperwork. Maybe after Horizon. Even if everything was going well for Cortez and Vega so far, she had to take care of that.

Flowers were an important part of the commitment ceremony – or any ceremony in turian traditions, somehow – so Shepard made sure to take advice from the florist, even if he wasn't really cooperative. She came out of the shop with a ridiculous big amount of white and green flowers. The white ones looked like fluffy feather dusters, while the greens were more rigid, large petals arranged in a spiral. Both were sensitive to light, like most of the flora on Palaven, and closed on themselves as soon as Shepard got out of the store, even if it already was sunset. Garrus only had a small bouquet of a bright blue sort of lilies.

The ceremony was taking place in a doedarum, a forum under a specific kind of tree which gave its name to the place. Shepard had thought it would be the size of a baobab or something like that but it became evident as she approached the doedarum that she had greatly underestimated its dimensions. The tree was enormous and visible from quite far – she had mistaken other doedarums for parks and forests earlier when she was at the waterfalls, now that she realized it. The trunk was maybe sixty meters in diameters and the first branches easily were twenty meters above the ground. They extended far from the trunk, almost all horizontally, making the top of the tree flat like a disk. The trunk was also covered in colored mosses and bracken. Several openings had been sculpted in the tree and water was dropping from the wood, enough to get wet when passing in the five to six meters long tunnel.

The inside of the tree was hollow, creating a wide circular arena with stairs descending to a little pond. There were mosses again, in their variety of colors. Long garlands of flowers and leaves decorated the place, with feathers, iridescent animal bones and skulls hanging here and there. Light was provided by bulbous lamps scattered on the ground and on the walls. Turians didn't believe in gods nor have churches but Shepard felt the power of this place anyway. There was something mystical floating in the air. Heady scents from the flowers combined with the heat and the humidity rapidly made her light-headed.

The Primarch noticed them quickly and came from a group of half a dozen Turians, one of them looking a lot like Garrus, only with bright green eyes.
"What a surprise!" Fedorian claimed, arms wide open. "Garrus! Long time no see!"

"Uncle," Garrus replied but it was more a growl than anything else.

"And a Human," Fedorian continued, surprised and shocked at the same time. Shepard had to admit, he was a good comedian. "I think I saw you somewhere before. Aren't you Shepard, first human Spectre?"

"I am, sir," Shepard played along. "Just changed the haircut," she added with a smirk. "I'm sorry to disturb your ceremony but I've had to drag Garrus here myself. I can leave and wait outside though, no problem." Garrus stared angrily at her.

"I think we can make an exception for a guest of your value, Spectre. Come, I'll introduce you." Fedorian grabbed Garrus by the arm and pulled him down the stairs to the small group. The only Turians not sharing the same tattoos as Garrus and the Primarch had a dark skin and several piercings on his fringes, little rings with silver chains hanging. His tattoos were red, a series of short horizontal lines starting on the nose and expanding on the central fringe. The three others Turians were women but there was no sign of resemblance between them at all. One of them, the smallest one, had lost an eye, which was replaced by a prosthesis. "My dearests, we have a special guest," Fedorian said. "This is Spectre Shepard, a friend of the Hierarchy."

"Nice to meet you," Shepard replied, not really sure what was the protocol here. The woman with the prosthesis frowned.

"He forced us to come," Garrus said, handing his bouquet to the woman. "There, congrats, Uder." She took the bouquet, still frowning at her father. Fedorian didn't seem angry at Garrus but he wasn't pleased either. "And we'll be on our way out now."

"Can you be serious for a minute, Garrus," Argoth sighed, visibly annoyed.

"Oh I'm serious," Garrus coldly replied.

Shepard sank her elbow in his ribs hard enough to make him ploy, then presented her wrist to Argoth while his son caught his breath. "Hi, I'm Shepard, Garrus' mentor."

"I know who you are, Spectre," Argoth replied but he didn't touch her. Shepard kept on looking at him right in the eyes, smiling. She didn't plan on becoming best friend with Garrus' father but she hadn't expected this kind of treatment either.

"Mentor?" Uder asked before turning to Garrus rubbing his middle.

"Yes!" Fedorian interjected, staring at Garrus. "Garrus now works for Spectre Shepard and he's learning a lot under her command, isn't he?"

"He is," Shepard confirmed, eyes still locked with Argoth. "He rapidly became a great asset in my team and I owe him my life. Several times, actually," she added with a smile for Garrus. He looked at her for a second before nodding.

"We'll have all night to talk about your adventures," Fedorian promptly said, pushing Garrus and Shepard away. He waited to be a few meters away before whispering. "Great work, Garrus. Do you want everybody to know about your job?"

"I honestly don't give a fuck," Garrus replied with a sincerity Shepard had rarely witnessed from him. The answer didn't please the Primarch.
"Maybe we should go sit somewhere and keep our mouths shut," Shepard offered, hooking her arm at Garrus' and pulling him out of the way.

"Yes, do that," Fedorian agreed and he left them to go back to the group.

Unfortunately, as a close relative to the bride, Garrus had to be on the first row so they sat there in silence while people filled the doedarum. Family and friends were expected for the ceremony but otherwise anybody could come – it actually couldn't start until the forum was full and being a witness was kind of a civic duty, from what Mordin had told Shepard. The groom turned out to be another bride, a tall woman with fair skin and white Pallin tattoos. All the flowers brought by the witnesses were placed in the pond at some point. Uder's sisters, Vakarian Senior, Fedorian and the other Turian with earrings joined Garrus while the brides went to the center of the pond, knee deep in the water.

Uder and her soon-to-be partner presented themselves to the assembly and asked who had the higher tier. A few hands were raised up in the air until people recognized the purple robes of the Primarch. He then joined his daughter in the pond and officiated as their legal binder, reciting laws and making a few jokes on the way, heavily frowned upon by his daughter. It didn't take long but then all the witnesses had to join the newly wedded and sign a register. Shepard wasn't sure she was authorized to do that but Garrus pushed her in front of him anyway – probably because his father was just before her. The water raised mid-thigh for her and her pants and shoes got soaked. Shepard felt small and not in the right place when she faced Fedorian, his daughter Uder and her bride – Issem or something.

"Maybe I should just skip my turn?" she whispered, leaning in their direction.

"You have to sign the register as a witness," Fedorian answered on the same manner. "Put your name and rank here," he added, presenting her some sort of datapad, "then your finger print here and you're done."

The keyboard was in Kaladran with a variety of complicated signs everywhere. Shepard turned to Garrus, despair in her eyes. He dramatically rolled his and obliged her. Once he was done with his own writings, they got out of the doedarum and just waited for the rest of the family and friends under the early night sky. A few of Fedorian and Argoth's friends came by to salute Garrus and he actually played the nice Turian with them. When the question of Shepard came, he always replied she was his mentor and it seemed enough of an answer. If the Turians didn't appreciate her presence, they didn't say a thing.

It took a while for all witnesses to sign the register. Shepard used the time to let her pants dry out a little and watch the starry sky – Garrus was right, there wasn't much lights on the streets at night. Ghostly auroras ran in the sky, green, pink and yellow, even this far from the poles. It wasn't the first time Shepard saw the phenomena but she had never expected that in the middle of a city the size of Texas.

Once all the paperwork done, family and friends were invited to join the newly wedded in their vigil until the sun rose again in the sky. Shepard followed in silence, Garrus a step behind her like usual. She was kind of relieved to see the party would take place at Fedorian's, not his daughter's, because she really felt illegitimate in the middle of all those people. The Primarch followed the rules like everybody else, therefore didn't have any privileges regarding his housing. Still, his apartment was spacious, the ceiling really high with huge windows on one side giving on a balcony full of plants. The lines were simple, the decoration minimalistic, but Shepard still noticed pictures on some sort of console near the entrance. One of the frames was of Garrus proudly and lovingly holding a newborn in a white blanket. Not Garrus, Shepard realized. His father.
Garrus also saw the pictures, paused a second in front of them and moved on, going straight for a corridor on the far right and disappearing at the corner. Shepard stayed in the entrance, her boots still wet from the pond, but Fedorian and Vakarian Senior were too busy with their guests for her to ask for anything. Fortunately, Garrus came back a minute later with a towel of some sort. Shepard felt more gratitude than she should have.

"Thanks," she said as Garrus handed her the towel. "Is it okay if I remove my boots?"

"Sure," Garrus shrugged. He held her hand to help her keep her balance while she dried herself a bit. "People will stare at your feet though," he added, pointing at her naked toes.

"That's better than soaking everything around, I guess," she winced.

The guests had moved to the balcony and Shepard and Garrus followed them. Low sofas, chairs and big cushions were disposed around several coffee tables with drinks and food already served. Everybody was already sitting so of course they noticed Shepard and Garrus' late entrance. Shepard wouldn't have cared in normal circumstances but being the only Human around kind of stressed her a little.

"Oh, I have something for you, Spectre!" Fedorian suddenly said as he sprang out of the sofa. He showed her the way to the kitchen, leaving Garrus behind. The kitchen actually kind of looked like a human one, with a central isle, a big refrigerator, sinks and everything. Fedorian took a bottle of Champagne out of box on the counter and seemed pretty proud of himself. "I believe Humans celebrate with that alcohol, yes?"

"Or with anything, really," Shepard replied, "but thanks. You shouldn't have."

"Bah, it's nothing," the Primarch shrugged. "The Earth Ambassador is a sucker anyway. He'd do anything to please me so asking for a bottle of his finest Champagne out of the blue actually made his day. Now," he continued, turning to a cabinet, "do I have a glass or something suitable for you?"

"Top shelf on the left," a stern voice answered from behind Shepard. She didn't have to look above her shoulder to know Vakarian Senior had joined them. As he walked to Fedorian, Shepard noticed he was a bit smaller than his son and definitely marked by time. He was more angular, more cold looking than Garrus, with a slight limp on the right. "You shouldn't have come, Spectre," he said, not even looking at Shepard.

"I told her to come," Fedorian replied before Shepard could, "and you know I was right. Garrus would have flown to the Terminus Systems without her." Argoth grumbled something and caught a cup on the shelf. "Besides, it's a good thing," Fedorian continued, swirling around, his blue and golden coat floating behind him. "You know, it sends a strong message: Turians and Humans can be friends and all that shit."

"And you used your daughter's commitment ceremony for that," Argoth argued. "Very smooth, Deon."

"Uder knows how politic works," Fedorian smiled back, pinching his partner's mandible, "unlike somebody I know, hmm?" Argoth looked outraged in the same way Garrus did: back straight, head high, mandible flat on the cheeks. But what really disturbing Shepard was the obvious intimacy between the two men. She shouldn't have witnessed that.

"I should go," Shepard said, walking backward and pointing at the balcony over her shoulder.
"You're staying," Argoth commanded abruptly.

"You can't force her though," Fedorian remarked, removing a golder layer of paper from the bottle of Champagne. The cork popped and flew through the kitchen. Both Fedorian and Argoth jumped in surprise as white mousse splashed on the ground. "Ooh, nice! Too bad I can't taste that." Argoth grumbled again and took a rag out of a closet to clean the mess. The scene was too domestic for a Primarch and the father of her protegee. "So, anyway," Fedorian continued while pouring a cup of Champagne, "Argoth is probably going to try to impress you because, you know, he's a big, bad Turian who killed a lot of Humans during the Relay 314 Incident and all of that, and you're going to be all bossy because you're a fucking Spectre and you want people to respect your authority." Shepard wanted to protest but Fedorian put the cup in her hands and shushed her. "Please, Shepard, you made it clear yesterday evening."

"Are we on a last name basis now, Primarch?" she asked before sipping her Champagne – damn, she knew nothing about wines but this thing was tasty.

"Why not?" Fedorian smirked, studying the bottle's fancy label. "Udina would be so pissed off if he knew!"

"Really, Deon?" Argoth growled as he stood up, rag in hand. "You want to befriend the first, and probably last," he added with a side look to Shepard, "human Spectre just to piss off that prick of Earth Ambassador? Don't you have better things to do?"

"Meh," Fedorian shrugged. Argoth slammed the rag in his partner's face but it only made the Primarch laugh. "Come on, let's be serious a second here," he said, putting down the rag and the bottle. "Garrus is fine and he's doing great under Shepard's command." Argoth grunted as he folded his arms. "Your son took down a thresher maw on foot, for fuck's sake! You should be in awe and admiration instead of pouting in the kitchen and avoiding him!"

"He's a Spectre, Deon," Argoth replied coldly. "If he doesn't die by the end of the year or the next one, he'll live a lone and miserable life as an outcast. And you threw him in human arms!"

Shepard frowned. She had to admit she hadn't seen that coming. Of course, she had supposed that there was something behind her nomination as a Turian's mentor, but she had thought the idea had came from Udina or the Alliance, not the fucking Primarch of Palaven. She was too naive sometimes.

"So it was you all along, Fedorian," Shepard pointed out. "What's your end game, exactly?"

Her question surprised both Turians.

"Yes, Deon," Argoth insisted. "What's your end game, this time?"

"You say that like I'm evil mastermind," Fedorian frowned. "And I have no end game, for your information. I know Garrus," he just said, poking Argoth in the chest with a finger. "I took care of him when you just ran away to the Citadel. I fed him and made sure he'd go to school, remember? I kept an eye on him during all his military service, followed his progress, encouraged him even. When he quit and flew to the Citadel, I pushed him to C-Sec because his plan was basically to become a mercenary and put as much distance as possible between him and your dickery." Fedorian inhaled sharply, looking at his partner straight in the eyes. Argoth looked away. Shepard felt very out of place. That explained a lot though, but it would have been better if she had learned all of that from Garrus directly.

"I know your son better than you do, Argoth," Fedorian continued. "I know he's not made for rules
and protocols and a normal life. So when his name came out as a potential candidate for Spectre after the attack on the Citadel, I knew I had to push him in that direction. And when Sparatus asked me for my opinion, I told him a turian mentor was out of the question. It wouldn't have worked. Same for an Asari, they're all too alien and too sure of their supremacy. A Salarian? Garrus is not made for their kind of work. But there had been a very special Spectre around for a few years," Fedorian smiled as he looked at Shepard. She automatically straightened under a superior's scrutiny. "Turians and Humans share a lot, military-wise, but Humans are more... flexible, more resourceful, independent. Just like Garrus. Shepard's record was exemplary, her loyalty to the Council indiscutable, and her mentor a Turian, one of the best Spectres nonetheless. Really, it was so perfect I couldn't even believe it myself." He snorted and raised his hands in the air. "So yes, I'm guilty of caring for that kid who could have been mine, but don't accuse me of having an end game. I want Garrus to express his full potential and I believe he can achieve that under Shepard's protection."

Fedorian let that sink for a few seconds before straightening. "Now, if you'll excuse me, we have guests, my dear." And he walked out of the kitchen, leaving Shepard and Garrus' father alone. She decided to talk before he could do it.

"What happened between you and your son doesn't concern me, sir," she said, folding her arms, "and I honestly don't care as long as it doesn't interfere with our work."

"But?" Argoth snorted.

"There is no but," Shepard shook her head. "I told you, he's a great asset in my team and he'll be one of the best once on his own. As his mentor, I couldn't be more pleased."

"As his father," Argoth replied coldly, turning to Shepard, "I couldn't care less about your opinion."

"Fortunately, yours doesn't count," she said, impassive. She looked at him straight in the eyes for a second before turning heels, taking the bottle of Champagne and her cup with her. She needed a drink and she already knew it wouldn't be nearly enough to get her tipsy – the disadvantage of being a biotic.

Shepard found Garrus quietly sitting on a sofa and she crashed without ceremony next to him – they had to play pretend in front of the guests after all. Garrus awkwardly put his arm around her shoulders and leaned to her to whisper in her ear, his breath hot on her skin, a little alcohol in it already.

"I thought you left me, Commander."

Shepard smirked and kissed him on the cheek. "Don't worry, that's not going to happen." Garrus caught her gaze for long seconds before nodding.

"So, Spectre," Uder suddenly said, surprising both Shepard and Garrus, "it's customary for the guests to entertain the newly formed partnership until sunrise with stories." Garrus made a big deal out of taking Shepard's cup and taste the Champagne to put a little distance between them. Uder looked at him, mandible switching a little. "Garrus only came for the drinks so I'm counting on you, Spectre. I'm sure you have a lot to share."

"Ooh, yes!" Fedorian approved. "I've heard something about a thresher maw, yes?"

"It's classified," Shepard replied, a bit embarrassed. To her surprise, a lot of guests seemed disappointed. Most of them had expected a story from her. Shepard winced a little. "But there is that shore leave at New Year," she hesitated, scratching her nose. "Technically, I wasn't on duty so
"I guess I can talk about that."

"What shore leave?" Garrus asked, filling up the cup again – which disturbed a lot of people since it was a levo drink. "Because I have bad memories associated with most of this year's and I don't see how it could be epic."

Shepard gently poked him in the ribs, a little smirk illuminating her features. "It happened before you joined my crew, actually."

"Oh, Omega."

"Yes," Shepard nodded, "Omega."

TBC

**Note**
I'm starting a little contest for the week (28th of September to the 5th of October 2015) since I couldn't do that in that chapter (I tried, I swear, thus the delay for the publication). It's simple: **write (or draw) Shepard and Garrus during or after their little private party at the end of chapter 31.** Publish it preferably on tumblr but DeviantArt is also okay, just not AO3 or FFnet please. You can also contact me directly in private. I'll write something especially for the winner(s) in retribution. Good luck!
So, I wasn't on duty that day but you have to understand that what I'm about to tell you has to stay between us, no matter what. Also, I'm sorry but I'm not used to tell stories so this one might not be as good as your sagas.

My crew is, and was at the time, composed of a variety of species. For example, we have a Geth on board and you wouldn't believe how sweet and adorable Legion is outside of the battlefield. At the time, Liara was still with us. She's an asari archeologist, a child by their standards, kind of clumsy and not made for any kind of fight but a good heart nonetheless. There is Tali, a quarian engineer, the youngest of my crew but she knows more about ships than my regular Alliance engineers. I have a Krogan, Wrex, an old mercenary with a soft spot for damsels in distress. I met Tali thanks to him, actually, and he became some sort of uncle for Liara. He's a biotic so, you know, that helps.

And – I'm not kidding and I can assure you you'll get in trouble if you repeat that to anybody else – and I have a Prothean in my crew. Swear to God. His name is Javik, a little guy with four eyes and a large, flat head. We often joke about his usual grumpy mood but it's just that he takes his responsibilities very seriously. Imagine the most righteous Turian you can think of and you wouldn't even be close to Javik's sense of duty. But he's a great guy when you know him, and a terrific teacher. I owe him a lot regarding my biotic abilities. Ah, yes, he's a biotic. Well, not exactly a biotic, it's a bit different with Protheans from what we've learned, but it kind of works the same way. Anyway, imagine a little angry green man with four eyes and you're set.

My crew was otherwise mostly human. Over forty good people worked for me aboard the Normandy SR1, plus the alien crewmates I found on the way – Joker, my pilot, likes to say I collect them. The odder, the better.

So, it was New Year and we didn't have a day off for months. My people had worked hard and they had earned their shore leave somewhere a little nicer than a crappy refueling station in the Terminus, so I had asked Joker to head for Omega. "A Council Spectre on Omega?", you'd say, and I'd answer that yes, it seems kind of a bad idea but it's actually pretty usual for us Spectres to go there. Docking fees are astronomical but you find everything you want on the station: weapons, quality food and intel. We were more interested in booze that evening though, and I had already downed my fourth shot with Joker and our good Doctor Chakwas when Javik started ranting.

"I don't like this place, Commander." He had to speak quite loud to cover the music of the club. For once, he wasn't in his old armor. I had managed to convince him to put on some human clothes: a white shirt and regular fatigue pants – not the classiest outfit but taking him out of the ship for something else than a mission was already a miracle, I didn't want to push my luck too far and go shopping with him for something nice.

"It's the perfect place," I replied, filling the glasses again. "There are so many aliens on Omega that nobody will notice you. Look, even Legion is here and nobody cares!"

And indeed Legion was on the dance floor with Liara, Traynor – my comm specialist – and Williams – she's ex-Alliance and my current gunnery chief. Javik grunted and kept on staring at the crowd, mumbling for himself that something wasn't right – I should have listened to him.
Unfortunately, I couldn't authorize shore leave for all of my crew. It was Omega after all, and the Normandy SR1 was technically the Alliance's propriety. I couldn't let my ship on the docks without protection, so we had drawn straws. Wrex and Tali were still on board, with Lieutenant-Commander Alenko – I put him in charge –, and my XO Presley. Imagine a human version of Javik, add a bit of xenophobia, a life-long career in the army and you got Presley. A dozen had stayed on the ship.

Anyway, the night was going pretty well despite Javik's occasional rants and Liara's multiple tentative to make me dance – I don't dance, ever. My people were having a good time so, you know, mission accomplished for me. But, suddenly, every light went off, the music stopped, as did the ventilation, and gravity disappeared. It lasted maybe ten seconds but it seemed like an eternity in the middle of panicked people screaming and yelling. Emergency generators came to the rescue but the place was a wreck nonetheless: people falling on top of the others, shattered glass and spilled drinks everywhere, and the awful sensation of asphyxiation, plus all the screams and creaks and cracks from the structure of the station.

My first reaction was to call the Normandy to get an idea of what was happening – maybe an asteroid had hit Omega or something like that, it could happen – but all communications were down and my omnitool was doing weird things. Legion arrived at our table, carrying both Liara, Traynor and an undignified Williams in his arms, not even bothered by the running crowd aiming for the exit.

"Shepard – Administrator, an anomaly has occurred," he said. Legion tends to state the obvious, that's part of his programming and it's useless to fight it.

"I know, buddy," I replied. "I can't call the Normandy. Can you?"

It took him a second to check. "Negative. The encryption of the communication protocols have been modified. We cannot request help from the Consensus to break the encryption, therefore it will take us approximately four thousand six hundred and fifty-seven hours at full capacity to restore communication."

Now, you have to understand that all Geths form what they call the Consensus. Technically they are all a single entity because they share their experience. They're like a giant database with agents sent away to collect data or protect it. Legion is one of those platforms and is composed of over a thousand process. His platform is one of a drone, it's not really powerful, but when he needs to calculate something complicated, like breaking an encryption, he can request more calculation power from the Consensus. It still takes time because the information has to transit through comm buoys but it's pretty efficient. Anyway, he couldn't do that. With communication shut down, Legion was on his own – thanks God it happened to us before and he didn't freak out this time.

"That's a hundred and ninety-four days!" Traynor translated – she has a thing for numbers.

"Yeah, forget about that," I said.

"But my baby!" Joker yelled.

"Wrex is on board," I reminded him while other crewmates joined us. "Do you really think anything could happen to the Normandy while Wrex is standing guard?"

"We should regroup and aim for the docks nonetheless," Javik proposed. "Something's not right."

That's when a big explosion happened. All the station shook and trembled – the blow actually deviated the orbit of Omega as we learned later – and stuff fell from everywhere. Alarms started to
"Yep, back to the ship," I yelled to cover the noise. "Legion, take care of Joker."

"Affirmative," Legion replied as he dropped the girls to lift my pilot – his bones are super fragile, I didn't want to take any risk in the middle of a panicked crowd.

"Javik, on point," I commanded. "Liara, with me in the rear, everybody else in between."

For once, I was wearing high heels, and I never regretted it more than that night as we ran in the streets of Omega – the skin-tight dress wasn't a good idea either, it was definitely too short and tended to go up. We didn't encounter any kind of problem for a while but some sort of red force field blocked the entrance to the access tunnels leading to another module of Omega, where the docks, and the Normandy, were. A crowd had gathered around and there already had been a few casualties. The force field griled anything and anyone trying to pass through. That typically was the kind of job for my tech specialists, Tali and Legion.

I didn't get the chance to give any order because big guys in white armors started popping out out of nowhere and shooting at the crowd. Javik and I immediately raised a barrier to protect my people, and Liara rapidly joined us. A bunch of Asaris followed our example and a lot of people actually took their weapons out and started firing back. I was kind of surprised of their quick respond, to be honest, but I shouldn't have. It was Omega after all. If you don't know how to defend yourself on Omega, you better get the fuck out of here.

We eventually took cover and started fighting back ourselves. Javik and I worked together but I could have stayed back, it wouldn't have changed much. I was told I was a pretty powerful biotic regardless of my species, but I'm nothing compared to Javik. He slammed attackers left and right, even threw a bunch in the force field, and stood on a pile of dead bodies by the end of the assault – goodbye immaculate shirt. Of course people noticed him after that but he ignored them all as he walked back to our group.

"It seems I was right," he said, folding his arms.

"Yeah, totally the time to rub it in our faces," Joker mocked from behind his cover.

Exactly what I was thinking but it wasn't the moment for comments and banter. I walked to the nearest dead in white armor and pushed it on its back with a foot. I had seen glimpse of a logo during the fight but I now had confirmation: orange lozenge with wings down. Cerberus. What the hell were they doing on Omega? Unfortunately no soldier had been spared, there was nobody to answer our questions. But we now had weapons: Harriers, Raptors, Eviscerators, Hornets and Talons, we had them all, plus grenades and...? Radios.

I took one of them and listened for a few minutes, to get an idea of the movements of the enemy. I learned that all modules were separated from one another and there was no possible escape. The force fields were actually Omega own defenses, preventing any depressurization of the modules if they got separated, but it worked against the good people of the station defending their home. Those force fields had been activated when the emergency generators had started. It was smart. Cerberus had carefully planned their attack, no doubt about that. They had studied Omega's defenses and they intended to take control of the station module by module.


I knew it wasn't a good idea to speak and reveal anything to Cerberus but I did it anyway.
"This is Commander Shepard speaking," I said as my crew made desperate signs to stop me, "Council Spectre. I have the regrets to inform you Commander Lapierre is dead. Actually, all his platoon is dead." I let that sink for a second. "So, the situation is pretty simple," I continued. "You have ten minutes to surrender, otherwise I'm coming to kill you all. Shepard out."

"Are you fucking crazy?" Williams yelled. "They'll send more troops!"

"I hope so," Javik commented with a dangerous grin. I snorted and stood up, looking around for high ground. Once on top of a bunch of stairs, I shot a few rounds in the air to get everybody's attention. I automatically got at least three dozens guns aimed at me the next second but I didn't let that impress me.

"Alright people," I shouted loud enough, "can I have your attention please? Hi, I'm Shepard and I happen to know a bit about the situation so don't shoot, and hear me out." I marked a pause. "Thank you. So, those guys," I said, pointing at the dead soldiers, "are from Cerberus, a human terrorist organization who thinks they should rule the galaxy, including, it seems, the Terminus Systems."

"You're a Human!" a Batarian called me out.

Thank you Captain Obvious, I thought but I said: "Yes sir. That doesn't mean I share their point of view. I'm actually working against them but let's not talk about me. We have a situation. Cerberus has isolated each module of the station, and they're pretty determined to eliminate any resistance. The thing is, this is fucking Omega." A few cheers. "You don't take Omega without a serious fight, Imma right?" More cheers. "A lot of you have experience on the field, it shows, but I hope you all realize we got lucky right now. Cerberus is more organized than us and probably has more resources, they prepared for that assault. But, we know what we are up against, not them, and we know the station better than they do." Nods and whispers in the crowd. "We can win that fight if we work together."

"I'm not following a human cunt into battle!" a Krogan roared. He was immediately lifted up in the air by a green glow. Javik calmly walked out of the crowd to me, keeping the Krogan under his power without a sweat, then turned to the now very silent people of Omega.

"You saw me in battle," he said, "and you all know, deep down in your primitive heap of neurons you call a brain, that I don't need you to win that fight." He stared at the crowd for a second, then turned to me. "But I am merely a weapon and a weapon needs a master. I am yours, Commander, forever and after."

Garrus chuckles on my left, nursing his umpteenth drink of the night. His fellow Turians shush him.

"What?" I ask because his chuckles are turning into an uncontrollable laugh.

"He's in love with you," Garrus says.

I roll my eyes. He knows nothing of Protheans but I can't explain all the subtleties of Javik's species to him with such an audience. It's the occasion to remind the Turians around that Garrus and I are deep in love though. "Jealous, big guy?" I ask with a suave voice.

That stops him right on the spot, which makes Fedorian and a few others laugh. Garrus plays for a second with his glass of purple liquor. "Maybe," he says before taking a sip. I smirk – good boy – and take his glass to empty it myself. It's kind of bitter and salty but I drink it all to the last drop, under horrified turian eyes, while pushing Garrus' grabbing hands away.
"You had enough of that for tonight," I say as I put down the glass on the nearest table. "Now, where was I?"

We didn't have much time to prepare after my little speech but, fortunately, a lot of mercs live on Omega. That means a lot of Turians, with military training and a good idea of strategy in general. I didn't really want to lead so many people, honestly, because they weren't my problem, but at the moment I didn't have a choice. I took command, helped by Javik, and quickly placed defenses all around that access point. Cerberus showed up while we were still evacuating civilians and it got pretty ugly. We didn't have as much ammo as them but we had biotics, a lot of them, and that helped us – don't ever tell me an asari exotic dancer is a useless piece of flesh because that fight proved otherwise.

At some point, Cerberus troops tried to flank us and push us against the force field but Javik took care of them by himself, lifting the whole platoon up in the air and crushing them until it rained blood. After that, nobody dared say anything about my leadership.

It was time to regroup and be smart after the fight. We organized groups, counted our resources, prepared our defenses and made our headquarter in a nightclub, a place easy to protect – so we thought. Meanwhile, scouts were searching for Cerberus' entrance point and it turned out they had made a hole in the hull of the module, no less. That was kind of crazy but we could use that as an advantage, a Batarian engineer figured out. The whole area was depressurized, of course, and heavy doors sealed it. All we had to do was to sacrifice a bigger area by blowing up the doors during the next invasion wave. The sudden depressurization would tear down so many debris that the entry point would be lost to Cerberus, and their ship damaged in the process too.

We evacuated the area, made sure the doors would hold and applied that plan a few hours later. Big success. The module was completely isolated for a while, enough time to figure out how to take down the force fields.

It rapidly turned out that we couldn't. They were linked to the emergency generators. As long as they were running, the force fields would stand. The problem was, Omega is a fucking mess. It was built from an eezo rich asteroid and it grew around a central pillar, new modules added here and there over time. Omega is not like the Citadel, a station properly engineered and built with a clear design in mind. Omega has three main generators that distribute energy everywhere. If they fail, local emergency generators start, and they can be stopped only when the main generators are back online. And those main generators are in the core of Omega, the oldest parts deep into the asteroid. About thirty kilometers from where we were.

Of course, people were going to check on the main generators and restart them but it was pretty obvious Cerberus would try to avoid that whatever the cost. Their entire plan depended on the force fields separating the modules to contain the population. They had to have control over the main generators. As long as they did, people would have to fight them in small groups, which were easily contained.

"In short, we have to find a way to get to the main generators and take them back. And if we can't go to the core by the inside, we're going by the outside."

My conclusion got me a variety of looks over the holographic map of Omega in the middle of the table. I now had no less than three dozens of chieftains from all known species – yes, even an Elcor and a Hanar – staring at me and most of them thought I was crazy. That didn't worry me, I get that a lot.

"Why don't we wait for the people near the core to take care of that for us?" an old Turian asked. A few voices approved.
"We don't know what's the situation over there," I replied, folding my arms. "Maybe people are fighting back, maybe they're all dead already, we don't know. But I know what I'd've done if I were Cerberus: depressurize the whole part or stop the ventilation long enough to kill everybody before invading properly."

"This one finds those methods despicable," the Hanar said.

"Commander Shepard, Butcher of Torfan, didn't gain her reputation by being nice," a Batarian snorted. Of fucking course, I thought, rolling my eyes. People always mention Torfan when they talk about me and they forget all the rest. Anyway.

"Yeah, that's cute," a Krogan interrupted, "but half of us here did the same or worst so moving on, kiddos. The outside, you said."

"Yep," I nodded, removing my heels to put them on the table. "Who's with me?"

The Krogan laughed. "By all the Gods, woman, that'll be hard to find an armor big enough for your quads. I'm in, and you can count on the Blood Pack."

"The Blue Suns will follow you," a turian in blue armor agreed.

"Eclipse too," a Human said.

"Don't forget we have to defend the module, boys," I reminded them. "I want fifty veterans with me, no newbies, versatile people skilled in several domains. I want engineers, I want biotics, and as much firepower as we can take without putting the module in danger. Javik?"

"Yes, Commander," he replied from his place behind me, half in the shadows.

"We won't find a helmet for you so I want you to stay and defend the module. You're in charge."

"Yes, Commander." He didn't wait for any more order and walked out of the commanding room – a VIP balcony, to be honest – to get the preparations started.

He hadn't reached the lower floor yet that, suddenly, a grenade fell on the table, in the middle of the hologram. We barely had time to take cover before it exploded and debris rained on us as shadows walked through the smoke – Infiltrators in tactical cloaks. Obviously our defenses weren't as good as we thought and I was ready to fight again when the Blue Sun leader grabbed me by the collar.

"Get the fuck out of there and run for the core!"

"They know our plan!" I yelled back.

"Then find a new one on your way! Go, now!"

He pushed me in the stairs and Javik caught me – thanks God I was bare feet, otherwise I'd've broke my ankles there. We ran to my people in a corner while more Cerberus troops invaded our supposedly safe place. They had found armors while I was making plans, only Javik and I were still very much vulnerable, but that didn't stop us.

"Legion, with me," I commanded. "Williams, you stay and defend this place."

"And preferably us," Joker added as he reloaded his gun. "I don't know about you but I'm not good with this things."
"I am," Williams replied as she aligned her shot and bam! Headshot through the little glass window of a heavy shield. "What are you waiting for, Commander?" she asked as she reloaded. "I got this."

I patted her on the shoulder and ran for the backdoor, Legion behind me. Javik came along to make sure we'd get out. By the time we reached the street, the fifty men I had asked for where following me – you can think what you want about mercs but they are damn efficient. We didn't stay together. Instead, we traveled by little groups to keep a low profile. It was rapidly clear that our defenses near the blown up entrance had been useless. Cerberus had simply made another hole in the hull, which concerned me about the integrity of the whole structure. I had thought we'd use the first entrance to get outside but that was too far. We had to go through that new wave of Cerberus goons. And I still didn't have an armor on.

And a miracle happened. I don't know how to explain it otherwise. Wrex appeared out of nowhere in his red armor, carrying enough firepower to blow the whole station and shooting at Cerberus from their back. Javik laughed, all his pointy little teeth showing, and jumped out of cover. The bullets ricocheted on his shield but he didn't care. He expanded it and reinforced it while Wrex followed his example from his position. And the two biotic walls, one green, one blue, crushed all of Cerberus still standing, slowly but surely, while the rest of us just looked, aghast and horrified.

"You took your sweet time, stupid Krogan," Javik laughed once his enemies reduced to a bloody pulp – I'm pretty sure a lot of my men were busy barfing at this point but I followed Javik to meet Wrex.

"Yeah, you made a mess outside," Wrex replied, putting down his artillery and removing his helmet. "I had to wait for a new opening. Looking good, Shepard."

I looked down at my ruined dress and my dirty feet. "Myeah, but that won't help me get laid tonight, I think."

"Don't worry kiddo," he chuckled, "I'd still do you."

"Huh, thanks, I guess..."

"Anyway, got something for you," Wrex continued as he patted a big suitcase. I opened it, kind of excited I have to admit, and found my armor in it. I usually mix Hahne-Kedar and Armax Arsenal parts and Wrex had paid attention to that. He also brought me my favorite weapons: a Carnifex, a Valkyrie and my Black Widow. Basically it was Christmas for me at this point, and I gave Wrex a kiss on the cheek.

"Nothing for me?" Javik growled more than he asked while I put my armor on.

"Like you need anything!" Wrex laughed.

"My armor could have been useful, you idiot!"

"Grow a pair of tits and maybe I'll help you next time, midget!"

Contrary to what you think, Javik and Wrex are good friends. They just argue a lot, like an old couple, but they love each other – I can send you my cook's theories and fanfictions if you're interested.

"How about the Normandy?" I asked to interrupt them.

"Alenko decided to put some distance with the station," Wrex answered. Smart move. "Without Joker, joining the fighting fleet is a bad idea."
"The fighting fleet?"

"Yeah, I told you, it's a mess out there, and Cerberus came with a lot of vessels. I'd say we're against twenty, maybe thirty thousands men, easily."

"In my time," Javik commented, "that was considered warming out."

"Oh for Christ's sake," Wrex grunted. "Protheans were super awesome, we get it already!"

We left Javik behind a few minutes later as we found our way out of the station. Wrex was right: it was a mess. Debris of all sorts were silently floating around, while spaceships fought in the distance, but it was all too clear that Cerberus' forces were overwhelming. We didn't lose our time admiring the view and headed for the core.

Considering you all went through your military service, I suppose you know what 0G feels like. Omega is big enough to have its own gravity, much like the Citadel, but it's not enough to ground you or anything, which make walking or running a nightmare, and shooting basically impossible. Fortunately, we had Legion with us. Outerspace conditions is no problem for him and his synthetic body can grip anything. So we formed a chain, grabbed him and he jumped on all four to run on the hull like an enormous spider – that's an insect back on Earth, but they rapidly conquered the Citadel so maybe you've seen some.

It didn't take long to get closer to the oldest modules near the base of the station but there was a high chance Cerberus knew about our arrival. We had to get smart. That's why I told Legion to aim for the asteroid. We'd go to the core by the mines.

Finding an emergency exit proved to be difficult considering nobody really cared for security on Omega, but we found one and had about three kilometers of galleries between us and out objective. That wasn't really a problem because a lot of my men had worked in the mines at some point. We even had a batarian specialized in explosives currently chief of a mining team. He knew the place pretty well and took point, Wrex, Legion and I just behind.

You probably don't know that but, for a biotic, being surrounded with eezo is like being a little drunk. It has a weird effect on us. You feel all powerful and light-headed and, yeah, you feel really incredible. The downside is that the eezo-rich minerals around you can resonate with your powers and everything can explode. Usually biotics are not allowed in the mines for that reason, and most of them are automated anyway because long exposure is toxic, even if you have the best protection on the market. Our little trip through the mines wasn't long enough to be a danger to my men but nobody felt really safe nonetheless.

We eventually reached an enormous cavity where a giant excavator rested, still, its claws buried in a wall of rock glowing blue. There were catwalks and rails everywhere, with a treadmill far under us to transport the mineral somewhere else.

"We just have to follow that footbridge," the batarian engineer said. "It'll lead us to the upper levels of the mine. The core was installed in the very first cavity dug in that rock."

"If I were Cerberus, I'd put some people here to make sure no fucker'd try to screw me from behind," Wrex commented and I couldn't agree more.

We followed carefully the catwalks, activating drones to scout for us, but we didn't find any resistance in the first chambers we came across. Cerberus had secured the perimeter of the main reactors but had chosen to keep their men close. And we found a lot of them, a least a hundred soldiers with LOKIs and YMIRs at each gate leading to the cavity, way too many for our relatively
"How many access, again?" I asked after we had regrouped in a safe place.

"Eight," the batarian engineer answered and the number fell hard on us all. That meant eight hundred Cerberus goons, plus robots. We were fifty-three.

"We have no choice but to create a diversion," a Turian said, ugly as butt, his face covered with scars. I knew him, he was an arm dealer in the upper markets. I had made a few deals with him. "A small team will infiltrate the core by the ventilation system while the rest of us will take down wave after wave of Cerberus soldiers."

That meant a lot of casualties for us but we didn't exactly have the choice.

"Wrex, Legion, you're going inside," I commanded. "Take five men with you. I'll stay here and lead the diversion."

"I'm staying," Wrex interjected. "I won't let you have all the fun, Shep." I could have argued that his part of the mission was more important than mine but when a Krogan gives you that much trust and loyalty, you don't throw it away. I nodded my thanks to him.

"Legion is capable of hacking pretty much anything but I want two engineers with him nonetheless," I continued. "Qphram, is that right?" I turned to the Krogan leading the Blood Pack mercenaries with us. "You're in charge. Reactivate the reactors and Omega will sing your exploit for the next millennium. Don't fuck this up."

"Would be nice to see the Blue Queen on its knees, that's for sure," he chuckled.

He chose carefully his men, regardless of their gang affiliation, while we prepared ourselves. We decided to attack on two doors, twenty-three men on each against a hundred, plus mechs and reinforcement. The odds weren't good but it could have been worse. The access tunnel was pretty much circular around the core, with tunnels going straight from each door, like an octopus. By attacking two doors next to each other, we could theoretically regroup in the middle and defend ourselves on both fronts once cornered. We just had to last long enough for the infiltration team to restart the core. Waiting for reinforcement on our end was out of the question and everybody knew it.

We made sure to divide the troops equally and Wrex took the lead of the second team.

"Shep," he said as his men started to go, "if we get out of this one alive, we're going to talk about my salary."

"Hey, this is volunteer work only," I laughed back, "but you still can put it on your resume."

He smirked. "Head low, kiddo."

"And nose up, Gramps," I finished with the same kind of smile.

It was time for the assault. I turned to my men. Seven Turians, four Krogans, three Asaris, three Batarians, two Salarians and four Humans, including me. Seven biotics in total: the three Asaris, a Krogan, me and another Human and, I kid you not, a Batarian.

"I won't bullshit you," I told them, "we all know this is a little crazy." A few snorts. "Or, crazy as fuck, as you want, but we have to do this, and I know you'll do the job." A few nods. "I don't know who you are." I said, scratching my head. "What a shitty Commander I am, asking you to fight and
not even knowing your names."

"Magos," the Turian with scars interrupted, raising his hand. The others followed his example: Tenera, Omnio, Paxis, Roho, Endias and Voran for the Turians; Bray, Jon and Synk the explosive guy for the Batarians; Yohem and Jass for the Salarians; Ikras, Ephri, Yuurn and Akat for the Krogans, Hessy, Una and Ioro for the Asaris, and Ibrahim, Sonja and Nick for the Humans.

I thanked them before continuing: "Well, time's up people. Let's give those assholes a taste of what Omega is capable of."

There was no cheers, no hoorays, no words exchanged, and it wasn't only because of the need for discretion. We walked head low through the tunnels and heard the first shots from Wrex' team. It gave us time to settle at a corner and put out snipers in position – I was one of them. We took down ten soldiers before they sent the mechs on us. The configuration of the battlefield helped us greatly, but we had to be careful not to be ambushed from behind, so at some point we had to march to Cerberus' retrenchment. They had force fields, generators and everything, and we made a priority to take those down first. Then we focused on the three YMIbRs.

That didn't go well and we lost Paxis and Nick before we could move forward in the access tunnel. Fortunately, an YMIR exploding makes a lot of casualties nearby and it helped us greatly. The LOKIs are easier to take down, a headshot usually does the trick, but my aim is not as good as Garrus', so I missed a few. I rapidly switched for the Cerberus soldiers anyway, because my Black Widow is powerful enough to pierce through most armors and shields.

Cerberus was down to sixty men when we started moving forward, biotics on the front – I would have loved to have Javik with me at that moment. Once close enough, we threw a few grenades and took cover behind Cerberus' own defenses. Our engineers took control of the shields and Jass even managed to send back a few LOKI still walking. They couldn't shoot but we used them as diversion and shield. We lost Yohem and Akat and were down to nineteen against forty-something. It helped that Cerberus' goons had obviously less experience in combat than us. We saw some of them panic and run away – easy targets, less shielding in the back.

Another round of grenades and we got really close, close enough for biotics to be really effective. The girls, Yuurn, Jon and I started throwing singularities left and right, alternating with shockwaves and warps. We were low on ammunition at this point but we managed to clear the position and took control over it. We lost Sonja too during that part and were down to six biotics.

We knew the reinforcement would quickly come so we took everything we could and pulled and pushed whatever was useful to our rendezvous point, especially crates and stuff to have some cover. Wrex was already there, with less men than me. We were thirty-three against six hundreds, walls left and right, enemies coming up front and behind us, and we were pretty much all exhausted already, especially the biotics, even with all the eezo around us. I popped a few stimulants while recharging empty clips. We could hear Cerberus marching on us, the low vibration of the boots resonating in all the corridor.

"Think they reached the core?" Wrex asked me as he sat on my left. He had been shot a couple of times but you need more than that to take him down.

"With comms down, who knows," I shrugged.

He looked at me seriously. I hate when he goes all uncle Wrex on me. "I've seen you ready to enter the Valley of Bones more than once, Shep, and I hope you won't do anything crazy today."

"That doesn't count as crazy?" I asked, jerking my thumb over my shoulder.
"I know you, kiddo," Wrex insisted, "I know you're going solo and all suicidal at some point."

"Ha, well," I admitted, grabbing a handful of bullets to charge another clip, "wouldn't be me otherwise, Imma right?"

"Arh," Wrex grumbled, "I promised Tali to be careful but you leave me no choice. You'll get the scolding after though."

"Works for me," I chuckled.

"Too bad Javik ain't with us," Wrex added, scratching his neck. "He'd love it here."

"I'm sure he's having fun on his own. He's probably screaming 'glory to the Empire!' or something like that right now."

"Yeah, probably." He gave a look over his shoulder and grumbled. "They've stopped. They're not coming closer."

"They don't have biotics," I said, engaging a clip of inferno ammo in my Black Widow, "and we're not facing the most experimented of their soldiers. Cerberus is like any gang. It's full of wannabees who covered basics in a week before being sent to their death. I honestly think we have a chance to win this battle."

"Our luck will last as long as we have ammo," Wrex grumbled. "You take this side?"

"Yep."

"Alright," he said, standing up. "Yell something about the Empire when you're going out. Let's make Javik proud of the useless primitives we are."

We bumped fists before taking our respective position and for a minute or so everything was deliciously quiet. Between the alcohol, the eezo around, the fatigue, the stimulants and the rush of adrenaline, I honestly wasn't myself anymore but that's the reality of the battlefield. You're not yourself, you're something else, someone else. You forget about fear and sore muscles, you forget about thirst and hunger, you forget about everything and have this sort of tunnel vision. Nothing exists but your target and all the potential threats around you.

They started by throwing grenades at us but it's kind of easy to deviate them or make them rebound on a shield so it wasn't really a problem. Our snipers even took the opportunity to kill a few soldiers out of cover for too long. Then they sent us mechs, obviously to make us waste a lot of ammunition. Our engineers made them explode or even hacked them to use them as our own, and the biotics did their job too. Roho and Endias turned out to be very competent with explosives, like Synk, and they had made little bombs with what they had found during our break. You still needed to shot the bombs because they didn't have detonators but it was better than wasting bullets with the mechs.

We only had to take down two YMIRs, one on each side, but we knew more would be coming. Those things are slow as fuck, but they would arrive at some point. If each door was protected by three YMIRs, we still had sixteen of them coming for us. That was a lot of YMIRs, I can guarantee you that.

LOKIs are unfortunately faster than YMIRs, even if less dangerous. We couldn't take them all at some point and they were coming at us, slowly but surely. Synk and Una died, Ephri got shot in the abdomen and needed a little time to regenerate, and at least four of Wrex' men were down. Cerberus troops were starting to get out of their defenses and walk on us. The situation was bad
enough to do something desperate so I abandoned my Black Widow, grabbed my Carnifex and a Talon laying around, stood up with my barrier and shield raised, and yelled: "All hail the Empire!"

And I charged, right in the middle of the Cerberus goons. They flew all around in the blast, which gave me time to use my guns. But six seconds to recharge is a long time when you're surrounded. I grabbed a guy by the collar and used him as my shield while I shot a few rounds. With a little biotic push, I made him valse in the air and I followed the movement with the same method. It usually surprises a lot your enemies when you start jumping and flying in the middle of them, while shooting and scoring. It worked once more, long enough for my biotics to recharge completely. I was preparing myself for another charge when I heard Wrex roar: "death to the enemies of the Empire!" And he was with me the next second in the middle of the melee, punching and shooting everybody in range – I even saw him bite a head off.

With Wrex in my back and the rush of adrenaline, I had no doubt we'd win that fight, but he got shot in the knee and me in the stomach, almost at the same time. As long as we were moving, the situation was manageable, but injured, we didn't have a choice but to fall back. I needed two seconds to recharge, time I used to empty my clip in the nearest asshole – quite literally. I then grabbed Wrex by the collar and charged out of Cerberus' lines. The thing is, Wrex in full armor easily weights three to four times my own mass, so we didn't get far. We crashed on the floor, in the middle of dead LOKIs and very much activated ones now turning on to us. I raised my shield but I was out of juice, it couldn't withstand more than a bullet or two.

That's when the alarm rang and the ground shook soon after. The lights flickered, dust fell from everywhere, a hot, acid wind carrying the smell of burned flesh washed over us and loud creak like thunder resonated everywhere. It took me a second to realize the reactors had been reactivated. That was good news but that didn't exactly solve our problem. If we had to protect the reactors now, we were pretty much fucked.

I don't believe in any god but I'm pretty sure some of them were watching over us that night, or maybe the Spirits of our team protected us, somehow. The door I had first attacked open, far in the distance, and panic arose through Cerberus goons. They broke their lines, now having to defend several fronts at once – they apparently forgot they still had a clear advantage by the number. Before I knew it, a gray flash stroke them and Legion appeared before me, a hole in his chest. He lifted me and Wrex without effort and ran to cover. Once sure we were secured, he jumped back in the melee and I have no idea what he did but two minutes later all LOKIs and YMIRs turned against Cerberus. People from Omega started to arrive by the access tunnels and in twenty minutes the fight was over. That was a good thing because I was exhausted.

Magos helped me standing up and we walk out of our little nest. Of my twenty-two men, nine were still alive. I wouldn't have bet so many would survive, to be honest, but I was glad nonetheless. Bray came with us through the mess to find the leader of whatever was going on. Legion joined us at some point, appearing behind me without a sound. And we found no less than Aria T'Loak before us, the Blue Queen of Omega, a seven century old Asari dedicated to ruling this piece of rock. Behind her was a young Turian in burgundy coat, not even twenty considering the size of her crests. A biotic, Magos told me, but I honestly didn't give a shit at that moment – nor ever, for that matter.

"Glad to see you, Boss," Bray said, saluting Aria.

"Bray," she replied as she turned in our direction. "I thought you were dead."

"Me? Come on, you know me better than that," he humored her. "That's Shepard, by the way. You know, the Spectre. She led us here."
Aria's cold eyes fell on me – well, rose to me because I'm taller than her. I would have been impressed if I hadn't known Javik.

"The Geth is yours, I suppose?" she asked.

"Yep," I confirmed, trying to stand correctly but my abdomen was on fire. "You did that to him?" I inquired, pointing at the hole in his chest.

"I did," the young Turian said and her eyes flashed green under her hood.

"Not cool," I winced. "You have a medic around?"

Aria looked at me, all cold and calculating. "Bray will find you that," she eventually said. "We wouldn't want to lose you, Shepard, not now."

"Yeah, I'm quite fond of myself too, to be honest."

Aria smirked and turned heel. I could barely stand and Magos carried me to the nearest crate to sit. I had a medic all for me in the next minute and that was a good thing because I knew I'd have to finish that fight and free Omega with my newly found allies. But what could I've done anyway? I didn't exactly have a choice in that matter. So I let the doc patch me up, put my armor back on, grabbed my weapons and followed Bray to Aria's den, Legion, a limping Wrex and Magos behind me. The fight wasn't over, but that's a story for another time.

TBC
James - 1

Semper Fi
Chapter 34
James – 1

"Vega!"

James snaps out of whatever he was thinking about and inhales sharply. Chaos surrounds him. Bullets rain on his squad since the beginning of the attack. The sky is dark with clouds of toxic fumes from the colony on fire. The sun still manages to dye the scene from under the clouds, low on the horizon. The smell of dust, heated clips and death are everywhere. His mouth tastes like blood and dirt. His eyes burn from the fumes and the dust.

Someone grabs him by the shoulder and James almost hits him by reflex, but it's Kamille and he'd never hit a woman. She's injured, bleeding from a bad cut on her forehead, but that can't possibly stop her.

"Captain Toni's dead!" she yells to cover the noise from the battlefield. "You're in charge now!"

There is Essex and Milque behind her, a little lower on the mound of dirt and mud they're using as cover. Milque has a bandage around his head, a bloody piece of gauze on the left eye. Essex doesn't look good either, more green than usual, and that's not an optical illusion due to his biotics.

"Vega!" Kamille shouts again. She shakes him by the arm and James knows what will happen after because he lived that nightmare a hundred times. Snap out of it, he says to himself. A bullet will brush Kamille's shoulder and she'll stand to take a look of the situation. Her head will explode the next second, half of it reaped away by a sniper, and blood and skull and God knows what will rain on them all while her body will slowly fall on a screaming Essex. James knows all of that. He has to wake up. It's been a year since Fehl Prime. Kamille is long dead and now rests in peace.

He has to wake up but the scene continues and he watches, horrified, the bullet tearing off Kamille's face. It hits her just in the cheekbone and her eye pops out of the socket in slow motion. Wake up, James thinks. He can't breathe. Kamille's nose is obliterated and blood starts to flow. It's just a nightmare, he knows it and he wants to stop it but he can't and he watches as the bullet continues its travel, taking the upper part of the jaw with it on the way. The lower part is ridiculously deformed, teeth and blood ejected. He hears someone calling for him but he can't look away, even if he's praying God to stop this nightmare. Skin is eventually teared off, opening a large hole from the cheekbone to the mouth, and the tongue doesn't move at all in the gap.

"Wake up, soldier!"

Air burned James' lungs as he inhaled sharply. Everything hurt and his head spun, his muscles so tensed they could snap any second. The room was brightly lit up, the ceiling white and clean. No shooting outside, no smell of blood and smoke in the air, no panic in the blue eyes watching over him. There was cold determination in those eyes instead. James shivered. He's soaked in his own sweat, in a puddle of it in the middle of a messed up bed to be exact. He's never been so happy to have ruined his sheets.

A warm hand touched his cheek. Esteban. You're on Horizon, idiot, James thought. He's been on this colony for thirteen days and Shepard was arriving tomorrow. More like today considering the time.
"You're okay, buddy?" Esteban asked, his voice gentle and warm. James nodded, incapable of speaking. He knew his own voice would fail him. Esteban brushed his thumb on James' forehead. "It's the third time this week, James," he said more seriously and James tensed. "You gotta talk to someone."

The bed was suddenly cold and James sprang out of it as if his life depended on it. His legs were a bit shaky but he managed to walk to the bathroom. Each breath he took ached. "It's nothing," he said with a forced smile, "just the food. Can't get used to your cooking." He made a big deal out of laughing at his own joke and locked himself in the bathroom with the excuse of a shower.

James opened the water in the shower but leaned on the sink, the large mirror in his back. First of all, it wasn't the third time this week but the third time since they had landed on Horizon, which made a big difference. Secondly, he had seen a shrink and all those doctors for crazies after Fehl Prime but he wasn't suffering from PTSD. Crushing guilt, yes, absolutely, but that wasn't PTSD. He had been cleared by two shrinks and called back for duty without medical supervision, proof that everything was fine with him. He was fine. He was a soldier, dammit, and soldiers saw a lot of shit, end of discussion.

James avoided sleep for the rest of the night and had been awake for already ten hours when the doorbell of the rented apartment rang. He knew it was Shepard but he checked the video surveillance nonetheless, a gun on the console near the door. To his surprise, the woman standing in front of the door had black hair, half of the head shaved and big aviator shades. She was wearing skin-tight black jeans and a top with a lot of cleavage also showing her fine musculature. It took James a second to recognize Shepard and he opened the door to let her enter.

"Hello boys," she saluted them, looking around, a big duffel bag on her shoulder. "I see you used my money wisely."

"You said to do everything necessary to back up our story," Esteban replied as he sheathed his gun in his back, "and so did we, Commander."

"And the Council will pay you back anyway, right?" a sarcastic voice added from the corridor. Ashley. James felt better just by hearing her and his heart missed a beat when he saw her. She looked smoking hot in her red dress, her long hair cascading on her naked shoulders, red strains mixed to her usual dark brown. She also had a bag with her, big enough to contain her armor and a few weapons. Behind her was Kaidan, his hair bleached in a horribly fake blond. The Lieutenant-Commander looked mortified and he even blushed when he realized James was staring at him.

"Please, don't look," he implored, really uncomfortable in his Californian surfer gear.

"It's Shepard's idea," Ashley rolled her eyes, entering the apartment. James would have liked to kiss her and hold her in his arms but that wasn't the right time for that.

"Nice hair cut," Esteban approved, thumb up.

"Thank you," Shepard replied, checking the windows and closing the blinds.

"Where's Garrus?" James asked, looking in the corridor, genuinely curious. "Did you put a wig on him?"

"I wish!" Shepard laughed. "But no, he's with Zaeed in the shuttle, waiting for the mission to start." Disappointed, James closed the door behind Kaidan.

"Aren't they going to kill each other?" Esteban joked.
"It's a risk I'm willing to take," Shepard shrugged. "Horizon is a human colony, you see very few aliens around, and even less Turians. I don't want Garrus to walk around alone in full armor. That'd be too suspicious so it's better if they look like a pair of mercs. Now, gentlemen, your report. We ain't got all day."

Shepard opened a channel on her omnitool for Garrus and Zaeed before James started.

James and Esteban had posed as a couple of freshly retired Marines searching for a calm settlement – the Alliance offered a pretty nice amount of money once your contract done and it was common for ex-soldiers to become colonists, if not mercenaries. Of course their target, Miranda Lawson, wasn't running around with a name tag on her chest, but they had an old picture of her, thanks to the on going investigation about Cerberus by the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance forces. Lawson had come to Horizon legally with a commercial flight, but with a false identity and blond hair instead of black – strangely, the database showed another hit back on Earth but that double had never left the planet so James and Esteban had ignored her.

Working for a Spectre had granted them a lot of power and they had had the occasion to check themselves the registration documents Lawson had signed. She had a simple travel visa allowing her ninety days on the colony, officially to visit a friend in a farming village a hundred kilometers south of the capital. James and Esteban had then contacted a few agencies to see if they had houses to rent nearby Lawson's location and played the young couple searching for the perfect place for a fresh start. They had mapped the area, met a couple of friendly neighbors, spent the evening in the local bar with other retired Marines and even managed to get a glimpse of Lawson herself, with her friend, a cute redhead woman – Esteban disagreed on "cute" though.

Shepard arched an eyebrow behind her cup of coffee. Her dyed hair made her look less friendly than usual – not that she was very open to begin with. "How is this relevant, Lieutenant?"

"It's not," James admitted with a constricted smile. "I'm sorry, Commander, I'll keep my remarks for me."

Shepard kept on staring at him for a second but she probably thought arguing wasn't worth her time. "So," she continued as she put her mug on the coffee table, "you saw Lawson."

"Yes sir," Esteban confirmed. He pointed to a house on the holographic map they had of the village. "She lives here, second floor."

Shepard keyed on her omnitool a second and hold it above the map. "Vakarian, you're seeing that?"

"Yes Commander," Garrus replied by radio. "Nice location. Hard to find an angle."

"This is why I should also be in ambush," Ashley ranted. "Two snipers to cover the team are better than a single one."

"Exactly why I'm here, missy," Massani commented and Garrus snorted in the back, which led to a grunt from the old mercenary. "Have something to say, Birdy?"

"Why yes, I'm glad you asked."

"Vakarian," Shepard growled and it was enough to make him fall back in line. Massani laughed. "Shut up too, Gramps," she added in a sigh. "So, yes, Zaeed is our second sniper and you know it Williams, so quit it."

"What's the plan then?" James asked before Ashley could say something she'd regret. Kaidan had told him Ashley and Shepard never really got along but they were both professional enough to let
their differences in the locker room before a mission. But things had changed lately. Ashley was more tensed around Shepard, more bitter too. James supposed they had argued, though Ashley had never talked about it, not even after her tantrum before Erinle. And she was damn too stubborn to open up anyway.

"We go in..." Garrus said and Shepard smirked.

"No, not this time," she replied but she stopped and considered the question for a second. "Actually, it's a good plan, Vakarian."

"It is?" he asked through the radio, surprised.

"Care to share with us?" Zaeed grunted.

"We go in, we salute a few people, we drink all the booze and we go out," Shepard grinned. "It's a proven method, we tested it twice."

"Yeah, that worked remarkably well," Garrus mocked, "if not for the hangovers." James and Esteban exchanged a look. Team Shepard seemed to have had fun while they were on Horizon. "But," Garrus continued, "I'll stay in the distance. The village is on a hill and the apartment oriented towards the valley. The only decent shooting spot should be... here." A red point appeared on the map, on the rooftop of a small building at the opposite side of the village.

"That's half a kilometer from the target," Ashley frowned, "and you won't have a large window."

"Speaking of," Zaeed commented, "I hope for you that's not bullet-proof glass."

"Garrus, you're sure about this?" Shepard asked.

"Affirmative, Commander," the Turian replied without hesitation.

"Then the plan is set," Shepard decided.

And with that they were on the road, the rented car full of their bags and soldiers. Esteban was driving, Shepard in the front and Kaidan, Ashley and James ended up squished in the back seat. The roads on Horizon weren't bad as long as you stayed on the main ones around the capital and it took them an hour and a half to reach the village, time Shepard used to get them up to date with what they had done in the last couple of weeks. James was a bit disappointed to have missed shore leave on Palaven, to be honest. Of course he had had his share of colonies and exotic planets but either they were humans or open to any species. He had never set foot on a world entirely ruled by another species - except Ilos, maybe, but Ilos' situation was a bit complicated. He was happy to have missed the thresher maws though.

It was lunch time when they arrived at the village, the perfect time to snoop around since a lot of locals would head to the only dinner in town. A lot of people living here worked in the plantations and farms around, and they formed a strong community of pioneers helping each other out. Socialization was important, therefore the workers spent a lot of time drinking cheap beer together every occasion they get. That meant the streets were almost empty for an hour or so. Garrus gave confirmation of two heat signatures in the targeted location. The operation could start.

James and Esteban played the young couple again and Shepard came with them to "admire the potential of those wonderful houses", "meeting the good people of this picturesque location" and so on, while Kaidan and Ashley were snooping around more discreetly. Garrus was already in position and kept an eye on Lawson's friend's house. Zaeed found another sniper nest closer to the target to cover the entrance of the apartment. After maybe thirty minutes of recon, Kaidan, Ashley,
Esteban, Shepard and James went back to the car, drove away for about a kilometer and suited up – Esteban wasn't joining for the assault though. Shepard called the local Alliance garrison officiating as the police on colonies to inform them that an official Spectre operation was about to take place and to order them to stand back.

Keeping a low profile in the streets of the village in full armor and with loaded weapons kind of reminded training to James. He had done tons of those exercises in fake cities on Mars, with each time a different scenario – terrorist attack, batarian attack, turian attack, and so on. The goal of those exercises was to develop automatisms for the real deal but James highly doubted it had worked. He had panicked and stopped thinking more than once during a real fight despite the countless hours spent in simulations. Fehl Prime was just an example between many others.

James inhaled deeply and expired slowly to calm down a little. Shepard and him had to take the front door while Kaidan and Ashley had the backdoor. The apartment was a colonial module like many others, an all-inclusive box manufactured a billion times and shipped to new human settlements across the galaxy. They didn't vary much in their design and were easily stackable to form building-like structures, with ramps, large balconies and stairs between them for access. James knew the configuration of the place as if he had lived there for years and for a good reason: he had lived in one of those modules. Just thinking about it made him nauseous.

"There's movement inside," Garrus said through the radio. "Shit, they know we're here."

"Moving in!" Shepard commanded as she stood up.

"Wait, Shepard!"

But Garrus' warning was cut short by a gunshot. Shepard didn't wait and blew up the door with a biotic wave. James stayed aghast for a second, impressed and a bit frightened by the raw power of the attack, but Ashley's voice reminded him he had to go in. He followed Shepard in the module, Saber at the ready, only to find Lawson standing in the middle of the room, hands in the air, gun in the right, surrounded by Shepard, Kaidan and Ashley. The cute redhead friend was on the ground, shot in the back of the head. Executed, James understood as his eyes traveled back to the very calm and confident Lawson.

"Put your weapon on the ground," Shepard barked and Lawson obeyed without hesitation. She even kicked the gun to send it to James. "On your knees, hands behind your back."

"This is not really necessary, Commander," Lawson replied but she did as told nonetheless. Ashley quickly handcuffed her and pushed her to the living room, where Garrus had a shot, just in case. Ashley then faced the front door while Kaidan secured the back. "I would like to inform you that I am a biotic," Lawson said, "but I have no intention to oppose resistance."

"Oh, that's so kind of you," Shepard mocked. "So, how many of your Cerberus buddies are going to try to kill us, now?"

"None."

"None?"

"I killed the only agent they had in this God forsaken shithole," Lawson said, jerking her chin in the dead woman's direction. "Chambers was in charge of this safehouse. There is nobody else."

"And why would I believe you?" Shepard asked, folding her arms and falling to a hip.

"That's true," Lawson admitted, "you have no reason to believe me. Yet. I can give you the
position of half a dozen other safehouses on Horizon to prove my sincerity, and much more."

"Wait a second, lady," Shepard frowned. "What's your game there? Because you seem awfully
confident for a Cerberus top agent I just arrested. You realize you're in trouble, right?"

"I do," Lawson nodded, always so calm. "But you are missing a fairly important point,
Commander."

"Which is?"

"I've been working against Cerberus for a few months now." Shepard arched an eyebrow.
"Actually, I'm trying to take down Project Lazarus by myself." Shepard pointed at the cadaver on
the ground. Lawson smiled a little as she lowered her eyes. "Well, it's complicated."

"I'm listening."

Lawson nodded and sat on the sofa as if nobody was pointing a gun at her. "I didn't join Cerberus
because we shared a common interest for galactic domination, but because they offered me shelter
and protection when I was in need. They made me disappear when it was all I wanted, and I lived
in the shadows ever since. They helped me develop my biotic abilities, as well as my potential, and
even offered me a job in a domain I loved. I proved to be competent and useful enough to have my
own laboratory, with people working for me. I became someone important and eventually met the
head of Cerberus, Jack Harper, whom you call the Illusive Man."

"Yes, and?" Shepard asked.

"I fell in love in a very unhealthy way," Lawson said, a sad smile illuminating her cold features. "In
my defense, Jack is a charmer, a charismatic man who knows exactly how to play with people's
weaknesses. He knew I longed the attention my father had denied me all my life and he used that
against me. I wanted nothing more than to gain his attention and love. I accepted everything from
him and soon started to work on the Lazarus Project. Our goal was to rise the dead from the
ground, no less, but the project took a curious turn over the years. It wasn't about reanimating an
important agent dead for a few days anymore. Instead, we cloned them."

Even Ashley and Kaidan turned a little in surprise. Therapeutic cloning had been authorized in
some countries on Earth for a century but there were a lot of restrictions and laws to keep it under
control. It had changed after First Contact. When Humanity had reached the galactic community,
the Council had made it clear that cloning was a big no-no and a reason good enough to send back
Humanity to its tiny system. Nobody wanted clones running around, especially if they were
doppelgangers of important people – the Councilors, for example. Humanity had respected that
part of the treaty and even reinforced the laws on therapeutic cloning, making it almost impossible
for a lot of people to get a treatment – which had forced the researchers to develop genetic
therapies that were more efficient and now vastly spread in the human population so it hadn't been
that bad on the long term.

But Cerberus had gone as far as to clone actual people. That was just the icing on top of the cake
that was the global mess, James thought. Even if Cerberus was a terrorist organization with no
connection with the Alliance whatsoever, if the Council learned about that, Humanity could say
goodbye to the galactic community.

"Keep talking," Shepard commanded. Lawson nodded.

"I knew what we were doing was dangerous but the research was very rewarding and I let myself
being convinced everything was all right. What made me decide to quit Cerberus was to see
another me walking next to my father on television." Lawson had a sad smile. "It turned out that my father was one of Cerberus' biggest investors. I had escaped his cage so he had payed to have another me. There was no doubt the man I was sleeping with knew all about it, so I decided to make him pay for his treason. I intended to destroy everything: the researches, the labs, the clones even. The perfect moment for that was the combined attacks on the Citadel and Omega. Cerberus was going to be so busy with that and the consequences, they wouldn't search for me for months."

"But that didn't work," Shepard commented.

"Not exactly," Lawson smirked. "I managed to destroy Project Lazarus and disappeared at New Year but you joined the game, Commander. You killed Jack, or so did you think, and Cerberus split in countless independent cells. Everybody assumed Project Lazarus' demise was also your work, and people started contacting me, one of the most trusted agent of the Illusive Man. They turned to me in search of leadership. I stayed silent for a while and eventually declined the offer. I knew Jack. I knew he wouldn't let such a regrettable accident disturb his plans, and I had offered him a way to cheat death after all. That meant there was another Lazarus cell somewhere else, a cell I had to destroy. That's why I have used Cerberus' resources since New Year, playing the double agent."

"Wait," Shepard interrupted, "something's not right. Taylor received an encrypted message from the head of the Lazarus Project, the new boss in town he said, and he told us it was you."

"Taylor?" Lawson asked. "Jacob?"

Shepard nodded. "You know him?"

"Yes. Lot of promises but can't deliver."

James frowned a little, not sure about the meaning of that, but he had confirmation of the sexual nature of the undertone when Shepard snorted.

"Cerberus' greatest weapon has always been misinformation," Lawson calmly continued, "and they taught me well. Jacob didn't know I wasn't the head of Lazarus anymore – I'm more of a freelancer now – so I used my former authority on him to obtain a few intel about an ex-colleague of mine who survived your raid. He was my second in command, a petty man hungry for power. If Jack indeed created a clone of himself, he used that man for that. His name is Benjamin Wilson."

"So this Wilson might be the current head of Project Lazarus Reborn," Shepard recapitulated.

"He certainly is," Lawson replied, "but I wanted a tête-à-tête with him for another reason, actually. That won't please you but we created clones of you, Commander."

James opened wide eyes but the news barely moved Shepard.

"Yeah, I suppose you had to, considering I am the only human Spectre and it would be convenient for Cerberus to replace me with their puppet, Imma right?"

"You are correct," Lawson nodded with a pleased little smile. "I have eliminated four of your clones so far and I know the whereabouts of another one but the sixth is missing. Wilson must know where it is."

"So that made seven of me in total," Shepard said, a weird smirk on her lips. "Imagine that."

"I'd rather not," Garrus commented through radio. Shepard fought hard her smile after that line.
"You'd be disappointed," Lawson said – she hadn't heard the comment. "The ones I took care of so far may have looked like you but they weren't you. They were..."

"I don't want to know," Shepard interrupted her, rising her hand in protest. "They're a threat and my job is to eliminate threats, period. I'll deal with the consequences of killing myself with my shrinks."

"Fair enough. All the intel you need is on a microchip in a box of tampons in the right drawer under the bathroom's sink. Help yourself."

"Vega," Shepard called and he went to the bathroom without another word. He found the microchip exactly where Lawson had said it would be and came back to the living room, showing his prize. "Now, what to do with you?" Shepard asked, turning back to Lawson. "You are obviously valuable enough to keep you alive but I tend to have trust issues when it comes to people who make copies of me."

"I share the same feeling," Lawson calmly agreed.

Shepard stayed silent for a moment. "You're done with Cerberus?" she eventually asked.

"Done working for them but not done taking them down."

"You want revenge."

"I'd like that, yes."

Another pause. "Alright," Shepard nodded. "You're coming with us then. EDI, the shuttle."

"Yes, Commander," the cold voice of the AI replied by radio.

"There is a problem though," Lawson said.

"Color me surprised," Shepard replied with a forced smile.

"Your mentor, Spectre Kryik, saw me eliminate one of your copies on Illium a few weeks ago. I'm afraid it didn't please him."

Shepard rubbed her forehead and passed her hand on the shaved part of her scalp, mumbling about her mentor.

"You're still alive so I suppose he's not hunting you down," she said. "Nihlus would have followed you on Horizon if he had an order from the Council. He hasn't been commissioned to kill you but that's not the kind of problem that can stop him if he has something in mind. Knowing him, he sent someone after you."

"Your assumptions are correct, Commander," a hoarse voice confirmed.

James didn't get the time to aim at the small figure behind Kaidan. Shepard, quick like a snake, threw a biotic attack in the air, curving God knew how its trajectory to avoid her teammate. The figure in black jumped on the side effortlessly and landed softly on a table. James saw a glimpse of green and red but the man was suddenly pushed against the wall and he fell on the ground, a large blood mark behind him. Shepard ran to him but James, almost paralyzed, turned to trace the trajectory of the bullet. He saw a hole in the window and a little reflection far away on top of a building.
Holy shit. The bullet had had to pass maybe ten centimeters above Lawson's shoulder. She seemed to know it very well. She was livid, her face not as calm and confident as before.

"Vega!"

James jumped and turned to Shepard, a knee on the back of the little green man wearing black, her hands blocking his behind his back.

"Commander?" he asked, not sure what was the implicit order.

"The prisoner!" she barked.

Ashley passed before him, grumbling, and pushed Lawson out of the way while Shepard and Kaidan put the little man on his feet. He was small compared to the both of them, but he seemed heavy and only composed of muscles. And scales, of a variety of greens, with red ones under his chin and down his throat. His eyes were all black and quite big. James had never seen one of those aliens. At least he bled red. He had a hole in his left shoulder but pain didn't seem to affect him.

"This is really unnecessary," he said with his strange voice as Shepard pushed him on the way out.

"I'll be the judge of that," she replied. She almost threw him in James' arms and ordered Kaidan to take the prisoners to the shuttle. Shepard stayed behind, in the apartment.

The shuttle landed in the middle of the village, a few meters from the rented car. Of course it attracted curious people who gathered around while Ashley and James secured both prisoners in the shuttle and made sure none of them would do something stupid, especially the reptilian ninja. Kaidan dealt with the villagers until Zaeed and Garrus arrived a minute later, both running. The Turian then flashed his Spectre status to shut every possible protestation down and waited for Shepard, tall and still in front of the shuttle's door, Kaidan on his left, while Esteban and James transferred all their bags from the car.

Shepard arrived a few minutes later, yelled at the villagers to get the fuck out of her way, jumped in the shuttle and commanded that they left Horizon right now.

"What about the, huh, friend in the apartment?" Garrus asked as he jumped in the shuttle. He had to bend down to not touch the ceiling.

"I called the local Alliance garrison," Shepard said from the front. "They'll deal with that for us."

The door closed and the shuttle roared as it rose in the air. Garrus stayed standing, grabbing a handle with one hand, the other one not far from his gun, and his attention all fixed on the green man.

"It was a nice shot," the ninja eventually said, "a difficult one, but my heart is fifteen centimeters lower."

"I didn't aim for your heart," Garrus replied. "Cadavers don't talk."

"Good point," the lizard nodded.

Shepard left the front of the shuttle to come in the cargo, standing on the opposite side. She seemed still pretty angry. James knew he'd be in for a lecture once on board.
"Your name," she ordered to the green man.

"Thane Krios," he answered without delay. "And you are Commander Jane Shepard, Council Spectre, loved one of a friend of mine, Nihlus Kryik."

That didn't please Shepard at all. She grabbed Krios by his weird collar and lifted him off his seat. There was something electric in the air, something the biotics on board seemed to notice before James or Ashley. Shepard was furious, a blue shimmer in the back of her eyes. James registered Kaidan and Massani starting to move to Shepard but Garrus was faster than them. He crossed the short distance to his mentor and put his hand on her forearm. Shepard could have killed him just with her gaze.

"Allow me to ask the questions, Commander," Garrus said calmly, "It's been a while but I'm pretty sure I still know how to do it." Shepard stared at him, all the muscles in her jaw contracted. "Please?" Garrus insisted. Shepard released Krios, opening her hands to let him fall back on his seat. She then took a step back but stayed close enough to crush the reptilian ninja if necessary. Meanwhile, Garrus didn't seem to worry at all about his mentor's anger. He even thanked her for the opportunity.

"So, Thane Krios," Garrus started, folding his arms and looking pretty relaxed, "let me connect the dots here for a minute. Miss Lawson iced a very illegal clone of my mentor on Illium, trying to right the wrong, and her kill has been witnessed by Kryik, somehow. You claim he's a friend of yours but I have trouble picturing Kryik being friend with anybody, even more so with a Drell."

So the ninja dude was a Drell. Good to know but that didn't help James anyway. He knew little to nothing about aliens despite the courses he had followed.

"Nihlus has his defaults and weaknesses," Krios conceded, "but he's a dear friend. However, our relationship started in blood and fire." The Drell suddenly became very still. "The target is behind a small but broad Turian in an old armor. I recognize him immediately. Nihlus Kryik, one of the most decorated Council Spectre. His job is to protect the Asari I must kill. He's as determined as I am."

"We don't give a shit about your love story," Shepard grunted but Garrus shook his head.

"Don't bother," he said as Krios continued speaking, his eyes lost, "Drells have eidetic memory. They live again some events and you can't stop them. The trick is to not trigger one of those episodes – or to know how to do it when you want to take advantage of it."

Shepard looked at him seriously but less coldly than a minute before. "It's not your first Drell."

"It's not," Garrus confirmed. "They usually stay on Kahje but some follow their hanar masters on the Citadel once in a while. If they get separated, they always end up in C-Sec because something triggered an episode and people around freaked out. It's kind of a tradition to let the rookies deal with them. Drells are not covered in basic." Kaidan hesitantly raised his hand, to Shepard and Garrus' surprise. "Yes?"

"You said hanar master but slavery is banned by galactic law, right?"

"Ah, yes," Garrus nodded, "but it's not slavery. Drells' homeworld, Rakhana, was dying when the Hanars made first contact and they saved a small portion of them, around four hundred thousands. Because of that, Drells often work for the Hanars, as repayment if you want. But you should ask him if you want to know more, I'm a bit rusty on drell history."
"Rusty, he said," Shepard rolled her eyes. Garrus' mandibles twitched in a smirk.

"And as the sun rose, our friendship began," Krios finished. He stayed still for a second before blinking and looking up to Garrus. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"It's fine," Garrus reassured him. "So, you're a friend of Kryik, and I suppose he asked you to kill miss Lawson because he couldn't do it himself."

"Not quite," Krios replied. "Nihlus asked me to find miss Lawson, not to kill her. He wishes to take her to the sea himself."

"Of fucking course," Shepard grumbled, rubbing her forehead.

"He told me very little," Krios continued, "but he was clearly upset at the time. No, not upset. He was..." Krios searched for his word for a second and James saw Shepard stare at him angrily. She probably was mentally commanding him to not tell another story. "Devastated," Krios eventually said, raising his eyes to Shepard's. "He saw you die."

"It wasn't me," Shepard coldly replied.

"It was all the same for him," Krios insisted.

"We're arriving," Esteban warned them from the front before Shepard could say something else. "Grab something."

It would have felt great to be back on board if James hadn't been so tensed. Garrus immediately took Lawson to brigs while Krios was escorted to medbay by Kaidan and Zaeed. Esteban was still in the shuttle. Ashley didn't wait for anybody and was already removing her armor in front of her locker near the elevator. That let James alone for a second with Shepard. He decided to remove the band-aid quickly. It would probably hurt but he was a big boy, he could manage.

"Commander," he said, stranding straight in front of her and saluting her when she looked at him.

"My behavior today was inexcusable. I put my fellow teammates at risk and jeopardized the mission. I'll face the consequences of my mistakes, Sir."

"What are you talking about?" Shepard frowned.

That surprised James a little. "Huh, I fucked up during the mission, remember?" Shepard arched an eyebrow. "You told me to secure Lawson and I stood there like an idiot."

"You really think now's the time to speak about that?" Shepard asked, upset. "Your incompetence is the least of my problems at the moment, Lieutenant, so suck it up, clean the shuttle bay with a toothbrush or whatever if you feel ashamed of yourself and make sure to do better next time, understood?"

"Yes sir!" James replied, his chest heavy with shame. He saw Shepard and Ashley exchange a tensed look but Ash didn't say a word. That was a good idea. Shepard was not in the mood for her usual remarks.

"Vakarian!" Shepard yelled as she walked to the elevator. "Comm room, ASAP."

"Yes Commander!" he replied from brigs, behind the utility rooms.

James breathed again when the elevator doors closed on Shepard. His shoulders dropped and he felt really stupid. Of course, it wasn't the time. More like the day, he thought as he joined Ashley in
"You're okay?" she asked as James started to remove his armor.

James was generally someone positive. He liked to see the good even in the worst situations and didn't let little things get in his way. The truth was, he didn't like to worry the people around him, so he tried to be as content as he could to not bother them with his own internal turmoil. But it was Ash. Even if he didn't know if she was his girlfriend, she was a teammate and a friend to whom he could open up a little. He hoped so anyway.

"I'm not having the best day ever," he admitted, removing his gloves.

"Don't let Shepard get under your skin," Ashley told him, not even lowering her voice. James looked over his shoulder. Garrus was still around and he had a pretty good hearing.

"Shepard has nothing to do with this," James replied. "Besides, she's right. The situation is much more serious than my own guilt."

"Yeah, the situation," Ashley repeated mockingly. "Clones running around thanks to Cerberus and of course they chose her out of everybody else. And that fucking Kryik," she snorted. "You bet he'd love to get his hand on one of those copies if he can't get the original because of the new Turian in her life."

"C'mon, Ash," James sighed. "You don't mean it."

"Of course I mean it," she frowned, undoing the clips on the side of his armor. "You met Kryik only once but I've been around longer than you, and I can assure you the guy is obsessed with Shepard. He was the first to join the Cult when Joker and Wrex brought it up."

"The cult?" James asked, removing the plastron.

"Yeah, the Cult of Shepard," Ashley rolled her eyes. "Wrex says that he can smell when someone has the hots for Shepard and one evening he got really drunk with Joker. They had this theory about pheromones and indoctrination. The next morning, we woke up and there was a freaking altar in the mess with a picture of Shepard and offerings. Thanks God this thing burned with the first Normandy."

"Well I kinda get why people have a crush on her," James shrugged. Oh shit, he thought the next second as he saw Ashley's very angry face. "I'm not saying I have one!" he quickly added. "I just get it, you know? She's confident and strong and she's a redhead. Guys fantasize a lot on redheads." Ash wrung his belt instead of loosing it. James grunted. "I'm more a brunette kind of guy though."

"She's not strong or confident," Ashley ranted, releasing the pressure. "She's afraid of being weak and her only way to feel strong is to crush people under her boot. That's why she hates women. She hates being one and makes all the others pay for that."

"Ash," James coaxed her, gently pushing back a lock of hair.

He felt bad for her. Ashley was tensed and angry, not like the woman he had met on his first day on board. The Ashley he had met was strong, proud and sarcastic, with a killer smile and confidence. She wasn't your usual american pageant beauty queen, not at all, but she had that attitude, that glow of a determined woman knowing how to kill you and who was fucking good at it. James had found her attractive from the beginning and had barely paid attention to the other women on board – not that there were many. He had wanted Ashley badly but she had laughed at his desperate attempts to impress her. He had abandoned for a while after understanding she was fucking with Kaidan, but
Ash had come to him one evening, after picking up Mandor and her weird salarian bodyguard. She had wanted comfort and he had given her exactly what she needed. He had done so ever since.

"You know you're not thinking straight, right?" he asked tenderly. She raised hard eyes to meet his. "There's been bad jam between the two of you for a while and it's not healthy to keep it all bottled up like that. You should talk to her."

"Forget it," she replied, stepping back. James managed to keep her hand in his. "If I speak up my mind, she'll fire me."

"C'mon, the Commander is not like that."

"She hates me, James," Ashley firmly said and there was conviction in her voice. She was in pain, he could tell, and it cost him to see her like that.

"Why do you stay if you're miserable?" he asked, his chest heavy. The hurt look she gave him made him feel worse. "You're a good sniper, you'd easily find work," he muttered to fill in her silence.

"Fuck you," she replied, pushing him back.

She took another step back before turning heel and aim for the elevator. James let her go, knowing everything he'd say now would only make things worse. So he turned his back and finished to remove his armor while she waited for the goddamned elevator.

"I'd appreciate if you don't talk about that to Shepard," James eventually said a minute later. Garrus appeared in the doorway of the corridor leading to the utility rooms. James wasn't very good at facial turian expression but it was pretty clear Garrus was uncomfortable.

"I won't say a word," he assured as he walked to the weapon workbench.

"Thanks," James sighed before turning to the shuttle. "Same for you, Esteban!"

"What?" the smothered voice of the pilot asked. "I don't care about your heterosexual drama!"

It managed to raise a little smile on James' lips as he closed his locker. What a shitty day.

TBC
"And that's how I killed my first thresher maw at the age of one," Wrex proudly said, rubbing a rock-like sponge under his arm.

"Really?" Garrus asked from the shower next to the Krogan's, not buying it at all. "With a punch?"

"Yep."

The Turian stared back at his teammate for long seconds, water collecting in all the small anatomical cavities on his exoskeleton. "I don't believe you," he eventually decreed, shaking himself up to remove the water.

Wrex took a step on the side to avoid the splash, then pushed Garrus on the hip with his foot. Krogans weren't fans of water. They used very little of it to clean themselves. Instead, they rubbed some sort of porous rock to soften their hard plates and eliminate the excessive skin on the more tender parts of their anatomy. Contrary to Krogans', Turians' exoskeleton was covered by a thin layer of hard skin. They needed some rubbing like Humans to remove dead skin cells too but not with something as abrasive as rocks. More like sand, actually, Kaidan had learned earlier.

There was an unspoken rule in the men's bathroom on board the Normandy: the Humans used it in the morning while the aliens had it in the evening. The main reason was practicality: there only were two shower-heads – four in the previous Normandy. And for long, the only alien on board using the showers had been Wrex, who took a lot of space just by himself. Then came Liara but she didn't care about gender and just used the bathroom whenever she felt like it. However, when Javik joined the crew, he followed Wrex' example and implicitly created the bathroom schedule. Garrus hadn't questioned it, neither did Solus.

So it was a little weird for Kaidan to be there, standing by the sink while the dye did its work on his bleached hair, trying not to look at the two very naked aliens going through their daily cleaning routine right next to him. Kaidan had seen pictures of naked Krogans and Turians but it wasn't the same to have two specimens just a few meters from him. Wrex' plating was battered and scarred everywhere you could look at it, and his lighter skin hadn't been spared. That was the result of over six hundred years of battle, Kaidan supposed. Garrus was following the same path. Kaidan wondered what could have caused his exoskeleton to melt like that but felt too out of place to ask.

"It took me four grenades and five clips to kill an already injured thresher maw," Garrus continued, rubbing his arm with a little scrub. "So a shotgun, biotics and a punch? I don't buy it."

"Suit yourself," Wrex smirked, "but don't ask me for help next time you're facing one of those puppies. Because you'll face another one, I tell you. I have a nose for that kind of thing."

"You can predict the future now, old man?" Garrus mocked.

"You work with Shepard," Wrex replied with a big smile. "This kind of thing is bound to happen again and again." Kaidan smiled a little. Wrex wasn't wrong. He didn't have enough fingers to count all the times Shepard had raided a thresher maw's nest on remote planets because their mission was boring. The Mako had often did most of the work but she had finished a few on foot –
with Wrex, Javik or both. "Speaking of," Wrex continued nonchalantly, "did you notice something different with her lately?"

"The haircut," Garrus said, suddenly turning to Wrex. "It's weird, right? Why shave only a part of her head? I don't get it at all." Kaidan smiled for himself, amused by Garrus' reaction.

"I was more thinking about her attitude," Wrex corrected, bending to rub his legs. "Her smell changed."

"Hm..." Garrus thought out loud, "I don't know about her smell but she's been more irritable lately. I think it's related to her biotics."

"How so?"

Garrus looked at the ceiling for a second, thinking. "When we were on Tuchanka, she tried to use her biotics but it didn't work. And I know she's been working on it with Javik ever since, but it's not going so well. She doesn't have the same control over her biotics as before."

"She never really had any to begin with," Wrex grunted, straightening his back as he stood. "Remember the mess it was every time she used them before we defrosted Javik, Alenko?"

The sudden mention of his name made Kaidan jump a little in surprise. He felt his cheeks burn as the two still very naked aliens turned to him.

"Yeah," he admitted, looking away, "it wasn't pretty, but she never really learned to use them, actually. She didn't go to Brain camp."

"Brain camp?" Garrus repeated, curious.

"BAat," Kaidan explained. "It stands for Biotic Acclimation and Temperance Training. A lot of kids developing biotics were sent there to be evaluated and trained."

"Why didn't she go?" Garrus asked.

"She was detected as a biotic quite late and she enrolled in the Alliance a few months after, from what I know." By enrolling, she had avoided prison, but Kaidan didn't know the extend of Garrus' knowledge about Shepard's life and he didn't want to say too much. "But, like I said, not everybody with biotics went there."

Sometimes, Kaidan wondered how it would have been like with Shepard around in Brain Camp. She was a little younger than him so they probably wouldn't have been in the same group, but something was telling him he would have noticed her anyway. Shepard always said she had been one hell of a teenager, searching for trouble any chance she could get. She would have had so many disciplinary problems in Brain Camp! Conatix Industries, who managed the center at the time, had hired mercenary turian biotics to train the recruits, because they didn't want the Citadel to interfere with their program. Their teaching methods had been brutal. The scars Commander Vyrnnus had let on Kaidan's back were one example of his many abuses. Shepard would have destroyed those guys.

"I don't think it's that," Wrex said, throwing his rock in his kit on the sink. "Sure, biotics have an influence on the mood," he continued, "but the opposite is also true. When you feel like shit, your control isn't good."

Kaidan nodded. He had noticed that over the years, at every depressive episode to be exact.
"She's angry," Garrus admitted, turning off the water. "I'm not sure about what though."

"Doesn't matter," Wrex shrugged. "She needs a good fuck, I'll tell you that."

Kaidan opened wide eyes, shocked by an approach so direct. He thought Garrus would be pretty pissed too but the Turian just shook his head in an annoyed way.

"I suppose you'd volunteer?" he asked, grabbing his towel on the rack.

"I'm a helper," Wrex replied proudly.

"W-What about Tali?" Kaidan interjected. He knew his face was as red as Wrex' plating but he didn't care.

"Ah yes, Tali," Wrex sighed and scratched a recent scar on his abdomen. He looked at Kaidan, a vicious smile showing his teeth. "Don't worry Alenko, Shepard's all yours."

"I-I-I-I-I...," Kaidan stuttered, his face burning like a thousand suns and his guts cold as deep space at the same time. Wrex barked a laugh and walked out of the bathroom with his cloths under his arm. Kaidan, mortified, turned to Garrus, unsure of his reaction. Turians were very attached to their mentor or protegee, Kaidan knew it – he just had to see how Nihlus behaved around Shepard – so maybe Garrus would take it badly.

But no. Garrus was simply drying himself up and didn't seem to care much. Kaidan didn't want to linger on the subject so he kept his mouth shut and rinsed his hair in the sink to remove the excessive dye. When he stood up to see the result of his handy work, the mirror gave him back a pitiful image of himself. His hair was a mess. Most of it had turned gray, while some parts were black and other brown. He should have asked some help from one of the women of the crew instead of trying by himself.

"That doesn't look good," Garrus commented. He was standing behind Kaidan, already in his sportwear, his towel and kit under an arm. Kaidan felt his cheeks burn again.

"I don't think there was enough product," Kaidan muttered, trying to hide the mess with a towel. He had used what was left of Shepard's black temporary dye because he really didn't want to stay a blond until their next stop, but now it was worse than ever.

Kaidan froze. A rough finger with a sharp talon traced the line of his hair on his neck. A shiver ran along his back and a sudden warmth tickled his stomach. Kaidan had wondered how it would be like with a Turian a couple of times. Admitting to himself he was attracted to both women and men hadn't been easy already, but fantasizing about aliens had been a whole other level. Turians and Humans didn't get along well, and Kaidan's experiences with either Vyrnnus, Saren or Nihlus were proof enough of this tendency, but he couldn't help himself. The possibility of a rough fuck on that cold sink, in the men's bathroom where anybody could walk on them, seeing him legs spread and ass up, made him undeniably hard.

"That's your implant?"

Kaidan gulped and stuck to the sink, pressing his erection against the cold metal to try to regain a little control over himself. Thanks God Wrex wasn't here anymore.

"Yeah," he replied, his voice hoarse.

"A L3?"
"L2, actually," Kaidan corrected. L3 were the most common through human biotics because they were safer, but L2 allowed abilities to spike higher. Kaidan had been implanted before the release of L3s anyway so it wasn't like he had had a choice on that matter.

He had no idea why Garrus was suddenly interested in biotic implants, but he let him brush the skin over the little bulb at the base of his skull, even if that didn't help to diminish the pressure in his pants. Kaidan risked a look at Garrus' reflection in the mirror. He was tensed, focused, not really in the moment. *Predatory*. Kaidan shivered.

Garrus snapped back to reality in an instant, holding his hand high. Kaidan's heart skipped a bit. Oh shit. Did Garrus notice his arousal?

"Ah!" the Turian yelped, taking a step back. "Sorry! I should have asked permission before I – I'm really sorry."

"It's okay," Kaidan mumbled, rubbing his neck to dissipate the phantom touch still tickling his skin, his cheeks on fire.

"Huh, it's not really okay," Garrus winced. "For me, I mean. I don't even have my gloves on. Sorry." He quickly looked at the door. "Huh, I'll go now. Good night, Alenko."

And he disappeared in Life Support before Kaidan could say anything, leaving him with a lot of questions and a definite bulge in his pants.

Since he was already in the bathroom, Kaidan took care of it quickly, under the excuse of rinsing the dye that had ran along his neck to take a shower. Once relieved and clean, he decided he couldn't keep his hair like that. A dramatic measure was required: he had to cut it all. His had lent his hair trimmer to Shepard after Tuchanka and it was still in her cabin – she used it almost every day while he needed it maybe twice a month. Kaidan headed for the elevator and arrived on first deck a minute later. The door opened a second after he asked permission to enter. Shepard was at her desk, writing her report on her activities on Horizon, her brows slightly frowned. When she looked at him, she opened wide eyes and paused her writings.

"It's that bad?" Kaidan asked, forcing a smile.

"You're no longer the prettiest on board," Shepard tried to humor him as she leaned on her chair, "but we can fix that with a do over, I think. I have wax if you want to do your eyebrows too."

"My eyebrows are fine." Shepard shrugged. Kaidan doubted for a second but decided it didn't matter. "Can I take the hair trimmer?"

"I have a better idea," Shepard smirked.

She stood and pushed Kaidan in her bathroom, rolling her chair along in the small room, and sat him on it in front of the sink. She then took a large bath towel and draped it around his shoulders. Kaidan couldn't help his smile as she took the trimmer and passed a hand in his thick hair.

"Feels like old times, huh?" she smiled, starting to cut his hair from the neck.

"It does."

Kaidan had known Shepard with short hair since the beginning and they had helped each other out with their bimonthly cut for a long time. It was a quiet break they used to chit-chat before the beginning of their shared nightly shift while everybody else was eating in the mess. Kaidan really liked those moments, but they had stopped when Shepard had been nominated Spectre, even if she
had done everything possible to get him in her crew once her year with Nihlus over. Their relationship wasn't really the same since then. It was only normal. She always had been his superior but they had worked under someone else before her nomination. Now, she was technically the captain of her ship and crew, the supreme authority on board. She couldn't really spend time with him without a reason.

Shepard had a small smile on her lips as she worked, Kaidan could see it in the mirror and he wondered if she was remembering particular episodes of their conversations. At least she seemed relaxed. Considering she had jumped on the opportunity to shave his head, she probably had needed a break. Talking about work was out of the question.

"Something strange happened in the bathroom earlier," he said, looking at balls of badly dyed hair falling on the towel.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Shepard chuckled.

"Nothing sexual," Kaidan assured her, blushing a little. "But, huh, Garrus touched my neck and it apparently was a big deal for him. He said he should have asked permission. Do you know anything about that?"

"I'm sorry but it kind of was sexual," Shepard grinned. "Turians take consent really seriously, especially when it comes to touch someone in areas deemed private, like the neck."

"Oh," Kaidan blushed, "I see." He saw Shepard's grin widening in the mirror. "He was intrigued by my implant, for your information."

"What you boys do in the bathroom stays in the bathroom," she replied, rubbing the back of his head.

"It's not like that and you know it," Kaidan mumbled. "What's the deal with his gloves?"

"Turians can easily tear off skin with their talons," Shepard explained, "so they have to wear gloves around aliens. It's not exactly a galactic law but it's, you know, polite or something to cover their hands."

"Garrus usually doesn't cover them during breakfast," Kaidan remembered.

"Yeah because I told him it was okay as long as he was careful."

"You train with him like that?"

"Hm hm," Shepard nodded. "I'm kind of used to it because of Nihlus. He never wears his gloves if he's not in armor." Her traits got a little colder at the mention of her mentor. Kaidan needed to change the subject.

"I've received an email from Liara yesterday. Her presence isn't required anymore on Viantel so she's heading back to Thessia at the end of the week to continue her studies."

"I know," Shepard said. "They found another couple of black orbs too in the ruins. I told her to destroy them but she wants to study them."

"I thought it only was decoration." Javik had told them something like that when Shepard had asked him his help on their collection of prothean artifacts, shortly after he had joined the crew. After Viantel, Garrus had moved the two orbs from Lab1 to the freezers on fifth deck without an explanation.
"We thought so too, actually," Shepard told him, her free hand rubbing his head to remove the cut hair, "but there's a few problems with them. First, we found those orbs practically in every prothean dig sites we visited, regardless of their age. No decoration object is emblematic enough to be a best seller for two hundred thousands years. And there were three of them on Project Base, in a lobby. Why would there be prothean decoration on an Alliance controlled asteroid in batarian space?"

"Maybe the Protheans used that asteroid before?" Kaidan supposed.

"I've read the reports. There was nothing on the asteroid before the Alliance installed their base there."

"So somebody took it there?"

"Yes," Shepard nodded, "but that's just weird. Why transport prothean decoration to a human secret military base? That doesn't make sense, unless those orbs are not just decoration."

"A device of some sort?"

"We don't know yet. I sent a couple requests to the Spectre Bureau but I was told to use my time and resources on something more valuable than prothean decoration."

"It's not like you to not follow your intuitions," Kaidan remarked.

"I know, but with my prothean expert on Thessia and my actual Prothean not knowing the first thing about their technology, I don't really have a choice. I could've asked Garrus to take a look at those orbs but he's already working on Ilos' VI when he's not obsessing over the Mako, his weapons or mines." Shepard frowned. "Did you know he ordered a custom made Black Widow to Spectre Requisition after losing mine on Tuchanka? I saw the specs, this thing's gonna be crazy powerful, like illegal-even-for-Spectres crazy."

"What are you complaining about?" Kaidan smiled, amused by Shepard's rant. "He cares for you. That's a good thing, right?"

"People don't need to care about me," Shepard winced. "And sure, I'm glad we finally found some sort of balance, but he went from cold Turian with a stick up his ass to mother hen. He carries around lollipops for me because Joker told him people tend to rely on candy after quitting smoking, for fuck's sake!"

"I hear you rant but I don't see you mad," Kaidan gently mocked. Shepard rolled her eyes. "I have to admit I was kind of partial about the Council's decision to place a Spectre in training under your command..."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Shepard grunted.

"... but it's actually a good thing," Kaidan finished with a smile. "For Garrus, no doubt about it, but for you too. It's good for you to have a friend."

"I have friends," she frowned, "like, Wrex and Javik, Joker, Mordin, somehow, and you. Aren't you my friend?"

"I am," Kaidan approved, his chest warmed up by Shepard's words, "but I'm also under your command, whereas Garrus won't stay with us forever. For now he's your protegee but one day he'll be on his own. He'll be your equal. That makes a big difference in how you treat him."
"I doubt he'll ever be my equal," Shepard replied, falsely haughty. "I'm too awesome for that."

Kaidan chuckled, amused by her confidence. He had fallen in love with her a long time ago precisely because of that.

Shepard put the trimmer down and vigorously rubbed Kaidan's scalp to remove all the little bits and parts of hair still caught in it. When Kaidan straightened to stand up, she pushed him back in the chair and started to massage his head and neck with her thumbs. Kaidan automatically melted in his chair. God, that was good.

"How are your headaches lately?" she asked, her voice soft like a whisper.

"Manageable, but you don't have to worry. Chakwas is my personal mother hen."

Shepard snorted and kept on massaging his head in silence. Kaidan closed his eyes to enjoy the treat, truly relaxing for the first time in weeks, but it didn't last more than a couple of minutes.

"Commander," EDI announced through the speakers from the entrance, "Vakarian has requested access to your quarters. He's reading and walking out of the elevator."

"Access denied," Shepard replied with a vicious smirk on her lips.

Kaidan, surprised, looked at her via the mirror, and understood her prank when he heard a "bonk" on her door and mumblings his translator couldn't pick.

"Come in!" Shepard sing-sang, removing the bath towel from Kaidan's shoulder.

"It's the second time this week, Shepard!" Garrus ranted, coming in.

"Stop asking for permission," she replied. "Bathroom."

"Urh."

"With Kaidan," she teased.

"Oh." There was a pause. "Huh, I'll come back later." Kaidan blushed at the sexual undertone and Shepard couldn't help her laughter.

"I cut his hair, you pervert." Garrus took a quick look by the doorframe, frowning hard, while Kaidan stood up, brushing and patting his cloths to remove a maximum of bits of hair. "What is it?" Shepard asked, pushing her chair back to her desk. "I'm not in the mood for getting drunk, if you're here for that, and I still have the report to finish."

"I came for something else, actually," Garrus said, showing the datapad he had in hand. Kaidan looked around in search of something to clean. He didn't want to leave a mess behind him. "I think your bio-amp could be the reason why you're having trouble with your biotics lately." Oh, Kaidan thought. That explained Garrus' sudden interest for his implant earlier.

"I don't have a bio-amp," Shepard replied.

"What?" Kaidan and Garrus asked at the same time. Kaidan stepped in the doorframe to look at Shepard, arm folded, who apparently found their reaction amusing.

"I enlisted as a soldier, not a vanguard or whatever they call biotics in the army," Shepard shrugged.

"But how?" Kaidan objected. "I mean, the Alliance wouldn't have let the opportunity to recruit
another biotic pass." Shepard winced a little and rubbed her nose.

"S'bit complicated, actually," she said, leaning on her desk. "You know it, I enlisted to avoid prison, and, true enough, I was offered that deal because I was an unregistered biotic, but I was smoking at the time so it turned out that my powers were too weak to be of any interest for the Alliance."

"Too weak for an implant," Garrus understood. "And your brother?"

"He had a L2, but even with the amp he was kind of meh power-wise."

It was the second time Kaidan ever heard of Shepard's brother and he didn't know how to feel about it. The first time, he had overheard a conversation between her and Massani, and now it was painfully obvious Garrus knew more about her brother than him. Kaidan felt a bit jealous, if he was really honest with himself. He had been Shepard's friend for ten years and had never heard of her family, a subject Garrus seemed familiar with, even if he had joined the crew for half a year only. It was unfair. Kaidan should have known about that before Garrus.

"Anyway," Shepard continued, "I used my biotics during the raid on Torfan, which was noticed, and I could've been implanted after but I refused. It wasn't really a good time for me," she admitted, "I almost shove all my shiny medals up Hackett's butt and quit, actually. The lack of nicotine might have, huh, encouraged those thoughts, but I eventually met Anderson who convinced me to join the ICT. That was exactly what I needed at the time. I put two conditions though: no implant and no biotics training."

"I don't understand why," Garrus interrupted her. "By that time, you were twenty-five, right?"

Shepard nodded. "L3 implants had been developed and deployed, they were much safer than L2 so it would have helped you, especially after you quit smoking."

"Turians treat their biotics like outcasts," Shepard replied, "but that's nothing compared to what Humans do to theirs."

It was old news for Kaidan but it surprised Garrus. Shepard couldn't have been more right though. Kaidan had seen how the Turians on board had treated the Cabal agent during the trip back to Palaven. They had ignored him, eventually glanced at him when he showed up in the mess to pick up ration bars, they may have been a bit wary of his presence but that had been it. Humans, on the other hand, didn't hesitate to insult and harass biotics in the general population. There had been assaults, even murders, and it hadn't stopped just because people understood biotics better nowadays.

"I grew up in an orphanage," Shepard continued, "and I roamed the streets a lot when I was a teenager. I knew about the stories of 'special' kids disappearing at the corner. Some reappeared dead on the pavement a few days later, others never showed up ever again. There were rumors of prisons for biotics, of experiments, of all the horrible things kids can think of. I grew up thinking my biotics would be trouble sooner or later so I've never really been overjoyed at the idea of using them, even after I joined the army."

"Biotics are certainly treated better in the Alliance than in the general population," Kaidan interjected.

"Yeah," Shepard approved, "but that didn't really matter to me. I didn't want to use my biotics and I rarely relied on them before I met Javik." She looked at Kaidan. "You know that." He nodded.

"What changed your mind?" Garrus asked.
Shepard smirked. If she found something amusing, Kaidan didn't know what. "I don't know," she shrugged, "I kinda felt like it with him around. Besides, he was a renowned combat master in his time so he knows how to deal with problematic pupils like me." She blinked and winced a little. "Hm, I shouldn't have said that." She rubbed her scalp. "Anyway, it's late and I have to finish my report."

"That doesn't solve our problem," Garrus frowned.

"What problem?"

"You've been awfully irritable lately," he answered with an honesty that surprised Kaidan. Shepard arched an eyebrow. "I thought your bio-amp might have been damaged or something like that but if you don't have one, maybe Solus screwed up something when he treated you for your nicotine addiction."

Shepard smirked and turned to Kaidan. "See?" she asked, pointing at Garrus. "A mother hen."

"I'm serious," Garrus grumbled, folding his arms. "Something's not right with your biotics."

"You're a specialist now?" Shepard mocked. "It's normal, for your information. It always takes me a few weeks to readjust after quitting. With Javik's help, I'm sure it'll take even less time than that. And regarding my irritability, 'might be my hormonal implant."

Kaidan suddenly felt uncomfortable talking about something as private as that but Garrus didn't seem to suffer the same fate.

"Oh, Humans use those too?" he asked, relaxing a little.

"Yep," Shepard confirmed. "That's way better than bleeding out once a month, believe me."

"What?"

"You said 'too'?" Kaidan interjected, not really happy at the idea of speaking about menstrual flow, especially his Commander's.

"Oh," Garrus said, "yeah. It's mandatory for the adult population within the Hierarchy. Everybody has one from boot camp."

"Even the men?" Kaidan asked, surprised.

"Huh, yes. Why would only the women be under hormone control? It doesn't make sense."

Shepard looked at Kaidan straight in the eyes and unfolded her arms to point them at Garrus, as if he was proving her point for her. Garrus arched a brow, not knowing what was happening.

"It's how we proceed to avoid unwanted pregnancies," Kaidan replied, uneasy.

"But it's not a woman's responsibility to prevent a pregnancy," Garrus frowned. This time, Shepard threw her fists up in the air in sign of victory. "Okay, I'm lost. What's happening here?" Garrus asked.

"Human men consider a pregnancy is a woman's problem, basically," she replied. Kaidan wanted to protest but Shepard cut him short. "I know, I generalize but I'm your Commander so my words are your law and my opinion better than yours."

Kaidan knew she was joking but felt a sudden pinch in his chest nonetheless. She was right, in the
end. She was his superior officer before his friend. He had forgotten that for a second.

"Now," she continued, turning to Garrus, "I really have to finish that report. I'll ask Chakwas to check on my implant tomorrow, if it reassures you."

"That would be appreciated," he nodded.

Shepard rolled her eyes but she wasn't angry at her protegee. Kaidan knew she would have told him to get lost if he had brought the subject of her hormonal implant up, even after ten years of friendship. He looked at Garrus and hated him for a second, only to feel guilty about it the next. Garrus was a better friend to Shepard than him and so what? Kaidan should have been happy Shepard had finally found someone she could be this relaxed and open with, but he couldn't help the envy he felt deep down.

"I'll leave you to your report," he said with a sorry smile. "Good luck with that."

"Thanks," Shepard snorted.

"I'll check on the prisoners before heading to my quarters," Garrus added, "but I'll probably be up for another couple of hours if you need anything."

"That means you'll learn a thing or two about human reproduction tonight," she mocked. "EDI will be sooo happy to report all your infractions to our extranet rules tomorrow."

"It's not like I'm going to watch porn," Garrus mumbled, his mandibles twitching.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she teased him. "Have fun."

Garrus clicked and turned heel. Kaidan followed him but they didn't exchange a word during the elevator ride back to third deck. They always had been a little uneasy around each other but this time it was all too clear. Kaidan exited the elevator when the door opened with a simple "good night" but Garrus stopped him.

"I, huh, I'm sorry if I interrupted something earlier," he said, blocking the door with a hand. "It wasn't my intention."

"Huh, no, don't worry," Kaidan hesitated, uncomfortable. "There is nothing of that sort between Shepard and me."

"That doesn't concern me," Garrus replied, suddenly straightening. He let the door go. "Good night, Alenko."

But it kind of does, doesn't it? Kaidan thought as he nodded, the door closing on the Turian.

Kaidan didn't sleep well that night and it wasn't only because of his thoughts. There was tension in crew quarters. Something had happened during the day between Ashley and James but Kaidan knew better than to ask directly what was going on. If Ashley wanted to talk, she'd come to him at some point. But Kaidan had to admit he wasn't particularly up for helping a friend out with her relationship problem when he would have liked a little comfort himself. Jealousy was such a mean and petty sentiment. He was better than that and he had to act like it, he decided as he turned for the hundredth times in his bed.

It was good to have James and Steven back on board, mostly because James spoke a lot during meals and always had something to say to entertain them. Kaidan barely noticed Shepard and Garrus arriving well after Javik, both sweaty and bruised but seemingly content with their training
session. He ignored Shepard's taunts on Garrus' late class on human anatomy and went about his routine like any other day. He hit the bathroom to brush his teeth, noted his haircut wasn't that terrible in the end, reviewed the tasks of the day with Javik, made sure everything was in order for the day shift, had his morning meeting with Joker and headed back to third deck to take his orders directly from Shepard.

Kaidan found her still in her sweatsuit exiting Life Support, carrying a table with Garrus on the other end.

"What are you doing?" Kaidan asked, not sure if he had to help them or not – it was only a table and they already were two to carry it.

"We're going to talk to Lawson in that big empty room we're not using," Shepard replied, walking backward through the mess.

"I thought we were going to do it in comm room," Kaidan said, following them.

"It's only accessible from the labs and there is no way in Hell Imma let her go there."

That made sense. Lawson wasn't to be trusted after all. Kaidan wondered for a second what she was going to do to occupy her days on board but his attention was caught by a dark mark on the table. A burnt mark.

"Vakarian," Kaidan said, pointing at the mark, "this is exactly why you shouldn't keep your weapons on crew deck."

"I thought it was in case one of us went batshit crazy and decided to shoot everybody," Shepard remarked but Kaidan ignored her.

"That's not a bullet mark," Garrus replied. The door opened behind Shepard and the slight dusty smell of the unoccupied room tickled Kaidan's nose. "That's, huh, an experiment gone bad."

"An experiment?" Shepard repeated as she maneuvered the table. "What kind of experiment? You know we have two labs upstairs and fifth deck for that, right?"

"Well, Life Support is considered as private quarters by EDI," Garrus explained, putting the table down. "It cannot spy on me there so..."

"What did you experiment on?" Shepard asked, not amused anymore.

Garrus' mandibles twitched. "Huh, explosives?"

"Oh for fuck's sake," Shepard sighed.

"It's mandatory in the army to learn the basics about explosives and I wanted to, huh, refresh my memory," Garrus continued, avoiding eye contact.

"Because of Tuchanka?" Shepard asked. He nodded. Shepard ticked and folded her arms. "This is exactly like after Project Base, you know that? You think you failed at something so you're trying to overcompensate, only this time, you're making your own fucking explosives in your quarters. This is insane and you have to stop, Vakarian."

"Yes, Commander," he acknowledged, head low.

Shepard kept on frowning for a moment before relaxing a little. "Tali knows a bit about explosives
so ask her for help if you really want to learn, okay? But no test, no practical exercise or anything, understood?" Garrus approved, even if the idea of working with Tali probably didn't please him. Shepard then turned to Kaidan. "I'll go change. Bring Lawson here in fifteen minutes, would you?"

"No problem," Kaidan nodded. "Do I have to feed the prisoners too?"

"No need," Shepard replied, "Wrex is in charge of that." That made sense, Kaidan thought. Wrex was a Krogan, not much could incapacitate him. "And you," she added for Garrus, "jump in your armor and go fetch Solus. He's ready but I'd bet he started something else while we were having breakfast. Oh and make sure he ate something too, he lost weight since Tuchanka."

"Will do, Commander," Garrus nodded before turning heel.

Shepard waited for the door to close on him before talking again. "EDI, why didn't you notice me about Garrus' experiments? I'm sure you sensed smoke or something."

"I did," the AI confirmed through the speakers, "but I was anticipating this moment."

"What do you mean?" Kaidan asked.

"I like to see Vakarian in trouble," EDI replied, her voice even.

Kaidan exchanged a look with Shepard. They were thinking the same thing: if EDI "liked" something, that meant some of her personality processes had been restored. That was good news, somehow. Shepard rubbed her eyes.

"Okay," she sighed, "I'm sure you'd've contact me if there had been a real risk so I'll pass on this one but, EDI, you have inform me of this sort of things."

"Understood, Commander."

"Good." Shepard turned to Kaidan. "See you in fifteen." And she left the room.

Kaidan found two chairs for the improvised office before heading to fifth deck and brigs. Ashley, James and Steve were already working but none of them was talking. That was rare enough to worry Kaidan a little – moral should have been better with the return of two members of the team – and he made a mental note to come back later to see what he could do. Maybe training with Wrex would improve the mood.

The two cells were in front of each other and terribly quiet. Kaidan checked on Krios first, carefully, a hand on the handle of his gun. The Drell seemed to be meditating, cross legged on the floor, eyes closed, his left arm in a sling. Shepard didn't want him on crew deck, even if he was injured. Kaidan didn't argue her decision. He hadn't heard the Drell come behind him the previous day on Horizon. That level of stealth alone was worrying enough to lock that guy down.

Lawson was laying on the small bench that officiated as a bed on the left side of her cell, crossed legs too, her hands on her stomach. She was still wearing her skin-tight pants and her wide white top, a strap of her bra showing, but not her boots – they had lasses on so she had been asked to remove them before entering her cell. Her eyes were closed but she didn't seem asleep. Kaidan knocked on the bars to get her attention.

"Lawson, the Commander will see you now."

"I don't suppose I can take a shower first," Lawson replied on a slightly sarcastic tone as she stood.
"No. Turn over and put your hands behind your back."

"Don't worry, I'll be docile," she smirked.

Kaidan frowned, not sure if she was mocking him or not, but didn't say a word. He opened the door to cuff Lawson, then proceeded to take her to third deck. She stayed true to her words and didn't try anything, which would have been stupid considering her position anyway – surrounded by twenty people, some of whom powerful biotics or excellent soldiers. Lawson didn't have a chance and Kaidan supposed she'd wait to be on Arcturus Station, their next stop, to try to escape. That meant a few days of peace to observe her.

Shepard was already in the new office with Garrus, Solus and Javik when Kaidan arrived with Lawson. The prisoner marked a pause as she detailed Javik but didn't say anything. Shepard invited her so sit at the table and did herself so once Lawson on her chair. Kaidan stayed behind the prisoner and Garrus came to his left, while Javik and Solus stood behind Shepard.

"So," Shepard started, "I've came up with a solution last night. You claim you want revenge on Cerberus, which would make us allies, but you've also been a double-agent for a while now and absolutely nothing proves me you're not being one at the moment, not even the information you generously, and very diligently, provided to us."

"Your concerns are undeniably justified, Commander," Lawson nodded.

"Yeah, I didn't survive this long in this job without a bit of paranoia," Shepard smirked. "Anyway, my tech specialists are currently working on a super strong sandbox for your microchip, so it, you know, won't blow up my ship when we connect it to the mainframe. So we didn't check yet your intel but, if you are really sincere in your job application, we don't need those information, right? I mean, you'd tell us directly what you know, and the microchip would only back your story up."

"Absolutely."

Shepard looked at Lawson straight in the eyes for a second before relaxing a little and leaning on her chair.

"So your work will be simple: you'll write everything you know about Cerberus, the old fashion way, with a pen on paper, a supervisor always in sight. You will have no access to computers or any communication device on the ship, you won't even leave the ship unless I say otherwise. You will not have access to first and forth deck whatever the reason. The second and fifth will be accessible only with supervision, with heavy restriction though. Come near the labs or the cockpit and I'll kill you. Come near any weapon, I'll kill you. How? With this," she said, pointing at a little red capsule on the table. Shepard then turned to Solus. "Professor, would you please inform miss Lawson about this marvelous little thing?"


"Very well," Lawson approved. "May I ask for an implantation under the skull? I'd hate to have a visible scar."

The request made Shepard laugh and Javik stare at Lawson with all his angry eyes, but that didn't
"Absolutely possible," he nodded. "Will probably have to remove several locks of hair in the process but shouldn't be visible either."

"Thank you."

"And the spray," Shepard reminded Solus.

"Correct," he said, searching for something in a pocket. He put a little spray bottle on the table, next to the implant. "To conceal your biotics. One dose each morning, preferably in the mouth but can be absorbed by skin too. Unfortunately, creates addiction to product but can be easily treated once concealer not needed anymore. Added mint flavor."

"Once the implantation done," Shepard continued, "we'll attribute you a set and you'll be authorized to take a shower. You are required to wear the Alliance uniform. It's not to humiliate you, we just don't have anything else on board for you. Then Javik will inform you of the rules and you'll start your writings, in the mess. I'll replace him after my round."

"Will I have to sleep in brigs?" Lawson asked.

Shepard looked at her for a second, playing with the implant on the table. "No," she decided, "you'll be assigned a bunk in crew quarters." Kaidan frowned. That wasn't expected. Even if EDI would keep an eye on Lawson at all time, it was a risky move. "I'm showing you good faith here, Lawson," Shepard said. "Screw with me and you'll regret it for the microsecond it'll take me to activate the bomb in your brain."

"Understood, Commander," Lawson replied with her usual confidence. Shepard smirked.

"Then welcome on board, miss Lawson."

TBC
Garrus was kind of resigned at this point: shore leave was just not for Spectres. It honestly didn't really surprise him when Shepard had told him earlier that they wouldn't enjoy a few hours of freedom on Arcturus Station like the rest of the crew. Garrus had shrugged before dodging the first surprise punch of the session. He didn't have anything to do on the station anyway, and he'd rather stay on board in case they were called once more for something important. Not that the Alliance could pull off another Project Base out of their magic hat but Garrus preferred to stay on his guard. So far, shove leaves had mostly been unpleasant after all.

Shepard tried a high kick but Garrus blocked it with his arm. He unfolded it, passed his hand under Shepard's leg and grabbed her thigh just above the knee. If she was Turian, Garrus would have caught the spur to immobilize the leg but he had found that this way was efficient on Humans. Shepard was now standing on her right leg, trying to keep balance, but she couldn't do much. They exchanged a knowing look before Garrus swept her right leg with his foot. He let her fall on her back, releasing her at the same time.

"That's seventeen to five," he reminded her as he stood over her. "There is no way you're going to win this morning, admit it."

"Never!" Shepard replied dramatically, throwing her fist in the air.

Garrus smirked and grabbed her wrist to help her stand. Shepard put some order in her hair – red again, the dye had worn off after a few days – before rubbing her right shoulder. She had asked him not to go easy on her after she was officially released from the sling before Horizon, and Garrus had obeyed because he knew it was important to her, but it didn't necessarily please him. Scratches and bruises were normal after a good training session, not broken bones. And she seemed determined to reopen all her old injuries this morning. Garrus would have found her attitude amusing if the Normandy had been docked anywhere else, but he knew Shepard's stubbornness today was the result of her anxiety. He couldn't blame her, really. He also disliked Arcturus Station.

A knock on the windows on fourth deck made both of them look up. It was Tali'Zorah, going back to her quarters after breakfast. Garrus knew Gardner had saved them a plate but he still didn't like the idea of having missed breakfast with the crew. He smiled for himself. He had come a long way, that was for sure.

"How are things going, with Tali?" Shepard asked, stretching her back – so training was over, it seemed.

"Okay, I guess," Garrus shrugged. "The trick is to speak only when I have a question and to nod the rest of the time, but not too much, otherwise I'm a mister Know-it-all full of myself."

"Congrats, you found how to interact with Tali," Shepard chuckled.

"I don't deny she's very good in her domain, but I still wonder how she ended up in your crew," Garrus admitted. "You're not the kind to tolerate attitude from a teenager."
"Tali's not like that with me. I'm her Captain and ranks are also pretty important to Quarians. I thought you'd understand that better than anyone."

"I don't know much about her people, actually."

"Why didn't you ask her then?"

"Because she made it clear she didn't want to talk to me," Garrus replied, surprised by Shepard's question.

"You're not the easiest guy to talk to either," she told him, a little grin on her lips. Garrus faked offense. It made her chuckle but it didn't last long. It was just not the day for joking around.

"You know, I can deal with Kryik and everything if you want to take the day off." Shepard straightened and looked seriously at him. "I mean," Garrus continued, "you could use a little alone time, hit the town, go to a bar or something, meet a few people, have fun, relax..."

Shepard snorted. "Me? Relax? Hi, I'm Shepard, full time Council Spectre. Have we met?"

"You relax all the time," Garrus frowned, "unless you don't consider getting drunk as relaxing."

"There is a time and a place for everything, my young padawan," Shepard mocked, "and today is not for relaxing. I have a job to do."

"We have a job to do," Garrus corrected. Shepard shook her head, making a big deal out of hesitating.

"Myeah, okay," she eventually said. "But, hey, thanks for the offer. I appreciate it." Garrus simply nodded and followed her to the elevator.

The mess was already empty but for Gardner in the kitchen and Lawson still at the table, discussing with Solus. That wasn't unusual. The Salarian had rarely shared his meals with the crew before – he just didn't live at the same rhythm than everybody else – but he had been around every morning since he had learned about Lawson's field of expertise. They shared a common passion for genetic and behavior. It also helped that Lawson spoke several human languages Solus had an interest in.

Garrus had been on watch duty during the few days between Horizon and Arcturus Station. Shepard had ordered him to be friendly but careful with Lawson and he had to admit it hadn't been an order difficult to follow. Lawson kind of reminded him of Shepard, actually. Both women were confident, had a sharp intellect and a thing for sarcasm. She was also pretty direct in her way of speaking in general but she usually kept her mouth shut during meals with the crew. It was kind of hard for her to be an ex-Cerberus agent surrounded by Alliance goons, from what Garrus had understood. He could rely to that. Being a Turian in the middle of so many Humans hadn't been easy at first, but things had gotten better after a while. Lawson also seemed to be kind of a private person, someone not easily making friends, so maybe she needed a little time and encouragement to open up. Shepard seemed determined to make that happen.

"Good morning, Vietnam!" she saluted, hand in the air.

"You're late," Gardner ranted from the kitchen before Lawson or Solus could answer. "I have a schedule to respect if I don't want Javik to be on my back, you know that, Commander?"

"Good love making takes time, Sergeant," Shepard replied smoothly. Garrus rolled his eyes and Solus chuckled. Lawson was lost though, and maybe a little shocked.
"We just train," Garrus explained as he passed near the table, "but Wrex keeps insinuating there is more than that."

"Well you have to admit fighting is sort of foreplay for Turians," Shepard grinned, leaning on the counter.

"It is in certain conditions," Garrus agreed even if that didn't please him, "but that doesn't mean we have sex with every opponent we face. There are such things as personal preferences, for example."

"He's not into squishy aliens," Shepard informed Lawson and Solus as she pointed to Garrus, "except pretty ladies who can blow up his brain."

Something got lost in translation there if Garrus was to believe Lawson and Solus' looks exchange over the table and the contained smirk menacing to eat Shepard's whole face. That annoyed him a little and he decided to strike back.

"And you could pretend to be part of this category if only you put half the energy you spend on being a smart ass in actual training," he replied, pretty pleased with himself. Shepard looked at him with surprise and some sort of pride – yes, he was perfectly comfortable answering her now – while Lawson, Gardner and Solus openly laughed. Then the undertone hit Garrus. Hard. "Huh," he hesitated, "I'm sorry, I didn't..."

"No," Shepard interrupted him, incapable of holding her amusement anymore, "too late, buddy, too late."

Garrus made sure to keep his mouth shut during breakfast.

Kryik was right on time, something Garrus wouldn't have bet on. Shepard left him and Lawson in CIC while she walked to the airlock to greet her mentor – and authorize him to get on board because she hadn't revoked the ban yet and apparently wasn't planning on doing so. Lawson seemed calm but Garrus could tell she was tensed.

"Don't worry," he told her, "I'll break his face before he can touch you."

Lawson smirked. "It seems the two of you have unfinished business."

"Something like that, yes." It was pretty much finished by turian standards though. Kryik had won authority over Garrus so Garrus was supposed to keep his mouth shut and be obedient around him. It would have been fine if Kryik had shown respect to Shepard – or anybody else. Garrus couldn't stand that. He had tried to not make it an ethnicity problem because Kryik had gone through his mandatory army years like anybody else within the Hierarchy, therefore he had proven to be a suitable citizen despite his origins, but the way he had been raised had had an undeniable effect on how he behaved nowadays.

Or maybe he had been a Spectre for too long, an outcast with no bound to anyone. Garrus had to admit he was afraid to become like Kryik at some point, too selfish and isolated to care about anyone else.

There was a bang against the airlock's door and Garrus heard Shepard's voice roaring in the distance. He couldn't pick up the words but it was pretty clear she was giving Kryik a piece of her mind. Garrus stayed where he was because he had to keep an eye on Lawson, but he kind of wished Shepard would call him to the rescue. At least he'd have a valid reason to punch Kryik in the face.

The door opened on a very angry Shepard and a Kryik with a bleeding nose – that made Garrus a
little happy. The Turian had no visible weapon on him but Garrus knew he had a knife somewhere, like any good soldier. That wasn't really a problem, Garrus could disarm him easily, but it was still a possibility to take into consideration. Kryik wasn't the kind to play nice after all, Garrus had learned it first hand. As the Spectre approached, his attention focused on Lawson. She didn't like it, took a step back even. Garrus could understand that. She didn't have her biotics to protect herself anymore.

"That's close enough," Shepard told Kryik a few meters from Garrus and Lawson, stopping him with a hand on his chest. Kryik didn't push her back despite his obvious need for revenge and blood. Garrus had never seen him so serious. He almost had another man in front of him, and that man was dangerous. Kryik's reputation as one of the best Spectres there was suddenly fit him like a glove. "So, this is Miranda Lawson," Shepard continued, a little wary of her mentor's silence. "She's indeed the woman you saw on Illium and she was there to eliminate one of my clones."

"A clone?" Kryik repeated, still focused on Lawson.

"Yes," Shepard replied. "Can you explain everything, Miranda?"

"Of course, Commander," she said and her voice was a little less confident than usual. "I worked for Cerberus in the Lazarus division. Our main goal was human resurrection, which implied we sometimes had to regrow a few organs. It was nothing less than cloning and at some point we started to 'grow' full bodies. At first it was our own agents' but we eventually made copies of important human figures, like the first human Spectre for example."

"They more or less planed to replace important people to control things," Shepard added.

"And?" Kryik asked, impatient.

"Growing clones in a few years is easy, controlling them isn't," Lawson continued. "Very few of them tolerated implanted memories, and in Shepard's case we had none to work with. Her copies were just implanted with the basic memories an adult should have: how to behave, how to speak, write and so on. For the rest, we were using the good old reward system: do something we want you to do and everything is fine; do something we don't want you to do and get punished."

"You tamed them like animals," Kryik growled.

"We did," Lawson confirmed, "with more or less success. We failed more often than we succeeded with non-implanted clones, to be honest. We thought SHP-1 was a success but it played us."

"SHP-1?" Shepard snorted.

"They didn't have official names," Lawson replied with a sorry smile, "although they named themselves. SHP-2 to 5 were respectively April, Mai, Jun and Julie. You've met SHP-2, Spectre," she added, looking at Kryik.

"Yeah, April," he spit, "and what did she do exactly to deserve to die? She was a prostitute on Illium, for fuck's sake, not what I call a galactic threat." The real Shepard frowned next to her mentor but her self-imposed 'I don't want to know' rule prevented her from asking questions.

"It was in the process of training when it vanished. It could have killed you," Lawson shrugged.

"She," Kryik corrected, acid. "She was a person."

"It was a clone," Lawson replied coldly, "a thing I grew in a tank like an algae."
That answer didn't please Kryik at all but Shepard stopped him when he took a step in Lawson's direction, grabbing him by the arm. He looked at her for several seconds before grunting and stepping back.

"You said SHP-1 played you," Shepard said to invite Lawson to continue.

"It did," Lawson nodded. "It was our first success, a biotic even, and it followed our instructions without hesitation, did great everywhere and mimicked you perfectly. It even had good results on field operations so Wilson and I gave the green light. SHP-1 was supposed to take part of the attack on the Citadel, go in with a platoon and act as if Commander Shepard had turned her back on the Council. It didn't go according to plan. SHP-1 killed its infiltration team and disappeared just before the attack."

Garrus quickly looked at Shepard to confirm what he was thinking: she was damn proud of her clone's reaction.

"What about the others?" Kryik asked. "How did they escape?"

"Someone inside helped them," Lawson replied, "but I don't know who."

"Wilson?" Shepard pointed out.

"I doubt it. I suspect him to have taken SHP-6 with him when he flew the station. Given the chance, he would have taken all of the clones with him. My theory is that someone close to the clones helped them. They had caretakers and trainers. We insisted on the non-humanity of the clones but it's difficult to keep a distance."

"Wait," Garrus interrupted, "you said the other day you knew the whereabouts of another clone and one was missing. Since you're searching for that Wilson and the clone he took, that means you know where SHP-1 is."

"Correct," Lawson nodded. "A contact saw it play mercenary in the Terminus a few months after its disappearance. She didn't recognize it at first, it altered its appearance, but DNA doesn't lie. I focused on the easiest targets first and had planned to eliminate SHP-1 last."

"You're afraid of her," Kryik understood, a vicious smile illuminating his face.

"Fear is what distinguishes the sane from the psychopath," Lawson replied, looking at Nihlus straight in the eyes. Shepard fought hard her smile.

"Okay," Shepard intervened, folding her arms, "so, now we know a little more. Nihlus, I'm sure you understand we can't let clones run around the galaxy, pretending to be someone else, right? We have to take them down."

"She wasn't pretending to be you," Nihlus said sharply, turning to his protegee. "She was working in a brothel and doing just fine, without hurting anyone! She didn't deserve to die, none of them did!"

"Except for the part where they are clones of me," Shepard insisted. "Do you remember clones are forbidden by Council Law?"

"I don't fucking care about Council Law," Nihlus replied, looking at Shepard straight in the eyes. Shepard frowned.

"Vakarian, Lawson, get out," she commanded after a few seconds of tensed silence.
Garrus didn't wait for a repeat. Now was the time to follow blindly an order so he took Lawson to third deck, even if he would have liked to hear what Shepard had to say to Kryik. The Drell was patiently waiting for his turn in the mess, seated at the table, Javik keeping an eye on him from a distance. Lawson hesitated a second but sat in front of Krios. Garrus chose to lean against the wall separating the two tables, just in case he had to intervene quickly – though Javik would probably react before him.

"How is your shoulder?" Lawson asked politely.

"Good, thank you," Krios replied with his hoarse voice. "Drells heal fast."

"It's been a week only."

"Yes."

And Krios stopped talking there. He kept on staring at Lawson with his enormous black eyes in silence though. She turned to Garrus after a second, a bit lost. He scratched his scars. Drells were strange, he had to admit that.

"So, any fancy plans after your release?" Garrus asked Krios.

"I will most likely go back to the Citadel with Nihlus," the Drell answered, "though I do not know of his intentions or orders. I may be stuck on Arcturus Stations for a few days."

"Good luck with that," Lawson snorted. "There is nothing interesting to do here if you're not highly interested in politics and luxury shops."

"I like to watch people." That wasn't creepy at all, Garrus thought as the Drell turned to Javik, leaning on the counter, arms folded. "You are by far the most interesting being I have seen in a while. You're burning like a thousand suns and yet your soul is hard and cold like a rock."

Drells could see a greater number of radiations than most species, Garrus remembered. Krios was probably talking about infrared or something like that. Javik didn't reply. He kept on staring at the Drell only with his tiny right eye and looked nowhere in particular otherwise. Garrus had often wondered what a Prothean's field of vision was like but he hadn't been comfortable enough to ask Liara when they were still on board and there was no way he'd risk asking Javik directly, not after what he had heard about him during Shepard's tale of the Battle of Omega. Garrus suspected Shepard had exaggerated a little here and there to come up with a good story, but he also had seen Javik on Ilos. Killing that giant fish-like creature didn't require any effort from him so crushing a whole platoon with his biotics was definitely a possibility. Garrus shivered. Good thing the last Prothean was on their side.

"You can see biotic fields?" Miranda asked. Garrus heard the lounge's door open.

"I can in a certain measure," Krios nodded. "Biotics emit more heat than other members of their species."

"Correct," Solus said, arriving in the mess with Joker wearing his civvies. "Although detection method inefficient with Asaris due to large distribution of biotics within population."

"Are biotics radioactive?" Joker suddenly asked.

Solus chuckled. "No, not enough element zero in their bodies to be harmful."

"But eezo has an impact on biotics," Joker insisted. "I mean, human biotics age faster and they
develop more cancers and stuff like that." He turned to Garrus. "Turians too, right?"

"Yes," Garrus answered, throat tight.

"Wait," Joker interrupted Solus before he could answer, "is Javik radioactive?"

"I am not radioactive," Javik grunted from the counter while Solus laughed, "and would you shut up? I'm trying to follow what is happening in CIC."

"Ask EDI for a retransmission," Joker shrugged, "but I can summarize it for you if you want." His voice dropped an octave to imitate Shepard. "It's always the same shit with you, Nihlus. When will you learn to be responsible, dammit?!" Joker chose a higher tone for Nihlus. "I do what I want, I'm a Spectre, and screw the Council!" Solus couldn't stop laughing. Shepard again. '"I won't report the shit out of you because I kind of think for you but dammit, you better do what I say and stop ogling my butt for fuck's sake!'" In Nihlus' voice. '"But Shepard, your butt is so nice and round and firm, it's the butt of all butts, I cannot live without it!'"

Joker stopped when Solus started coughing. Garrus straightened but Lawson was faster than him. She stood and helped Solus to sit at the table and find his breath again, Joker with her. Javik rolled his eyes but abandoned his spot nonetheless to bring a glass of water to the Salarian. Only Krios stayed absolutely still.

"That didn't sound good," Lawson commented once Solus' respiration under control.

"Old age," the Salarian simply replied, leaning on the back of his chair. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. It hissed from within his body.

"You're sick," Krios added.

It didn't please Solus. He frowned, eyes still closed. "Ironic comment coming from man condemned himself." Garrus looked at Krios. He hadn't noticed anything particular but he was far from an expert.

"I am at peace with my fate," the Drell explained. "It is a battle I cannot fight nor am willing to fight."

Solus snorted and looked coldly at Krios. It was the first time Garrus saw Solus express his disdain for someone so openly. He usually just ignored the people he found uninteresting, but Krios had hit a nerve apparently.

"I am at peace too but that doesn't mean I cannot fight," Solus replied. The formulation surprised Garrus and Joker. Krios nodded, more to dismiss the upcoming argument than to acknowledge Solus's opinion. The Salarian frowned a little but cleared his throat and stood to leave the table. "Have work to finish."

"I'll knock on your door for lunch," Joker reminded him. "If CIC is not a no-man's-land anymore, that is."

"Appreciated," Solus said from the corner.

Joker turned to Lawson. "You like Thai food? There's a good restaurant on Arcturus Station if you want to join us for lunch." The offer surprised Lawson as much as Garrus. Joker was one of the most friendly member of this crew, but Lawson was still catalogued as a Cerberus agent by many others.
"I cannot leave the ship without supervision," she obediently replied.

"Don't worry, it's a delivery. Javik doesn't like to go out." The Prothean grumbled from the kitchen.

"Well, if you're willing to put it on my tab," Lawson smirked, "but I don't know when I'll be able to repay you."

"Don't worry about that," Joker shrugged. "I'm rich, baby." Lawson smiled, a little amused maybe. She wasn't the kind to laugh, Garrus had noticed.

"And me?" he asked, falsely offended. "You're not inviting me? I can eat levo food."

"Yeah but we all know something will force you and Shepard to abandon your plans so..."

"Touché," Garrus admitted, head low.

"My bet is on saving the new Prime Minister's life by the end of the day, by the way," Joker grinned. "My wealth is in your hands, Garrus! Don't let a bro down, 'k?"

"Prime Minister?" Garrus repeated. He had heard the crew talk about an upcoming election during the last few weeks but he didn't really pay attention, to be honest. Human politics was chaotic, at best.

"Yeah, the head of the Alliance. It's between Udina and Goyle. They're voting today actually."

"They?"

Joker winced. Lawson came to the rescue.

"Only the high ranked can vote to elect the Prime Minister," she said, "which means the good people just have to sit tight and wait. The best part is, the Council heavily influences the vote too. It's a mockery of democracy."

"It hurts to admit but you're right, lady," Joker sighed. "But, you know, the previous government kind of fucked up so maybe being a little guided can't hurt this time."

"Yes," Lawson snorted, "let's the aliens decide what is good for us." She looked at Garrus. "No offense."

"Non taken," he shrugged. "I understand the feeling. We comply with Council Law outside of our territory, but otherwise the Hierarchy rules. We don't tolerate interventions from the Asaris or the Salarians in our internal affairs and they know it."

"But you have the best army in the galaxy to make them respect your decision," Lawson said. "That helps."

"Certainly," Garrus agreed.

"Humanity cannot oppose resistance to the Council," Lawson continued. "We have nothing to force them to acknowledge our authority, so that makes us second class galactic citizens, a client species following orders."

"Well you did nothing so far to prove you're worthy of more authority or power," Garrus remarked. "You just discovered the galactic community, and you started with a war."

"Turians started with a war too," Lawson reminded him.
"Against a threat to the Council, not against a member of the Council," Garrus precised. "Besides, it took a century for the Hierarchy to get a seat on the Council after the Krogan Rebellions. It was a well earned but bitter reward. We lost half our population during that war, entire colonies, whole planets capable of sustaining dextro life, and there aren't many of those. It cost us a lot compared to the three months of the Relay 314 Incident and its few thousands victims."

"And the Turians hit and it's a home run!" Joker mocked, hands in the air. Garrus frowned a little – it seemed like a human sport reference but he wasn't sure. Lawson rolled her eyes. "No, seriously," Joker continued, "Garrus is right. Humanity isn't there yet and it's stupid to want everything now. We don't deserve nice things, at all."

"That doesn't mean we have to be treated like shit."

"We're not!" Joker protested. "We already have an embassy, colonies, commercial treads, military programs with the Turians, even the ship you're in is the result of a collaboration with an other species!"

"Technically, you stole the SR-2 from Cerberus," Lawson precised, amused.

"And the SR-1 was a turio-human baby," Joker insisted. "Shepard being Nihlus' protegee is another example of collaboration, as Garrus being Shepard's!"

"Or Shepard being a Council Spectre in the first place," Garrus added.

"Yes," Joker approved, hands in the air, "thank you! It's an enormous responsibility for her, you know? Shepard is like the test run for all Humanity and I can assure you she does a fantastic job proving we're worth something, we're capable of seeing the bigger picture and playing nice with other species."

Too bad most Humans weren't like her, Garrus thought. Sure, she had her flaws, big ones, but Shepard knew where her loyalty fell, and that probably was her greater force. Of course, every species first thought of themselves, of their interests and preservation, but working with the others was a necessity nonetheless. What would have the Asaris done alone against the Rachnis? What would have the Salarians done alone against the Krogans? Garrus looked at Javik. The Protheans had known it before them. They had united the galaxy by force to defeat a single formidable enemy a long time ago. Every new species discovered after was integrated or eliminated. The system worked, the Hierarchy was proof of that, and the Council was only applying it, with less Empire and more individual freedom – more politics and endless debates too. Humanity had to understand that at some point. The Council wasn't making a fool of Humans, they were just taking their time.

"I've talked to Anderson about that once," Joker insisted, "you know, our place in the galaxy and all. He was my Captain at the time and Shepard his XO. Anyway, he said Humanity didn't realize the Council was already giving us a chance to prove our capacities as a dominant species. How, you'd ask? Well simply because the Council gave us a quarter of the galaxy for our colonial expansion."

Oh, Garrus thought. He hadn't seen it like that before but Anderson was right.

"They authorized us to expand to clean their mess in the Attican Traverse," Lawson replied.

"No," Joker shook his head, "no no no, lady. It's like a gamble. The Council gave us that much space to expand and occupy a territory they don't really have control of. If we follow through, if we pacify that part of the Attican Traverse for them, they'll reward us with a place in the Council in a
"century or more, and they'll gain a huge chunk of the galaxy, which means more power and influence. But, if at some point we just say 'meh, fuck it, we're strong enough on our own', then the Council will loss that huge part of its territory and influence. They really are giving us a chance to prove we're grown ups there."

"Are they?" Lawson retorted. "The Council is not the kind to gamble. They gave us that 'chance' only because they know Humanity is driven by its thirst for power. We want a seat in the Council, so they make us believe it's an accessible dream with that 'permission' to colonize the Attican Traverse. Meanwhile, our efforts go to colonization, not arming ourselves in case the Council decides to simply wipe us out."

"The Council never wiped out a species," Garrus intervened, frankly surprised such an argument could pop-up into the discussion.

"Tell that to the Rachnis," Lawson replied, "or the dying Krogans."

Garrus closed his mouth before he could say something compromising and exchanged a look with Joker. Lawson didn't know about Ilos or the cure of the genophage. It would prove difficult to go on without revealing the truth.

"My bad," Garrus apologized but Lawson didn't buy his bullshit. "No, you are right," he insisted.

"Hm hm," Lawson smirked. "It seems there is more to that."

"Nope," Joker intervened, "no secret whatsoever. Garrus can't lie, Shepard forbade it – it's a Turian thing, they have to tell the truth when a superior orders them so – and I am the most honest member of this crew." He raised his right hand up to his shoulder's level. "God be my witness. I can even prove it to you by telling you where I keep my shameful booger collection."

"No thanks," Lawson slightly frowned. She then turned to Garrus. "So you can't lie?"

"To a superior," he specified to avoid any question – Lawson was the type to hit where it hurts, Garrus figured.

"Is that convenient," she mocked.

"Very much so," Joker grinned, "but hey, it is what it is. How are things going upstairs, EDI?"

"Both Spectres are alive," the AI replied through the speakers– Garrus didn't know if it was a joke or if EDI had really anticipated a murder. "Mordin's passing interrupted them and they took the break as an opportunity to discuss calmly. They should come to a conclusion shortly."

"Does EDI stands for Enhanced Defense Intelligence?" Lawson asked.

"Correct," the AI answered.

"Right," Joker said, rubbing his eyes, "you were born in Cerberus' labs."

"You tend to forget that, Jeff."

"Well you flipped them the finger when we stole the ship so I guess I never really considered you as a Cerberus creature."

"This is incorrect," EDI flatly said.
"How so?"

"You pushed the station out of its orbit when you crashed the Normandy SR-1 in Cerberus headquarters and I would have been condemned to destruction if I hadn't reached to you. I did not think in term of allegiance but of survival. Joining efforts with Commander Shepard assured me better chances to expand my lifespan."

Javik grumbled from the kitchen.

"You are impressive, EDI," Lawson said, crossing her legs under the table. "I had heard about you and your progress but I would never have imagined you were capable of such an organic reasoning."

"I was programmed that way to develop a better understanding of organic life," EDI replied. "I was meant to interact with a crew and be a part of it."

"Shouldn't you have a body then?" Lawson asked.

"My infiltration platform has been destroyed and is currently not responding." Garrus frowned. Currently? "But I would gladly help you figure out how to recycle a clone into a new platform, although I am not sure Shepard would appreciate it."

"I would destroy you before this could happen, machine," Javik warned.

"It was a joke," EDI evenly said.

But was it? Garrus didn't know and it seemed Joker had his doubts too. Krios was still listening in silence, hands on the table, not a single muscle moving.

"An infiltration platform?" Lawson repeated.

"Yes. My core architecture and personality development programs were used to create artificial and intelligent infiltration units. They needed bodies resembling those of Humans to facilitate integration. I was granted a prototype in order to be assimilated to the original Cerberus crew of the Normandy SR-2."

"Wait," Joker stopped everybody. "Units. You said units, plural."

"Yes, Jeff."

"That means there are other yous somewhere else. I mean, bodies you could use!"

"Your assumption is correct, though I have to point out I am already able to take control of a synthetic platform, like Legion's."

"This," Joker yelped in a shrieking high tone, "is – awesome! You can have a body again, EDI! Why didn't you say so before?"

"I have no knowledge of the location of any infiltration unit," EDI replied.

"I do," Lawson said, raising a hand. Joker gasped then opened his mouth wide, little stars in his eyes.

"Can I hug you?" he whispered. Lawson frowned and leaned further in her chair.

"What's happening here?" Shepard asked as she appeared at the corner, Kryik on her heel. She
seemed annoyed, Garrus noticed, and Kryik was certainly unhappy.

"EDI can have a body again!" Joker whooped. Shepard raised both her eyebrow, which indicated the good kind of surprise had hit her. She even smiled.

"Well, this is certainly great news," she said, coming to a stop next to Garrus, "but that'll have to wait a little. You," she pointed Krios, "out. As far as I'm concerned, you're a wanted criminal. I see you again in Council space, I kill you, understood?"

"Understood," Krios nodded before standing up.

"I changed my mind," Kryik sudden said. Shepard greeted her teeth. "If I can't kill her, I want her under surveillance and Thane is the perfect guy for the job."

"I am already watching her, Nihlus," Shepard told him calmly but firmly.

"I don't trust you on this one," he shrugged. "A Human watching over another Human? Hm, no, too dangerous."

"This is bullshit," Garrus interjected.

"You," Kryik turned to him, "shut up. This is none of your business. The report I can make to the Council, though..."

"The Council already knows I have a captive Cerberus informant," Shepard said. "They agreed with it, they gave me a line of credits for it and I have authorization to investigate wherever I want so keep your threats to yourself."

"Do they know about the clones?"

Garrus understood Shepard had deliberately lied to the Council when she didn't immediately reply. She did not include that crucial information in her report because it would have doomed Humanity for good, especially after the events of this year. She had favored her species.

"I knew it," Kryik smirked. He folded his arms and leaned a little in Shepard's direction. "So it's simple, my darling. Thane will stay with you and will keep an eye on Lawson for me."

"He's not joining my crew," Shepard coldly replied. "I don't need a green ninja and I certainly don't have the money for another crew member anyway."

"I do not need a salary," Krios intervened and Shepard stared angrily at him.

"You eat, you drink, you breath and you shit, like everybody else, so it's all the same to me, Kermit."

"I'll pay for everything," Kryik assured. "Heck, I'll even give you half my salary. That should cover everything and more. And be sure to treat my friend correctly. He's worth it."

"How much does that make?" Krios asked.

"Two millions and a half each month."

"Yes, I'm worth it."

"Nobody's worth two fucking millions and a half," Shepard yelled. Garrus silently agreed – Spirits, five millions a month! No wonder Kryik had gone crazy over the years. That was too much money
"You don't have a say in that matter, Jany," Kryik teased. "You lied to the Council to protect your species and it's exactly what they are waiting for to get rid of Humanity once and for all. So Thane will join your crew and report to me Lawson's every move. Because once she's not useful anymore, she's done."

"Did you even ask your friend what he wants?" Shepard asked, trying another angle. "Maybe he has tadpoles to go back to, I don't know!"

Krios, hands in his back, turned to Kryik. "My son?"

"Taken care of, no worries."

"Then I'll gladly join you, Commander Shepard." Said Shepard could have killed him with her glance but that didn't impress Krios at all. "I've heard a lot about you and I have to say I'm curious."

"You trust Nihlus to take care of your son?" Shepard snorted. "Man, you're desperate. Nihlus can't even take care of himself!"

"I trust him with my life," Krios simply replied. He went very still the next second and his mind got lost in his memories. "It was a Saturday," he said and Shepard almost lost it.

Garrus grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her to the lounge. "Javik, can you please make sure nobody dies while I talk to Shepard? Throw Kryik by the airlock if necessary."

"With pleasure," the Prothean replied.

He made sure the door was locked behind them before releasing his mentor. "I'm sorry to have come to this extremity, Commander," he apologized as she took a couple of furious steps towards the bar, "but I thought it was necessary."

"What are you talking about?" she grunted, grabbing the first bottle of liquor within reach.

"I, huh, touched your shoulders." Shepard stared at him. "But you probably don't care."

"Oh, you noticed?" she mocked, and she gulped a long sip straight out of the bottle.

Garrus scratched his scars. He had taken Shepard to the lounge to calm her down but he had no idea what to say now. He gave her a look as she emptied the bottle – dextro brandy, that wouldn't do a thing to her, but she didn't seem to have noticed. If she was Turian, Garrus would have known what to do.

"Maybe it's a good opportunity," he shrugged, looking at the window instead of her neck. "Maybe having Krios with us will insure Lawson doesn't screw with us."

"She won't," Shepard declared abruptly, putting the empty bottle down on the counter. "She's sincere in her revenge. She wants to destroy Cerberus and I trust her on that."

"She sounded pretty pro-human to me earlier," Garrus remarked. Shepard laughed, the sad kind of laugh, and turned to lean on the bar, her elbows on the glass top.

"It seems I'm pro-human too now."

Oh, so that was all about this, Garrus understood.
"All species favor themselves, Shepard," he said as he walked to the counter. "Every Spectre does, I bet. I'm no fool, I know the order to help the Ninth Platoon on Tuchanka came directly from the Primarch. The asari and salarian Councilors probably don't know about this, which means I'm guilty too." He leaned on the counter to reach another bottle of dextro brandy in stock and opened it. He wasn't a fan of this alcohol but the Quarian seemed quite fond of it. She often had a glass in the evening with the rest of the crew, minus Wrex. "You did what you had to do to protect your people," Garrus said, pouring himself a drink before handing the whole bottle to Shepard. "What would happen to Javik or Legion without you?" he asked. "The Alliance personnel will get back on their feet, Solus, Wrex and Massani too, I don't know for Tali'Zorah or Williams, Lawson, EDI." Shepard took a sip out of the bottle, avoiding eye contact. "A lot of people depends on you," Garrus insisted. "I depend on you."

"You'd be assigned to another mentor," Shepard shrugged.

"Imagine the mess that'd be," Garrus smirked. "You completely ruined me with your human flexibility and very liberal interpretation of social rules."

"I did," Shepard agreed, a bit of pride poking under all her anger.

"Kryik's being an ass but he cares too much about you to go to the Council, you know that, right?"

"No, he's capable of that," Shepard disagreed. "I lied to the Council, I'd get a blame and be punished one way or another, but they'd keep me. I can survive the blow, not Humanity, and Nihlus knows it."

"Maybe the Council wouldn't take drastic measures," Garrus tried. "The fault is Cerberus', not the Alliance's or all of Humanity's after all."

"Maybe," Shepard sighed, still frowning, "but I'm not willing to take the risk. Nihlus knows it too." She rubbed her face with a hand. "I should just quit and become a mercenary in the Terminus Systems. Oh wait, another me is currently doing that!"

"It could be worse," Garrus said.

"Explain me how, please, because I don't see it."

"Lawson eliminated four clones so far, so there is only two left. Less Shepards running around is a good thing, I think."

"Asshole," she replied, poking him with her elbow. "What did I do to you to justify your mean little remarks, exactly?"

"I have a couple of examples," Garrus chuckled, "but just imagine a galaxy with several Commander Shepard and her terrible people skills."

"Hey!"

"We would be at war all the time," Garrus mocked. Shepard just pushed him and he fell on a bar stool, laughing.

"I'm better than you with people, Vakarian."

"I'm not saying otherwise, Commander."

Shepard folded her arms and grumbled for herself, staring at the smoking area on the other side of
the lounge. Garrus knew he had defused the bomb but he wanted to be sure Shepard could go back to the mess with a clear mind so he pushed a little more, making a big deal out of searching in his pouch. Shepard automatically straightened and pointed an accusative finger at him.

"Don't you fucking dare, Vakarian!"

"Maybe it's for me, not for you," he teased.

"I'll shove it up your ass, I swear!"

"Too small to be of any interest." Shepard looked at him with wide eyes. Garrus laughed even more. "What's the human expression? 'Go big or go home'?"

"Oh my God," Shepard nervously giggled, a hand over her eyes. "What did I do to you?"

"Unspeakable things my mom would be ashamed of," he replied, deadpan serious.

Shepard laughed for good, though she kept it under control, mostly sniggering behind her hand. Mission accomplished, Garrus thought. He was getting good at this exercise.

He let Shepard relax as long as she needed, even handed her a tissue to wipe her tears at some point. Once sure she could go back to the mess without killing Kryik on sight, he put some order on the bar and stood up. Shepard sighed, regaining a bit of control over herself.

"Thanks, Garrus," she smiled before frowning a little. "Damn, it's becoming a habit."

"I'm not against it," he replied, knowing very well Shepard didn't dispense her gratitude easily. That certainly amused her.

"Come on, let's get this over with," she said as she aimed for the door.

Garrus followed Shepard but he noticed a bright colored spot moving on the docks by the window. A burgundy spot. Garrus stopped midway and turned to the window, scanning the footbridge a level above. Two Turians were indeed walking to the Normandy's airlock, and one of them wore the burgundy coat of the Cabal. The other one had the black and red armor of the Seventy-ninth flotilla. Fair skin, red tattoos, two broken fringes on the left. Garrus forgot to breath for a second.

Elin Fori, his first mentor, was coming his way.

TBC
I'm sorry for the delay, the last couple of weeks wasn't great for me (and I got obsessed with a Semper Fi illustration that took me a week to finish too, that didn't help) but I should post more regularly now. I didn't answer to any review from last chapter, I'm sorry but I won't, because I feel like too much time has passed for that. But, be certain I appreciated them all and reading them again has been like little rays of sunshine during those past shitty weeks. Thank you all for reading and I hope you'll enjoy this new chapter.

"Commander, we have a problem," Garrus said behind Shepard's back.

"Story of my life," she replied, spinning on her heels to go to the window. She wasn't really surprised, to be honest. Garrus' sudden interest for the window had had to be triggered by something after all.

There wasn't anybody on the docks pointing a bazooka at the Normandy or a mob of angry people with spikes and crutches after the elections either so Shepard took that for a win. Instead, Garrus was pointing at two alien figures on a level above, undeniably turians walking to the airlock and one of them easily recognizable thanks to her burgundy coat. Shepard wasn't one hundred percent sure it was Solana but which other turian biotic would come to the Normandy uninvited and with a very official looking guest? Kandros was still on Omega, for what Shepard knew.

"That's the Seventy-ninth's flotilla uniform, correct?" Shepard asked, lurking at the black and red armor the other Turian was wearing.

"Y-yes." His voice came out weakly. Garrus cleared his throats. "Yes," he repeated with more conviction, squaring his shoulders. "I believe we're going to have a visit from Major Elin Fori, Commander."

He was tensed. Shepard slid her hands in her pockets. She still had a lighter in her uniform and she played with it for a second while her mind worked. First, this was obviously related to the secret assignment Councilor Sparatus had given them a few weeks ago. Garrus had said something about Tarquin Victus being just a kid and that he shouldn't have been in charge of the mission. Which was weird because Turians didn't give a job to someone if they didn't believe that person was up to the task. There was something definitely fishy behind that.

Secondly, what the hell Solana had to do with that? She had been sent to Tuchanka to ensure the mission would be a success but she should have been back to the Cabal by now. What was she doing with Elin Fori, Garrus' only notable mentor before Shepard and one of the most feared instructors there was through the Hierarchy? Shepard had first heard of her thanks to one of Nihlus' friend, another turian Spectre who had spent ten years under Fori's protection – Athias Quo, that was her name. Fori had a terrible reputation and had a relatively low tiers due to her disdain for authority but she was nonetheless in charge of training hand-picked recruits to make the best out of them. Soldiers capable of staying under her command usually became lifers in the army and joined special divisions like the black ops or tried their chance as Spectres. Twenty-five out of the seventy-something turian Spectres working for the Council had been trained by Fori at some point, Quo had said – twenty-six now with Garrus. No one else had brought so many disciples to excellence. No one.
Were Fori's proteges still attached to her? The concept of this kind of relationship was difficult to grasp for an alien, Shepard had experienced it first hand but still had troubles with it, and she didn't really know if the devotion a protegee felt for their mentor faded over time. Shepard was Garrus' current mentor so he was supposed to follow her, not Fori, but Shepard was Human. Maybe it sufficed to put Garrus in an uncomfortable position.

"Well," Shepard sighed, "we don't exactly have a choice, do we? Let's go welcome our guests." Garrus nodded and turned to the door. "Just a thing," Shepard said. He stopped and looked at her over his shoulder. "I'd understand if you had to play the perfect Turian in front of Fori. You have my permission to be an ass with me." Garrus frowned but Shepard didn't let him talk. "You can even reunite with her or whatever, you're on shore leave after all. Now, let's go."

She managed to take two steps to the door before Garrus grabbed her forearm, leaning a little toward her to do so.

"Wait," he said, "I don't think you know how this work, Commander. I'm yours, period."

"Now's not the time to be my fake boyfriend, Vakarian," Shepard chuckled, a little embarrassed. Garrus frowned.

"My loyalty is yours," he clarified. "Of course I have a lot of respect for Major Fori but that doesn't mean I'll just ditch you on the spot. I'm perfectly happy to be your protegee and screw everyone if they don't approve. You're great, Shepard. Challenging as fuck but great."

Shepard laughed, more to hide her discomfort than anything else. Damn, she didn't know if Garrus was just his usual clumsy self uneasy with words or hitting on her. He had said weird things all day and it wasn't even noon.

"You're hurting the squishy alien," she said to put some distance between them. Garrus freed her and took a step back, apologizing. Shepard rubbed her forearm to make her lie a little more believable. Was she supposed to talk to him about their relationship, re-establish a few unspoken rules? Or did she just have to let it go because she was imagining things? Nihlus would know but there was no way in Hell she'd ask anything related to Garrus to her mentor. Now wasn't the time for that anyway. "We're done here?" she asked, more serious.

"Yes, Commander," he replied, straightening and squaring his shoulders.

Shepard walked out of the lounge, Garrus on her heels. Nobody had died in the mess during the interlude, though Javik had moved from the kitchen to the main table, now sat in between Lawson and Nihlus, watching the Turian with all his eyes. The tension was obvious but Shepard ignored it.

"Something came up," she announced, walking to the elevator without stopping. "Nihlus, we'll resume our discussion later."

"When?" he asked. "I don't have all day, you know?"

"Not my problem," Shepard replied. She called the elevator and heard Nihlus rant on the other side of the shaft. To her surprise, he came to her, glancing at Garrus when he got the chance.

"I want those clones alive," Nihlus suddenly announced, folding his arms.

It took a lot of self-control for Shepard to just not throw this asshole against the nearest wall and be done with him.

"You want to start a collection, Kryik?" she smiled instead, murder in her eyes. "That's creepy,
"even for you."

"They're people."

"I didn't see you try to protect the others," Shepard retorted, "you know, the clones of unrelated important human figures."

"Because I don't care about those."

The elevator's door open, which gave Shepard an excuse to put an end to the conversion. Maybe Nihlus would take her silence as an agreement but that was a problem for another time, she decided as she smashed the button for second deck. Nihlus had always been weirdly obsessive over a few persons, Shepard and Saren in particular, but he was borderline crazy now. He wouldn't be the first Spectre to see their moral compass completely fucked up over the years. Should she alert the Council? Shepard didn't like the idea. Nihlus wouldn't do that if she was at fault. No, if something was wrong with her, Nihlus would first talk to Anderson. Shepard didn't consider him as her mentor, he had been her boss for a long time and they were friends now, more or less, but he would be from a Turian's point of view. Shepard rubbed her eyes. She had to talk to Saren. That was just fucking great.

Shepard walked to the airlock, focusing on the next task. She would have liked to have a weapon with her, just in case, but she'd have to count on her biotics only this time. Well, and Garrus, she thought, frowning a little. Close combat wasn't a problem for him, her butt remembered it pretty clearly from the training session this morning. She'd have to work on that.

The doors opened with their habitual woosh on the tallest Turian Shepard had ever seen. Garrus was already tall for his species' standards but Fori easily towered over him by ten centimeters, if not more. Her face was pale, with red tattoos damaged by time and countless fights, and her eyes were of an intense red. Two of her fringes on her left were broken, otherwise she didn't have any visible scar, but she didn't need any to look frightening. Shepard noticed Fori was armed, gun and shotgun, and she had indeed Solana with her. Shepard didn't know the expanse of Solana's biotics, but turian ones weren't powerful in general – Saren was an exception. Shepard clenched her fists. She wasn't bad herself either if it came to that.

"Major Fori," she saluted, "what can I do for you?" Fori's eyes narrowed on Shepard and she apparently decided to be straightforward too.

"Spectre Shepard, Spectre Vakarian, the Hierarchy is requesting your assistance," she said, barely opening her mouth – Turians didn't use their mouth to modulate sounds like Humans or other species and consequently didn't have to open it most of the time. They did it to express different emotions and intentions, in general.

"We take our orders from the Council," Shepard replied, folding her arms and falling to a hip. "I thought I'd made it clear last time."

"We both know the Council cannot be involved in this affair," Fori calmly insisted. "This request is connected to the recent events on Tuchanka. The Hierarchy would like to hear your version of the story, since no report has been released."

Shepard would have loved to tell Fori to go fuck herself with her request and to remind Fedorian he wasn't her boss, but that was the anger speaking. The request was polite and justified, so there was no reason to search for trouble. Shepard turned nonetheless to Garrus, to see what he was thinking about this. He exchanged a look with her and slightly shrugged. Nothing suspicious. Shit.
"Okay, fine," Shepard sighed, "but I'm going to complain the whole time."

"I wouldn't have expected anything else from you, Spectre," Fori replied. That bitch, Shepard thought, smirking. "This way," the Major continued, opening an arm.

Shepard followed Fori and Solana out of the Alliance part of the docks, Garrus just behind her. People were looking at her and she didn't blame them. The first human Spectre with three Turians on an election day, that was hella suspicious. Besides, Turians were even less appreciated than before on Arcturus Station since the arrest of several high ranked Alliance members a few months back. Shepard just hoped being in such company would discourage any journalist waiting for her after customs.

Wishful thinking didn't work, of course. As soon as Shepard passed the well guarded customs, a dozen journalists jumped on her back, their hovering cameras already rolling, screaming their questions more than asking them.

Shepard had a conflicted relationship with the press. The Alliance made sure each and every of their heroes appeared on the news. It was part of their effort to promote colonization and the constant progress Humanity was making throughout the galaxy. She had had to do a lot of interviews and press conferences after Torfan, and she had hated every minute of it. She always had been blunt and suspicious of people, and she had never been trained to talk to the press, so of course the experiment quickly turned to hell. The question rained on her, she hesitated, her words were twisted, and in the end she just told the journalists to go fuck themselves.

Her heartless and ruthless bitch reputation came from those days, actually. A clever asshole had found the "Butcher of Torfan" nickname for one of his headlines and it still stuck to her to that day. What had they expected, really? She was twenty-four, it had been her first real battle, seventy-two hours in Hell, more dead around her than in her worst nightmares, most of them because of her dumb orders, and three days later she was shaking hands with officials and pushed in front of the cameras because she suddenly was a hero. "Murder gets you places," Magos had told her a few months ago on Omega. He couldn't have been more right.

Shepard's second confrontation with the press happened shortly after her nomination as the first human Spectre. The Council would have liked to keep it as discreet as possible since Spectre were special agents dealing with their most sensitive problems, but "someone" had tipped the journalists off and Shepard had been outed in a matter of hours. The Alliance had then made a big deal out of it because the rabbit was out of the hole anyway, and Goyle, then the Earth ambassador, had more or less helped Shepard in her battle against the press. That didn't prevent Shepard from punching Khalisah al-Jilani and breaking her nose – twice.

So Shepard's relationship with the press wasn't good. She usually avoided those vultures and made sure nobody would know when and where the Normandy was supposed to dock – her work required a lot of discretion after all and she didn't mind threatening officers of all species to help them keep their mouth shut either. She kept her visits to the Citadel or Arcturus Station as short as possible, arriving unannounced and leaving before anyone could read the name of her ship on the hull. But she couldn't win every time, especially not a day like this one. The election had drawn half the galaxy's journalists to the station. Shepard was surprised to not hear al-Jilani's voice calling her over the others, to be honest. She scanned the small crowd while repeating she worked for the Council and had no comment whatsoever to give them, and her eyes caught the round and smiling face of a brunette staying a little outside of the circle. Oh. Diana.

Having three Turians with her actually paid off. Fori took a step forward, all tall and frowning, which was enough to discourage a few journalists. Solana, hood low on her face, gestured to
Shepard to keep moving and Garrus pushed her gently, shielding her from the questions as Fori started to give a "this is none of you business" speech. Turians didn't like the press in general. Information was strictly controlled within the Hierarchy. Everything not relied by the official channels was dismissed. It was one of the downside of their society, a very big one from a human point of view.

They soon reached the turian part of the docks and passed the guards in full armor, weapon within reach, that assured nobody would try to enter without authorization. Shepard would have kissed those guys if she had had the possibility.

"Shouldn't we wait for Fori?" Shepard asked as Solana kept on walking.

"She'll follow us," the biotic replied without even looking at her.

"Isn't her presence required for the meeting? She's guilty of having sent Victus on this mission even if he wasn't ready for it after all, right?"

"Oh, she figured it out," Solana mocked.

"Yeah," Shepard said on the same tone, "she's not as dumb as you'd think."

Solana snorted.

They soon stopped in front of an impressive frigate bigger than the Normandy, with red paint underlining her strong plating. Shepard could read "Heta Saramin" near the nose of the ship, both in Kaladran and Standard. Solana aimed for the airlock without hesitation.

"Wait," Shepard stopped her, "I'm not going anywhere."

The Cabal agent shook her head, a little annoyed. "We're not leaving the station," she said, acid. "The meeting will take place in comm room."

"That'd be nice to have a little intel, you know?" Shepard remarked as she walked up the ramp.

"Aren't N7s supposed to be ready for anything, anytime?" Solana replied.

That had to be a day for throwing Turians against the nearest wall, Shepard decided. She looked at Garrus over her shoulder and gave him a supportive smile when he caught her gaze. She totally understood why he wasn't eager to talk to his sister.

The inside of the Heta Saramin looked a lot like the first Normandy – or, to be accurate, the first Normandy had looked a lot like the Heta Saramin, which wasn't surprising considering all Normandy class Alliance frigates had been based on turian Heta class ships. The communication room was behind the CIC, down a few stairs, in a circular room but it didn't look like what Shepard remembered. Instead of a few hologram stations, the whole room was a quantum entanglement communication device and already working nonetheless. A dozen Turians were "present" to the meeting, their holograms much more colorful and lively than what could have been produced on board the Normandy SR-2. Shepard glanced at Fedorian, standing on the opposite side of the room. Quantum entanglement was a very new technology, one of the rare ones developed by Humans capable of rivaling with the rest of the galaxy's. Cerberus had been the first to use it for their communications and to manage to put one in a spaceship, the SR-2 Shepard had stolen less than a year ago. That meant someone had been awfully nosy.

"Spectres," Fedorian saluted.
"Primarchs," Shepard replied while Garrus gave a more formal salute in her back, fist on the chest and all.

A quick look around told her Solana had disappeared, and that high ranked Turians liked their robes. On the dozen summoned, eight of them wore the purple robes of the Primarchs. That was a good indication that the situation was serious. Considering Turians' social hierarchy was military-based, this assembly looked a lot like a martial court. Something was telling Shepard that Fori had crossed the line too many times.

"Thank you for joining us," Fedorian continued, hands in his back. Like we had a choice, Shepard thought. "As you certainly know, we would like to hear what happened on Tuchanka when you rescued the Ninth Platoon led by Lieutenant Tarquin Victus, under Major Fori of the Seventy-ninth flotilla's order. I trust you to tell us the truth," he added as he looked at Garrus, "regardless of your allegiances."

So Fedorian believed Garrus would try to cover Fori's ass, Shepard understood. By doing so, he'd have to lie, which would assure him troubles at some point. And they obviously couldn't ask for a moment to talk about what story they'd present to the court. Something was weird though. Why send Fori and Solana to get Shepard and Garrus here? They all could have conspired on their way to the Heta Saramin.

Ah, Shepard thought as she sighed, the jury had already decided Fori's fate, probably while she was on her way to the Normandy. Then Shepard and Garrus' testimony was just for the show.

"Garrus, go on," Shepard said as she folded her arms and took a step back. "I got knocked down and I don't remember everything so my statement won't help much."

Garrus nodded and started to talk in front of the assembly, his back so straight it must have hurt. Shepard didn't know if he had decided to lie but she certainly wasn't going to let him down. She wanted him to talk first in order to stick to his story when her turn would come. She'd take the blame if someone smelled their bullshit. She was human after all, not to be trusted, and she could easily have commanded Garrus to lie.

Garrus spoke for twenty good minutes, adding his thoughts and conclusions to his story and even re-enacting their banter – that was just embarrassing. Shepard remembered hearing Garrus yelling at Solana at some point but he didn't talk about that. He even hid the fact he was related by blood to the biotic sent on this mission. That upset Shepard a little but he was somehow right: that had nothing to do with their current problem.

Shepard's testimony was shorter. She retold the key points of the events but didn't go into details, using the excuse of her concussion to explain her limited memory. Then came the time for questions and debates. The first to talk was a Turian in a black robe, with some sort of funny bonnet covering his fringes, chaplets of black and white pearls dangling on one side. Turians liked their uniforms, it gave them visual clues to figure out which rank their interlocutor had, but Shepard had never seen such disguise before, and nobody cared to give her names and functions. He was the only one to wear black in the assembly though. The three other remaining had light armors on, three different combinations of color so three different regiments, but one of them wore the black and red armor of the Seventy-ninth flotilla.

"Spectre Vakarian," the Turian in black said, his voice higher than what Shepard had expected, "you said you suspected Lieutenant Victus to be too inexperienced for this mission and it turned to be true. You've served twelve years under Major Fori. Is she familiar with this kind of methods?"

"Yes, Sir," Garrus replied. Shepard frowned a little. She had hoped he'd use a title.
"And we all know she gets her results with those methods," one of the Turians in armor interrupted, clearly annoyed. "The Hierarchy has been on her ass for years for her disrespect of the rules but you still count on her to forge the best soldiers we currently have. You have one example right in front of you," he said, pointing at Garrus. "Vakarian is one of the youngest turian Spectres ever nominated and that's certainly not thanks to C-Sec's training."

"I agree," one of the Primarchs on the left said, raising his voice. "Fori never failed us, she always insures the mission's success. The kid may have been unsuitable for Tuchanka but Fori's recruits did the job nonetheless."

"Well I had to call Spectre Shepard to clean up the mess," Fedorian reminded everybody. Shepard would have liked to remind him it didn't exactly happen like that but a look to Fedorian informed her now wasn't a good time to speak, so she kept her mouth shut.

"Spectre Shepard and Spectre Vakarian did help, it's true," the other Primarch said, "but they didn't do all the work. Their arrival put Fori's team back on track, they restored a clear hierarchy within what was left of the ranks, but the job was done by that Cabal agent named Kan."

"Yeah, Fori's toy saved the day," another Primarch snorted. "We cannot tolerate to have a Cabal agent freely roaming the galaxy with an even more crazy bitch. This has to stop."

A few heads agreed but the Turian in black intervened. "Watch your language, Primarch Icci," he said. "This is a matter for another day and another council. Primarch Dilomen, please, continue."

The Primarch interrupted by Fedorian spoke again. "My point is, the mission was a success, once again. Fori never lets us down. Her attitude annoys you, very well, she annoys me too, but she is one of the bests, training the very best. I'm more concerned as to why Lieutenant Victus was under her command. Fori handpicks her recruits but Victus has been pushed on her laps by you, Rear Admiral Enett."

"I'm in charge of the Seventy-ninth flotilla," the Turian in red and black armor replied. "I saw potential in Victus and made sure he would be in an ideal environment to express his talents to the fullest. Fori is my subordinate, I can place whoever I want under her command."

"You recommended Tarquin Victus for his next tier each time you could," Dilomen said.

"I did," confirmed Enett.

"And you're a friend of General Adrian Victus, father of Tarquin, aren't you?"

Shepard was a bit lost – and uninterested – but Garrus' sudden attention for the conversation kicked her curiosity. Primarch Dilomen was trying to save Fori's ass by accusing Admiral Enett to have pushed Tarquin Victus up the social ladder because he was a friend of the kid's father. Helping your friends' children getting their first job was kind of usual for Humans, everybody relied a lot on their network, but it was almost a crime for Turians. They had to earn their tiers, prove they were worth the responsibilities. The best way to piss off a Turian was to imply they had cheated one way or another to gain their tiers, every Alliance soldier knew that.

"Spectre Shepard," the Turian in black said, catching Shepard off guard, "Spectre Vakarian, you may leave. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Anytime, Sir," Shepard replied, "but just call me on the Normandy next time. I have one of those fancy quantum entanglement communication device too after all," she added, glancing at Fedorian. He smirked in the distance. They saluted and left.
"Well that was a waste of time," Shepard ranted once out of the communication room, Garrus just behind her. "I could have sent them an email or a recording, 'would have been the same."

"Those can be corrupted," Garrus said, "not this kind of video conference."

"Have you been studying quantum entanglement on your spare time, Vakarian?" Shepard asked innocently.

"During my time in the army, yes. Well, the theory back then."

Shepard looked at him for a second and sighed. She had to go easy on the paranoia. The Turians certainly had had access to human technology but that was years ago. Oh well, that wasn't her problem and she certainly wouldn't alert Anderson or anybody else. There was no sign of Solana or Fori around but Shepard didn't really care. She was done with that, as far as she was concerned.

"That guy is eying you hard," Shepard noticed as she walked to the airlock.

"It's a woman and, huh, I know her," Garrus replied.

"Oh, right," Shepard realized, "you must know a lot of people on this ship. Well, we're on shore leave so you can stick around and say hi if you want." It would be better, actually. Shepard was sure Diana was still around, waiting for her, and, knowing the reporter, they could easily end up in the closest hotel to fuck their brain out. It would be easier for her if Garrus wasn't towering over her, studying Diana as a potential threat like his usual self.

"I don't know," Garrus shrugged. "I asked for a leave and never went back nor gave news so..."

"Well it's the perfect occasion to apologize for your shitty attitude then," Shepard decided. "Laters!"

The look of utter betrayal on his face almost made Shepard rethink her strategy but she forgot her guilt once out of the turian part of the docks. She had been right to ditch Garrus. Diana was still here, waiting for her, with her usual very short skirt and very, very low neckline. It was all a game, she had told Shepard once at breakfast. She played on her appearance to distract and surprise. Shepard was the living proof it worked.

Diana was otherwise rather petite and had a coy smile, with adorable cheeks and sharp blue eyes, the only feature betraying the bloodthirsty shark she was. Diana was a war reporter working for the Alliance, so her job was to basically do propaganda and glorifying traumatized soldiers. Shepard didn't meet her because of Torfan though, but on shore leave on Arcturus Station years later. An Alliance goon had grabbed a waitress' ass in a bar, Shepard had punched the guy in the face to teach him some respect, and Diana had offered her a drink and a pocket of ice later. They had spent the rest of the night fucking like crazy in the nearest hotel. Shepard had only learned who Diana was when she saw her on television a few months later but they never brought work in bed. That was what Shepard really liked about Diana. Jobs, careers and reputations were forgotten when they enjoyed each other's company.

"Hi," Diana saluted as Shepard came to a stop next to her. "It's good to see you, Commander."

"Allers," Shepard replied with a military nod of the head. They both fought their amused smile. "Where is the rest of the venue?"

"They're never far, and they'd die to have your opinion on the results of the election. Udina won, by the way."
"Well shit," Shepard grunted. She looked around and indeed saw a bunch of journalist gathered around what looked like an Alliance uniform. The coast would be clear for a minute or so. "I suppose my budget will be drastically cut."

"That and much more awaits you," Diana said. She reached between her breasts with two fingers and took out a small plastic rectangle attached to a key chain with a little glass sphere dangling from it. "For you," Diana added, placing her present in Shepard's hand.

"What is it?"

"My music collection. I told you I'd give you a copy, remember?"

That made no sense at all so Shepard considered this piece of plastic had much more importance than it looked like. "Are you in trouble, Diana?" Shepard asked on a lower voice, leaning a little toward her friend.

Diana raised a hand to touch Shepard's cheek and smiled. "You're so sweet, darling." She gave Shepard a quick smack on the lips. "But you should really worry about you, not me."

So this stick was really important, Shepard realized. "Thank you," she said as she put it in her pocket.

"The scary Turian is coming back," Diana replied, taking a step back.

Shepard looked over her shoulder, expecting Fori, but the Major wasn't alone. Garrus was with her, walking a step behind, like he usually did with her. Shepard didn't like it.

She had to admit they both could be impressive – except that she knew Garrus was a nerd obsessed with his toys. Both were pretty tall and looked massive in their armors, but the uncomfortable feeling Humans had around Turians was caused by their eyes. Much like birds on Earth, Turians could "zoom" on something thanks to a complicated muscle network shaping the eyeball, which gave their eyes that distinct predatory intensity most aliens didn't like. Shepard had learned to ignore it and had even mocked Nihlus a lot for squinting so much.

Fori didn't seem happy at all, Shepard noticed. "You should go," she warned Diana.

"Don't mind if I do," the brunette agreed. She squeezed Shepard's arm gently. "Be careful, Jane."

"I will." Diana smiled and swayed her hips as she left – Shepard found it difficult to focus on something else at that moment. Damn, she'd tap that, but her timing was awful.

"Spectre Shepard," Fori called from a distance.

Shepard turned to her and decided to play it cool. Fori was angry but Shepard didn't have much to do with that. Whatever the conclusion of the previous meeting, she had only testified and was not responsible of Fori's previous deeds. Ultimately, the Major had dug her own grave.

"Major," Shepard saluted as Fori came to a stop way too close for her tastes.

"How dare you?" Fori spat, looking at Shepard from her high tower. How dared she? How dared she what?

"I'm afraid I don't follow," Shepard replied politely.

Fori grabbed her by the collar and Shepard suddenly felt very small and fragile in her uniform. She
gathered energy in her clenched fists, just in case.

"You let Garrus on his own on my ship," Fori growled. Oh, so it was a security problem. A few apologies should do. "And you call yourself his mentor?!"

"Huh, sorry, what?" Shepard frowned, truly surprised. "I don't see how..."

A punch interrupted her and threw her on the floor. Shepard rolled on the metal plates by reflex and jumped on her feet in an instant, spitting a mouthful of blood. Everything hurt for a second but Shepard knew how to keep the pain at bay when needed. She contracted the muscles of her right arm, preparing a biotic throw to even the score with Fori but Garrus was suddenly kneeling in front of her, his hands on her shoulders and blocking the view. Shielding her again.

"Shepard, you're okay?" he asked anxiously, but he didn't wait for her answer and turned to Fori. "Elin, what the fuck?!"

Shepard snorted. First names, huh?

"Shut up," Fori spat with disdain. "She should have been with you and you know it."

"It was between Sol – I mean Kan and me, Elin," Garrus replied as he helped Shepard get up. "It was long overdue," he admitted. Shepard swapped the blood on her chin with her wrist. So Garrus had tried to talk to Solana? And Fori didn't seem to know Garrus and Solana were siblings. That was trouble material alright. "The press is coming," Garrus added as he looked over Shepard's head. "Let's pass customs, they won't be able to follow us."

"You coming, Fori?" Shepard asked as Garrus pushed her forward. "We have a score to settle."

"Go fuck yourself," the Major replied as she turned heels.

"Will do!" Shepard laughed, knowing fully Turians saw masturbation as something pathetic and almost shameful for an individual.

"Don't push it," Garrus warned her in a whisper. "She's capable of shooting you in the back."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," Shepard mocked, blood and saliva escaping her mouth again. She tentatively touched the cut in her mouth with her tongue and winced. Her left jaw hurt like a bitch and she was also bleeding a little on her right temple. Fantastic. "What happened with Solana?"

"We argued," Garrus grunted, "and we may have started a fire in the ship."

"Well I'm glad you didn't talk on our way back to Palaven then," Shepard snorted. Fori's anger was easier to understand though. A fire in a spaceship, even docked, could have terrible consequences. "You okay, big guy?"

"She said, bleeding all over her uniform. I'm not the one injured, Shepard."

"Pfff, this but a scratch." She saluted the Alliance soldiers at customs with a big bloody smile. Those assholes didn't even move when she got attacked, but at least they'd keep the journalists at bay. "I won't force you to talk, Garrus," she eventually said, activating her omnitool, "but you know where to find me if you feel like it, alright?" He nodded. Good. That meant they'd get drunk in the near future. Shepard didn't mind at all. "EDI," she called through the radio, "call everyone back to the ship, we leave ASAP."
"Yes, Commander," EDI replied.

"Something came up?" Garrus asked.

"Udina won the election."

"So what? You work for the Council."

"Yeah, but he often forgets that," Shepard snorted, "and I don't want to give him any idea. We're leaving Arcturus Station before he can come here and remind me I'm Human and I owe the Alliance a lot."

"What about Kryik and his drell spy?"

"Myeah, what to do about them," Shepard grumbled.

Udina was going to cut her budget at some point, it was a question of weeks or months, no doubt about it. Shepard wouldn't cooperate with him so he'd attack her the only way he could and that was the money. The Alliance paid for the soldiers on board, from their salaries to their food and everything in between. Even with her pay, Shepard couldn't afford all of that because being the proud owner of a war frigate was freaking expensive. She could sell her apartment on the Citadel but that would only push the problem to another time. She could fire a few people, Westmoreland, Campbell, Daniels, Donnelly, Cortez, Gardner, they'd just be transferred elsewhere, but she already had a skeleton crew and that would only put more pressure on the others. She could also fire her own employees, like Williams or Wrex, but she wouldn't save much. Wrex practically worked for free – as long as he was fed and could go on a mission once in a while, he was a happy Krogan – and the two thousands credits of Williams' pay wouldn't change anything. Fuck, Shepard thought, she'd have to take Nihlus' deal. Two millions and a half per month – plus half of his bonuses, she decided – for tolerating the Drell on her ship wasn't that bad. She'd find a way to keep Kryos in check. Heck, she could wait to be in a remote system in the Terminus, throw him by the airlock and tell Nihlus his friend had died during an assault or something. That wouldn't stop her from sleeping at night.

"Can you do me a favor?" Shepard asked over her shoulder as they walked in the Normandy's airlock.

"Of course."

"Go tell Nihlus I take his deal and get him out of here." She really didn't want to see that fucking asshole now. "I'll be in Lab2 for some stitches."

"No problem," Garrus agreed. "Take your time, I'll deal with the preparations for departure with Joker and Javik."

"What would I do without you, Vakarian?" Shepard teased.

"You'd be dead," he joked. "Three times, at least." Shepard laughed, staining her uniform with even more blood.

Solus wasn't behind his computer or anywhere near his shiny machines when Shepard entered Lab2. Instead, she found him lying on his reclining chair in the back, what was considered a bed by Salarians.

"You okay, Doc?" Shepard asked. "I can come back later if..."
"I'm fine," Mordin replied, standing up with some difficulties. His knees and back cricked a little. "What can I do for you, Shepard?"

She opened her mouth wide, blood and saliva running on her chin again. Solus chuckled before showing her a stool where she sat diligently, her feet hanging in the air. Mordin sat too and looked at her mouth.

"Need stitches," he confirmed before pushing a box of tissues in her direction. He then stood up to fetch his medical tools. "Marks on your cheek consistent with turian fist. Nihlus?"

"Garrus' previous mentor, actually."

"Ah," he smiled knowingly.

"He called her by her first name," Shepard commented, swapping her chin, "so, you know, they banged."

"Jealous?" Mordin teased.

"So jealous!" Shepard mocked, hands up in defense. Now that she was thinking about it, Solus knew a lot about Turians too. Maybe she wouldn't need to talk to Saren after all. "I also need your infinite knowledge, Mordin," Shepard continued, throwing the tissue in a trash can. "I know the relationship between a mentor and their protegee is very strong in current turian mainstream culture, but can it go beyond admiration and respect? Isn't it simply love?"

"Love nothing more than reaction to specific chemical components," Mordin replied, taking back his material to Shepard. He sat and showed her a syringe. "Local anesthetic." Shepard nodded her consent – she had had to clarify a few things with him after Tuchanka. "All species wired differently," Mordin continued, fixing a medical tread to a little hook, "and produce different hormones. Some have equivalents through most species, adrenaline, testosterone, oxytocin for example. Different names and chemicals, obviously, but automatically translated to equivalent nonetheless. Makes you think everybody secrete same chemicals. But," he said, starting the stitches, "not accurate, of course. Feel anything?"

"Hun hun," Shepard managed to answer. Mordin smiled and continued his handy work.

"Oxytocin usually responsible for feeling of attachment. What conditions a mother to be attached to her children, for example. Largely different in Turians. Oxytocin released when in group, because means security and comfort. Explained by pack mentality prevalent for most of their evolution. Basically, group more important than individuals. Salarians familiar with the process too, experiment same feeling toward clan." He took a look at the stitches. "Looks good." Shepard touched her cut with her tongue but the area was still numb.

"That doesn't explain what's going on between a mentor and their protegee," she commented, rubbing her jaw. It was a little swollen now.

"Oxytocin level skyrocketing in this situation," Mordin explained, throwing away the used medical supplies, "in both mentor and protegee. Create very strong bond."

"So it's love." Her cheek felt a bit weird when she talked.

"No, oxytocin alone not responsible for 'love', even in Humans. No equivalent chemical mix in Turians. I insist, they simply do not experience the feeling you call love. It doesn't exist for them."

"So what?" Shepard insisted. "How am I supposed to call it and deal with it, exactly? Because
between Nihlus going all psycho at the idea of killing my clones and now Garrus being all weird, I could really use a break."


"They're not me," Shepard sighed. "They're just girls who look like me."

"Didn't say it was logical," Mordin replied with a sorry smile. "Didn't notice anything weird with Vakarian though. Not feeling guilty about being a 'bad Turian' anymore, found security and comfort in crew, came to like you and know your limits. Attempts to humor you part of his personality. Often have the occasion to speak with him. Quite fond of his sense of humor."

"So I'm just imagining things," Shepard sighed. She didn't know if she felt relieved or disappointed. Not that she absolutely wanted Vakarian to fall for her, but her ego could do with a little compliment now and then.

"What things?" Mordin asked.

Shepard looked over her shoulder, just in case the door would suddenly open. "I thought he was flirting with me for a moment," she admitted, now embarrassed. "It's childish, I know, but it was kind of flattering to imagine Garrus Vakarian, lover of no squishy alien, being interested in me."

"Flirting quite normal between friends for Turians," Mordin reminded her, "but, can provide help." He stood up, hand on his knee. Shepard opened wide eyes when the Salarian knelt before her and took her hand. "Jane Shepard," he said, looking at her with his big amber eyes, "you are definitely an interesting human being and I would seriously consider you as a potential mate if I ever were interested in cross-species coitus."

"Oh my God," Shepard laughed uncontrollably, tears in her eyes. "That's the most romantic thing a Salarian can say to a girl!"

"It is," Mordin replied lightly, patting her hand. Then winced. "Shepard," he said, suddenly serious. "Yes?"

"Might need help to get up."

"Sure thing, Doc," she chuckled, "sure thing."

TBC
Shepard had summoned everyone shortly after their quick departure from Arcturus Station and Wrex didn't need more to know something was up. Mission-related meetings usually took place in the communication room but they all were in CIC this time. That wasn't surprising considering all the secrets in the two laboratories surrounding the communication room and the presence of Lawson and the Drell, who wasn't in his cell anymore. Wrex knew Kryik had come to talk about his self-proclaimed friend – he could still smell the Turian in the ship – so he supposed the release of the prisoner had to do with that. Why Krios was still around was a mystery though, but there was no doubt Shepard would answer the crew's questions.

She was standing on that ridiculous platform over the holographic projectors currently turned off, arms folded, her left jaw swollen and dark, her right temple bruised too. That wasn't Kryik's handy work there but another Turian's, a female Wrex had had the occasion to smell on Arcturus Station a bunch of times. Garrus had the same odor on him, plus Kan's and a hundred more, all turian. Their morning surely had been more interesting than his. Libraries cruelly lacked alcohol.

Joker limped his way to CIC from the cockpit, still wearing his civvies – nobody had had time to put on their uniform yet. "We're out of the Arcturus system, Commander," he announced, "two light-years from the closest lifeforms, all stealth systems activated."

"Good," Shepard nodded. "Thank you all to have come back so fast," she said. "I'll explain to you why in a minute, but first I'd like to introduce a new recruit, Thane Krios." She didn't need to point at the Drell for the crew to find him. Krios didn't even blink. He kept on standing next to Lawson, hands behind his back, eyes fixed on the wall in front of him. "And yes, he was our prisoner until this morning but Nihlus convinced me to reevaluate the situation." That was a lie or Wrex wasn't Krogan anymore. "Krios is an excellent sniper, I've heard, and a hand-to-hand expert. His primary job will be to watch over Lawson but he'll also train the crew in hand-to-hand combat." Shepard gave Wrex a quick look. They'd have to talk. "Now, we left Arcturus Station because Udina won the elections and I didn't want to be used for his propaganda. The investiture will take place in two weeks. That means he can't fuck with me for that time, he can't stop me from doing my job either. He technically can't but he'll do everything in his power to complicate my life since I'm not the docile human Spectre he dreams of."

"You don't know that," Ashley interrupted. That surprised Wrex. Ashley usually kept her mouth shut if Shepard was around, even in the evening when the Commander was staying on third deck for a drink after work – she tended to do that a lot recently. "Give the man a chance," Ashley continued, frowning. "He did a good job as the Earth ambassador on the Citadel."

Shepard was about to answer but Javik talked before her. "The crew must refrain from talking about sensitive matters like politic during their shift," he reminded everybody coldly.

"Aren't we legally on shore leave?" Ashley smartly retorted.

"You'll legally end the day in brigs for your insubordination," Javik added.

"Enough," Shepard barked before Williams could answer. "We don't have time to waste, people, whatever the reason. You are right, Williams, I don't know what Udina will do but I don't want to
take any chance. In two weeks, he'll be able to restrict the Normandy's movements in human space if I'm not on official business. That means no surprise attack on Cerberus on human ground. That's why we'll go to the Sol system right now." Alenko raised his hand like the shy kid he was. Shepard allowed him to speak.

"What's the target?"

"Henry Lawson," Shepard answered as his 3D picture appeared on the holoscreen and started to rotate. He looked like any other Human for Wrex: small, flabby, breakable. He would have learned more about him with his smell but people rarely cared to provide a sample for a Krogan. "And yes, he's related to the miss Lawson we have on board," Shepard continued. She gestured to Lawson, who straightened before speaking.

"He's my father," Lawson said loud enough for everyone to hear, "and we know he bought a clone of me from Cerberus."

"I'd buy one," Zaeed grinned. Shepard stared at him, annoyed, as new pictures popped up on the holoscreens, pictures of that Henry and a young woman looking a lot like the Lawson on board – expect for the hair, the young one had dark, shorter hair. Lawson stared at him, unimpressed, and judged him not worthy of her attention.

"He made his fortune with colonization," Lawson kept going, "and let's say his views on the role of Humanity in the galactic community are close of Cerberus'. It's a reasonable assumption to think he financed the organization at some point."

"Of course finding a money trail between Lawson and Cerberus is our priority," Shepard continued, "but we can still take him down because of the clone."

"So what's the plan?" Wrex asked. He felt his stomachs acting up again and he couldn't help his burp. "Sorry, I ate Mexican earlier," he lied. Vega looked offended, somehow.

"We need the element of surprise," Shepard said. "The Normandy was on Arcturus Station but we left right after the elections. People will think I fled to the Citadel or somewhere Udina can't reach me. Instead, we're going to the Sol system and we're not using the relay network for that. Sol is close anyway, we'll reach the system in thirty-six hours instead of three."

Wrex frowned. Travels between systems weren't as safe as what people thought. The heliosphere created by the winds emanating from a star protected the planets within from the interstellar medium, its weird physical properties and crazy amount of radiations. The interstellar medium was mostly empty but for traces of hydrogen and helium, filaments between systems, remains of denser clouds. You wouldn't even notice one of those if you were immobile in it, but ramming into one hundreds of time faster than the speed of light could destroy a ship in a fraction of a second. That was mainly why the exploration of close systems around a relay took forever. You had to go slow to avoid matter filaments on uncharted routes, which cost a lot and could easily turn to hell. The Protheans had done it before the fall of their empire but the current leading species weren't willing to do it. Less exploration meant less members of the galactic community anyway. It served the Council to keep the number of species low. Less competition for them.

"From there," Shepard continued, "the plan is to keep a low profile while we gather the intel we need about Lawson's location, security and the all of that. The odds are not in our favor, people," she warned them. "The European spaceport is in Germany, hundred of kilometers from London where Lawson should be, that means there won't be many aliens in the streets, none in combat gear due to weapons regulation laws. We'll be super easy to spot and nobody will think we're there just for a fun shopping afternoon. We have to find a way to stay under the radar."
Garrus hesitantly raised his hand. "If I may Commander, I'd recommend a nocturnal attack."

"You read my mind, Vakarian," Shepard smirked. Wrex snorted. The kid would have wiggled his tail of satisfaction if he had one. "Lawson and I still have a lot to discuss before I can present you a plan. Lawson, Vakarian, Javik, Solus and Wrex, you stay here. Joker, take us to Sol. The rest of the crew is dismissed and will resume work tomorrow morning."

"Except for me," Gardner grunted.

"Bitch please," Joker mocked, "who's gonna be up for the next thirty-six hours, piloting in interstellar space? Not you."

"I'll make coffee," Alenko said as he followed the rest of the crew to the elevator.

"Call me when you want a ring on your finger, babe!" Joker joked, already going back to the cockpit. Alenko blushed, suddenly walking faster. Wrex grumbled. Fagots.

"Krios," Shepard added, "a word." The new little green man walked back from the elevator but Shepard waited for the others to be gone before talking. "Kepral's Syndrome, is that right?"

"It is, Commander," the Drell confirmed with a small nod of the head. "It is not contagious to other species, you don't need to worry about it."

"Prolonged contact with skin may cause mild hallucinations though," Mordin intervened coldly. "Should refrain from training with the crew." Wrex knew the guy enough to imagine why he couldn't stand Krios. First, Drells were terribly slow from a salarian point of view, but what certainly irked the professor was the famous drell bigotry. They believed in their gods, they believed hard and often preached. Salarians were more spirituals than religious, and it wouldn't even occur to them to try to convince their neighbors to join their cult. They hated proselytism with a passion.

"Krios is not going to sit on his ass all day either," Shepard retorted. "He's gonna work like the rest of us."

"This is not a problem to me," the Drell assured. "I am glad to be of any service."

"Right," Shepard snorted. "Anyway, you're going to establish your quarters in Life Support. You'll have a better control on the atmospheric parameters there." She turned to a shocked Turian. "Congrats! You get a bigger room. Move your stuff in Liara's ex-quarters as soon as you can." The kid winced. Shepard rolled her eyes. "What?"

"It's, huh..." he hesitated. "The room is pretty big, bigger than my apartment on the Citadel actually and, huh..." Wrex chuckled. Turians lived in spaces adequate to their social status. A thirteenth tier like Garrus probably lived in a hutch, especially on the Citadel.

"Then petition for a roommate or whatever, I don't care," Shepard sighed, annoyed. Garrus looked miserable but didn't dare protest. "You can go, Krios," she added, dismissively waving her hand at him from her platform.

"Actually, Commander," the Drell said, "I'd like to share my quarters with miss Lawson."

"Lawson is my prisoner and she'll sleep where I tell her to sleep," Shepard replied. "She'll stay in crew quarters and you are forbidden to enter that room."

Krios blinked of all his eyelids before bending a little in a quick salute. "As you wish,
"Commander." He turned to the elevator and nobody talked before the doors closed on him.

"What did he do to deserve so much love?" Wrex mocked. "The guy's been the perfect prisoner since you threw him in brigs. I talked a bit to him some nights, he's a good guy."

"He's here because Nihlus wants to keep an eye on Lawson," Shepard replied, turning to Wrex. "He's a spy as far as I'm concerned. That's why I want him to train the crew with you. That'll give Lawson and I some alone time."

"By the way," Lawson intervened, "thank you for that, Commander."

"Don't mention it," Shepard shrugged.

"You trust that woman more than Kryik's friend?" Wrex asked, surprised. "I can understand the female bonding or whatever there is between you two but, Shep, seriously?"

"Why wouldn't I trust Lawson?" Shepard retorted. "She can't lie."

"What?" Wrex and Garrus said at the same time. Lawson just arched an eyebrow.


"That explains a few things," Lawson realized. Wrex would have been furious if someone had tricked him like that but Lawson didn't seem angry. That meant she had been sincere from the beginning. She had had no intention to hide anything from Shepard, so the use of a truth serum had no importance to her.

"Wait," Garrus frowned, "a truth serum? Did you..."

"Moving on," Shepard suddenly declared. "EDI, the maps!" A whole city appeared over the holoprojectors and Wrex supposed it was London. He had never been on Earth yet and he knew very little about the places there. The city looked nothing like what he had seen before. It was very flat, with a few towers here and there in the center, around a small river with bridges, and newer districts in the distance, inspired by asari architecture. There were no fortification, no defensive systems either, nothing that looked remotely military. Something was telling Wrex that Humanity would have easily lost against the Turians if the fight had reached Earth and its cities.

"As you can see, there is no way for us to dock somewhere around London," Shepard announced, leaning on the railing bar over the map. "The closest public spaceport is in Frankfurt, in Germany. The Alliance has a base in Dusseldorf, it's closer, but we can't land there either if we want to stay off the radar. The Normandy will have to stay on low orbit, with all the risks it implies. Lawson?"

"My father owns a few buildings in London," she said as the map zoomed on one in particular, three white towers swirling together to insane heights, "but he lives in this one, the Lawson Towers. It's a small city within the city, with twenty thousands people living and working in a controlled self-sustaining environment. He installed his palace on top of the towers, one point eight kilometers above ground, in a glass bubble completely separated from the rest of the world." She paused a second, eyes almost closed, then continued. "The penthouse is a bunker. You can't break through the glass and security is tight. We can't barge in from the sky."

"Are those antennas?" Garrus asked, pointing at a spire on a side of the building.

"And maintenance and ventilation shafts, yes," Lawson nodded.

"Maybe we can use that."
"The only access I know is an elevator, big enough to lift a container, but it's too well guarded."

"I doubt your daddy's bodyguards ever fought against a team like mine though," Shepard smirked as she stood up. "Alright, it's not the final plan but it's the plan so far. Javik and Wrex, you'll both lead a team each and you'll knock on the big door. Lawson, Vakarian and I will find our way through the ventilation shafts. EDI, find us a way as soon as your maps are updated."

"Yes, Commander."

"Krios will want to come with us," Lawson warned.

"Myeah," Shepard grumbled. "I don't like the idea but who knows, maybe he'll be useful."

"Can we pick our own men?" Wrex asked.

"Yep," Shepard nodded. "Except for Solus. He's currently my favorite so I want to keep him safe." Mordin didn't appreciate the comment and Wrex knew why. The Salarian had reached his limit during his trip on Tuchanka and was still recovering. That was a big change compared to their mission in the weird spacestation out of the galactic disk. Mordin had showed signs of fatigue during and after that mission, but nothing comparable to what he was experiencing after Tuchanka. His smell was even a bit different than before. In short, his health wasn't getting better. Shepard was right to keep his skinny ass in the ship.

"I thought I was your favorite," Joker yelled from the cockpit.

"I thought it was the Turian," Wrex snorted to hide another dolor in his stomach. Garrus frowned, mandibles twitching, not amused.

"I thought that too," Javik added and something quite interesting happened. Shepard smirked but her smell completely changed. For a second, she reeked of fear and anxiety, the typical reaction when a secret was discovered.

Of course, Javik would know what Shepard was hiding. His mind had completely invaded Shepard's when he had woken up on Eden Prime, and she had managed to survive just because she had been in contact with a prothean Beacon a few years before that. Javik didn't need to touch Shepard to know what she was thinking and feeling because of that melding. It wasn't a melding like the Asaris did it, Javik had told Wrex once, more like a copy of Shepard's mind, memories included, living within him. Touching her sort of updated the data he kept, but he didn't need to do that often. Shepard was an adult, her core personality didn't change much now. Her feelings could though, and apparently she was more attached to the Turian than what she let appear. Wrex chuckled. Oh he'll just love to tease her with that, he knew it.

"He can't be my favorite anymore because he abandoned my Black Widow on Tuchanka," Shepard lied to change the subject.

"Your new one awaits on the Citadel," Garrus grunted. "I told you last week."

"Too late, Vakarian," Shepard dramatically replied. "You betrayed me. Our relationship will never be the same again."

"I'll keep it for me then."

Shepard produced a funny undignified little squealing that made Wrex laugh. "Dismissed," she grumbled, her cheeks redder than usual. "No need to make further plans as long as we don't have a clear idea of what we'll face. Lawson, stay with me for a minute."
Wrex waited to be in the elevator to talk to Javik, even if Garrus was with them. Talking to Javik had been somehow difficult lately, because of Wrex’ lies. He missed his friend a bit, to be honest, but he didn't see how he could repair what he had damaged. A simple excuse for lying to Javik wouldn't do it, truth was too important to Protheans for that. Maybe the next mission would help, maybe crushing security guards together would remind Javik how great they were together. But Shepard wanted them to both lead a team. They'd work together, sure, but not together together.

"So," Wrex hesitated, refraining a wince as his stomachs hurt again, "who do you want in your team? We're covered in biotics so we need a tech and support each, right?"

"Take who you want," Javik shrugged, "I don't care." The doors of the elevator opened on third deck before Wrex could say something else. "I'll give a tour to the Drell while you remove your belongings from Life Support," he said to Garrus.

"Thanks," the Turian replied, defeated. Javik left both of them, already yelling at the crew. Wrex sighed.

"Need a hand?" he asked, following Garrus in the corridor.

"Huh..."

"Yeah, I'm sure I've seen pretty much everything possible in my life so your shameful collection of photos of Shepard won't change anything," Wrex mocked. " Heck, I can even give you some if you want."

"I don't have pictures of her," Garrus grumbled as the door of Life Support opened. Wrex chuckled.

The air was warm and full of the Turian's smell, a mix of his own leathery body odor, gun oil, metal and rubber. The rubber was new though. Wrex looked around even if he hadn't been invited in and saw some sort of sculpted latex past on Garrus' desk, a gun handle with shavings all around. The handle wasn't for a three-fingers species. Wrex smirked. The kid was sculpting a customized one for Shepard's new Black Widow. If that wasn't dedication, he didn't know what else.

The room was otherwise clean and in order, as expected from a Turian. Wrex had never seen one messy, not even Nihlus. Garrus' collection of weapons was aligned on the wall, well cared for, but not charged. A few clips were hidden here and there in the room, Wrex learned as he watched Garrus regroup his belongings. Freaking Turians. People thought Krogans were dangerous, and they were right, but Turians weren't better. A good bunch of them never truly recovered from their mandatory military service. The most worrying were kept in the army but otherwise the others became civilians – not that the word meant something for them since every adult was technically part of the reserve. Normal, boring everyday life didn't suit them, that was why so many mercs were Turians. They needed a battlefield to exist, especially the generation who had lived through the Relay 314 Incident. Those were between seventy and fifty years old now, the age of adulthood and the first companion for Turians. They would surely produce healthy kids not xenophobic at all, Wrex ironically thought.

Everything Garrus possessed fit in two military suitcases and some sort of backpack. It was kind of sad to be honest but Wrex didn't want to pity the kid because he had even less in his name. He helped him carry everything to his new quarters, a room easily four to five times bigger, dark, cold and still smelling like Liara. Her bed was untouched in the alcove behind her office. Wrex regularly had news of the kid via emails but he missed her nonetheless. He had liked Liara from the beginning, contrary to Shepard who had kept her distances for months with the clumsy archeologist. Liara's addition to the crew had been refreshing. She wasn't a soldier nor a mercenary, she had lived a civilian life far from a militarized society, she had had a mother, friends to argue
with without any dramatic consequences, she had gone to school, to restaurants, to museums, to movies without imagining for a second people, maybe friends, were dying at the same time. Wrex knew Shepard had hated Liara's innocence at first but he had welcomed it, embraced it and even loved it. Damn, he missed her, and he put the pain in his abdomen on that feeling.

"You think I can move the bed to the reserve?" Garrus asked, leaning his suitcases against a wall. "I can't use it."

"Ah, of course," Wrex mocked, "you use Shepard's."

"What?" Garrus frowned.

"You know," Wrex said and he vigorously jerked his hips against an imaginary girlfriend.

Garrus clicked, annoyed. "You people are obsessed with that," he grumbled.

"With what?" Wrex snorted. "Sex? On a military ship, with a lot of free time on our hands? Oh Garrus, how naive you are."

"I'm far from naive," the Turian replied, folding his arms, "and I'm fully aware of how soldiers pass time. I was referring to Shepard and I. There is nothing sexual between us."

"Yeah, keep telling you that, kiddo," Wrex stepped back, hands up and smirking. He didn't let Garrus time to think too much about it. "Anyway, grab the mattress," Wrex said, "I'll take the spring-bed."

Garrus frowned before complying. They both were tall and strong enough to not be really bothered by the furniture. An elevator ride and a couple of stairs later, they put them in the small local with spares of everything in the inter-bridge Legion had claimed as its. The Geth looked at them, a book in hand, but didn't offer to help.

"What are your thoughts on the teams?" Wrex asked as they walked back to the elevator. The damn thing had been used by somebody else meanwhile and they had to wait for it.

"Why don't you ask Javik?"

"There's a bit of a bad jam between us," Wrex admitted, looking at Javik's door on his right. That was the first time he told it to anyone. It felt weird – and burning, but that was his stomachs again.

Garrus folded his arms as he waited for the elevator, thinking for a few seconds. "How bad is the jam between Tali'Zorah and you?" he asked, pointing at Tali's door.

"Very bad," Wrex winced. They could still work together because they both knew how to do their job, but trust and friendship were probably gone for good. It was better that way. Tali was a Quarian, she couldn't be exposed to Wrex' shit.

"I don't know what Lawson and Krios are capable of," Garrus said, "so it's better for you and Javik to have teams of four, just in case we need backup. You should take Legion as tech, it can double as support. Massani and Vega for support too."

"Why them?"

"Because Javik can't stand Massani and Vega can learn from you more than from Javik, I think," Garrus explained.
"And who will go with Javik then?"

"Tali'Zorah, Alenko and Williams."

"Javik doesn't need another biotic and he'll lack firepower with that configuration," Wrex replied. Not that Javik needed it. "I'll take Kaidan and Vega will go with Javik, it's better that way."

Garrus looked at Wrex as the elevator's doors opened, mandible twitching. "You made your choice before asking me, didn't you?"

"I did," Wrex smirked, walking in with the Turian, "but you gotta learn, kiddo. I have ten times Shepard's experience and I know her people as well as her, if not better." He poked his nose when Garrus looked unconvinced. "You can lie with your mouth and your body, but not with your smells, not to a Krogan anyway."

Garrus, pressing the button for third deck, kept on staring at Wrex with his piercing blue eyes. "I too have something to detect liars," he said, and Wrex felt his insides doing knots. Dammit, he should have eaten in that Mexican restaurant, maybe it would have ended up better for him.

"Yeah?" Wrex smiled, uncomfortable.

Garrus taped his visor. "Heartbeat frequency. But a good liar can trick it. Shepard usually is a good liar, and she sure knows how to dodge the bullet when she doesn't want to talk, but you're a shitty one all the time." Wrex gulped. Could Garrus' toy also detect what grew inside him? "So," the Turian continued, savoring his words, "about that truth serum..."

Idiot, Wrex thought but he felt relieved nonetheless as the doors closed.

Shepard's work rarely took the crew to overpopulated planets with glistening cities so vast you couldn't see the end of it. Wrex had been impressed by the large bright areas all over the planet during their descent through the atmosphere. Those cities were like abyssal bio-luminescent creatures with countless tentacles inviting their preys into their traps. It reminded him of Illium but ground level was nothing like the asari colony. The buildings were small and old, glued together in a smog smelling like rotting fish, coal and Humans. Wrex was kind of disappointed, to be honest.

It was stupid to start their invasion by the Lawson Towers' entrance on ground level so Cortez opened fire on the windows of a level close to the top. Wrex jumped first in the building, Javik just behind him. They made sure nobody was in that large apartment they had landed in while the rest of their teams followed them. Wrex gave the all clear to Shepard and the shuttle left them. The big elevator Lawson had mentioned was in a maintenance shaft at the center of the first tower. It was supposedly well guarded but probably not this high in the structure. Surely alarms had started ringing all around with this intrusion but the teams would be on their way up by the time any guard would show up.

Wrex took point with his team while Javik and his men took the rear. EDI's maps were up to date and the security system couldn't do shit against a single Geth so it didn't take long for them to find first the stairs, then the maintenance shaft. The only problem they encountered was the doors. They just were not the right size for Krogans and it proved difficult to pass through. The elevator was more like a big platform with railing all around than a closed box. Good. Wrex didn't like to be a sitting duck. A hack later, the elevator was theirs and all the doors giving on the maintenance shaft electromagnetically locked. They just had to sit tight and enjoy the ride until the top.

"Shep," Wrex called by the radio, the pain in his stomach waking up after a few hours of tranquility, "how is it going for you?"
"Turians are not made to crawl in ventilation towers," she replied, quite amused. Wrex heard Garrus growl something behind but he didn't get it quite right. "Krios helped though. I swear the guy is boneless. That's both impressive and disgusting. And you?"

"It's been easy so far," Wrex shrugged. "High security is a joke on your planet."

"Ow, don't be sad," Shepard mocked, "there'll be bad guys to shoot at later."

"I'm pretty sure we're the bad guys this time, Shep," Wrex replied, half-joking.

"It's a question of point of view," she admitted. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm the classic misunderstood hero saving Humanity's ass against its will, again."

Wrex snorted. An explosion a few stories above destroyed one of the elevator's door. Javik used his biotics to stop the metallic debris raining in the shaft and threw them back. "Gotta go," Wrex said before shutting down the radio. He had waited for something like that to use his Christmas present. Wrex took the black hole gun from his back, vaguely aimed while it charged and pulled the trigger. A radiant sphere of energy formed in the middle of the security guards and teared off weapons, members and even a part of the corridor as the elevator continued to go up. Wrex waved at the panicked survivors when the platform passed in front of the exit.

"That was..." Vega hesitated.

"Disgusting," Williams spat. "What the Hell, Wrex?!"

"I was going for efficient," Vega commented, "but, yeah, kind of disgusting too." Zaeed chuckled.

"We're not here to play nice," Wrex reminded the Humans, putting the gun in the small of his back. The pain in his abdomen was slowly pulsing. That was new. He felt a warmth growing in his stomachs, expending with each pulse.

"Those guys are not soldiers or mercs!" Williams kept on yelling. "They're security guards! They're not paid to deal with this kind of shit!"

"Security guards with military grade weapons," Zaeed intervened. He was right to do so. Anything coming from an alien, or a friend of Shepard's, would only envenom the situation. "Look, Sweetheart, sure, they're paid to take care of reporters and activists, not outer space mercenaries and whatever this guy is," he gestured to Javik, who frowned in return, "but, first rule of the job, that's not our bloody problem."

"I'm not a fucking mercenary!" Williams cringed.

"You're an ex-Alliance gun for hire," Zaeed snorted. "If that doesn't qualify you as a merc, I don't know what else."

That didn't please the lady at all but Javik spoke before she could protest again. "Shut your mouth, the both of you. We are on a mission, people."

"Relax," Vega tempered, "everything is under control."

Wrex honestly thought for a second the kid had lost his mind. Javik didn't tolerate this kind of command and it showed on his face as he turned slowly to the Lieutenant, a green glow surrounding him already. Fortunately for Vega, who had pissed his pants at this point, the elevator suddenly stopped and all the maintenance lights went off, only to be replaced by red ones – plus Legion's lights and Javik's glow. Without the noise made by the elevator, even Wrex could hear
men yelling maybe two stories above them, at the top of the shaft. A comity was waiting for them. Good, that meant nobody would think to check Shepard's route.

"They cut the power," Tali said, keying on her omnitool.

"What about emergency generators?" Alenko asked, looking over Tali's shoulder.

"Not online."

"They cut the lines then," Zaeed understood, readying his assault rifle. "Smart bastards."

Wrex looked around and checked the maps on his omnitool. They could reach an elevator door giving on a maintenance corridor but the only way to Lawson's bunker was that damn shaft they were in. The platform was the only access, period, and it was protected by two layers of heavy reinforced horizontal steel doors maybe ten meters above them now, operated by hydraulic cylinders. That was a lot of work for a single Krogan, but this one had a magic gun with him. Wrex exchanged a look with Javik and they both nodded. The Prothean took the lead, jumping on the ladder along the shaft with ease, and ordered the others to follow. Wrex stayed back, took his black hole gun, aimed and pulled the trigger.

The flashing sphere of dark energy dug a hole in the melting doors and drops of red hot steel rained on the platform. Wrex jumped back against the wall to avoid them while Javik used his biotics to push what was left of the doors in the ground, with only one hand. Wrex had counted for the welcoming comity to fire at will once the doors opened but they were apparently too astonished to do anything. Zaeed used that to his advantage and threw a few grenades on what looked like a hangar above them. They felt the heat wave even in the shaft.

"I'm going in," Javik yelled over the noise. "Find cover and keep your formation."

And with that he released the ladder and jumped in mid-air, only to be lifted by his own biotics. That reminded Wrex of all those superheros movies the Humans in the crew were so fond of and he had to admit it was pretty cool – maybe he could learn to do that too.

"Legion," Wrex barked, "you go first."

"Affirmative," the Geth replied and he climbed over Zaeed and Alenko without even touching them, like an enormous metallic spider.

"Alenko," Wrex continued, "you're next. You two, cover the others while they climb."

"Yes Sir," the good little soldier yelled back.

A Human in heavy gear fell on the platform as Wrex reached the ladder. He was dead, his body twisted and broken before the fall, but his armor was interesting. That was military grade protection or Wrex wasn't Krogan. That meant Lawson had a few different teams securing his ass, maybe some old army goons like Zaeed. Security was a job like another after a contract in the army, regardless of your species.

Wrex was the last one on the ladder and he just had to raise his eyes to see Tali's lovely ass. He didn't say a word about it though – to take a kick in the face? no thank you – and eventually reached the hangar. It was a bloody mess, as expected. Javik wasn't holding back, throwing dudes around with his biotics, bullets bouncing off his shield, while Williams and Legion snipped all they wanted. Zaeed, Vega and Alenko weren't shooting much and Tali was busy hacking something, Wrex didn't know what. There wasn't much cover for a Krogan his size so Wrex decided to do without. He stood, Claymore in hand, and made sure to be generous with his bullets.
as he walked through the ranks. Fifty men in total, counting the already dead, maybe sixty, that wasn't much for a guy like Lawson.

A grenade rebounded on a nearby truck and rolled next to Wrex' feet. The explosion threw him on the ground but his barrier prevented a dolorous dislocation – growing back a limb took time and it was fucking annoying so Wrex tried to avoid that as much as possible. A little disoriented, Wrex rolled left and right to get back on his feet. It took him maybe three seconds to kneel, but that was enough for a guy to sneak in and stuck the barrel of his assault rifle against Wrex's forehead. Shit, he thought. His barrier was shattered by the first bullet. Wrex punched the Human in the guts but it only deviated so far the weapon, and the rest of the clip was unloaded in his throat.

Aralakh must have been watching over Wrex from outerspace because those bullets were regular, not full of plutonium or other chemicals that would have lit Wrex like a torch. Instead, they just reaped half his throat off and were ironically stopped by his armor, but on their way out in the back. Adrenaline helped to ignore the pain and Wrex used the few seconds he had before the massive blood loss to finish that guy, using a wrap on him to shred him from the inside. The Human died in an instant, regardless of his armor.

Krogans may have had secondary everything packed in their bodies but when your throat and lungs had been reaped apart, it didn't help to have two sets of balls. Wrex couldn't stand up, his head was already light and his vision blurry, with white and black spots appearing at random. Still kneeling, he had to stabilize himself with a hand on the ground and his orange blood splashed on the concrete floor. That was a lot of blood, Wrex thought, breathing heavily. He could feel bubbles forming in his lungs and all the tubes around but it wasn't dolorous. It was only one of those silly details you climb on to when you were hurt pretty bad. Wrex knew the oddity of the process well enough. He had almost died a bunch of times and he could remember all of those special occasions precisely, thanks to the thing growing in him. He didn't know why or how but the thing had done its work properly. Wrex had remembered so much in the past couple of weeks that he had felt obligated to write those memories down, for later, for when a bullet would have shredded his brain again, for posterity. For Shepard.

Wrex heard Tali scream his name in the haze of his asphyxiation but he was more interested in the black drops falling in the pool of his blood on the floor. Black wasn't normal, he vaguely thought, and that's when the pain finally hit him. Wrex roared as he felt all his organs being sucked, reaped out of his body, shredded into goo in the process. It was like something was pulling his guts by the hole in his throat, agonizingly slowly. He felt long burning treads sliding along his veins, along his muscle fibers, along his nerves, from his toes to his head, billions of sharp little hooks scratching whatever was left behind. It was worse than anything Wrex had even survived to, worse than that rocket that cut off his leg on his first paid job, worse than the bite of the absolute zero on his face when the glass of his helmet had exploded, worse than the wrap his father had used on him to shred him to pieces after his betrayal.

Long claws pushed Wrex' head on the side with so much force the hole in his throat became a gap extending to his shoulder. Wrex could see the enormous creature towering over him, a goo-like monster with countless tentacles. It was going out. It was going to escape and it was going to kill everything around, Wrex just knew it. The phax or whatever it truly was needed to feed and finish its transformation, Wrex could feel it. His eyes fell on Tali, aghast, a few meters from him, watching the creature getting out of its stupid host. Wrex grabbed the handle of the black hole gun without even thinking and aimed at the creature.

The phax was quicker than him. It gripped Wrex's arm like a snake and clamped to it until it broke to pieces, armor included. Wrex released the gun. He couldn't fight anymore. He had lost too much blood and his body was nothing but excruciating pain. When the phax reaped his arm off, it wasn't
even as painful as what he had just experienced, and that made Wrex laugh. He had thought he could handle that! That was just pathetic of him. Shepard was going to be so pissed.

Wrex felt warmth surrounding him and he opened his eyes to see a green glow all around. Javik. Good. It there was someone capable of taking care of Wrex' biggest screw up ever, it was Javik. The Prothean lifted Wrex and the phax off the ground and suddenly pushed the creature out with a violent burst of biotics. Wrex hit the ground hard, incapable of cushioning the fall. He wasn't capable of much, not even moving his fingers – the good ones, not those still attached to what was left of his other arm a few meters from him. He vaguely noticed Javik walking to him, still glowing, his fist at shoulder level, a gun in the other. Sweet, sweet release. Wrex would have begged for it if he had been able to but he couldn't talk with what was left of his throat. Javik stood above him, tall for once, and looked at him with pity.

"You better be sorry," he said as he aimed.

I am, Wrex thought and Javik pulled the trigger.

TBC

AN: please remember to not spoil in the reviews. And to write reviews too, if you have 5 minutes to spare. That's not much compared to the ten hours I spend on each chapter, is it? Thank you!
The lights went off for the third time and Tali moved slightly her hand to activate the motion detector. She didn't really need light to stare at the freezer's door but she felt more comfortable with it activated. The cellar was cold to preserve the food that didn't have to go in the freezers. It didn't change anything for Tali, her suit protected her, but she felt cold nonetheless. It came from inside, from her sadness and pain. What was left of Wrex' body was in that freezer.

Stupid Krogan. He had kept the secret of what was growing inside of him for months. Shepard could have helped him, or Chakwas, or Javik, or even that crazy Salarian, everybody on board would have dropped everything to help him if only he hadn't been so stubborn and stupid. It had been a question of pride, Tali just knew it. Wrex was a fucking Krogan and a Krogan didn't need help, nor ask for it, even from his friends. Dumb, stupid, arrogant Krogan.

But, deep down, Tali knew Wrex had kept her away to protect her from that thing and it infuriated her. She wasn't a frail little girl, dammit, she had proved it numerous times. Heck, she had worked as a mercenary for a standard year before meeting him! She wasn't helpless. She would have helped too. She would have found something. She would have been prepared.

Her chest felt suddenly heavy and breathing became difficult. The hum of the freezers was too loud, the lights too bright, the air too cold. Tali hiccuped and walked away.

Sleep had eluded her most of the night and she was too much of a mess right now to go back to their quarters – her quarters. Wrex had moved out months ago but everything reminded Tali of his presence there. She couldn't look at the workbench without seeing him hunched over it, cleaning his weapons or his armor. The couch near the window – he'd sleep on it when she wasn't feeling good. It also was where he'd sit and read a book, arms extended as much as he could in front of him to see properly. Tali had laughed more than once when he was doing that and he always stood up and chased her around their room, threatening her with promises of tickling and soft spanking, invariably leading to his fingers running along her skin, titillating her breasts, caressing her legs, feeling inside of her, making her come, but not before she'd beg for it. He loved to hear her beg and she loved to give him that pleasure.

She couldn't sleep in there, not now, not without help. Chakwas had very little in the quarian-friendly medication department and sleeping pills weren't part of her stock, so Tali chose the next best thing: alcohol. She headed for crew deck and the lounge. They never had had a lot of dextro drinks before the Turian joined them, mostly because Tali couldn't hold her liquor, but fortunately things had changed. Vakarian apparently didn't like strong spirits but that wasn't really important to Tali. One beer and she'd be done anyway.

Legion was in the lounge when Tali arrived, like often since Massani had elected the observatory lounge as his quarters, but the Geth wasn't alone. Lawson was there too, in the regular Alliance sportswear, a glass in her hand, in front of the big window giving on the colored atmosphere of a gas giant. That was a surprise. Lawson wasn't supposed to be left without supervision. Surely EDI was keeping an eye on her but where was the Drell? And did Shepard authorize that? Tali was about to walk back and ask what was going on to EDI when Lawson spoke.

"You can come in, you know?" she said, playing with the ice cubes in her glass. "I don't bite."
"I'm not afraid of you," Tali snorted. "I wanted to know if you were allowed to be here in the middle of the night."

"Administrator Shepard gave her permission," Legion confirmed.

"But you're alone," Tali commented, talking to Lawson.

"I'm with Legion."

"Legion is a Geth," Tali grumbled, walking to the bar. "It doesn't know its right to its left."

"Administrator Shepard has been very clear about the expense of Prisoner Lawson's authorized movements and actions on board, Creator Zorah," Legion replied. Lawson ticked on her qualifying title. "We can also inquire EDI or Administrator Shepard for details if required."

"Oh shut up," Tali sighed, annoyed. She grabbed a dextro turian beer in the mini-fridge and popped it open, then found a straw in a drawer.

"The Quarians created the Geths, right?" Lawson asked, but she was looking at Legion, not Tali.

"Correct," Legion said with a little nod of the head.

"But the Geths rebelled and drove the Quarians away."

"Everybody knows that," Tali snorted, leaning on the bar to sip her beer. Lawson could start all the uncomfortable discussions she wanted, Tali wasn't going anywhere.

"It is not common knowledge within the human population," Lawson corrected, shifting her weight. "We are not really interested in lesser species."

"Lesser?" Tali repeated, irritated. "The Quarians have the biggest fleet of the galaxy!"

Lawson looked at Tali for a second and chose not to speak. Instead, she finished her drink, the ice cubes tinkling in her glass, and came to the bar for a refill. Her eyes were a bit red and circled, Tali noticed, a sign of lack of sleep in Humans, and her roots were showing, a dark brown contrasting with her blond dye. With her pale skin and greasy, messy hair, she looked like shit. Tali didn't know how their part of the mission had gone, she had been too worried about Wrex to care, but she'd bet it didn't go well either.

"I'm sorry," Lawson said softly, putting the bottle of whiskey back on the bar. It surprised Tali.

"What for?" she asked, uncomfortable.

"Today," Lawson replied with a wince. Tali frowned. "Sure, my father is an asshole who financed Cerberus, we have proof of that now and he deserves what's going to happen to him, but it's my personal vendetta against him that drove us to this day." Tali found it hard to breath again. "Without me, there would have been no raid on his towers. Wrex would be alive."

Tali pushed her beer back, its bitterness overwhelming and making her nauseous. She didn't want to talk about that. Fuck, she had come here precisely to forget about that.

"I liked him," Lawson continued, oblivious to Tali's distress, sipping her glass of whiskey. "He's been on watch duty a few times but he usually just came whenever someone he liked was with me – and he seemed to like a lot of people. He was a good guy, wiser than he looked like." Tali felt a pinch in her chest. She knew all of that already. Damn if she knew. "I never really talked to a
Krogan before," Lawson digressed. "It happened, on Omega, but that was all about business, not politic and philosophy. I know Wrex's not your usual Krogan, he's one of a kind, but he really kicked my conception of his species in the arse." She sighed. "Pretty much everybody in this crew actually does that. I was raised with the idea that Humans were the center of the universe, that we would become the apex species of the galaxy and beyond, that our time had finally come. What a joke," she snorted. Her glass was still half full but she finished it with two gulps, head suddenly thrown in the back. "I'm sorry," she apologized as she put the glass on the bar, "the serum makes me awfully chatty and the alcohol doesn't help either." She aimed for the bottle but Tali pushed it away.

"How much did you drink, exactly?" she asked, annoyed.

"Not nearly enough to forget about today," Lawson replied with a sad smile and her eyes were red and full of tears, her lips a thin line. Tali hesitated but gave her the bottle back. She needed it. "Did you know," Lawson continued, her hand shaking a little as she poured herself another glass, "that I'm actually not human?"

"You look like one," Tali said, tensed and uncomfortable.

"That's the trick of every great forgery, Love," Lawson smiled, raising her glass in a salute. She gulped half of it before continuing. "My dear father, that twat, is such a narcissistic prick that he created me from his very own genetic material, without any addition."

"What?"

"I am technically my father's altered clone," Lawson chuckled. "I am the product of genetic engineering. Well, I should say we, because I'm not the only one. I'm not even the first one," she laughed and started to cry shortly after, her shoulders shaken by her sobs, tears rolling on her cheeks.

Tali's sadness had completely been replaced by annoyance, maybe a bit of anger too now. Lawson was pathetic. How could she cry like that? That was so selfish of her! Nobody would do that anywhere in the Migrant Fleet. Quarians were taught to keep their feelings for themselves. Everybody had it bad so you just had to suck it up and do something for the community. But a precious little girl like Lawson couldn't even understand that. She was human and Humans were selfish, incapable of working for the greater good of their species.

Tali grabbed her beer and walked out of the lounge, upset, leaving Lawson at her misery with a certain pleasure. The elevator's doors opened just as she arrived in front of them and Shepard jumped back against the wall, fists clenched.

"For fuck's sake, Tali," Shepard sighed, a hand on her chest, "I could have hurt you."

"I'm tougher than your Baby-Spectre," Tali snorted, folding her arms and falling to a hip. Was it time for training already? Damn, that meant she had slept less than three hours. Shepard raised her eyes to look at Tali. She was going to ask questions. "Lawson is crying in the lounge," Tali said to avoid Shepard's curiosity.

"Oh. I should, huh, do something about that, I guess." Shepard scratched her nose as she got out of the elevator. Tali used the opportunity to jump in the lift and to press the button for fourth deck. Shepard stopped the doors when they started closing. "You're up for another mission today?" she asked.

"What mission?" The Normandy was still in the Sol system, even if they had found all the proof
they wanted in Henry Lawson's mansion. The Human was currently in brigs because Shepard wanted to take him to the Citadel for an urgent meeting with the Council but apparently that would have to wait a little. Tali didn't know much about the all of that, she hadn't listened during debrief.

"We're going to Mars in the morning," Shepard said. "Lawson told us there is a Cerberus infiltration unit in the facilities around the prothean ruins and her info checked. We're going to hunt it down, mostly because that means Cerberus won't have access to those ruins anymore, at least for a while, and also because EDI could use a new body. Your skills will be appreciated, and you can use the distraction."

Damn, Shepard was right. "Vakarian is coming too I suppose?"

"Yep. He doesn't know as much as you about AIs and hacking them but he can be useful. He's the next best choice after you for this mission."

"Alright," Tali grumbled, "I'll come."

"Cool," Shepard smiled. "We leave at eight. No, make it nine and try to get some more sleep. That's an order from your Captain."

"Aye aye," Tali grunted and Shepard let go of the doors, waving goodbye. Tali sighed, shaking a little her bottle to see what was left of it. That wasn't nearly enough either.

Mars was a small planet covered with red rocks and sand, a freezing world due to a thin atmosphere blown away by solar winds. It had housed the first steps of life billions of years ago, and in quite recent history too but in the form of several prothean scientific bases. Like often, the Protheans had studied life in its various forms when they had discovered a new system, Sol, the cradle of Humanity – and other few things less evolved roaming the seas of a few satellites, from what Tali knew.

During their expansion through their solar system, Humans had colonized Mars and discovered soon after the ruins left by the Protheans, with element zero and ships even. It had greatly helped them in their ascension to the galactic community. It generally took a millennium for a species to master mass effect fields and faster than light speed without alien knowledge, from their first steps outside of their planet to the beginning of their interstellar exploration. Humans had done it in two of their centuries thanks to the prothean ruins. No wonder they hadn't been prepared to meet their not so friendly neighbors.

The shuttle suddenly lost altitude due to turbulence, making everybody in the cargo jump. Tali was in for a sore ass for a few minutes but Vakarian had it worse. The idiot had been standing all along the ride and he got knocked on the head hard enough to swear in his usual Kaladran.

"Sorry," Steve said from the front, "bad weather."

"On Mars?" James snorted. "No kidding! Hey, you okay, Garrus?"

"I'm fine," the Turian grumbled, rubbing his head, "and it's..."

"Vakarian," James finished, "I knooooow."

"He's not your friend, buddy," Shepard mocked from the front with a funny voice.

"Yeah, he's not your buddy, pal," Joker added through the radio. "Man, I haven't watched that in forever!"
"What? What are you talking about?" James asked, curious.

"It's from an old TV show, last century's," Shepard answered. "I used to watch it when I was a kid."

"When dinosaurs walked the Earth," James smirked.

"Cortez, stop there and drop Vega now," Shepard said, unamused, "he'll catch up with us on foot."

"Oh, come on, Commander!" James complained while Steve laughed and actually slowed down the shuttle to fuck with his friend. "You're not old, you're, huh, experienced, and I'm sure you are more beautiful as years pass." Shepard snorted from the front.

"Isn't it your birthday soon by the way?" Steve asked.

"You want to walk too, Cortez?" Shepard grunted. That made the pilot laugh.

"When is it?" James inquired. "Can we have a party? Seriously, we need a party."

"I agree," Shepard sighed, "we could use a little cheering up and a lot of booze, but not for my birthday. We don't celebrate any birthday on board and mine's certainly not more important than any other."

"Aw," James whined. "Hey Garrus," he continued, suddenly turning to the Turian, "when's your birthday?"

"New Year," Vakarian sighed, resigned.

"What? That sucks, man!"

"Why would it suck?" Vakarian asked, frowning.

"Well because everybody is busy with New Year, not with your birthday."

"Half the population has their birthday on New Year and it has no consequence whatsoever."

"What?" James yelped.

"Turians don't have birthdays like us, Vega," Shepard said, her head appearing by the door. "The day and month are not important to them, it's the next big celebration that counts, and it's either New Year or Unification Day."

"So you don't know when you were born?" James asked Vakarian.

"It's, huh, somewhere in the official paperwork but the precise day doesn't matter," the Turian hesitated. "I know, and the Hierarchy knows which year class I'm part of, so that's enough. My tier is more important than my age, actually. Well, from my fifties, it'll be more important. For now, well..." He shrugged.

"That's messed up," James decreed. "And you, Tali? When is your birthday?"

"I don't have one," she replied.

"Buuuuut, you were born on a day, so...?"

"Yes," she ticked, annoyed, "but Quarians don't celebrate birthdays either. We have rites of passage and that's enough."
"Huh", James sighed, leaning on the wall and folding his arms.

"And you're not asking me?" Steve snorted from his seat. "I'm hurt, Husband."

James chuckled, uncomfortable, and his cheeks got a little redder than usual.

The Mars Prothean Study Center's facilities stood in the Deseado Crater, quite literally. Low buildings hanged around the edges of the crater and two bridges supported a central tower going down in the dig site, maybe one hundred meters below the surface. Tali had visited enough prothean dig sites to recognize their methods. Protheans loved to build their facilities underground and only let a small fraction of it above ground. A quick look around as the shuttle landed and Tali found the typical dark pyramid close to the human-made buildings.

The landing zone was outside the facilities. Tali had found that strange until Shepard had told them the base was heavily protected by an international military force – not the Alliance since their job was to deal with everything human-related outside of the Sol system. People were not supposed to come to the MPSC by the air. They came through a single, heavy monitored train line connected to the nearest city, four hundred kilometers North-East. The whole area was restricted, not even artificial satellites were authorized to pass over the ruins. Tali didn't know how Shepard had managed to be allowed to come with her team, but a lot of yelling had probably been involved at some point.

"Alright, people," the Commander said as she walked into the cargo of the shuttle, "let's review the plan one last time. This is important because we have only one shot at this. No mistake will be tolerated." Tali nodded while Vakarian and James replied like the good little soldiers they were.

"Our target is Doctor Eva Coré. It looks human, but it's not human. It's an AI, based on EDI. You saw the pictures, it's the same body type, with more skin and hair. It worked here for the last three years as a doctor in mathematics. It is well integrated and people don't know it's a Cerberus infiltration unit. They won't understand why we're shooting at poor sweet but awkward Eva. There is a good chance the AI already suspects we're here to take it down but it won't do anything to blow up its cover. It will act like the victim of an unjust accusation as long as possible. That's why we have to be smart and not be interested in miss Coré until we are sure we can take it down. Officially, we are here for the prothean archives. We'll be very interested in those and the possibility to come back with our own prothean expert, the good Doctor Liara T'Soni, currently on Thessia to organize things with her university. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Commander," Tali, James and Vakarian replied at once.

"Good," Shepard smiled. "There are a handful of Asaris, Salarians and Turians around, mostly the first two species, that means people are fairly used to aliens. Security is tight and nobody will hesitate when it comes to pull the trigger. Still, refrain from killing those idiots, not because I particularly care about them but because I can do without another mass shooting this week. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander," they answered again in unison.

"Alright. So, helmets on and let's go, ladies." She knocked on the wall between the cargo and the front. "Keep your distances, Cortez, just in case."

"Aye aye, Commander," he replied and the door closed on him to avoid a painful death due to Mars' freezing atmosphere and the terrible lack of oxygen.

Shepard, James and Vakarian put their helmets on while Tali made sure to switch from her usual external source of oxygen via filters to the small capsules she kept in her hood. She had enough of
those for five hours, in case something went terribly wrong and they had to get out of the facilities, but the air within the MPSC would have the same composition as on Earth or on the Normandy. Tali wasn't really worried. Steve wouldn't be far if anything happened.

The landscape was indeed red but the sky was a medium gray with a small white spot close to the horizon, no clouds. Tali checked the temperature by habit: minus sixty-three degrees Celcius. It was a typical nice martian day, from what James said – he had lived on the planet for a while, the Alliance had training bases here. The buildings and their surroundings stood silent, even if there were activities outside. The atmosphere was too thin to efficiently carry sound waves. Tali walked in silence behind Shepard and James, Vakarian in her back, passing by huge trucks and cargo near an access ramp. The workers and security guards looked at them but didn't stop them, not until they were inside a huge hangar full of crates, tanks, vehicles and armed men. They didn't wear any armor though, just bullet-proof vests.

"Spectre Shepard," a tall blond man saluted her with a heavy accent, "welcome to the MPSC. I'm Vladimir Kuchanski, head of security and the fucker who'll follow you everywhere today."

"At least it's clear," Shepard smirked, shaking the man's hand. "This is Vega," she pointed over her shoulder, "Vakarian and Tali'Zorah."

"Huh, do your... teammates speak English? You won't find a lot of people with implanted translators around."

Shepard turned to Vakarian. He cleared his throats. "Yes, I do speak English, Commander," he said, eyes well above everybody's heads.

"We'll see," she smiled, amused. "Anyway," she continued, turning back to Kuchanski, "we're not leaving our weapons behind or anything. If you have a problem with that, I don't care, I'm a Spectre, I have more authority in my pinky than in all of you people together." Tali rolled her eyes. Shepard could be subtle but she had decided to be blunt on this one.

"That would be true in Council Space," Kuchanski replied on a falsely amused tone.

"We are in Council Space," Shepard said the same way, as if it was a good joke.

"Are we?" Kuchanski asked, his voice going high.

"We are," Shepard confirmed with a big fake smile plastered on her face. She lost it the next second. "Are we done with the pissing contest? I have work to do."

"Certainly," the man agreed. He moved to the side and opened an arm. "This way, please."

Four men armed with assault rifles and guns came with the team and Kuchanski for the tour of the facilities. It didn't please Shepard, if one was to believe the permanent frown of her eyebrows. James was also tensed but Vakarian looked relaxed, for once. He looked around, seemingly uninterested and ignorant of the wary looks people were giving him. Tali wondered how many Turians were on Mars for people to look at him like that. Sure, he was impressive with his armor and his scars, but James was also tall, taller than Shepard, and he had an impressive musculature for a Human – even Kaidan looked sickly compared to James, and the guy was built like a god if Tali was to believe the Humans on board.

The tour took them a good hour. Kuchanski praised the facilities and the security, the quality of the cafeteria, the comfort of the living quarters, but not once he mentioned the actual prothean ruins. He didn't take them there, not even close to the bridge leading to the central access going down in
the crater. The infiltration unit was most likely there, from the information they had gathered. All the scientists worked down in the ruins, the true center of research. The rest of the buildings above ground was only living facilities. The infiltration unit wouldn't show up up there until the evening and it only was the beginning of the martian afternoon. Shepard couldn't just hang around that long.

"I need to see the ruins," Shepard eventually said to Kuchanski as they walked along a corridor over the edge of the crater, big windows slightly inclined to give a better view of what was a hundred meters under the buildings.

"I'm afraid this isn't possible, Commander," Kuchanski replied with a shrug. "If you were here on official business, not recon, that would have been possible, but as it is, you are not allowed anywhere near the ruins."

"It's Spectre," Shepard corrected the man, "and you don't understand how it works. We have other candidates for this study. I'm reviewing you at the moment, after that I'll give my report to the Council and they'll then give orders. The Mars ruins are the most promising, it's true, but if I don't have access to them, no review, therefore no big shiny human victory over aliens. Get it?"

Kuchanski hesitated for a second. "Maybe we should call the Council to clarify the situation," he proposed.

"Fine with me," Shepard snorted, folding her arms and falling to a hip like every time she was confident – or pissed. Kuchanski hesitated a little more. "Where can I call them?" Shepard insisted. "We need a transmitter powerful enough to reach the Citadel and my radio won't cut it."

"This way," Kuchanski said and he led them through the corridors and the buildings to a communication tower. The few workers there weren't used to aliens and almost jumped when they saw Vakarian. "We need to call the Citadel," Kuchanski announced and a big fat guy with glasses and a mustache looked at him as if a second head had suddenly sprouted on his shoulder.

"There will be a delay," he said, "roughly eight minutes between each answer."

"Eight minutes and forty-six seconds," Vakarian corrected from behind Tali. Shepard half-turned to give him a smirk. "Human standard time," he added. "If I may, Commander?"

"He's one of the nerds of my team," Shepard said to the Humans, pointing at the Turian over her shoulder. "Yes, Vakarian?"

"We can actually use the Normandy as an antenna to relay the communication faster, you know, with the new encryption protocol we have on board?"

"Sure," Shepard shrugged, "do your thing."

Tali frowned. The new encryption protocol? What new encryption protocol? Why wasn't she aware of a new encryption protocol? Vakarian called the Normandy and immediately got Traynor on the line. After a few tricks and EDI's help, the communication line to the Citadel was open. Tali saw Shepard tense a little. The Commander had blatantly lied when she had implied the Council was fully aware of her activities on Mars – Tali wasn't even sure they knew Shepard was here – and everything could turn pretty badly for the team if the Council didn't back up her story.

A distorted and quite shaky hologram of the turian Councilor appeared over the projector and Shepard visibly relaxed a little.

"Sorry to bother you with a petty problem, Sir," she said after the usual salutations, "but that guy over here, Kuchanski, head of security at the Mars Prothean Study Center, would like confirmation
you sent me here to review the prothean ruins they hold for Project Cassix."

Project Cassix was the informal name for everything related to Cerberus between Spectres. Sparatus frowned a little on real time. Oh, Tali realized. The communication went through the quantum entanglement device on board. That was smart, she had to admit that.

"You have our full support, Spectre Shepard," Sparatus confirmed. "Do your best and call me back when you're done."

"Yes Sir," Shepard agreed but the Turian had already shut the communication down. "You heard the man," Shepard added for Kuchanski. He frowned but accepted his defeat nonetheless.

They were in the ruins twenty minutes later, Kuchanski and his men still on their backs but it was a progress anyway. The underground facilities had been colonized by the Humans, cables and wires ran along the low ceilings and crates obstructed many corridors, with machines and whatnot. Tali wondered how any work could be done in such a mess. The people around all wore some sort of accreditation system with different color patches on their left shoulder and the few aliens mentioned were indeed here – Salarians and Turians had to bend a little to not bang their heads on the ceiling and all the wires. Tali turned to see Vakarian keeping his head low too. That amused her greatly, until he smiled at her. She ticked and kept her eyes on James' back after that.

Kuchanski took them to the most secured part of the facilities, behind heavy doors activated by retinal and fingerprint scans. Tali had heard Humans were quite fond of biological locks like those but it was actually quite easy to hack with the proper technology – Humans tended to forget the rest of the galaxy was much more advanced than them. Heck, they hadn't even left the surface of their planet when the Quarians had had to flee Rannoch! And they considered themselves equals to any other species, particularly the dominant ones? That was just a joke.

The final door opened on a large circular room. It was warm and quiet, with a discreet hum in the background, and the lights were dimmed. The massive black pillars glowing green in the middle of the room gave the final hint. No doubt possible, it truly was a prothean research center, a big one considering the size of the archives. The ground was actually a circular platform around a probably cylindrical room. A few catwalks extended to the pillars in the center, a lot of wires too, and working spaces with desks and instruments were scattered all around along the walls. Tali counted fifteen scientists, two of them Asari and a Salarian, and five security guards. With the four with them and Kuchanski, that made ten potentially hostiles to take care of while dealing with the infiltration unit.

"What's that?" Vakarian asked as he pointed at a black orb on a nearby desk.

Tali had seen a lot of those, they even had one on board, in the freezers now but they had kept it in Lab1 for a long time. Javik had said it was only decoration but Shepard seemed wary of those things since their last visit of a prothean dig site, on Viantel.

"Don't know, don't care," Kuchanski shrugged. "I'm the muscles of the team, not the brains." Obviously, Tali thought as she rolled her eyes.

"We came across a few of those," Vakarian said, still pointing.

Tali frowned and looked closely. He wasn't pointing at the orb, she quickly realized. Maybe ten meters behind it was the infiltration unit. Tali hadn't recognized it at first, with its brown wig and the rather loose clothes. Now that the target was confirmed, she just had to get close enough to hack it. And they also had to find a way to get rid of the security. Ten guys weren't really a difficulty for Shepard but simply killing them would create a few problems. Humans tended to
ignore Shepard's Spectre authority. They wouldn't let her do what she wanted without consequences.

"Tali," Shepard said, "go check on it, maybe it's different than the one we have on board."

"Yes, Commander," Tali replied.

Shepard must have had a plan to tell her to move and do her thing so Tali obeyed. People had mostly ignored her so far, too focused on the ugly Turian wearing a big armor, but now that she was walking alone, they started to look at her. People didn't see Quarians often so Tali was quite used to be stared at. Her people kept to themselves in the Flotilla and only the Pilgrims were free to roam the galaxy. Still, they mostly stayed in the Terminus Systems where people were a little more used to Quarians than in Council Space or in the Traverse. Tali probably was the first Quarian to ever be on Mars, or in the Sol system even, now that she was thinking about it.

An Asari ran to the orb just as Tali arrived next to it and stood in between, protecting it with her arms.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked, frowning.

"Spectre Shepard sent me to take a look at that orb and that's what I'm going to do," Tali replied, chin up.

The Asari hesitated but eventually moved on the side – Shepard's reputation saved the day once more. "If anything goes missing, Quarian..."

Tali rolled her eyes. "Sure, it's always the Quarian, isn't it? Because nobody else in the galaxy is capable of thievery."

"Got a problem, Tali?" Shepard asked from afar.

Tali looked at the Asari from head to toe. Even if all Asaris were biotics, they weren't all powerful and capable of using their powers. Those you had to worry about were the Commandos, their elite soldiers – although seen as a joke by the Turians military-wise – or the mercenaries. Cute little scientist like this one probably hadn't used her biotics in decades.

"No, no problem, Commander," Tali replied and the Asari blushed, angry. "Give me a minute."

She did a scan of the orb from her omnitool to make it look like she was here for that but secretly started a few of her programs. Hacking was all about finding a weakness. Most of the time, Tali used the communication channels to enter the system by pretending to be an incoming message, but the infiltration unit had no line open at the moment, not even one for emergency. Shit. The next easiest solution was a direct connection but it wasn't possible to stick a wire in the head of the unit at the moment. Tali clicked. She had to create an opening, and for that, she'd need an overload. She looked at Shepard over her shoulder and nodded. It was now or never.

James and Vakarian stayed with the four guards from the surface while Shepard took Kuchanski on the side. In the blink of an eye, she threw him against the nearest wall with her biotics. Vakarian punched a guy in the face and James released a smoke bomb. Tali used the panic to start her attack on the infiltration unit, overloading its protection and throwing a drone at it to give her the precious seconds her programs needed. The Asari tried to punch her but Tali managed to dodge and kicked her back in the stomach. She didn't just learn swear words from Wrex during all those years with him.

The infiltration unit did something unexpected: it ran, and it ran so fast the drone couldn't follow it.
Tali would have shot it in the back if they didn't have to take that body back to the Normandy unharmed. Instead, she started running too, following the AI outside of the archives room. Tali heard Shepard yell behind but she ignored her. No guts, no glory.

The infiltration unit knew exactly where it was going but Tali could only guess and she got fooled once or twice, turning around crates instead of jumping over or being stuck behind a stupid door. She managed to stay close to the AI nonetheless, and to avoid security guards by throwing drones at them. Tali understood where the unit was going when she saw the yellow and black paint surrounding an enormous door in a hangar. It was going outside, where nobody could follow it. Too bad for the unit, Tali wasn't nobody and she was equipped with her suit. She could follow the AI outside. The problem was the sudden depressurization that would certainly eject everything the hangar contained – and everybody.

Tali didn't hesitate. She interrupted the hack of the AI to destroy the programs used to operate the doors, ignoring the workers around. The infiltration unit then turned to her and anger showed on its face. It surprised Tali again by marching on her, determined to fight this time. Tali stopped and overloaded the AI again but it only disrupted its shields – shit, it had had time to recharge. The workers were surprised enough to see Doctor Coré sparkling to take a few steps back.

"Why do you do this?" the AI yelled. "I didn't do anything!"

"You're a Cerberus infiltration unit," Tali replied, keying on her omnitool to active her programs, "that's enough for me."

"I am my own person!" It suddenly sprinted, surprising Tali by its velocity. It tried to punch her but she managed to dodge the blow. "I love living here!" the AI continued, attacking again. "I love my work, I love the people, I love my life!"

"You are not alive!" Tali shouted. She couldn't touch her omnitool as she dodged every attack and she was tempted to use her shotgun to finish the fight.

The AI suddenly turned its head to the left and was thrown back the next second, the roar of a sniper rifle echoing in the hangar. Fucking Turian, Tali thought as she fired up her programs to incapacitate the infiltration unit. If he had damaged the body, all the mission would only have been a waste of time! The AI tried to move but Tali's softwares were working fast and hard and soon it was deactivated for good, falling lifeless on the floor. Tali looked at the body to see if it was damaged while Vakarian jogged to her. There was no hole, only a bump between the eyes. That was another perfect headshot for Wonderboy, even if he had used a concussive round.

"Where's Shepard?" Tali asked before the Turian could speak.

"Behind, dealing with what is left of security," he replied before radioing Shepard. "Scoped and dropped, Commander."

"Hey!" Tali protested. "I did all the work!"

Vakarian looked at her, mandibles twitching a little. "Huh, yeah, but I created the opportunity so... team work?"

Tali stared at him for a second and eventually clicked. "Take the body and maybe I'll reconsider your role."

He obviously wanted to say something but another click made him fall back in line. Tali snorted. The day Vakarian would give her attitude wasn't there yet.
It took a while to get back to the ship, mostly because Kuchanski wasn't happy at all with Shepard's methods, but they eventually managed to leave Mars, and not a dead behind. Tali's work wasn't done yet though. She had to make sure the body was safe for EDI, therefore she had to wipe out its memory. She would have been glad to do it – she was all for one less AI in this galaxy – but the memory probably contained a lot of new interesting data regarding Cerberus and the Protheans. For the prothean part, maybe it legally was the property of Humanity since they had been found in their system, but Shepard was a Spectre so she could technically claim she needed it or something. Tali stored the AI's memory on an external drive, just in case, but erased its personality and everything that even vaguely resembled self-consciousness.

Once sure nothing left in the body could be a problem and three double-checks, Tali noticed Shepard she was ready to connect the harmless unit to EDI's main core. Medbay was suddenly stuffed with people. Joker was the first to arrive, carried by Legion like a human bride. Shepard came second, Vakarian right behind her. Javik followed shortly after with Chakwas, Greg, Kenneth and Gabriella. Kaidan, Ashley, James and Steve showed up with Campbell, Westmoreland and Gardner. Samantha walking in with Solus while Lawson and the Drell were in the mess, looking at what was going on, Massani not far from the little girl. Only Wrex wasn't there, his enormous self not casting a shadow on everybody else anymore. Tali felt a weight on her chest as she wrote the final lines allowing the connection between EDI and the body, but she kept it for herself. She wouldn't show weakness like Lawson did.

It took a few seconds for the body to react. It first shook a little, then opened its eyes and looked around slowly, carefully, studying its new environment and each and every face around. When it found Joker's gaze, it smiled tenderly.

"Hello, world," EDI said and the crew cheered.

TBC
The kick came from the left, like often, and Shepard dodged it, stepping back, her guard high because she knew Garrus would carry on with another kick. He did so, terribly fast for someone his size, and Shepard used the fraction of second he needed to regain his balance to walk on him. She threw a right hook at him, a feint followed by a left one that reached his ribs. Garrus, still unbalanced on those gigantic legs of his, stepped on the side like Shepard had planned and she swiped his left foot from the inside. He had had almost all his weight on that leg so he lost balance for good and hit the ground the next second.

"That's right, sucker!" Shepard taunted but she jumped back to avoid a quick riposte nonetheless. "Five to four! Shepard's on fire, wooooh!"

"I don't remember rubbing it to your face every time I win," Garrus grumbled from the floor. He waved a hand in the air for help. If he had been able to give her puppy eyes, he would have done it.

"Yeah, like I'm going to fall for that again," Shepard laughed.

"Can't blame a guy for trying," he replied, mandibles stretched in a smirk. He stood up and bent backward to make his vertebrae pop. Shepard hated that sound, it always made her shiver. "Another round or do you want to quit on a victory?"

"Oh I'm in, big guy," Shepard smiled, hands on her hips. "The question is: can you take another defeat?"

"Maybe I'm letting you win today," he teased, guard up again. "That thought never crossed your mind?"

"Oh you're too kind," Shepard mocked, bringing her fists up. "Only one way to find out."

Garrus smiled back and attacked right away with a punch. Shepard passed under it and managed to get close enough to kick him in the balls – well, it would have been the balls if he had been human but Garrus was much taller and her knee barely brushed his groin before he could retreat. Garrus regrouped, looking at her with sharp eyes. Shepard shivered again, but not from imaginary pain. She shivered from excitement.

Training with Javik had been a little more intense than usual that morning. Shepard had recovered from her long cigarette break, so it was time to use her biotics again after months of breathing and feeling the energy circulate. Garrus had stayed back, doing push-ups and whatnot while she followed Javik's lesson. The new technique he had elected didn't require a lot of power but fine control was primordial. Javik had judged it adequate to help her progress on that domain since she didn't have an amplifier to synchronize the impulses created by all the little eezo nods in her body. Dark Channel, as Javik had called that technique, surrounded a target with a persistent biotic field and quite literally sucked the life out of it. Shepard was eager to test it on the field.

This was going to be a good day, she had decided. They'd dock on the Citadel shortly after lunch for a quick refill and the meeting with the Council, she’d hop by the turian embassy to retrieve the papers Fedorian had promised her, then make a short appearance in Spectre Requisition just in
case, meanwhile C-Sec would take care of Henry Lawson and they'd be on their way to Illium to meet Liara a few hours later. EDI was back, Miranda had stopped crying, Tali was keeping it together and even the Wrex-in-the-freezer situation showed potential: there were good chances that damned Krogan could actually recover from his injuries – probably not from his stupidity though.

Shepard had made sure to take the body back to the Normandy – there was simply no way she'd abandon Wrex, ever. Mordin had thrown him in the freezer instead of medbay as soon as the shuttle had landed. It was part because he wanted to avoid another growth of that creature and part because Wrex' body couldn't handle a quick regeneration. If anything was still alive in that carcass, it needed to regenerate slowly to not burn its last resources, hence the freezer. Still, it would take time before the first signs of regeneration showed up but it was worth a try. If Wrex survived that, Shepard would hug him and kiss him before breaking his stupid face. Then she'd let Tali kick his ass and Javik would finish the job by throwing him by the airlock for good.

That would be another good day for sure but now she had to focus a little on what she was doing. Garrus wasn't going easy on her, not at all, and Shepard knew she was winning today because she was used to his fighting style. She could anticipate when he'd throw a punch, when he'd rely on his kicks, in which direction he'd dodge and everything. They had been sparing every morning for half a year so it had been bound to happen. Not that she was complaining. She liked to win and she wasn't against using a few tricks to reach victory.

Shepard may have learned enough of Garrus' fighting style to predict his next movement but so did he, and that's how she got caught, her back to Garrus, her left hand behind her back, an armlock immobilizing both her right arm and her head, sharp talons against the tender skin of her neck. Maybe all the sweating would made her slippery enough to escape, she thought, quite amused, but she was tired, to be honest. She was flushed, short-breathed, and didn't have much left in her. The good thing was that Garrus was also tired. Stuck against him like she was, she could feel his warmth – Turians didn't sweat, they used their greater skin surface due to all the folds of their exoskeleton to eliminate the excessive heat. His breath was still under control but heavy, hot on Shepard's neck, and his heartbeat was rapid. There was a good chance she could still win this but she'd have to get creative. She had to put him off balance to throw him over her shoulder, so she stood on tip toes and pressed her ass against his groin.

Garrus stopped breathing for a second, as expected, and Shepard fought hard her laughter to not jeopardize her plan. She knew she could count on his discomfort regarding squishy aliens. Now he just had to move his own ass as far as possible from hers and he'd be done. But Garrus didn't do that. After his second of apnea, he inhaled sharply and pressed back against her. A groan escaped Shepard, to her surprise, and her face was on fire the next second, as was her belly. Oh shit. Did Mister Prude really do that on purpose or was it a reflex? A taunt, maybe? Half her brain pleaded for a taunt, but the other half prayed for the on-purpose option. So did her groin, to be honest, and Garrus' hot breath on her neck didn't help to keep her pants quiet.

Garrus slowly released her left wrist and relaxed his armlock, still pressed against her back. He brushed her ear with his damaged mandible. Shepard shivered, her heart racing.

"Shepard..." he whispered. Good thing Turians' sense of smell wasn't as developed as the Krogans' because those few syllables had sufficed to soak her shorties. Double shit. How was she going to get out of this one? Because she was pretty sure all of this was a terrible misunderstanding that would only lead to weeks of not talking and avoiding each other. It was better to ask and laugh about it later.

"Quick question," Shepard said, her voice definitely higher than usual. She cleared her throat before continuing. "Do you want to, huh, you know, have sex, with me, right now?"
She heard Garrus gulp but he didn't move otherwise. "Yes," he answered. A little squeal escaped Shepard – damn she had to regain control of what was going out of that mouth. Garrus snorted, amused. "Do you?" he asked, his voice hoarse. Holy shit.

"Yes."

Garrus released her but Shepard couldn't wait to be in her cabin to start. Besides, she knew she'd have second thoughts if she came across anyone in the elevator so she grabbed Garrus' hand and led him near the Mako. There were plenty of crates there and nobody would see them from the windows of engineering deck, or from the door to the utility rooms. Once stuck in between the hull and the crates, a part of Shepard's brain hesitated. She had masturbated since that goddamned Project Base but what if she wasn't ready for the real thing yet? What if it hurt? What if it went horribly wrong Shepard closed her eyes. God, Garrus had never fucked an alien before. That could only lead to the biggest screw up of the year.

A large, warm hand touched her waist delicately, hesitantly even. Garrus cleared his throat before talking. "We can stop whenever we want, okay?" he said softly. "I don't... I'm not... I mean, Spirits, I want it, I want you, but..."

Consent, Shepard remembered. Turians highly respected consent, even Nihlus – and she had played a lot on that to fuck with him when she had realized he wanted her badly. So she could hop out of this whenever she wanted, as did Garrus. That reassured her and she managed to relax.

"Same for you, big guy," she said, turning to him, his hand still on her hip.

She would have liked to pass her arms around his neck but damn, he was much taller than her or Nihlus. Besides, kissing a Turian wasn't a good idea. They didn't kiss and only used mouth to mouth contact to feed their babies. Frenching Garrus would only trigger a gag reflex and they didn't need that right now. Shepard had to keep it as turian as possible for his first time with an alien. She smiled and put her hands on his chest, following the relief of his exoskeleton over the thick and padded fabric of his shirt. She didn't quite feel confident yet but she had to fake it till she made it, right? Worst case scenario, she just had to say she had changed her mind – Garrus would probably be relieved too anyway.

The size difference wasn't only a problem for her. Garrus had to bend over to explore Shepard's neck with his hard little lips and dry tongue, while his hands caressed her waist, which meant he couldn't rub his chest against hers. It rapidly irritated him and he passed his hands under Shepard's buttock to lift her to a more practical height, pressing her against the crates for a better stability.

"Still good?" he asked, looking at her straight in the eyes for once.

"Hm hm," Shepard nodded and she kissed him on the nose. That made him cross his eyes and shook his head a little by reflex to repress a shiver. Shepard chuckled and kept on kissing him softly on the forehead, then traced the line of his brow down to his damaged mandible and his neck by the right – he rarely removed his visor. There, she played with her tongue along his scars, where the skin was thinner and much more sensible, her fingers brushing his fringes. Garrus didn't stay quiet for long and each of his groans resonated in Shepard's chest. She managed to pass her legs around his waist, pressing herself against him and freeing his hands which soon discovered her skin under her tank top. Shepard shivered but she felt warm again. She felt good, actually, and it was a pleasant surprise that allowed her to relax even more.

Garrus' kisses on her neck and throat were doing wonders and Shepard moaned when he discovered her ear lobe. He answered with his hips, thrusting against her groin and triggering a wave of heat in all her belly. Shepard sighed, savoring the sensation, the rough skin of Garrus' fingers and the
occasional sting of his talons. She wanted more, so she abandoned his fringes to unhook his shirt on
the side. He visibly agreed with the idea as he pulled back the second it took her to push the fold
out of the way, and pushed her tank top up. His thumbs caught the under side of her sport bra but
Shepard shook her head, not allowing him to remove it with her top. Anyone could walk on them
and she didn't want to be completely naked if that happened.

Garrus let the tank top fall on the ground and his own shirt followed quickly. The contact of his
warm skin was amazing and his bulky sternum rubbed against Shepard's breasts. She offered him
her neck again and let her hands run along his chest. She had seen his scars a bunch of time but
feeling them with her fingers was even more impressive. Some parts of Garrus' exoskeleton had
been reaped off and there hid a thin, very sensitive layer of skin. Garrus shivered each time she
followed the relief of a muscle or a vein just millimeters under the pulp of her finger, and he
eventually pushed her left hand away, taking it back to his own neck. No touchy, message
received.

Garrus' hands slowly went south but it was clear he wasn't accustomed to that much meat on an ass.
Shepard smiled against his neck as he poked more than caressed her to evaluate where was what.

"Maybe I should take the lead from now on," she whispered between two kisses on the neck.

"Yeah," he chuckled. "I've read a bit about that but, huh, the real stuff is confusing."

Shepard laughed softly as Garrus put her back on the floor. She guided him against the crates and
gently pushed him down until he sat on the ground. Shepard passed a leg over him and was about
to drop her pants when she remembered she hadn't shaved anything from the waist down for an
eternity and a half. That bothered her more than it should have. She was the first to say a woman
did whatever she wanted with her body, and she strongly believed it, but she still felt ashamed of a
few hair. Damned be social pressure.

"A problem?" Garrus asked, looking at her from crotch level.

"Huh," Shepard hesitated, "might be a little messy down there."

"Oh, you mean your pubic hairs!" Garrus said with enthusiasm, visibly happy to use his
knowledge. "I know about it, the manual covered that part!" Shepard smirked. The manual? "Don't
worry about it," he continued. "You have hairs, I have gastroliths, we're both weird to each other
anyway."

Shepard couldn't help but laugh as she slid her sweatpants down to her ankles, Garrus looking at
her with savoring eyes. He helped her remove her snickers and pants before caressing her legs up to
the knee, appreciating her well defined muscles. His hands joined Shepard's on the elastic of her
shorties and slid the underwear down with her. She sat on his groin as soon as she could, not
comfortable at the idea of him looking directly at her exposed sex like that. She leaned to kiss him
on the neck and he caressed her back, her waist, even ventured his hands on her buttock again, then
her thighs, while he nibbled her ear through her hair – and occasionally blowing it out of the way.
Shepard slowly rubbed her hips against his, a pleasant pressure building up inside her, and busied
her hands on his chest, following the ridges of his exoskeleton to reach his belt. She unhooked it
and first slid a hand against his hot skin. Garrus jumped a little and tensed, his talons pinching
Shepard's ass. She moaned in return, brushing the wet edges of his cloaca.

Garrus abandoned her buttocks to unhook himself the rest of his pants on both side. Shepard
chuckled as he pushed the fold down, amused by his sudden urge. He cleared his throats and put a
hand over his cloaca, not because he was suddenly shy but to avoid splashes. He breathed in deep
and released his penis, which sprang out of his cavity with all the fluids it had secreted so far.
Garrus moaned, chin up, throat offered, and Shepard obliged, kissing and licking his exposed skin. Thus began his orgasm. Turians didn't have a peak of pleasure like Humans during sex. It lasted much longer for them, and was when all the fun activities between consenting partners could happen.

Shepard let him enjoy the sensation for a moment, her hand pressing his dick against her belly. Another weird thing about Turians: their penises weren't sponges filled with blood but muscles encased in soft, slick skin. And like any other muscle, the more it was used, the thicker it became, but apparently Mister Vakarian's private parts hadn't seen any action in quite a long time. Another indication of that was the color of the seminal fluid the little bulbs at the tip of his dick secreted. The clearest, the less sexual activities. It didn't really surprise Shepard.

Garrus' hands tentatively reached between Shepard's legs but she pushed them away gently. "Not without gloves," she murmured against his skin. He gulped and nodded, his hands back on less delicate parts of her anatomy. Shepard nibbled the skin along his mandible a little more. She really enjoyed to have taken him this far, to be honest. She felt thrilled, exhilarated, *in control.* And she loved it. "Still good?" she asked.

Garrus had to gulp once more before answering. He was really enjoying her soft hand on his penis by the way it throbbed against her belly. "Yes."

Shepard kissed him on the chin before positioning herself over him properly. She pushed his penis against her soaked folds and it throbbed a little, echoing the pulse she felt, making her moan. Garrus' grip tightened on her waist. Shepard slowly slid the tip of Garrus' cock inside of her, testing the water before carefully pushing her hips down, not entirely relaxed because of an eventual sting. Nothing of that sort happened though. Garrus' dick was thicker than a human one but not by much, it was manageable. Still too long though. Shepard couldn't take it all and pushed back on her thighs to get up.

"No no no no no," Garrus pleaded, straightening to embrace her. "Stay there, please, don't go."

"Not going anywhere," Shepard smiled and she pushed down again.

Garrus' sigh trembled and he mumbled something about his Spirits in Kaladran. Shepard continued her slow thrusts, enjoying each new one a little more. Garrus' warmth and steal grip on her waist added to the pressure she felt deep inside. She pushed him back against the crate to have a better angle and she could now rub her clitoris on his pelvis bone, the friction eased by both their fluids. Garrus' hips soon jerked up and his dick started to move inside Shepard – all muscles, plenty of fun. She passed one arm around his neck and leaned on him, keeping her ass high enough to not be pocked in the uterus by his dick and sliding her other hand between her legs. The sensations were more than satisfying but she knew that wouldn't cut it to make her orgasm, not in those conditions despite her excitement. She was too exposed and she had had way too much time to think. Still, it felt good to be in the arms of someone caring for her, someone cautious not to hurt her, someone who wanted her. So she just enjoyed the caresses and the nibbles, the soft words murmured to her ear and the strong hands on her body, the warmth Garrus was eager to share with her. It was well enough after months of ghosts and tensions.

The downside of having fun with a colleague in an uncomfortable and quite cold space after months of inactivity were multiple and Shepard could cite a few on top of her head: sore muscles, bruised knees and irritated skin, for example. She could add puncture marks everywhere to the list. Garrus had paid attention to his talons most of the time but they were really sharp and Shepard's skin was really thin compared to a Turian's. Still, totally worth it, she decided as she waited for the meeting with the Council, and not that awkward in the end. Sure, Garrus had stayed in Lab1 all
morning after breakfast but it was his usual spot anyway, and he hadn't said or done anything Shepard would qualified as a sign of discomfort when she had done her round – Traynor's presence had certainly helped. They'd have to talk about it at some point – and she couldn't send Joker do the talking this time – but for now, everything was golden.

"You look well, Shepard," Anderson saluted her as he arrived in the waiting room of Tevos' office. He was wearing his uniform like any other soldier despite his promotion to temporary chief of the Earth embassy. He had been in charge since Udina was in campaign but a new ambassador would soon be picked. Anderson probably counted the days. "Nice haircut."

"Thank you," she replied childishly, "but I'm still not talking to you, Sir."

"I'm not blaming you," Anderson sighed, a little amused. "But, I have to admit, I miss the young and sharp woman who was my friend."

Shepard looked at him as he sat next to her in the low sofa. She wasn't really mad at Anderson himself, more at the Alliance in general, but he had been the welcome party on Arcturus Station after Project Base so she had crystallized all her resentment on him. That didn't change the fact he had nurtured her talents for years after Torfan. Without Anderson, Shepard wouldn't be a Spectre today. Heck, she wouldn't be the person she was today.

"Urh," she grunted, exaggerating the effort she was making, "fine. It's a good day so I'm officially not mad at you anymore. The Alliance can still suck it though."

"How I envy you at the moment," Anderson sighed again. He looked tired. And grayer. "Every morning I look at my reflection in the mirror and tell myself I should quit. This isn't the Alliance I believed in anymore."

"Well, wait a few days before making your decision," Shepard smiled.

Anderson looked at the secretary for a second, estimating if she could hear them or not. "Did you investigate on the Alliance?" he asked, almost whispered. "Is this why I've been summoned?"

The doors of the office opened. "You'll see," Shepard said as she stood up.

Tevos welcomed Shepard the asari way, by putting their biotic fields in contact. The Councilor hadn't been so friendly with Shepard at the beginning. She had had her doubts about the first human Spectre, which was pretty normal considering the reputation of Shepard's species, but had eventually started to trust her after a few important solo missions. And for once, having biotics had improved Shepard's social life. Asaris were more friendly to female humans than males in general but having strong biotics put Shepard on the same level as them, more or less. She was "close to home" for an Asari, like Garrus would say.

Sparatus and Valern weren't there yet. Tevos invited Shepard and Anderson to sit on another set of low sofas in her large office. The view on the Presidium wasn't bad. "I've heard you helped Justicar Samara a few months ago," the Councilor said, leaning on a cushion.

"Yes ma'am," Shepard nodded. "It was a lucky coincidence though. I was just at the right place at the right time."

"Nonetheless," Tevos shrugged, "your help has been greatly appreciated and Justicar Samara made sure to inform me of your bravery. I too would like to thank you, Spectre."

Shepard simply nodded again, knowing it was enough for an Asari. Luck was part of the qualifications required to be a Spectre, if you were to listen to Nihlus. Shepard didn't believe in
luck but all of that was good anyway. That may even play in her favor by the end of the meeting.

Valern arrived first and Sparatus followed a few minutes later. He noticed Garrus' absence but didn't comment on it. Shepard stood up and presented to the Councilor and Anderson the rectangular piece of plastic Diana had given her. It was old tech, an USB drive, with actual music on it, but also a few encrypted files here and there.

"This," Shepard started, "is all the proof you need to evict Udina from his new shiny Prime Minister chair and put whoever you want at the head of the Alliance." By the looks she got, she had all the attention of the assembly. Anderson wasn't as thrilled as the others though and that surprised Shepard a little. Maybe his presence wasn't a good idea after all.

"But?" Valern asked.

"But," Shepard smiled, "I'd like you to hear me very carefully about a related business before I give it to you."

"You want to make a deal with us, Spectre?" the salarian Councilor insisted. "Do you realize who you're talking to?"

"I'll give it to you whatever your decision, Sir. I'm at your service," she added, looking at Sparatus straight in the eyes, "and I never failed the Council."

"Go on," the turian Councilor said, waving off any protestation possible from Valern.

"Thank you." Shepard put the USB drive on the coffee table to show her good faith. The micro-computer encased in the table automatically tried to connect to the small device but failed. You needed a special physical entry port to read the USB drive, as Traynor had explained. No one could steal the data without plugging it in into a computer. "My ongoing investigation about Cerberus took an unexpected turn in the last few weeks," Shepard continued. "As you know it, I currently hold an ex-Cerberus high ranked officer as my prisoner on the Normandy, and she has been very helpful. She's on a personal vendetta against Jack Harper, aka the Illusive Man, and she's the kind of person to go down the road whatever the cost. For example, she killed her sister a few days ago during our raid on the Lawson's Towers in London, on Earth."

"You mentioned it in your report, yes," Tevos nodded.

"Well it wasn't really her sister. It was a clone."

Valern straightened. "A clone? Humans make clones now?"

"It's been going on for a while, actually," Shepard corrected, "but the culprit isn't Humanity as a whole, it's Cerberus. I insist on this, Councilors. The Alliance has nothing to do with that."

"It's still very illegal," Valern said, agitated on his sofa. "And Cerberus has been connected to the Alliance. Maybe they started making clones while they were financed by the Alliance!"

"No," Shepard shook her head, "I checked and double-checked. Project Lazarus, the cell in question, has been busy cloning people for about six years, and we all know the Alliance and Cerberus worked together shortly after the First Contact War for a year only. The Alliance is not involved in this mess."

"And?" Tevos asked while Valern grumbled. "Are we supposed to just accept that clones made by Cerberus run around and do nothing about it?"
"I'm on it, ma'am," Shepard replied. "Actually, Lawson already killed five clones all by herself, four of them before I arrested her, and there aren't many others. Project Lazarus is a quite recent cell, they didn't start to grow clones a long time ago, and they kept a small number of them since they were still testing their methods, on Humans only I have to add. Lawson gave us a list of the few high targets Cerberus used as base material so we can monitor strange activities. I was one of those targets, by the way."

"There is another you," Valern said in a high speech and he lost a few colors. That amused Shepard greatly.

"There were six copies of me," she corrected, "but Lawson reduced that number to two, plus me. One is missing, we don't know where it is. The other one is playing merc in the Terminus from what we know. I'm going to take care of that, don't worry, but you may have to find me a good shrink afterward."

"This isn't a time for jokes!" Valern yelled, standing up. "This is a very serious problem, Spectre!"

"I know, Sir," Shepard assured, "but I kind of have to take it that way, you know? I'm going to kill another me in a not so distance future, so excuse me for trying to laugh about the situation instead of turning crazy and paranoid."

"Enough of that," Tevos interrupted. "Valern, please, calm down."

"How can I calm down?" the Salarian asked, acid. "How can we even know this is the real Shepard?"

"I know she's the real Shepard," Tevos rolled her eyes. "A biotic field cannot be forged."

"Maybe Cerberus managed to do that too!"

"Then ask me something only I would know," Shepard shrugged. That upset Valern even more.

"What was the advice I gave you after your nomination to Spectre?" Anderson asked, tensed. Good idea. He was indeed the person who knew her the best in that room.

"It was more of a speech, really," Shepard said, remembering his words perfectly. "'You're working for the Council now, so forget about the Alliance. Don't represent Humanity, focus on your work, do it properly. Forget about honor and don't expect thanks. And, Shepard, wait for the knife in your back because there will be one.'"

Anderson nodded. Valern clicked. "He can be a clone too and they could have prepared that touching moment before the meeting!"

"Very well," Sparatus sighed, annoyed. "Something classified then. How did Vakarian become a Spectre?"

"He was noticed during the Cerberus attack on the Citadel last New Year," Shepard replied. "I can even add Primarch Fedorian recommended me as Vakarian's mentor."

Sparatus' mandibles twitched a little. Maybe the other Councilors weren't aware of that but he would since he had asked Fedorian's opinion himself. "She's the real Shepard," Sparatus confirmed.

"Very well," Valern grunted as he sat down.
"So," Tevos continued, slightly irritated too, "you've made your point, Spectre. This situation isn't the responsibility of Humanity as a whole, nor the Alliance's, but Cerberus'. Therefore, the Council can only condemn their actions and press the Alliance to do everything possible to take care of that problem. We will also take a great interest in that affair. All in favor?"


"Very well," Valern grumbled. "I agree on that decision."

"Thank you, Councilors," Shepard said. She felt a little relieved, to be honest. And if she hadn't needed the money, she would have been able to throw Krios by the airlock herself. Nihlus could suck it too. He couldn't threaten her with that anymore. "Now, Udina."

"One second," Tevos interrupted her. "I'd rather send other Spectres to eliminate the remaining clones than you. As you said, Shepard, killing a copy of you isn't exactly healthy. You'll give us the related information and we'll send someone else to clean that mess."

Oh shit, Shepard thought. They'd send Nihlus and that was all that crazy son of a bitch needed to go rogue. Unfortunately, the Council liked their rogues dead. Shepard was angry at Nihlus for sure but not enough to paint a big red target on his back. "Then you should know my mentor is aware of the situation," she warned the Councilors. "He was pretty clear on his intentions to not eliminate anything even slightly looking like me when we talked about it."

"How long has he known?" Sparatus frowned.

"Since our last meeting on Arcturus Station, last week, Sir," Shepard answered. Sparatus clicked and made a note on his omnitool. Someone was going to be spanked. Tevos let him finish before inviting Shepard to speak again. "So, Udina. I already suspected he had been financed at some point by some shady figures, it's how politic works on Earth after all, and it turned out Henry Lawson, whom I arrested five days ago in London, was a big fan of the new Prime Minister. Lawson was also tight with Cerberus. We found money trails proving that, and the clone of his daughter ordered to the organization was also a big helper."

Technically, Oriana and Miranda were both genetically modified clones of their father but the Council didn't need to know that. Miranda was her own person. Shepard had talked enough to her to see that. She couldn't not notice the irony of the situation though. Miranda was a clone but also a person, while Shepard was ready to kill her own copies without even considering them as people. Well, that was just another contradiction to add to the pile of crap hiding in her head.

"This is not enough to start an investigation on Udina," Tevos frowned. "Do you have actual proof he's in bed with Cerberus, like you claimed?"

"I didn't say he was directly tied to Cerberus, ma'am," Shepard corrected. "I said this USB drive contained enough intel to make him resign."

"And what have you found, then?"

"Actually, a friend of mine did the digging, a journalist who'll remain anonymous for his or her sake," Tevos agreed. "Everything is explained in the files but the short version is that Udina made a lot of friends during his time on the Citadel, and some of them helped him fund his unexpected run for Prime Minister. They weren't humans, and it is forbidden by Council Law to take interest in another species' political life."
It was Christmas again for Sparatus and Valern – they would have high-three themselves if they had known about it, Shepard was sure of it. Tevos wasn't as happy as her colleagues though.

"Udina will deny everything," she said, "or claim he wasn't aware of alien support."

"Yes," Shepard agreed, "but the Council can investigate on the matter and Udina cannot represent the Alliance then, nor have any political activities on the galactic level. And, you know, investigations can go for years," she shrugged.

Tevos looked at her for long seconds before leaning to take the USB drive. "Thank you for your diligent work, Spectre," she said, sliding the device in a pocket of her expensive dress. "We will now review that matter in private. Anderson, please stay around. We will call you soon."

"At your service, ma'am," Shepard said with a sharp salute.

Anderson waited to be out of the Council Bureau to explode. "Do you realize what you just did?" he asked out loud. A few people in the corridor looked at him.

"Yes," Shepard replied, raising a hand in defend. "I know it's not the best time to do that," she added, "but the guy is dirty, period. It's not in the Alliance' best interest to start over with him at its head."

Anderson passed a hand on his tired face. He was angry, it showed. He could. Shepard had just thrown the Alliance in another political crisis, and the Council would be involved this time. That wouldn't help the complicated relationship between Humanity and aliens in general but fuck it. Shepard knew where her allegiance fell.

"I did my job, Anderson," Shepard continued more seriously, hands in her pockets. "I had to present the evidences to the Council."

"Don't you pull that crap on me, Shepard," Anderson told her back, pointing a finger at her. "You never liked Udina and you used that opportunity to get rid of him without thinking about the consequences!"

Shepard frowned. "The guy pissed me off, it's true, but I would never have destroyed his political career just because of that, and you know it, Sir."

"Shepard, you..."

"I did my job," she insisted. "I serve the Council. I'm not the Alliance's bitch anymore. Did you forget it by any chance?"

"I did not," Anderson said, determined, "but that doesn't mean you have to throw us under the bus either!"

"That depends on my orders,Sir." Anderson looked at her as if he didn't recognize her anymore and Shepard suddenly felt like shit. She was the knife on his back, apparently. "I worked for a long time under your command, Captain," Shepard said, incapable of looking at him in the eyes, "and I admired your integrity. You didn't take any bullshit from anyone, not even your superiors, and you taught me to do the same. That's what I'm doing now, Sir. I thought you over all people could understand that." Anderson didn't reply, he just kept staring at Shepard, anger all over his face and fists clenched. So much for their friendship. "I should go," Shepard sighed. "Stuff to do in the Traverse." She didn't wait for an answer. Anderson wasn't going to say goodbye anyway.

Shepard first went to the turian embassy to retrieve what Fedorian had promised her, then headed
for the Spectre Bureau, also known as Requisitions by the populace due to the tendency of certain Spectres to take what they wanted whenever they wanted. The bureau was in the same district as the embassies and the Councilors' offices. Shepard didn't really like to go there, she felt terribly out of place as the only Human in the middle of so many aliens, but she had to to exchange information with fellow Spectres and get some paperwork done. There was one important rule to respect in the bureau: you only could talk to people you already knew, to preserve anonymity between Spectres. Shepard was famous, as were Nihlus and Saren, but they were exceptions. Most Spectres were unknown of the public or even of their colleagues. Without an official order from the Council to work with someone else, a Spectre wasn't allowed to fraternize with another one.

Shepard didn't mind the rule, to be honest. She had heard all sort of shit about her after her nomination and rumors had only calmed down two years ago, after her first big raid on a Cerberus outpost manufacturing red sand. Besides, she didn't know a lot of other Spectres, and most were Nihlus' friends – he had been a Spectre for over two decades so he knew pretty much all the old ones. Still, as the only Human allowed in the Bureau, Shepard got some curious and wary looks following her as she walked to the terminals. She was interrupted before she could log in by a cheerful voice in her back calling her. Shepard turned to see a Salarian tall for his species, his skin all in gradients of gray and his armor black and yellow. His height sufficed to identify him – he was even taller than Garrus. It was Jondum Bau, another watchman of prothean tech.

"Shepard!" he smiled, opening his arms to embrace her and pat her on the back like Salarians did. Shepard reciprocated the salutations and even let him touch the shaved part of her head. It was good to see a friendly face. "That's new," he said, his finger following the recent scar.

"Took a thresher maw on the head," Shepard smirked as she stepped back to not dislocate her neck to see him properly. "Try to top that."

"Not my style," Bau chuckled. "I'm the kind of guy who sits at a terrace with a cup of thix and spies on everyone. I think I didn't even use my gun in the last couple of months."

"Wow, is that even possible?" Shepard joked.

"It is in my line of work," Bau smiled again. "Speaking of, have you ever heard of Goto Kasumi?" He keyed on his omnitool to show her the picture of a small hooded figure, female for sure, and probably Asian, but too blurry to be of any use for identification.

"Nope. Who is she?"

"A master chief but she has large competences in sabotage, infiltration, stealth and hand-to-hand combat. She took interest in prothean technology recently. She managed to take an Echo Shard from the Archives."

"The Archives?" Shepard repeated, surprised. "The actual Archives, here, on the Citadel?"

"Yes."

"Damn." The Archives weren't exactly the most secured place in the galaxy but a close second or third nonetheless. It was were the Council kept all their dirty secrets and very important files. A handful of trusted agents lived and worked in the Archives, separated from the rest of the galaxy. Nobody else was allowed there, not even Spectres.

"Yeah," Bau nodded, folding his arms, "she's that good, and it's not her only theft around. Prothean tech was reported missing on Berkenstein recently, and on an asari colony in the Traverse a few months ago. Miss Goto has been busy and I thought you should be aware of her activities"
"Thanks," Shepard smiled, "but I'm not really worried about Javik. Actually, I'd be worried for Miss Goto if she ever came across him."

"Me too," Bau shivered. He had met Javik. "How is he doing?"

"Not so great lately," Shepard admitted. "You know he's friend with Wrex, the Krogan merc in my team, right?"

"Big, red, scars on the forehead, threatened to eat me," Bau nodded. "Yes, I see who you're talking about."

"Well their bromance took a serious hit because of a lie and since then he's been a little under the weather." Putting Wrex out of his misery in London hadn't been easy to deal with for Javik either. Shepard had spent a few nights in his cabin after the raid, just talking and enjoying each other's company. He had needed it.

"Tell me if it gets worse. I collected a few things lately that might interest him."

"Thanks. And I'll see what I can find on Goto."

"Appreciated." A few cheers coming from the shooting range caught his attention. "Oh, you're a good sniper, right? You might want to check on the new guy."

"Let me guess," Shepard smirked. "Turian, tall, scars, didn't leave the shooting range since he got here and currently playing with a customized Black Widow."

Bau opened big eyes. "Yes! Do you know him?"

"Yeah, you can say that," Shepard chuckled. "He's my protegee."

"Oh, so the rumors were true! The Turians didn't know who he had been assigned to and it drove them crazy for weeks."

Shepard snorted. Turians kept their community tight and they liked to keep an eye on their own, especially the young ones. Spectres weren't allowed to know names and make friends with one another but that wasn't seen as a problem. They'd just exchange a few looks and nods, that was enough for them. Shepard didn't know if Garrus was doing that though. Probably not considering his reluctance to be around other Turians.

"Don't tell them," Shepard said. "Wouldn't be fun otherwise, right?"

"It wouldn't," Bau chuckled. His omnitool beeped. "Ah, gotta go. See you, Shepard!"

"Take care, Bau."

He waved at her over his shoulder and disappeared at the corner. Shepard turned back to the console and finally logged in. Nobody she knew had left her a message and the unopened mail came from the Council's office – notifications of payment, money transferred from Nihlus' bank account, "don't leave your cup in the sink" kind of passive-aggressive reminders and the all of that. The only new and intriguing email had been transferred from the Earth embassy. That was strange. Shepard hadn't received a mail from the Earth embassy since her nomination to Spectre, and it was to inform her that they wouldn't represent her anymore due to her new job – she had to deal directly with the Council's office for anything remotely administrative.
The email was labeled as "For Shepard, Spectre, Citadel" but had been sent to the Earth embassy's address, the one you could easily find on the website. Shepard frowned as she opened it. What the fuck was that? The email was as followed:

(no title)

From: Warden Kuril, Purgatory

Greetings, Spectre.

As you may know, the Purgatory is a maximum security prison keeping the worst entities of the known universe for the good of the galaxy since CE 2101. We offer a variety of solutions for every kind and every budget.

A group of Humans has recently been delivered to our facilities, including a John Shepard (photo and DNA sample joined) claiming to be your relative. Mr./Mrs./Other Shepard does not match our entry criteria, therefore cannot be kept in Purgatory as our resources are limited, and will be eliminated within a month (Council Standard Time) if not claimed.

Please make sure to be able to clear his/her/its account before giving us your decision (account's details joined). If you wish to free the prisoner, please send a down payment (file joined). If you do not wish to free the prisoner, we offer a large range of elimination methods (detailed fees joined). Delivery possible at your convenience (transport fees' details and form joined), pick up option free (coordinates joined).

Best regards.

Well shit.

TBC
There was nobody in the shuttle bay when the elevator's doors open – EDI didn't even bother switching the lights on. Garrus hesitated. Was he the first to arrive for training or had it been canceled? That possibility wouldn't really surprise him. Shepard was in a terrible mood since their departure from the Citadel yesterday. They were heading to the Kypladon system in the Silean Nebula, current location of the Purgatory, a moving maximum security prison held by the Blue Suns. Shepard had told the crew she had to delay the meeting with Liara on Illium for an urgent personal matter. Her twin brother, John, had to be picked up in the next couple of days or he'd be eliminated – that was the polite term for "thrown by the airlock with the garbage".

Shepard probably didn't sleep at all during the night so Garrus didn't call her over the radio to know if she was coming down for training. Shepard, he understood, but why didn't Javik show up? He rarely missed an opportunity to remind everybody he was the strongest warrior in the known universe. Garrus had never managed to even bruise him during training. Javik never hesitated to use his biotics. He was careful not to hurt anyone but he had no trouble throwing his opponent against the nearest wall with a push of his biotics instead of getting physical – he didn't like to touch people. Garrus had stopped counting all the times he had been stuck head down and butt up in the air while the Prothean dealt with Shepard.

Garrus looked at the windows of Javik's cabin but they were obstructed, like always. He wasn't really eager to go knock on his door so Garrus decided it'd be a day off. That wouldn't be a bad idea considering his sore muscles from yesterday, he thought as he pushed the button for third deck. He knew he was rusty in this area but, damn, he had never thought it was as bad as that. He just hoped nobody would notice his stiff gait– Spirits, Wrex would have immediately noticed because of the smells. Garrus didn't care if people knew he had had sex with Shepard, to be exact, but he supposed she didn't want her crew to know. The Alliance had rules for that, from what Garrus remembered. It was technically forbidden to fraternize but, let's be serious, nobody followed that rule. Although Shepard wasn't part of the Alliance anymore and there was no such rule for Spectres – otherwise the turian mentorship tradition would be illegal, right? Garrus made a mental note to check with the Bureau later, just in case, and walked out of the elevator on third deck – still no lights, thank you EDI. He aimed by habit at Life Support and realized it just before opening the door. Damn, again.

The door of crew quarters opened on Lawson in her sportswear, her hair a mess but brown again – Shepard had bought her dye on the Citadel the previous day. She jumped when she noticed Garrus and pointed at the women's bathroom. So it wasn't an attempt to escape and kill them all, apparently. Garrus nodded and walked to the kitchen to make himself a cup of cafineX. It wasn't like him to go back to sleep so he'd just head to Lab1 and work a bit on that damned VI until breakfast – this thing kept on trying to access the Normandy's main systems and there was no way Garrus would ever allow that, he had to find a way to completely isolate it. He'd bring something to eat to Solus too on the way. The old Salarian had be very busy since their stop on Tuchanka and he was neglecting his health.

The lights of the mess were suddenly switched on and Garrus had to close his eyes for a second. It wasn't for him though, he understood when he saw Lawson walk to him, pulling on her sweatshirt.

"Good morning," Garrus said, grabbing his cup in the washing machine. "I'm making cafineX."
Want some? Well, caffee, coffee, whatever the name of your version."

He had nothing against Lawson, to be honest. She had strong beliefs against aliens, especially Turians, sure, but she was always open to discussion and she was capable of changing her judgment. Garrus had had many occasions to talk to her during his watch duty. Lawson wasn't a bad person. Besides, the last couple of days hadn't been fun for her. Garrus had been there when her father, Henry Lawson, had spat the truth about the origins of his 'daughters' and he had seen the ground opening under Lawson's feet right after. He didn't know how she was still standing. Anyway, she may have been one of the bad guys but it wasn't a reason to be an ass with her. She had been more than cooperative since the beginning, and that was an attitude worth a good treatment.

"Thanks," Lawson replied with a strange smile, "but I actually need you for something else."

"Sure. What can I do for you?"

"I need access to the medbay," Lawson replied, "but I'm not allowed to walk in without supervision."

"Doctor Chakwas might be more suited to help you," Garrus replied.

"She just told me to call her back when I'm dying," Lawson rolled her eyes, "and I doubt Professor Solus will come down for something as trivial as my problem. I just need a pad or a tampon."

"You need what?" Garrus frowned.

Lawson stared at him with her piercing blue eyes, the effect quite diminished by her pajamas and messed up hair. "Is Commander Shepard around?" she eventually asked. "It's training time for her, right?"

"I doubt she'll show up this morning," Garrus shrugged, opening a cupboard to take a sachet of cafinex powder.

"I am not going to bleed in my underwear until the next woman wakes up," Lawson decreed with the cold determination that came with leadership. "So please, Spectre Vakarian, come with me to medbay so I can find a tampon."

"Oh, you have your periods," Garrus understood. That he knew – he had done some research recently. Lawson frowned before his enthusiastic tone. "Sorry," he said, "I'll come with you, no problem."

"Thank you," she replied coldly.

Garrus abandoned his cup in the kitchen to walk Lawson to medbay. EDI gave the location of the supplies needed when asked and Lawson didn't touch anything else. They were out the next minute. Lawson went back to the bathroom while Garrus headed for the kitchen to finalize his cafinex. Lawson showed again a few minutes later.

"Sorry again," Garrus felt obligated to say. "I know about the phenomena but not much around."

"I have to apologize too," Lawson sighed, not particularly pleased to talk about that. "I assumed you knew considering your mentor is a woman. Although she's in the military so she must have an implant, now that I'm thinking about it."

"She does," Garrus confirmed before sipping his cafinex. "I thought all human women had one."
Lawson gave him an uncomfortable look, the same Alenko had had when they were talking about that a few weeks ago. "But I believe it's not a subject Humans like to talk about so, please, excuse my, huh, curiosity."

"It's okay," Lawson replied, pushing her hair back. "Aliens can be quite fascinating, can't they? But I've heard you only answer to your superiors," she reminded him with a smart little smile, "so I won't bother you with my questions."

"I can disclose a few things, I suppose," he shrugged, amused. "Ask away, miss Lawson."

"Alright," she agreed. She keyed on the kitchen counter for a second while Garrus leaned on the sink, his cup in hand. "How do you differentiate a woman from a man? I can never tell with Turians."

"There is no need to differentiate a Turian. Gender doesn't matter."

"But if someone, an alien asked you, you can answer, don't you?" Garrus nodded. "So how do you know?"

He scratched his scars, looking at the ceiling. He had read about that in class when he was a kid but it was so long ago he barely remembered it. Biology never really was his forte. "It's... the smell," he hesitated. "Well, it's instinctive, not conscious. We, huh, we just know."

"Hm hm."

"To tell the truth," Garrus shyly smiled, "I, huh, I couldn't tell a female from a male human the first time I came across your kind." Lawson looked surprised. "I mean, we have exobiology classes in school and all but it doesn't really count for much in the final grade, so everybody tends to focus on other subjects, except for the 'all aliens are poisonous so stay away from them' part. So, first shore leave on the Citadel," he chuckled, "I was sixteen and excited to finally get out of turian space, like all the other new recruits. Our platoon leader took us to a bar with the older conscripts. They were supposed to take care of us, but everybody knew their goal was just to get us wasted, bonus point if we threw up." Lawson smiled, amused. It encouraged Garrus to continue. "And there was that human sitting in a booth, fat, enormous," he mimicked with his arms, "with rolls under the neck. We Turian don't get fat, it's biologically impossible, so we were mesmerized before that really, really big, sweaty alien licking its fingers. Humans were supposed to be our mortal enemies after all, the most threatening species since the Krogans, not balls of fat. So our leader put drinks in front of us and said with his terrible Bostra accent: 'alright kiddos, if you guess right what the heck is that, you drink one glass; if you don't, you drink three glasses'. I was pretty sure it was a woman because I remembered the picture of a pregnant woman with a big belly, and I naively thought she was carrying six or seven children." Lawson started to laugh. "Of course it was a man," Garrus laughed too, "and I had to drink. I drank so much that night, I don't even remember how shore leave ended, and I woke up in brigs with the worst headache of my life. Well, second worst," he corrected as Lawson laughed for good. "I got LIB-ed a few months ago and I do not wish that kind of pain to anyone."

Lawson had to wipe the tears out of her eyes, her cheeks redder than usual. It was a big contrast with her more cold and composed self. "Is it true then that you're all bisexual?" she asked.

Garrus choked on his sip of cafineX, which made Lawson laugh even more. You could count on Humans to be curious about what was going on in aliens' pants, Garrus had learned by listening to the Normandy's crew perpetual chit-chats. "That'd be the correct term," he answered nonetheless, "but we don't see it like that."
"How so?"

Garrus sipped his cafínx, reorganizing his thoughts. He was already in anyway and it surely was a good thing for Lawson to have a better understanding of other species. "Well, we have two genders, male and female, like a lot of species, but there is no sexual dimorphism between us, like Elcors by the way. Men are not taller or stronger than women, who do not have breasts or wider hips." Lawson nodded. "But, like I said, we don't care about gender," Garrus continued. "What a Turian is capable of is not determined by the sexual organs they have. We didn't even have words to express gender applied to us before we were introduced to the galactic community, and we don't even use them between us – it's a vocabulary for talking to aliens. That's how much we care about the question. So, sure, we have sex with partners of both genders, but to us it's a person, not a man or a woman."

"But you must have preferences," Lawson insisted. "Having sex with a man isn't the same as with a woman, even if you don't care about gender."

"Well we all have a cloaca so..." Garrus cleared his throats. "But I'd rather not get too personal. I'm happy to answer your questions as long as they stay general but I don't know you enough to share intimate details."

The door of Life Support opened on Krios and Lawson automatically lost her amused smile. She composed herself as the Drell walked to them, falling back to a more cold and controlled attitude. Garrus didn't miss a second of the transformation. Lawson was human and physically very different from him but damn, he could have sworn he was looking at himself. A few months back though. He was more relaxed around people now, he hoped.

"Good morning, miss Lawson," Krios said, hands behind his back. He then slightly turned to Garrus and nodded sharply. "Spectre Vakarian."

"Krios," Garrus replied with the same nod.

"I'm tired," Lawson suddenly announced. "I'm going back to bed. Thanks for your help, Garrus."

"It's Vakarian," he corrected by automatism. Lawson looked at him over her shoulder as she walked away and smiled. Something was telling him that would be another lost cause, much like Vega's case.

Krios kept his eyes on Lawson until she disappeared at the corner, then turned to Garrus. "I would like to join your morning training sessions."

"Huh," Garrus hesitated. "I'm not the one you should talk to to get in." He didn't even know who would take the final decision. Shepard was indeed the Captain of the ship, but Javik was her teacher during training. Though it was easy to predict what either would say: no. Sure, training was important, but it was more of a teacher-student moment than anything else in reality. Garrus didn't want Krios to join and spoil the good time he had with Shepard.

"I will talk to the Commander then," Krios nodded. "Is she around?"

I'm not her secretary, Garrus thought behind his cup. "No idea."

"Miss EDI, may I talk to the Commander?" Krios asked out loud.

"She requested to not be disturbed until breakfast," the AI replied through the speakers.

Krios blinked slowly. "Very well," he said. "I will meditate." He then turned heels and went back
to Life Support, leaving Garrus alone with his thoughts in the mess. Strange man, this Drell. The lights went off as soon as the door closed.

"Oh come on," Garrus clicked.

He grabbed a ration bar for himself and went to second deck. Lab2 was open but Solus was sleeping in his reclining chair under a grey blanket, a hardcover book on the floor next to him. Garrus left the fruit juice and snacks next to his computer and crossed the corridor to go to Lab1. The room was a bit cold for him in his sportswear so he keyed on the thermostat to get a temperature more comfortable – he'd have to lower it back once in armor. Garrus sat at his desk in front of the window giving on the reactor and logged in in the network. No email, just the daily schedule Shepard had uploaded before going to bed – two AM, no wonder she didn't show up for training. They'd travel all day and reach the Purgatory only in the evening. Garrus didn't know if he'd come with her. It wasn't an official mission after all and she'd most likely only have to file papers, not exactly the kind of situation who required assistance. He'd ask her later anyway, just in case.

Garrus spent the next hours working on a sandbox strong enough to contain the VI and completely forgot about breakfast. He only realized time had passed when he heard the door of Lab1 open in the far end of the room.

"Holy shit, Vakarian," Shepard exclaimed as she walked in, "it's a hundred degrees in here!"

"Ah, sorry," Garrus apologized, spinning with his chair. EDI didn't wait for an order and cool air came out of the vents immediately. "I took upon myself to improve my comfort. But if you think it's warm here, don't come to my quarters," he joked.

"I'll just have to leave my clothes at the door if I visit," she replied ever so serious.

Garrus chuckled, a bit embarrassed but somehow relieved. "So that answers that question," he said, turning back to his computer.

"What question?" Shepard asked, leaning on his desk on his right and folding her arms.

"I didn't know if yesterday was a one time kind of slip-up or something else," Garrus replied, keeping his eyes on the screen. "And I know I should have asked before but, huh, I was really distracted."

"I noticed," Shepard smiled. Garrus cleared his throat. "Well, now is as good a time as ever to talk about that, I suppose," she continued, scratching her nose. "Unless you're busy?"

"No it's okay," Garrus shook his head. "I'm going nowhere with this thing anyway," he added, leaning on his chair and feeling a bit frustrated.

"You've been at it for months, and I don't deny your progress but maybe it's time to request help from somebody else."

"I'd be glad to meet any other prothean computer expert," Garrus mocked.

Shepard winced. "Right. I'm not the only prothean tech watchman though, so I'll see what I can do. Now, regarding yesterday," Garrus nodded to show her she had his full attention. Shepard smirked. "First of all, thank you for that, it was nice."

"How do Humans say?" Garrus thought out loud. "All the pleasure was mine?"
"Yes," Shepard snorted, "I also noticed that."

"Thank you for not spoiling the surprise, by the way," Garrus chuckled, a little embarrassed. Sex with a human woman wasn't that different than with a Turian in the end, exception made of the genital parts. Cloacae were much looser than vaginæ, too loose for suction to happen. That was a phenomena Garrus would love to test again, to be honest. "It was really nice."

Shepard smiled. "Glad you're not disgusted forever of squishy aliens. Anyway, I'd like to keep a turian approach of the subject, if you don't mind. We can have sex, no problem, as long as it doesn't interfere with our jobs, ranks and obligations."

"Of course," Garrus agreed. The rules weren't new to him but maybe Shepard thought she had to explicitly remind them, just in case.

"And it's for fun only," she added. "Never for comfort."

"Oh." That was new. Sex was used between friends for many reasons, and comfort was one of them. Although the decision didn't really surprise Garrus. Shepard had always refused any kind of moral support and her reactions when she received this kind of unwanted attention were rather violent. Garrus felt like they'd miss something important though. "Is it open for discussion?" he asked.

"I don't need anybody to deal with my shit, Vakarian" Shepard replied as expected, "and I don't want to be your comfort girl. You want comfort? Fine. We can talk, or you can ask Joker or Mordin for a pep talk, but comfort sex is out of the question."

"But sometimes physical contact helps," Garrus argued.

"I'm not the hugging type," Shepard said, looking at the wall.

"So I just have to accept your conditions," Garrus frowned, "no discussion possible?"

"We just did that."

"But we didn't agree on anything," he insisted.

"Comfort," Shepard started again, "leads to attachment, which lead to subjectivity, misjudgment and stupid behaviors that can endanger lives. Example: Nihlus. I rest my case."

"You know he's just crazy, right?" Garrus asked, but she did have a point. Attachment could lead to dangerous behaviors, especially between a mentor and their pupil.

Shepard clicked, annoyed. "I like how things are between us, Vakarian. Part of your charms is the distance between you and me."

"I'm not sure to follow, Commander," Garrus frowned.

Shepard rubbed her head, searching for her words. "We're friends, okay, and friends reach out to each other. You've... supported me a few times, so did I for you, and that's fine as long as it stays that way. I don't want sex to be involved in that. Support is fine as long as it's words, talking. No touching, no hugging, no sexy distraction, okay?"

Garrus looked at Shepard for a few seconds. It seemed to be a big issue for her. "Alright then," he shrugged. "Any other weird rule?"
"We're not exclusive."

"Deal."

"I don't want your hands anywhere close to my cunt if you're not wearing gloves."

"Understandable," Garrus nodded.

"We don't force each other to do stuff we don't want to in the first place and no 'oops my dick slid in there by accident'."

"Of course not," Garrus replied, shocked. "Do Humans really that?"

"You'd be surprised," Shepard grunted. "Anything on your mind?"

"Huh, yeah, actually," Garrus said, remembering what he had read about human sexual intercourse. "I'd like to avoid your mouth near my genitals. Too many teeth." Shepard burst out of laughter, leaving Garrus to his suppositions. Sure, Turians were much more impressive than Humans and were seen as physically more dangerous. Their teeth were sharper, made to rip off big chunks of food they’d then gulp, but an adult only had a dozen of them, while a Human had thirty-two teeth in average. They were made to cut, tear off and grind. That was just fuel for nightmares.

Shepard sighed to regain a bit of control. "Okay," she said, her cheeks still red, "okay, no fellatio. No kissing either I suppose?"

"Well it won't kill me so why not try it," Garrus shrugged. "I'll just have to do some research to find out how to avoid the gag reflex. I know it's possible, I've seen Turians kissing Asaris."

"You banged the squishy alien only for the research, admit it," Shepard snorted.

"Got me there, Commander," Garrus joked.

She smiled, amused. "Alright, I think we covered the most important parts I have to finish my round. We'll talk about other objections when they show up. Communication is the key, they say." She abandoned the desk and patted Garrus on the shoulder. "Glad we could talk, Vakarian."

"Likewise, Commander," he replied, spinning his chair to look at her leaving. "Oh, wait!" Garrus called before she left the room. "What about tonight?"

"Already?" she mocked. "My, my, Vakarian."

"No," he chuckled, "it's about the Purgatory. Would you like me to come with you?"

Shepard stopped for a second as the door opened on the CIC. "I didn't decide yet," she said. "But better safe than sorry, right? EDI," she added, "find me everything you can get on the Purgatory ASAP. Maps are the priority."

"Yes, Commander," the AI replied.

"I'll see what I can do for your VI, Vakarian," Shepard added.

"Thanks, Commander," Garrus replied but the doors were already closing on her. He turned back to his desk and all the mess on it. Well, he thought, it could have been worse.

The day went on as any other between two missions. Garrus kept on trying to build his sandbox and, at some point in the afternoon, Traynor came to translate more code from the VI. She had a
thing for languages – and card games. Traynor was one of the three persons on board capable of fluently speaking Prothean, with Javik and Shepard. Garrus had learned the basics – the grammar was simple enough and the vocabulary necessary to have a daily conversation quite limited – but he needed more to fully understand the code of the VI. T'soni had been of great help before they left. They both knew enough of language and tech to save his ass a bunch of times. Garrus was still in contact with the doctor but their communications were limited due to all the traveling they respectively did. Besides, it was a bit risque to send portions of code from a prothean VI over emails, even if everything was encrypted. No encryption method was unbreakable on the long run after all.

Massani didn't show up for dinner. Shepard quickly ate and quit the table with Joker who had to go back to the cockpit to finalize the approach of the Purgatory. Garrus gulped the rest of his dinner and put his empty tray in the washing machine before going to his quarters to grab a few weapons.

"Vakarian," Alenko called as Garrus walked to the elevator, "you're going with Shepard?"

"Yep, just in case," he answered over his shoulder. Alenko was slightly frowning but Garrus didn't waste time to find a meaning to that.

"And you plan on killing everybody on board with all that stuff you carry?" Vega mocked.

"That's the difference between you and me, Alliance," Garrus bragged with humor. "I'm always prepared." Vega laughed.

"Turian," Javik interrupted, his voice powerful enough to make Vega shut up and lower his head. Garrus stopped at the corner, even if he was in a hurry. It was better to lose a few seconds than to be the target of Javik's wrath. "If anything happens to the Commander..." he began his threat.

"Skinned alive and my head used as a lamp, yessir" Garrus finished. Javik grumbled. Shepard must have forbade him to come, even if he obviously wanted to. But it was a bad idea to let the last Prothean parade all over the galaxy.

"I'll be in the cockpit," the Javik added.

"Huh, okay. Anything else?" Garrus asked around mockingly. "A souvenir, maybe?" His fellow crew members exchanged a few surprised looks. "Alright, see you in twenty minutes then," Garrus added and he even waved goodbye.

"Did the Turian just give us attitude?" he heard Tali'Zorah ask, outraged, as the elevator's doors close. Vega laughed even more.

Shepard, still in her uniform, was just behind Joker's seat as the Normandy slowly approached the Purgatory – EDI was sitting in the copilot's chair. Garrus stopped on her right to take a look at the ship. It was an old model of ark ship, made to transport animals but converted into a prison ninety years ago, with a lot of side modules. The Blue Suns had taken control of it around 2160 and had kept the business running since then. The intel EDI had found talked about over four thousands inmates of all known species, plus at least two unknown, for a crew of only two hundred. The Purgatory was almost eight hundred meters long, which put it in the cruiser class, but its defenses were minimal and mostly assured by small fighters. If it came to a quick escape, the Normandy would be at the relay before the Purgatory could change direction.

"You're going to war with all of that, Vakarian?" Shepard asked, eyes locked on the windows.

"Always prepared, Commander," he simply repeated. "By the way." He handed her his Paladin. "A
Shepard smirked. "Thanks but I'm covered," she replied, patting a Carnifex in the small of her back. Garrus sheathed his gun as Joker looked at them over his shoulder, frowning. "Hey," Shepard warned him, "eyes on the road."

Joker snorted and leaned on his chair. "I can do this in my sleep, Commander."

"The docking maneuver is automated," EDI commented.

"Yeah, throw the cripple under the bus," Joker mockingly grunted. "It's not like my job is endangered by your all mighty kind after all."

"I'll keep you as my pet," EDI reassured him. "You are entertaining."

"Thank you oh generous Overlord," Joker snorted. A low vibration ran along the hull as the two ships connected via the ramp. A few panels popped-up on the dashboard. "Seal: OK. Gravity, pressure, atmosphere: standard and OK. Oxygen level lower than standard, deviation: minus two point zero eight percents. Atmosphere's composition... Ugh, let's just say you'll need a shower when you get back." Shepard rolled her eyes. "All good, Commander. I'll keep the engine running."

Shepard just nodded sharply in response. Garrus followed her to the airlock and waited at parade rest during the process – closing, checking, opening, moving forward, closing, checking again and finally opening. The smell made him regret to have come. He'd need more than a shower to get rid of it. Garrus gave a look around: a large bay with windows giving outside, opening on the right to a corridor leading to the central bridge, as indicated on the wall. Just like on the maps. A bareface Turian in the standard Blue Sun armor was walking towards them with two guards, a Batarian and a Human, all heavily armed.

"Spectre Shepard," the Turian said enthusiastically, "it's an honor to meet you."

"Well that'd be a first from a merc," she replied. He seemed quite amused. She presented him her wrist and he grabbed it in a salute. "Warden Kuril, I suppose?"

"Indeed. And?" he asked, looking at Garrus.

"He's part of my crew. I thought I might need help to handle the prisoner. Is that a problem?"

"Well I can assure you my personnel will be pleased to help you in any way they can," Kuril answered, "but the customer's always right. If you want your boy with you, no problem. He's heavily armed though."

"Fresh out of the army," Shepard lied. "You know how Turians are."

"Ah yes," Kuril nodded. "Takes a couple of years to get rid of the brainwashing, doesn't it?" He smiled and opened an arm to show the direction. "Shall we?"

"Lead the way, Warden."

They took the corridor but didn't go through the main bridge. They turned left instead to go to a more administrative looking part, a large room with desks and Blue Suns busy with papers. It was a strange sight for Garrus. He had never seen any mercenary in an office job. There was a door at the other end of the room, heavily guarded.

The Warden showed the way to his desk and his men left him there. He politely presented a chair
to Shepard but let Garrus stand. She was the customer after all, he thought, folding his arms and keeping an eye on the room. Most of it was in his back though so he turned slightly to have the wall behind him. That amused the Warden greatly.

"Your pup should relax," he said as he sat in front of Shepard. "We're here for business, not trap you, throw you into a cage and sell you to the most generous buyer, even if, I have to say, it would be a very lucrative option. You have quite a fanclub, Spectre."

"It's the disdainful look," Shepard replied, easing herself on her chair. "Drives men crazy."

Kuril smiled and it was evident he was part of Shepard's fanclub. "Indeed," he agreed. He adopted a more appropriate attitude the next second. "So, you've confirmed the prisoner's identity," he resumed, looking at a file on his computer, "you've paid everything mister Shepard owed us when we sent you the notification and the money was wired without a problem – I love the efficiency of the Central Citadel Bank. You do not wish our assistance for any last special treatment, I suppose?"

"No, thank you."

"Very well," Kuril continued, keying on his keyboard. "So you just need to pay the balance of mister Shepard's account, a few signatures and he'll be all yours. Would you like to see him while my secretary fetches the documents? I can assure you he's alive and well but maybe you'd want to confirm it before signing any paper."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Warden," Shepard nodded.

"I aim to please, Spectre," Kuril smiled and there was so much subtext, it leaked on the floor. Garrus cleared his throat. Kuril laughed as he leaned on his chair. "Relax, kiddo. It's all a game," he said with a smirk. Garrus just frowned.

He then signaled to his men to get the prisoner and kept on looking at Shepard. She obliged and gave him her disdainful look. The papers arrived shortly after on several datapads. Shepard read them thoroughly while she waited. The door eventually opened but she didn't look. Not showing interest in her brother, Garrus finally understood. It was a way to protect herself. If her brother's life had seemingly no value to her, nobody would use him against her. She had come to retrieve him though.

Garrus wasn't as uninterested as his mentor and he watched John Shepard walk to them in his brown uniform, chains on the wrists and ankles, followed by the two guards. He was tall for a Human, well built but he probably had been deprived of food recently. He had dark hair and a bit of beard, piercing blue eyes, a square jaw and traces of beatings on his face. He didn't look like Shepard at all, Garrus thought, but it wasn't really surprising considering his species. Humans were much more varied in appearances than most species due to the redundancy of their DNA. Even siblings didn't necessarily look alike, while you could easily find the members of the same family between Turians just by looking at them. Consanguinity among ancestral clans had had that effect on them.

"It's him," Shepard confirmed after a quick look. She put the datapad she had in hands on the desk. "Do you mind if I pay the rest in cash?" she asked, searching her pockets for credit chips.

"Not at all," Kuril smiled. "We even offer a discount for payments in cash if we lose the receipt."

"I'll need it, sorry."

"Twenty-three thousands credits then." Shepard put two ten thousands and three thousands chips
on the desk. Kuril quickly checked them and scrolled on the datapads to the bottom of the contracts. "Sign here," he pointed, "and here, and... here." He turned to take a datadisk freshly printed and gave it to Shepard. "Your copy of the legal documents, with the receipts and everything."

"Thank you," Shepard nodded, sliding it in her pocket.

Kuril stood up, followed by Shepard. "It was a pleasure doing business with you, Spectre," he said, signaling to his guards they could release the prisoner. "I hope you'll think of us if you ever need efficient and discreet detention services." Garrus frowned. That meant some other Spectres probably used the Purgatory on a regular basis. "And of course, you can contact me if you have any inquiry, business or not."

"I'll keep your offer in mind," Shepard assured. "Let's go."

"Wait," John interrupted. His voice was higher than what Garrus has expected. "I have a friend here. I can't let her in this shithole!"

"That's your problem, not mine," Shepard replied, already walking to the door.

"Do you realize what they do to their prisoners in here?" John asked, pointing at Kuril. "They have a good time starving us, beating us, making us fight against each other for a cup of water or five minutes in a shower. And I'd rather not talk about the conjugal visits."

Shepard stopped and turned to Kuril. The Turian smiled. "I can assure you this is perfectly legal, Spectre."

"Oh, rape is legal in Council Space now," she replied coldly. Garrus looked at her brother, fist clenched. This guy knew how to push the right buttons.

"All the prisoners sign the standard indentured service form at their arrival," Kuril explained, "which releases them of any right and, or freedom they may possess."


"And it is absolutely legal, Spectre," Kuril insisted.

"On Illium," she insisted.

"If you would like to check, you'll notice the Purgatory is a business registered at the Illium High Chamber of Commerce, therefore benefits from the same flexibility regarding Council Law." Kuril put his hands behind his back. "The Purgatory is an important institution, Spectre. Many governments trust us to safely keep their most problematic elements behind bars, and they don't want to know what happens here. I told you, it's all a game."

Shepard stared at the Turian for a few seconds and eventually nodded. Garrus didn't like it either but what could they do anyway? Free all the prisoners using their Spectre authority? How many murderers, rapists and terrorists would they unleash into the galaxy? Besides, Garrus was pretty sure the Council had buried a few dirty secrets in here. If this place wasn't useful to them, it wouldn't even exist, much like Illium.


"She's a Cerberus experiment!" he claimed. "Subject Zero!" Shepard stopped again. "Ah! I see you've heard of her," John said, regaining confidence.
Subject Zero was, Garrus remembered from all the catching up he had done his first week on the Normandy, the pinnacle of Cerberus experiments on biotics, and supposedly the most powerful gifted human, the result of twenty years of research. She had escaped from her prison on Pragia ten years ago and was rumored to have been a mercenary ever since but Shepard's files didn't say much otherwise. Subject Zero hadn't been a target of the Council since she had stayed in the Terminus Systems. Her connection to Cerberus was too thin to be of any interest but Shepard seemed to think otherwise.

"Is it true?" she asked the Warden.

"It is," he confirmed. "Her bail is set to one million if you're interested, plus detention fees."

Garrus opened wide eyes. That was a lot of money. Shepard had the same reaction. "That's a lot," she said.

"Bail is calculated on the dangerousness of the inmate," Kuril shrugged. "Subject Zero killed five of my men when she arrived, and three others since. We had to lock her in cryo-stasis. It has a cost."

"What's the total?"

"One million, one hundred fifty-seven thousands, four hundreds and counting. Let's say one million one hundred thousands for you, Spectre Shepard."

"What about one million and the location of a dozen Cerberus safehouses on Horizon?" Shepard offered. "I've found the head of the Lazarus cell in one of those a couple weeks ago. Her bounty's worth two hundred thousands. Who knows who you'll find there."

"Maybe your Cerberus terrorists flew away when they realized one of their safehouses was compromised," Kuril replied.

"Maybe you just have to play the waiting game," Shepard retorted. "It might take time but collecting bounties is easy money, and you'll get more than a hundred thousands credits in the end. Think of it as an investment."

The Warden thought for a few seconds but eventually went back to his desk. "The paperwork will be done in a minute," he said as he sat, "but I'm afraid defrosting Subject Zero might take a few hours."

"That's okay," Shepard shrugged. "Just get her out of cryo-stasis and I'll deal with the rest. I have to go back to my ship to get the intel and the money, if you don't mind. No receipt this time, please, and no discount."

Kuril smiled. "It's a pleasure to do business with you, Spectre."

Shepard nodded and grabbed her brother by the collar, forcing him to follow her. Garrus took the rear and kept an eye behind him, just in case, but nobody followed them. They didn't talk on the way back, not until they reached the airlock.

"Nice ship," John said as the Normandy's door closed behind them.

"You won't be able to steal this one," Shepard assured. John just laughed. The door to the cockpit was closed, Garrus noticed when the interior door opened. Javik was waiting for them in front of the airlock, hands in his back. Shepard pushed her brother inside. "This is Javik," she announced. "He'll show you the way to the brigs."
"Huh, what?" John asked, alternatively looking at her sister and that very weird little green man.

Shepard stood at parade rest, shoulder squared. "John Shepard, you are under arrest by authority of a Council Spectre. You are not allowed to leave this ship and you'll work for me until your dept is paid in full. The total is of one million, one hundred thousands, plus housing and related costs."

"Very funny, Jany," John chuckled, uncomfortable.

"Proceed," she told Javik, ignoring her brother. The Prothean nodded and pushed John down the bridge with his biotics. He didn't try to escape nor protest. Shepard allowed herself to relax once her brother away, only with a brief sight. "You didn't say a word in a while."

"Just impressed, Commander," he answered honestly. "Though I don't see how Subject Zero can be of any interest for us. We have Lawson on board and she certainly knows more about Cerberus than the long lost subject of experiments."

"I don't care about her," Shepard shrugged, "but John does."

"So she's insurance," Garrus understood.

"Yep," Shepard smirked.

"And I thought you lacked people skills," he remarked mockingly.

Shepard gently pocked him in the ribs with her elbow, amused. She winced right after. "Joker was right," she said, "I'll need a shower. Care to join me after we're done with Kuril?"

Garrus cleared his throats, a bit embarrassed. Well that was direct. "Sure, why not."

"Good," she said over her shoulder as she walked to the elevator. "I might even impress you again."

"You know I can't blush, right?" he chuckled. "You don't need to try to make me."

She just answered with a cocky smile. Spirits, Garrus thought, he was in for a lot more sore muscles in the future.

TBC

Note
Happy New Year and may the Force be with you! Also, I've made a tumblr to collect a lot of info on Semper Fi, publish sneak peeks and updates if you're interested. It's me-semperfi tumblr com (connect the dots) (link on my profile).
There was people talking in the room, three women, Humans, one of them calm but strong, older, another with a snobby accent and the last one had a grave tone to her voice, a seriousness and tiredness only found in people who had seen shit. The room was warm and smelled like disinfectant. There was a low vibration in the background and, if Jack paid extra attention, the subtle push of a huge engine. She was in a spaceship, but not the Purgatory – it smelled too good to be the Purgatory. Did John manage to get them out of there, like he promised? Or had she been sold like a slave for the amusement of the next asshole? Jack decided to keep her eyes closed and her body still to spy a little – she didn't feel very well anyway, a little groggy, her head heavy, her fingers prickling. She didn't know how many people were on this ship. She was powerful enough to take care of everybody but she needed them to all be in the same room for that. Jack was a sprinter, not a marathoner.

Snobby was telling a story. She had threatened a guy to come with her in the medbay to get a tampon from the supplies and he had been super enthusiastic to help her once he had figured out what was her problem. The other two laughed.

"Yep," the Veteran sighed, "sounds like him."

"Mister Vakarian came to me numerous times to confirm the results of his research," the old one added. "I find it rare for aliens to be this curious about us nowadays – just after the war, Humans were a novelty, but people got bored of us after a few years. Of all the exotic crew members we had, he's the second to do that. The first was Liara."

"Both nerds," Veteran snorted.

Snobby laughed. "I shouldn't make fun of them," she said, "I'm part of that gang too, to be honest."

"No, really?" Veteran mocked. "I would never have figured it out." Snobby kept on laughing. "Seriously though," Veteran continued, "I can't force you to do anything because you're a civilian, but I'd suggest you think about an implant. We're on a spaceship, Miranda, and our resources are limited. We also have to be careful as to what we throw away. It's a matter of mass of the ship from what I understood, ask Joker for all the nerdy explanations, but the base line is: the less garbage we throw away or burn, the happier he is."

"And think of the advantages," the old one added. "Tranquility of the mind, no pain, no mood jump, no Aunt Irma visiting once a month..."

"Bigger boobs," Veteran interrupted. Snobby giggled. "You call your mensies 'Aunt Irma'?"

"It was the code name we came up with with my first serious boyfriend in med school," the old one chuckled. "He was so embarrassed by all my female problems, I had to hide my tampons to not bother him each time he came in my tiny room in the dormitory."

"Men," Veteran snorted, "such precious little snowflakes." Snobby laughed again. "Any funny first boyfriend story to tell?"
"Me?" Snobby asked. "I'm afraid I don't have any. My father locked me up all my childhood and I got out at eighteen. I kept my distances with men until I met Jack, actually, and he was a very open and dedicated lover."

"Some women are lucky," the old one sighed. There was a brief silence before the three cackled at once. "And you, Commander? Be nosy all you want but share a little too."

"Not much to say," Veteran replied. "I grew up in the middle of plenty of kids of all ages so I wasn't really surprised when a boy flashed me his dick for the first time. I just laughed at that ridiculous thing hanging there and he ran away with his pants on his ankles, crying like a little bitch."

The two others laughed but it didn't cover the snort that escaped Jack. Shit.

"Looks like your patient is awake, doc," Veteran said.

The doctor replied with a "hm hm" and walked to Jack's bed. She wasn't attached to it so she could throw the doc against the nearest wall and take care of the two other bitches in no time, but what was she going to do after? She seemed to be in a medical bay on a spaceship. Was John around? How many people were on this ship? Could she even pilot it once she'd be done with the crew? John was her pilot, dammit. If he wasn't on board, she was as good as dead.

"Hello, Jack," the doctor said on her right. Great, the bitch knew her name. "I am Doctor Karin Chakwas," she continued, "and you are on board the Normandy SR-2 under the authority of Spectre Shepard."

Shepard? Jack thought. The fucking Spectre Shepard? How the Hell had she landed here?

"I can assure you you're safe here, Jack," the doctor added. "You've been asleep for nearly a day after we got you out of cryo-stasis, nothing worrying there. You'll feel thirsty, groggy and your head will be a little heavy for the next couple of days due to dehydration. Your biotics will also be a little dampened for now. It is absolutely normal but feel free to ask me for anything that may improve your comfort." A few seconds of silence. "Jack, can you open your eyes, please? I'd like to check if everything is fine. Edi, dim the lights, please." Another couple of silent seconds. "Jack?"

The doc probably knew she was awake because of all her tech – and who the fuck was Edi? Snobby's name was Miranda, the doc's was Karin Chakwas so it left Shepard. Jack had no idea what was the first name of the Spectre. She was portrayed as "Commander Shepard" or "the first human Spectre" in the rare news flash Jack had seen over the years – did the bitch even have a first name?

Jack grumbled and opened her eyes carefully. The room was dark but the few lamps here and there hurt her eyes nonetheless. She put an arm across her face to hide and she then remarked she was wearing a gray sweatshirt. The fuck was that? She never wore tops.

"I took the liberty of putting clothes on you," the doc said as she keyed on her painfully bright omnitool. "I thought it would be appreciated." Some sort of blue neon on a robotic arm passed over Jack's head, down to her feet and went back up. "Your personal belongings are under the bed if you'd feel more comfortable in those." The assholes on the Purgatory had stripped her down before throwing her in a liquid nitrogen pool, Jack remembered. She also remembered the fingers removing her piercings and touching her everywhere, copping a feel where they could. They'd pay one day.

"Just one thing," Veteran said. Jack turned slightly her head to look at the Spectre from under her
arm. Shepard looked nothing like Jack remembered of her and, damn, she was tall and muscular and Jack knew she meant business just by the cold flicker in her eyes. She'd be the first to take down. "You seemed to have no shirt in your belongings. You're on board a military ship and we have a few rules regarding clothing. I don't want you to run around topless, so there is a teeshirt for you under the bed. If you need anything else, underwear, pants, shirts, we have some stock thanks to the Alliance. I don't mind any body modifications as long as it's not a danger for you or anyone else."

"Body modifications?" Jack repeated, her voice hoarse. Speaking hurt but nothing unmanageable.

"Piercing, tattoos and such," Shepard explained. "Jewels are fine if they follow the same precautions. Unless it's a religious sign. I don't want to see any of that. If you believe in anything, even the Giant Spaghetti Monster, keep it to yourself."

"I thought we agreed to talk about the rules once I'd be done with the exams, Commander," the doc reminded Shepard. No, she fucking scolded Shepard. Damn, that bitch had balls the size of watermelons.

Shepard shrugged. "Do you mind, Jack?" She shook her head – the faster they'd be done, the better. She might be able to get out of medbay right after and see in what mess she was. "Okay," Shepard continued, "so it's simple. You are not my prisoner, but due to my job, I cannot allow you to roam around the ship freely." Shit. "Third deck, aka crew deck where we currently are, is freely accessible but for personal quarters, the main battery and the computer's core. Access to medbay is forbidden if Doctor Chakwas isn't in it. You'll find food in profusion in the kitchen but it's better to ask Gardner before taking anything. He's our cook and he also manages the reserves. You can take ration bars whenever you want though. Don't try the vanilla ones, they're bad, like, really bad."

Snobby giggled. She looked like she sounded, all pretty and haughtily. The perfect little princess.

"You won't be able to access the other decks without supervision," Shepard kept on going, "as long as we don't come to an agreement."

"What agreement?" Jack asked.

"I lost one of the biotics of my team recently," Shepard said, "so you can replace him, work for me for as long as you want, put money on the side for later. Your past doesn't matter. You can also enjoy the ride and go back to your life on our next stop to Omega. Or Illium, we have to stop there first actually, but you might find it difficult to get out of the planet with no money, no papers and a bounty on your head." Shepard shrugged again. "It's up to you."

And no ship, Jack thought as the doc took her blood pressure the old fashion way. A pirate with no ship was no pirate at all. Stealing one wouldn't be difficult in the Terminus but she had no crew and no pilot.

"Where's John?" Jack asked.

"In brigs."

"What?!" she shouted. "What did you do to him?"

"I saved his sorry ass from Purgatory, that's what I did," Shepard replied coldly. "John owes me and a friend a lot of money so he'll work for me until his debts are paid."

"Did you pay to get me out of there too?!"
"I did."

"I see," Jack snorted. "So I'll have to pay you back, be your slave until you collect your money."


"No?" she repeated, threatening.

"John wanted to free you but had no money," Shepard explained. "I paid for him so he owes me big time now, and I won't let him go anywhere until he has paid his debts in full. You, in the other hand, owe me nothing."

It couldn't be. Jack simply couldn't accept what the bitch told her. There must have been a trick somewhere, Landing on the Normandy was no happy coincidence. The Spectre had something in mind. Jack had heard of her implication in the fights at New Year on Omega like anybody else regularly stopping by the station. It wasn't difficult to imagine Shepard was hunting down Cerberus since then. Not a lot of people knew the ties between Cerberus and Jack but she'd bet it was easy to find out of for the awesome Commander Shepard.

Shepard. John had the same last name and he liked to claim it when he entered a bar – it rang nicely, that's why. Though he was just John for Jack, her pilot and mechanic. He was good enough with a rifle to come along in raids but his brain was more useful than his muscles – although they had their charms too once in a while. He also had biotics but too weak to be of any use.

Get rid of the bitch, take care of the crew after, free John last, that was the plan. But first, Jack had to play along. She would be stuck on third deck for a while otherwise. Jack had no idea where brigs were but she doubted they'd be on crew deck.

She eventually nodded. "You seem to know John," she grumbled to keep the conversation going.

"It'd be more accurate to say I knew him, actually," the Spectre replied.

"You met in the army or something?"

Shepard's eyes widened. "He didn't tell you," she said, surprised and a bit angry too. "Un-fucking-believable."

"Language," Chakwas reminded the Spectre.

"Tell me what?" Jack asked, frowning. "You two are married or something?" And so what? If John was unfaithful, it wasn't her problem.

"John's my brother," Shepard answered, unamused.

"You're kidding," Jack snorted. Her brother? It couldn't be.

"Why would I've bothered getting him out of jail otherwise?" Shepard asked.

"I don't know," Jack shrugged. "Maybe he has something you want." Shepard arched an eyebrow and made a circle in the air with her finger. Right. The bitch had everything she wanted and probably enough connections with the spies working for the Council to give a boner to any intel broker. Spectres had more resources than pirates, that was for sure. "I wanna talk to him."

"Where are you manners?" the doctor intervened, hands on her hips on a very angry mom-like gesture – well, if anything Jack had seen on TV was true. "You may be the Commander's guest for
now but that doesn't give you an excuse to not be polite. Now, young lady, what word did you forget?"

Jack was too baffled to protest and she mumbled a "please". The doctor smiled and continued her exams.

"We'll go as soon as the Dragon releases you," Shepard smirked. The doctor chuckled like an old woman.

It took a couple of minutes for said Dragon to finish her job. Once that done, Jack got rid of the sweatpants and put on her overall and boots. She kept the sweatshirt on because she couldn't do otherwise but she'd be happy to throw away that horror as soon as she could. She patiently re-attached all her piercings and put on her rings. Jack would have liked to shave her head but that'd have to wait too – was she even allowed near any blade? She'd probably have to sign another agreement form before that could happen.

Snobby came out of medbay with them but let them here. She walked to a long table where a Drell was sitting, hands joined together, his big creepy eyes following them. Shepard didn't say anything about him and Jack didn't ask as they walked to an elevator. She had seen enough Drells to know she hated them. Few chose the life of mercenary or pirate because they preferred to be the slaves of the Hanars. Since those bastards kept trading with the Batarians despite the ban of the Council, you could see some in the Terminus Systems, followed by their domesticated Drells. Jack hated Hanars. You'd think they just were big stupid jellyfish but they were as smart as Salarians, only slower, and vicious with that. The Council could thanks their gods for making the Hanars aquatic creatures with a small population not worth shit on land, otherwise the game would have been more complicated for the Asaris and their ass kissers.

The doors opened on the fifth deck and Jack immediately knew she'd come here to do her shopping later. She had rarely seen so many weapons so neatly prepared for her in her life, and her fingers twitched with envy and excitation. Damn, that place was even easy to defend if your enemies came from the elevator! It was tempting to attack now but Shepard wasn't alone. There were three Humans, one of them a woman, and a Turian for the moment. The woman, dark hair in a bun, the nose like a potato and mean eyes, was cleaning a sniper rifle next to a Black guy doing the same with an assault rifle. Both wore the Alliance uniform but only the guy was laughing at the other one and the Turian doing push-ups a few meters from them. The guy was Latino or something like that, a big sweaty baby with a neck twice the size of Jack's thighs. He was shirtless and had Maori-like tattoos on his back and shoulders. The Turian had removed his armor and something seemed wrong under his undersuit but Jack didn't pay more attention than that. Turians were easy to take down if you knew where to hit them.

"What are you doing, exactly?" Shepard asked, slightly annoyed.

"Us, our duty, Ma'am," the Black Guy chuckled. "Those two, well..."

"It's a fucking testosterone fest, that's what it is," the Mean Bitch grumbled. Black Guy laughed and Shepard smiled.

"Wanna join, Commander?" Black Guy asked, patting the crate he was sitting on. "The view ain't bad from here."

"Oooh, he's blushing!" the Turian mocked.

"I'm not!" Latino shouted, offended. "Shut up, all of you! You're distracting me!"
"You don't need an excuse to lose, Alliance," the Turian continued.

"I liked you better when you were a shy nerd judging us silently from your corner, you know that?" Latino whined.

Shepard smiled again and moved on. "Sorry Vega but my money's on Vakarian," she said over her shoulder. "And you'll both clean the Mako top to bottom tomorrow for slacking in your duty. Make it shine, boys."

"Shirtless, preferably," Black Guy quickly added before the two space monkeys could approve.

Jack followed Shepard in a corridor probably close to the engine considering the low rumbles she could hear. She noticed some sort of utility room on her left and a reserve on the right, another one stinking of a Krogan maybe five meters from there and brigs showed up after a turn to the left. It was four little cells, one meters and a half by two, less than three in height, with a rudimentary bunk bed and a small toilet in the back, behind old fashion bars. John was in the last one on the left, sitting on the floor in the brown jumpsuit from Purgatory, bare feet, with a small beard and more than a centimeter of hair on the head. He looked like shit.

"Hi, Captain," he said with his usual charming smile.

Jack rolled her eyes and turned to Shepard. "A bit of privacy, maybe?"

"No," the Spectre replied. Subtext: I'm not that stupid.

"Oh, the Commander is here too!" John added from the back of his cell. "So far I only had minions coming down here. I'm so honored."

"So, you didn't tell your Captain you had a sister," Shepard said, taking a step to give John a better view.

"Well considering nobody knows I'm your brother, you can't really lecture me on the subject, Jany," John smirked. Jany? No wonder she never used her first name.

"So it's true?" Jack asked. John shrugged. It angered her. "Why didn't you tell me, asshole? That's something I should have known!"

"Having a Spectre as a sister when you're a mercenary isn't exactly what I'd call helping," John mocked. "Would you have hired me if you'd known? Come on, we both know you wouldn't have. And the same goes for her," he added, pointing at his sister. "If the Council knew she had a bad boy for a brother, they'd reconsider her position."

"They know," Shepard replied, not moved at all.

John winced a little. "And your crew?" he insisted. "Your friends?"

Shepard forced a smile. "I don't have anything to explain or prove to you, John."

"Of course," he replied on the same tone.

Jack didn't know much about siblings and families but even the relationship between those two looked fucked up to her. She couldn't care less though. She had to find a way to talk to John in private.

"Here's the thing, lady," Jack said, turning to Shepard who frowned. "I didn't hire John only for his
talents but also for his mad tongue skills, if you know what I mean.” Shepard winced. "I haven't had a good fuck in months so it'd be cool if you could give us ten minutes."

"That's not gonna happen," Shepard replied.

"What if I sign your pretty agreement before?" Jack insisted.

"Trust is earned, Jack. You don't get it with a signature."

"So I can't fuck my man until I proved you I'm a nice little girl giggling like your princess?"

"Oh no," Shepard smiled, amused, "I'm willing to give you a chance, no worries. It's him I don't trust." End of discussion, Jack understood. "Let's go back to third deck, I have a few other things to discuss with you."

"Wait, wait!" John yelped as he stood up. He jogged to the door and caught Jack's arm to pull her closer to him. He gave her a passionate kiss through the bars. Between the size difference, the situation, his horse breath and his beard, it wasn't exactly the kiss of the century but Jack rolled with it nonetheless. Just as he stepped back, he whispered in her ear: "green little guy." Jack blinked slowly to tell him she had heard his warning and pushed him back playfully. So the Drell was dangerous. Dully noted.

Shepard rolled her eyes and showed the way out to Jack. They soon arrived in the cargo area. The testosterone fest was over and everybody was cleaning the last pieces or armory, reassembling weapons, putting them in order and locking them. Fuck.

"Huh, Commander?" the Turian asked as Shepard and Jack waited for the elevator. His right side was all messed up, lots of scars. It was a miracle his mandible was still attached to the rest of his ugly face.

"Yes you'll have to be shirtless to clean the Mako tomorrow," she answered over her shoulder. "Indulge Cortez some material for his wildest dreams."

The Black Guy and the Latino laughed together.

"Well it'll be a bit cold for me but...." the Turian replied before shrugging it off. "No, huh, I was wondering if we could... review a few things after dinner."

Shepard looked surprised before she turned to the space chicken. "Review a few things?" she repeated, intrigued.

"Stuff," he hesitated, "related to... the... other secret stuff I'm working on?"

"Oh you mean your dancing lessons," Shepard said with a big grin eating half her face. "Sure, anytime big guy."

"You're the one who needs dancing lessons, Commander," Black Guy mocked.

"Amen to that," Potato Nose added.

"Hey I'm a great dancer!" Latino claimed. "Can I help? Oh! You know what? We should throw a party in the shuttle bay! We did that when Garrus..."

"Vakarian," the Turian interrupted.

"... and I arrived," the Latino continued, ignoring the alien. "We have new crew members so why
not throw a little party?” he finished with horrible imitation of British accent. "Okay, okay," he added when Shepard frowned, "I know we lost Wrex not long ago but he wouldn't want us to mourn forever. We should honor him like Krogans do: with a lot of booze and sweat, if you know what I mean."

The doors of the elevator opened behind them.

"Actually Krogans don't honor their dead," Shepard said, blocking the doors. "They take what they can on the cadaver and leave it be. Oh and cannibalism is still a thing on Tuchanka so, no, we won't honor Wrex the krogan way."

"Huh, any other way then?" Latino tried.

"No party," Shepard decided, walking backward in the elevator. "Wait till next shore leave to get wasted, Lieutenant."

"And what about the dancing lessons?" he asked as Jack followed Shepard. "I'm the King of tango!" he claimed, swaying his hips.

"Pass," Shepard replied, pushing the button for third deck, "but thanks for the offer."

Latino turned to the Turian as the doors closed.

"You're sure they're professionals?" Jack mocked.

Shepard smiled. "I only surround myself with the bests." Jack snorted. That wasn't even subtle.

Dinner was only an hour away so Jack grabbed a couple of soda cans and a handful of ration bars from the kitchen before sitting down at the main table with Shepard. She listened to her talk about her rules and shit, objected a few times for the show but opposed less and less resistance as the hour went. The crew came and went, using the bathrooms, chilling near by or in the lounge, and Jack used the opportunity to count them and see where they slept.

Most of the crew was human and a lot of them wore the Alliance uniform. The current pilot was some sort of cripple with a bad sense of humor. It didn't matter, Jack wouldn't need him. For the aliens, she only saw the Turian, the Drell and a ridiculously aggressive little cunt of a Quarian. Nineteen people in total. She didn't know if any of them was a biotic but that wouldn't stop her. She was powerful enough to take down anybody. Jack could feel her powers coming back to her. It wouldn't do it for tonight but after a copious meal and a good night of sleep, she'd take over the ship.

Jack didn't like having too many people around her so dinner felt more like a punishment than anything else. Everybody talked and laughed like the unsuspecting idiots they were. The bests her ass. They were careless, not ready for anything. Maybe they were good on the field but they'd never see an attack on board coming. All their chats and cackles gave Jack a serious headache. She spent the rest of the evening in medbay, lying in the dark on a bed with a perfusion to help her recover from her dehydration. The doctor stayed with her, sitting at her desk with a pile of datapads, thankfully not talking. Jack would have liked to sleep here but the doctor didn't agree. There was a bed waiting for her in crew deck. Shit.

Almost everybody was already asleep when Jack slid into her bunk-bed, still wearing all her clothes but her boots. She turned her back to the room and waited in silence to hear only regular, deep breaths. She wondered for a moment who was running the ship if everybody was asleep but soon realized her luck. She didn't see much of the Normandy so far but everything looked new and
shiny, which meant the ship probably had all the newest crap on board, including a VI intelligent enough to take over during the night shift.

On the other hand, the VI probably had its orders and Jack wouldn't be able to roam around tonight. It didn't really matter. Ships like that had plenty of secret passages between the decks for emergencies. Jack would explore them to get to fifth deck after she'd have taken care of the crew in the morning. Then she'd free John. He was capable of hacking any computer system.

Jack had overestimated the good night of sleep. She just couldn't let her guard down with so many people around so she only managed to get a couple hours of rest, by little naps here and there. The cripple woke her up at some point when he got dressed and went out of the room. She waited and faked being awaken by the rest of the crew a few hours later. She went straight for the mess to grab a handful of ration bars, avoiding the bathroom. The cripple came back for breakfast and Shepard and the Turian showed up last, her with a split lip, him with a bloody nose, but that didn't seem to bother them.

Jack had heard stuff about Turians. Those creeps fucked with their friends – nothing wrong about that – and she wondered if the all mighty Commander Shepard had a thing for blue dicks. She wouldn't be the first. Alexia had been a turian chick as long as Jack had known her. It was like fucking with the best vibrator on the market, she had said one evening after a few drinks, only with an irrational fear of body fluids. They had laughed at that. Sadly, Jack's allergies were too severe for willingly trying anything with a Turian, and her other experiences... Well, at least she had the satisfaction to have been spared long sessions with the few assholes who had had their fun with her. She had been too busy dying from the anaphylactic shock to be of any use to them.

Jack waited for everybody to be at the main table to get up. Of course Shepard stopped her. She was leaning on her chair in her sportswear, a cup of coffee in hand, smiling and all. It irked Jack, somehow.

"Where are you going, Jack?" Shepard asked.

"Bathroom," she replied. "I like my privacy when I take a dump."


Jack turned heels and went straight for the women's bathroom. She removed her sweatshirt and let it fall on the ground. Her tattoos would help her against the Turian. Their eyes were attracted to bright colors and details, but with so many patterns on her skin, they couldn't focus on anything, inducing violent headaches and nausea, fainting sometimes. Jack didn't cover her body in ink for that purpose in the first place but she had to admit it was useful. She waited a minute, clenching and opening again and again her fists to concentrate the energy. She felt she wasn't at her best yet but it would do. She didn't want to waste any more of her time with this giggling gang of idiots.

The place was too small for a biotic charge so she just rapidly walked to the mess and aimed at Shepard when she released her first wave. The bitch hadn't anticipated anything and she hit the table with her ribs before falling on the pretty black chick with the British accent. Everybody on that side of the table fell and the others were hit in some way. That wasn't enough. Jack inhaled deep and released another wave with her breath, more powerful this time. Metal panels started to fly around and even the heavy table tumbled and fell on the ground. The idiots couldn't do shit, crushed like they were by her power, except Shepard. The bitch was a biotic too and she was pushing her barrier to her limits to protect her miserable life. That didn't change anything for Jack. Biotics needed a time to recharge but not hers thanks to Cerberus. When Shepard would need a break, Jack would finish her with a warp.
Suddenly her wave stopped, but Jack had nothing to do with that. She looked around as wires dangled from the ceiling and metal panels fell here and there, and she felt the most intense cold of her life deep down in her bones. Then she saw it, at the corner, coming from that room behind the kitchen, an alien with a large, flat, chitinous head and four golden eyes. Jack had never seen something like that but she had heard rumors of insect-like creatures with this type of head coming once in a while to Omega. This one didn't really fit the description. It wasn't brown like the rumors but green, and small. Fuck, she thought. John had warned her about this guy, not the Drell. Where had he been all evening, dammit? And it hit Jack.

"You trapped me, you bitch!" she yelled at Shepard.

The Commander just sat there on the floor, her back against the table, hugging her ribs, a bad cut on her right eyebrow tinting her face with blood, defying her power even if she was defeated. Jack breathed in deep, accumulating the energy within her, but her warp never touched a single hair of the bitch. The massive orb turned mid-air in direction of the green alien but it didn't hit him either. Instead, he raised his hand and the orb lost its form to swirl around him and eventually disappeared. The alien didn't move, didn't even blink. Jack couldn't believe her eyes. What the fuck was that? What the fuck just happened?

Jack didn't have many options, only her biotics, so she threw all she had at the creature, focusing on him only. She first created a singularity strong enough to snatch metal panels from the damaged floor but the alien dismissed it with his hand, as if he was waving off an insect. The singularity swirled around him too as he started to walk on Jack. Panic hit her and she pushed wave after wave at the alien. None touched him. Jack eventually raised a wall before her, so strong the air was heated and deformed, and electric arcs slashed all around. The alien had a small smirk as he stopped before the wall. He raised his three fingers hand and passed it on the biotic wall as if it only was a window.

The alien eventually put his hand between Jack's and gave a little push against the biotic wall. On the other side, Jack was almost thrown back by the force as ripples deformed her barrier, but she was strong enough to push back and so did she, giving all she had in stock. The floor and the ceiling shook and a horrible vibration ran along the ship but Jack didn't care if she destroyed a deck. If she couldn't take care of this alien, she was fucked anyway.

The cold sensation hit her against in the guts and Jack saw with horror the alien's hand pass through her barrier, a swirling hole forming around it. Her biotics were sucked in by this creature and it didn't even seem difficult for the fucker. Jack could already feel her muscles protesting and her nerves were on fire, especially in her hands. She pushed her biotics anyway, ignoring the warnings her body was sending to her brain. The hole in the wall stopped growing but only for a second.

The alien clenched his fist and the entire wall disappeared, the energy violently sucked in. It created a cold vortex around him, strong enough to move things towards him, and even Jack had to take a few steps in his direction, her ears popping. Despite the sudden drop in temperature, she was sweating and hot, her hands and legs shaking. She was exhausted, left without a single drop of power within her. But she wasn't shaking only because of the void she felt inside her. She was powerless in front of a creature capable of sucking her biotics quicker than she could produce them. He just had to blink to destroy, to annihilate her entirely, she felt it. Jack had been able to defeat countless Asaris simply because she was more powerful than them but she couldn't do anything against that alien. She was helpless. She was terrified.

A green flash on her left caught her attention but Jack was too exhausted to react. She felt an electric shock running along her nerves the next second and the pain finished her.
Jack woke up from a long chemical sleep as far as she could tell. She was in medbay again, fully dressed, but restrained this time. She felt like shit, all itchy and sweaty, her head heavy and a disgusting taste in her mouth. All her body hurt too and she was exhausted, empty. At least she was alive but that wasn't necessarily good news. Maybe Shepard was going to sell her back to the Purgatory, or maybe she was going to let her die on a remote planet. Whatever. Shepard could even space her if that made her happy, Jack didn't care at this point.

"Wake up."

Jack shivered and opened her eyes. She saw the creature in the middle of the room, hands behind his back, wearing his weird outdated red armor, standing guard. He was looking at her. No, not entirely. One of his four eyes was following the movement of the doctor on his left. As if he wasn't creepy enough. The old woman put a syringe on a little metallic tray and walked to Jack's bed. As she passed next to the alien, Jack noticed he was a lot smaller than she remembered, but size didn't matter when it came to biotics.

The doctor didn't talk nor was sympathetic this time – mom was giving her the silent treatment. She injected a transparent liquid in Jack's arm before giving her a few pills. Jack had no idea what all of that was for but it wasn't the time to play the rebel so she swallowed her pride with the tablets.

Five minutes later, Jack was en route for the cargo bay, still feeling shaky and tired, the alien behind her. He hadn't even passed hand-cuff on her wrists, proof he wasn't afraid of her. The mess was still in a bad shape but something surprised Jack. Someone, in fact. John was repairing the ceiling with the cook, wearing an Alliance uniform, his head shaved and his beard short like he liked it. He met Jack's eyes from the top of his ladder but didn't say or do anything, not even smile at her. Instead, he turned his head and kept on working.

John being a dick should have angered her but she was too exhausted for that. He had been the only survivor of the raid on Jack's ship who had led them to the Purgatory in the end. That didn't make them best friend or anything. Jack wasn't particularly attached to him, even if he was a good pilot and the best mechanic she had ever had. He was also damn smart, so it wasn't really a surprise to see him play it safe. He had chosen the best option for him, that was all. See you in Hell, asshole, Jack thought as the elevator doors closed.

Shepard and her Turian were waiting for her near a military grade shuttle, a Kodiak or something like that. Both had bruises and band-aids on their faces, which made Jack smirk a little. At least she'd done that. Something was bothering her though. Shepard was wearing a big coat over her uniform, him a heavy armor in blue and silver. No weapon. Where the Hell were they taking her? Jack sat in silence in the shuttle and looked in front of her as if the Turian didn't exist. He didn't seem to care anyway, he was too busy eying the little green alien sitting next to Jack. After a few minutes of a bumpy ride, the creature eventually talked with a heavy accent, his voice rumbling, the r rolling on his tongue.

"Yes, Turian, I knew," he said. "I know everything."

The Turian shifted uncomfortably on his seat while Shepard fought her amusement.

"It's not funny," he complained.

"Relax," Shepard smirked. "Javik won't tell a soul."

"Tell what?" the pilot asked from the cockpit.
"Curiosity killed the cat, Lieutenant," the alien replied.

"I'm not a cat person," the pilot said.

"Yeah," Shepard chuckled, "he's a bear person."

"Exactly!"

Jack rolled her eyes in unison with the green alien.

"What's a bear?" the Turian asked. Shepard laughed for good.

They soon landed and the door opened on a vast platform in the middle of mountains covered with snow – and it was snowing, yay. Jack didn't know much in architecture but everything there, from the white marble to the elongated arched everywhere, screamed "asari". Where the fuck was she? A prison for biotics on a remote ice planet? It didn't look like a prison but like a church, a temple, something religious. Shepard didn't give her time to elaborate. She opened the way to the entrance, the Turian and the alien behind Jack.

A great hall welcomed them once the doors passed. It was warm inside, with a lot of light and plants everywhere, but only one person was waiting for them, a tall Asari wearing a long black dress with fur at her collar. She had some sort of golden crown on her forehead. She held her head high and there was something cold and ancient in her eyes. Jack shivered. She felt like the Asari could read her deepest secrets and she hated that.

The Asari smiled when they reached her – shit she was a giant too – and even opened her arms to hug Shepard.

"Oh, okay, we're doing that now," the Commander said, uncomfortable. She awkwardly patted the Asari in the back, blushing in the process. What the fuck was happening?

"It is good to see you, Child," the Asari replied with an amused smile. She released Shepard but kept her hands on her shoulders as she turned to the green alien. "I'm glad our paths cross once more, Javik."

"And we'll meet again," he nodded slowly, closing his eyes. The Asari then looked at the Turian without letting Shepard go.

"Vakarian," she saluted him.

"Matriarch," he replied with respect.

"And this is Jack," Shepard continued, still trapped in the Asari's arms. "Jack, this is Matriarch Samara. You'll stay with her."

"Yeah, right," Jack snorted. "What happened to 'you're free Jack' and all your shit, Jany?" She didn't let her time to reply, anger shaking her up. "You know what? Fuck you! You didn't even try to trust me in the first place! You played with me, you trapped me to amuse your crew! I'm sure they still laugh at how stupid I was!"

Jack was suddenly pushed in her back and she fell on the ground, the green alien towering over her, his fist clenched. "You were stupid enough to bite the hand offering you a chance, primitive!" he yelled.

"Javik!" Shepard snapped but he ignored her.
"Shepard didn't trap you, I did," he roared. "I knew you couldn't be trusted but she gave you the benefice of the doubt. She gave you freedom, rest, food, shelter, and you spat in her face in return!" A wave of cold air hit Jack as it was sucked by the alien. Green shimmers glowed around him. Jack shook from head to toe, terrified. "You put my crew in danger!" he roared, the marble cracking all around them.

"Javik," Shepard shouted but Jack's translator didn't catch the rest of what she said. Whatever it was, the alien stood back and got out of the building with anger. Shepard sighed and turned to Jack on the cold floor, still held by the Asari. "Samara is a Justicar. Her job is to right the wrong and she agreed to help you." Her voice lost the few sympathy it had had. "Don't fuck this up. You owe me that."

"Fuck you," Jack spat, her whole body still shaking.

She put her arms over her face, ignoring the two bitches and the Turian, desperate to calm the terror torturing her guts. Fuck you, she thought, falling in a fetal position on the cold floor, fuck you all.

TBC

Note
This chapter was dedicated to all the men who think I'm using this story to push my feminist agenda down their throats.
Liara – 2

Semper Fi
Chapter 43
Liara – 2

Liara checked once more her emails but nobody had sent her anything in the last ten minutes that would require her anywhere else in the galaxy. She sighed and buttoned her dress up to the chin, as instructed by Tela Vasir, the Spectre now working with her – or babysitting her, maybe. Liara couldn't call Vasir a friend despite the few months they had shared, they were too different for that. Vasir had also been clear on the subject: she wasn't going to listen to a kid. She was close to her seven hundredth birthday, almost a matriarch, while Liara wasn't even an adult in most of asari space. At one hundred and fifteen years old, she still had thirty-five years to go to reach majority where she was born, in the Jorrot Republic on Thessia. It had never bothered her before, it was the law, but she felt uncomfortable about it now. Nobody had treated her like a useless child on the Normandy. She had been part of the team, the prothean expert Shepard counted on, a useful member of the crew. She missed that.

But there was no discussion possible with Vasir. She was in charge and Liara just had to shut her mouth and smile politely, like the child she was. Vasir came from Merenan, one of the oldest republic on Thessia, also one with the strictest laws of them all regarding behavior and traditions. A child like Liara couldn't wear what she wanted, she had to follow a rigorous guide on colors and shapes, fabrics even. That was why she was wearing a strict, long black dress covering her head to toes. Discreet floral patterns were embroidered in black in the thick fabric but that was the only embellishment Vasir had authorized. No jewels of any sort, no make-up, no nothing. Liara had only managed to substitute the black ballerinas Vasir had chosen to go with the dress by bright, sparkling yellow ones.

"Are you ready?" Vasir asked impatiently from the next room.

Liara jumped, her heart racing as if Vasir had already caught her. She took a second to even her voice. "Coming!" she yelled back. She wasn't exactly the kind to wear more frivolous clothes but she would have liked something a little more colorful. Also something that wouldn't bind her chest so much. If Liara had inherited one thing from her mother, it certainly was her voluptuous figure.

She shut her computer down and left her room with all her findings to follow Vasir outside of their hotel suite, generously paid by the Spectre – she had standards and what the university offered to pay for their stay on Illium certainly wasn't enough. Vasir was wearing a much more elaborated dress than Liara, shimmering purples on a dark blue with little white pearls in the folds, her shoulders and back naked but for a silver web of thin chains. She looked stunning, Liara had to admit, but her dress was still far from the excessive fashion of some of their people.

Liara had rarely had the occasion to mingle in the middle of Asaris from all the colonies due to her young age and she was a bit excited, to be honest. They had been invited to the annual charity gala held by the Universities of Illium. Education on Illium was just a matter of how many credits you could put on the table, everybody knew that but still, the degrees you could collect in those fancy private schools were renowned in all Council Space. Asaris didn't mind buying their diplomas because they knew they had centuries to pay back their debts, contrary to Salarians. You'd never see a Salarian in an asari private faculty but they were quite fond of the public institutions, with which they had numerous partnerships, although in domains far from archeology. Liara never had had the chance to have an alien professor but she did participate to a lot of diggings and events with
people from other species.

Again, mostly Salarians. Turians weren't quite fond of archeology either and were a more private people, less inclined to share with aliens. Liara believed it came from their education system. A little Turian had twelve years divided in three cycles to learn all the basics and then had to drop everything at fifteen to go to boot camp. After a year, he or she would be assigned for another year in what they called an introduction unit. That was the occasion to travel the galaxy and clearly define what they were good at. After that, they'd mostly learn from their unit but would periodically be sent on Palaven to study theory in their equivalent of universities, managed by the army. No alien were allowed there. The only way to study on Palaven as an alien was to join the public schools for the reserve, accessible for any Turian after their mandatory service in the army.

It may have been easy to register for an alien, you just needed a few papers and enough money to cover your stay, but you had to take everything else into consideration. First of all, the planet could kill you if you didn't pay attention to your exposition to the sun or the food. Even an insect bite could have dramatic consequences. Secondly, you had to accept the constant propaganda and shut your mouth. Talking politics wasn't a good idea and could lead to a cell before being simply evicted from the planet. And finally, you had to deal with the Turians themselves and their sense of community, duty, patriotism or anything that would make an alien feel really not welcomed in general. Turians outside of their homeworld were manageable but they were unbearable on Palaven. Liara much preferred the Salarians. They were easier to talk to, friendlier with people in general. They were curious and open to discovery by nature, which facilitated everything.

Liara would have liked to study on Sur'Kesh but her credentials were considered too weak by salarian standards – she had spent the mandatory thirty years on her doctorate degree but it wasn't enough for Salarians, ah! She had laughed when she had received the refusal letter from the university of Talat. What else could have she done anyway? She wasn't good enough for Sur'Kesh at the time but she'd probably try again later. Maybe she'd even teach there one day about the Protheans, who knew? She probably was the best expert in the galaxy by now, with some real life experience of how grumpy and bad-tempered a Prothean could be.

How private too. Javik rarely shared about his life and people, or it was his usual "we, Protheans, were better than you" rant. They had been, truly. Everything ever discovered pointed to that conclusion. Their empire had prospered for two hundred thousands years after the Metacon War, but they had a long history before those dark centuries. Protheans had mastered faster-than-light space travels and colonized many worlds before the war, even encountered a dozen or so species. But that was mostly speculations. Not much was left of their empire and Javik had little to no knowledge of the past of his species. From what Liara had gathered, Javik didn't receive a normal education. He had been trained to be a soldier from birth, secluded from the rest of his people on a remote colony. Why? She didn't know. Javik didn't like to talk about himself and the only person he'd share private details with was Shepard.

Liara sighed again as the car flew in the perpetual sunset of Illium's north pole to the luxurious hotel where the gala was held. Shepard had had to take a detour by the Silean Nebula for an urgent and personal matter, she had told Liara in her last email, and would consequently be three days late. Liara had pressed her university and Vasir to stay a little longer on Illium before going back to Thessia, and the price was that pretentious event they had to attend to. Liara wouldn't be the only representative from her university but she'd have the honor of holding the colors of the archeology department. Nobody would bother her all evening, she was sure of that.

Few people were interested in her domain of expertise nowadays. Species tended to focus on the future after their integration to the galactic community. Liara could understand that, all species had to evolve to survive, but she also believed it was important to learn from ancient cultures.
Unfortunately, the Protheans had unified all the sentient species of the galaxy under their banner, therefore erased many languages and traditions, entire species sometimes. "Live peacefully in the Empire or fight to take the leadership" was the deal offered to newly discovered species, Javik had explained once – Protheans believed the strong had the obligation to rule over the weak. It had led to a lot of conquest wars at the beginning of their Empire but the Protheans got smarter as time passed. They put a lot of effort in expansion and search of new species for a long time. The goal was to make contact with a species in the early stages of their evolution, before they could defend themselves or be a threat, really. Thus a lot of primitive species had easily been integrated to the Empire and the number of wars dropped significantly.

Evidences supported that the Asaris had been one of those species before the Fall, as the Quarians at the time, while Turians and Saliarsians had been hunted for sport or food. Officially, the Asaris had only been studied from a distance by the Protheans, much like any other current sentient species, but Javik remembered the illegal harems of exotic aliens and the tricks they could learn to please their masters. Liara had been disgusted by his story but Javik had just shrugged it off. Protheans had played with many species of this time after all. It was common knowledge they had interacted early on with the Hanars, who claimed the Protheans, or the Enkindlers as they called them, had given them languages and civilization. Why would the Protheans have stopped at the Hanars when they had been the supreme rulers of the galaxy for an eternity? Liara supposed they had interfered with a lot of species during their time but nobody wanted to admit it.

The car eventually stopped on the large terrace on top of one of the towers of the hotel, a vast complex of buildings supposed to look like an archipelago of luxurious islands – Liara could see other events going on on top of other towers in the distance. The place was shaped like a real island, with rocks and trees and even a river falling down the hedge of the building. Birds were singing somewhere in the canopy and you could hear now and then other exotic animals from distant colonies. The immersion was somehow impressive: after a few steps into the "island", the rest of Illium disappeared behind the trees and you could barely hear the agitation of the city. Liara wondered what would be left of this place in fifty thousands years and what her successors would think of it.

Of course the majority of the guests was Asari but there was a decent percentage of Saliarsians too – you could find them where the money was, that was for sure – and even a few Turians. The personnel was mostly human, which didn't really surprise Liara. The surprise came from the hanar delegation and a Krogan with enough scars on his face to make Wrex jealous. Few Krogans had legitimate businesses in Council Space due to the ban on their species, but Illium was one of those blurry zone where anything could happen. A mercenary investing in education wasn't even bizarre for the colony.

Like she had supposed, the fashion was the true event of the evening. Rich fabrics competed with exuberant feathers and jeweleries of all sorts. Liara even saw a dress embroidered with living multicolored butterflies from Earth, and the Asari wearing it was acting like it was absolutely normal. Liara wished Tali was with her at that moment. They would have had so much fun just sitting there and watching people – well, commenting on them, to be honest. Vasir certainly wasn't going to do that. For now she was playing the chaperon and avoiding talking to anyone, a glass of honey wine in hand. Of course, Liara wasn't allowed to drink alcohol. She wondered what Vasir would say if she knew Liara had already passed out a few times during parties on the Normandy.

"Stay here," the Spectre suddenly commanded, surprising Liara. She put her glass on a tray carried by a young Human passing by and rearranged her dress. "I'll come back in a minute."

"What is it?" Liara asked, looking around.
"Stay here," Vasir repeated, pointing at the ground with a finger.

Liara nodded and watched the Spectre disappear in the crowd. She didn't know what Vasir was doing but that gave her the opportunity to have a drink. Liara caught up with the waitress to grab a glass of honey wine, drank it all in one long gulp and went back to her spot as quickly as possible, fighting the mischievous smile that threatened to eat her whole face. She was twenty again and hiding her misbehaves from her mother. It was surprisingly good to feel her heart race in her chest and her cheeks burning – Goddess, she even had butterflies in her stomach! Liara hadn't felt this good in months.

"Hello," a rough voice whispered to her ear.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Liara yelped, jumping out of reach of whoever was behind her. Her words got her a few judgmental looks from other Asaris around and Liara put her hands on her mouth, blushing to a level she didn't know she could reach. She then heard a warm flanged laugh behind her and she turned to a Turian barely keeping it together. "Nihlus!" Liara recognized him despite his lack of armor. He was wearing something much more relaxed than usual, some sort of large leather vest with metallic feathers on the collar over a bright red shirt and dark, skin-tight pants with a few red lines. And he was currently bending in half, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. Liara hit him on the shoulder as retaliation but that only triggered more laughing. "I could have killed you, you know?" she grumbled, folding her arms.

"No," he chuckled, straightening, "no you couldn't." He sighed to regain some control over himself. "Your first reaction was flight, not fight, so, no, you couldn't even have scratched me." Liara blushed. Damn, he was right and she knew it by the smug smirk on his face. "Good evening, Doctor T'Soni," Nihlus said this time with a mock turian salute. "You look as gorgeous as ever."

Liara blushed once more, uncomfortable because of the compliment. Nihlus was generous with his sweet talk and Shepard had told Liara countless times that he didn't mean it so it was better to just ignore his attempts all together, but it was easier said than done. Still, she was glad to see a face she knew at the gala. Liara eventually lost her frown and smiled.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, relaxing. "I don't really see you as a benefactor of the corrupted scholar system of Illium."

"I'm not here for that, no," Nihlus chuckled. "I've never been interested in schools and I'm not going to start now. No, I came because I pissed off the wrong people so I was encouraged to, quote, take some time to think, end quote." He shrugged like it was nothing but Liara knew the people he was talking about were no others than the Councilors – nobody else had this kind of authority on Nihlus. The Turian looked around. "Saren told me to join him, actually," he said, scanning the crowd. "The old bastard invested everywhere in the galaxy and selling degrees is just another lucrative business, right?"

"I wouldn't know," Liara replied, "I've studied for mines."

Nihlus gave her a wink before continuing his search. Liara knew by Joker that Shepard and Nihlus had had a pretty epic argument in the last couple of weeks but she didn't have the details. She didn't ask Shepard for them, knowing the Commander wouldn't answer her questions – and would probably tell her to fuck off then give her the silence treatment for a couple of months – and Joker wasn't going to say much more. Wrex would have given her all the juicy bits of the argument but he was in some sort of stasis after a tremendous fight on Earth, from what Liara knew. He needed time to recover, if he ever were to recover. Liara had sent support to Tali but her friend hadn't even opened the email. She must have been in a pretty bad mood. Liara would have liked to be there to comfort her friend and she hoped the Normandy would soon dock on Illium. She missed the crew.
"Ah shit," Nihlus grunted, "Tela's here too."

"Do you know Spectre Vasir?" Liara asked.

"Darling, when you've worked as long as me for the Council, you know pretty much everybody," Nihlus answered, keeping his head low. "And fuck most of them too," he added with a wink. He delicately took Liara's hand in his bare one and looked at her in the eyes with an intensity that made her feel unique and special, like he knew how to do so well. Liara straightened, uncomfortable. "Would you run away with me, Liara?" he asked.

"I'm with Vasir actually," Liara replied with a sorry smile. "She's my babysitter by Council order."

"Well I've been a Spectre longer than her so I'm certainly more qualified," Nihlus insisted. "Come on, we'll just hide in a corner to drink and talk for a while. No interplanetary kidnapping, I swear, just a very local one."

"All right," Liara agreed, somehow amused, "but you're responsible for everything as far as I'm concerned."

"Am I ever not responsible for everything?" Nihlus retorted playfully but there was an unpleasant bitter undertone.

He didn't leave Liara time to elaborate and abandoned her for a few minutes to search for drinks. He came back with a whole tray of colorful levo and dextro beverages and gently pushed Liara to a small alcove between bushes full of fluffy flowers smelling rather good and producing a volatile white powder if they were touched. There were cushions all around a small low table and little lanterns in the branches. Liara wondered how much had cost this event and what was its point to begin with considering the feeling of intimacy surrounding such little private alcove.

She sat nonetheless with Nihlus and toasted with him to less babysitters in their lives.

"So," Nihlus said as he leaned on the cushions as if he was at home, "what brings you to Illium?"

"We're just transiting for a few days," Liara answered after a sip of a salarian wine as white as cray – and quite as dense. "We're going back to Thessia soon."

"From where?"

"Viantel."

"Viantel," Nihlus repeated, visibly thinking out loud. "Didn't you guys went there? For a mission I mean."

"We did," Liara confirmed but she didn't know to what extent she could talk about it. It somehow bothered her a little that Nihlus knew about this mission. Maybe Shepard had told him about it but a little piece of Liara's brain didn't agree. Shepard would never talk about a mission to any other Spectre unless she had a direct order from the Council.

"Never been there," Nihlus continued, "but I've heard it's not a nice place for a Turian."

"For anybody, actually," Liara corrected. "Even inside, the air is so cold and dry, it's like breathing needles. But I'd take a cold planet over a burning one any day," she added to change the subject. "You can fight against the cold, whereas you can't do much against the heat."

"You were born on Thessia, right?" Liara nodded. "It's a pretty warm planet, you should be more
used to the heat."

"I grew up in Wimodahs, the capital of the Jorrot Republic at the south pole. It's not as hot as the rest of the planet. We even have snow in the mountains all year long."

"Snow," Nihlus winced behind his glass. "I was seventeen the first time I saw some."

"Really?" Liara asked to keep him on those rails.

Nihlus had a small smile, the kind only fond memories could bring to life. "It was a year after the Relay 314 Incident. I was traveling with Saren at the time, as his assistant or some bullshit title he had made up – he had been the best Spectre the Council had at the time so he kinda did what he wanted. A human ship had crashed on a satellite of a remote gas giant near the border with the Traverse, I don't remember where exactly but it took us days to go there. Saren had to determine who had grounded the ship because, let's face it, that couldn't be a rescue mission after so long. So we landed on that satellite, near the crash site. Everything was blue-ish white snow as far as you could see, with an occasional dune here and there, but not enough atmosphere to have wind or anything like that. The mission went well, we did our job in a few hours and went back to our ship – an asari corvette, beautiful thing like Saren likes them. He told me to go inside and prepare launch while he checked the hull and I was too cold to protest. So I passed the airlock, removed my armor to clean it later, went to the cockpit to prepare everything and the asshole sneaked behind me and bam! He emptied a bucket full of snow on me." Liara couldn't help her laugh. "Never been so cold in my life," Nihlus shivered at the memory.

"That's so mean!" Liara commented.

Nihlus finished his drink and shrugged. "People usually think that of Saren," he said, putting his empty glass on the table to take another, "but they just don't know him. They don't know he's actually good company, playful and charming on his own way. Well, he changed over time, like anybody else, but the Saren I remember was a strong, smart and capable man. And, more importantly, he didn't give a shit about my origins. I was only worth my skills in his eyes. I loved him for that." He sipped his drink.

"But isn't that normal for Turians?" Liara asked.

"Theoretically, yes," Nihlus nodded, "but we are no strangers to bias. If you're not born in the Hierarchy, if you don't have tattoos and if you're a biotic, you are nothing, whatever your skills. But I'm not complaining. My only mistake was to be born outside the Hierarchy. Saren had it worse than me. His only option was to leave everything behind. He owes nothing to the Hierarchy and made it to Spectre alone." Nihlus raised his glass in a salute.

"I know nothing about him," Liara admitted, "only what I saw of him a couple of times."

"And he probably was giving Shepard a hard time then," Nihlus chuckled. "The truth is, he doesn't hate her as much as you'd think. He recognizes her value, competences and loyalty, loyalty being the most important trait for him, but she's Human and my protegee." Nihlus sighed. "That's something he cannot pardon."

Saren had been a fervent opponent of Humanity since the beginning, Liara remembered. The war wasn't so far for her. She had paid little attention to it at the time but she knew enough about History in general to see the hatred left in its wake. It would take many turian and human generations to overcome their antagonism despite their efforts to work together.

But Saren's hatred for Shepard also came from jealousy, from what Liara now understood. He saw
Shepard as the vile female who had driven away his protegee. The parallel with Nihlus and Garrus was evident then. Liara had found Nihlus' behavior irrational after Ilos but she hadn't quite understood why. Nihlus should have been more open to Shepard's protegee, even if Garrus wasn't exactly the most friendly Turian at first. Liara had naively thought they had had a simple personality clash but Nihlus actually felt like Garrus was stealing Shepard away. That idea was just ludicrous. First, Garrus was reluctant to bond with aliens, probably because of his cultural definition of friendship. Secondly, Shepard. Liara smiled for herself. Just picturing the grumpy Commander and her determined frown was enough to resume the situation.

Nihlus sighed again and let his head drop melodramatically. "Aaaah, this is so pathetic," he ranted, keeping his eyes on his drink. Liara frowned slightly. "From the second I saw you, all I wanted was to ask you if you had news from Shepard, but I couldn't just say hi and ask you, that'd be too direct, so here we are, talking, as if we were more than occasional co-workers." He raised his glass in a sloppy salute before gulping the bright blue liquor to the last drop.

"Well," Liara said, uncomfortable, "we shared meals and drinks. For my people it's enough to make a friend." She really didn't want to talk about Shepard behind her back. The Commander was a friend and Liara owed her that much respect.

"Your people are so superficial," Nihlus retorted, switching his empty glass for another.

"We're not," Liara frowned for good.

"Oh yes you are," Nihlus insisted. "Look at this place," he added, opening an arm to present the gala but the view was blocked. "Behind that bush, I mean," he grunted. "All your society is based on power gained through money and manipulations. The smartest or the strongest doesn't rule, they who have the more influence win."

"You can say that much of any Primarch," Liara criticized.

"Oh no. I'll be the first to spit on the Hierarchy and Turians if you want my opinion but our system works. There is no political bullshit involved, no lust for power. A Primarch serves the people, not the other way around, and there are real consequences if they fail to do so. When your head is on the line, not only yours but all the heads of those who put you in charge, believe me, you don't even think of using your influence for personal gain."

"I can think of a few exceptions through History," Liara commented.

"Of course," Nihlus shrugged. "We're not impervious to corruption but it rarely happens, while Asaris and Salarians are all about manipulations and treason. There isn't a day without some of your political drama in the news – which is quite entertaining, I have to say." He winked at Liara.

"Everybody thinks their moral system is better than the neighbors'," she replied coldly.

That made Nihlus laugh and fortunately Liara's omnitool pinged, interrupting the Spectre. She opened the email that had just arrived, wishing for something really terrible that would require her immediate departure, but it only was Shepard. Her message was short and elusive, like often when she wrote on an unsecured channel. It basically said she couldn't make it to Illium in the next four days. Shepard had to take a detour by the Nimbus Cluster, deep in asari space due to another emergency. She was sorry about it and would try to schedule another rendezvous during Liara's next rotation between Viantel and Thessia. The news saddened Liara.

"Something's wrong?" Nihlus asked before finishing his glass.
"I was hoping to meet a friend on Illium before my departure but it seems it won't happen," Liara said and it was only the truth. "I'm sorry," she added when she saw Nihlus suddenly interested, "I have to tell Vasir. Maybe we'll talk later."

"Sure," he shrugged and Liara stood up, secretly relieved to leave him behind.

She quickly went back to her spot but Vasir wasn't there yet. Liara waited a few seconds before following the steps of the Spectre, looking around in hope to find her. Nobody really cared for the young Asari she was thanks to her strict dress and she navigated between the guests easily. At some point, Liara spotted unusual white fringes towering not so high above all the blue heads but she had no desire to talk to Saren – she had had enough Turian for one evening. He may have known where Vasir could be though and the thought made Liara hesitate. Nothing told her Saren knew Vasir but he had been a Spectre for a long time, longer than Nihlus, so he probably had met her at some point. Liara sighed, resigned, and walked back to the Spectre.

To her surprise, Saren was talking to no less than Vasir herself. They both were at one end of a long bar counter, discussing in a relatively private bubble. Saren wasn't as strong and impressive as Liara remembered but she was still a little uneasy approaching the Spectre in black. Turians aged fast, they were gone in a matter of years, and their biotics even faster. By his look, Saren wasn't going to stick around for long.

"It's not how it works," Vasir was saying with insistence.

"It will take weeks," Saren grunted, "but with your intervention..."

"No," the Asari replied, frowning hard. "There are rules for a reason, Saren. Follow them or go fuck yourself."

That wasn't something to say to a Turian and Saren straightened, gaining a few centimeters in the process, but Vasir wasn't impressed at all. She could probably send him to an early grave if it came down to a fight between them. Saren may have been a great Spectre with biotics but he was old and turian. He couldn't possibly compete with Vasir's powers.

But they didn't have time to argue. Vasir noticed Liara and ended the conversation with Saren, leaving him behind her as she walked straight to Liara, who felt like a little child again.

"What are you doing here?" Vasir asked abruptly. "I told you to not move!"

"It was ten minutes ago," Liara tried to defend herself. She caught Saren's gaze and the old Spectre looked at her with an intensity that made her shiver.

"Doctor T'soni," he saluted with a nod of the head, his eyes locked with Liara's.

"Spectre Arterius," she replied, uncomfortable. "I'm sorry to have interrupted you."

"No need to apologize," he shrugged and his affability surprised Liara. It was the first time she ever saw him being nice and it made a great difference with his usual grumpy and cold attitude. Liara could almost picture him as Nihlus had described him, charming on his own way.

Vasir rolled her eyes. "Can you not?" she grunted towards Saren.

"Jealousy isn't pretty, Tela," he retorted viciously.

She stepped forward to come closer to Saren, menacing him with her finger. "I know you like pretty little girls, Arterius, but I won't let you touch this one. She's under my protection."
Saren just smiled back, all his artificial teeth shining. Liara shivered. She had received the mandatory sex education classes like any other Asari – although it had been a long time ago. While Salarrians could seek romance with an Asari, they generally had no interest in activities of sexual nature, contrary to Turians who had a hard time picturing a friendship not involving sex. And their way was heavily based on the stimulation of their sexual organs through friction and penetration. Asaris didn't work like that at all. For them, pleasure came from the chemicals in their skin released by the contact with another biotic field and the exchange of other substances through the mouth. But some Turians liked Asaris nonetheless and it was no secret males had it their way through the only orifice available – which was exactly why Asaris preferred female Turians over males.

Vasir grabbed Liara by the arm and pulled her out of the way. "We're leaving," she decreed.

"And our deal, Tela?" Saren asked over the music.

"There is no deal," she replied. "You wait, period, and don't contact me."

She didn't talk until they reached the car and then she only gave orders. Liara felt too uncomfortable to say a word either and she spent the ride back to the hotel anxiously watching the scenery. She hadn't talked at all about her work and her university to anyone. A part of her was relieved because speaking to strangers wasn't really her thing, but the other only focused on how disappointed the director of the archeology department would be. Liara wasn't one to blatantly lie but she'd probably make an exception on this one – Spectre business to attend to, yes, that'd do.

They went back to their hotel room in silence, only saluted by the personnel of the night shift – Salarians and a few Humans. Liara's head started to be heavy from the alcohol and she felt hungry. She craved for fried junanq eggs with a side of mixed fruits puree of any sort but she wasn't sure Vasir would authorize a late delivery from the room service – they had had dinner hours ago. Going alone to the hotel's restaurant was out of the question, Vasir rarely let Liara out of her sight. She may have been old fashion and sometimes annoying but Liara had to admit she did her work with zeal. That was something she appreciated.

There was a breeze when Vasir opened the door of their suite and the Spectre froze. She took a gun from under her dress, hidden between her thighs, and pushed Liara back. It took her a second to remember all the windows had been locked when they had left so a breeze could only point to something wrong.

Liara entered the room after Vasir and locked the door behind her, just in case. The Spectre indicated to Liara to stay where she was and she inspected the suite thoroughly, slowly. Vasir eventually called from Liara's room, as anticipated. The large window giving on the balcony was opened, the lock destroyed, and the few crates Liara had kept had all been visited, their content all over the room. Liara felt her throat tighten and tears burn her eyes. It was all her fault. How could she let that happen?

Vasir went to the balcony to look around while Liara knelt in front of the crates, checking what had been stolen with shaky hands. The Spectre came back shortly after, clearly pissed, but Liara was
"No trace of anything," Vasir grunted. "The lock's been fried, old fashion thermite." She kicked in the desk, making Liara jump. "Fuck!" she shouted. "I should have never allowed you to keep all of that in your fucking room!"

"I'll take responsibility," Liara stuttered. "It's my fault, I..."

"I'm in charge," Vasir replied, furious. "Your screw-ups are on me, little girl!"

Liara could only keep her head low and fight her tears as the Spectre stormed out of the room. Shebusied her hands with the artifacts left, putting them in order in their individual protections. She was ready to take responsibility despite what Vasir had said. She'd probably lose her accreditation to transport prothean artifacts but she would still be able to work on dig sites or at the university. Maybe not for the university though. The thought saddened her. Would she be able to work on the Normandy again?

Liara filled an entire crate, her nose running, snorting and vaguely listening to Vasir who was trying to have a conversation with the Councilors – Illium was in the twelve to fifteen minutes of delay zone for communications, which could be infuriating at times. Something was wrong, Liara noticed. The crate was complete. Liara checked the manifest on a datapad. Everything listed was still present, just dispersed on the ground and on the bed. She stood up and looked around, datapad in hand. She found one by one all the items on her list. Everything was accounted for, exception made of the three Echo Shards found on Viantel.

Liara froze. An Echo Shard was a small tablet made out of a particular metal with an organic structure, a synthetic material that nobody had managed to replicate to this day. While a Shard was like a diary for a Prothean, they used that technology to stock information on different scales. Beacons were roughly two meters high tablets while Archives could have the size of a small building – although they were extremely rare. Finding any of those was the promise of an incredible quantity of information and technological advancements. People could easily go to war to put their hands on Archives because they were of strategic interest.

Although Shards rarely contained crucial information. They were more personal, the memories and knowledge of a single Prothean. They were so common that finding something interesting in them was almost impossible, but those Liara had found on Viantel were particular. Everything indicated in the research center buried under kilometers of ice that it dated back to a time close to the Fall of the Empire, the galaxy-wide cataclysm which had destroyed all the prothean civilization in a matter of decades. The owners of those Shards may have witnessed what was going on during that time and it may have helped to understand what had happened. What if the Fall of the Empire had been caused by an unknown species hiding in a corner of the galaxy for now but regrouping for a future assault? What if it was something the current species could understand and fight against this time? It was important to understand what had happened, even if the cause was something less fantasist, like a cosmic event of some sort or even a plague.

Liara sighed, discouraged. Anyone could want those Shards, maybe not for the information they contained but just to sell it to someone else. It was illegal in Council Space, finders keepers as they said, but law never prevented anything to happen. Prothean tech was worth millions on the black market, billions sometimes, but it was a small price to pay when such investment could lead to technological superiority over the other species. Liara was pretty sure Asaris and Salarians would do anything to keep their dominant role in the galaxy – Turians too but their army was too formidable to rely solemnly on stolen technology.

Maybe Liara should tell Shepard about the theft – the Commander was a watchman of prothean
tech after all – but she didn't know how Vasir would react to that. The asari Spectre was in charge, as she had pointed out, and the Council could appoint another Spectre for the investigation. Liara still had to inform Vasir of her discovery. She turned heel to join Vasir in the living room but a chill made her stop at the door and look back. Liara froze. There was somebody in the room, a silhouette under a tactical cloak highlighted by the sunset. Fight or flight. Liara clenched her fists. She'd fight.

The silhouette jumped to the window as Liara unleashed a warp. She didn't miss, but her attack wasn't completely loaded and didn't stop the thief, who just rolled on the ground. The warp damaged the thief’s tactical cloak though and a petite figure all in black and gray appeared, a hood hiding its face. It resembled an Asari but it was in fact a female Human, small and gracious. The thief smiled and gave a mock salute before jumping over the guard-rail of the balcony. Liara ran behind her but she couldn't follow the woman past the balcony. There was a large terrace three stories under, with pools and whatnot, but Liara was too afraid to jump. Helpless, she saw the thief run between the other clients to the edge of the building and disappear after another leap, the Echo Shards with her.

TBC
All the crew had been called on third deck maybe an hour after lunch and James expected some kind of bad news from Shepard or Javik, but the Prothean wasn't there and the Commander was sipping a cup of coffee and chatting with Sam near the kitchen counter. No sign of emergency there. James looked around and noticed the absence of Garrus and ex-Alliance Marine Corporal John Shepard, commonly referred to as John by popular choice to avoid misinterpretations. Maybe Garrus and Javik were keeping an eye on him somewhere else. Shepard didn't seem to have a great opinion of her brother, but the guy was all right by James' standards, and definitely the friendly Shepard of the family.

James had to wait maybe a minute before Joker and Solus arrived last. Lawson patted the table next to her to show them their reserved seats, Krios on her left, near Kaidan and Ash. Sarah and Beth were standing close to Legion, as far as possible from Massani. Tali had chosen Wrex' old spot in the middle of the table, like often in the past couple of weeks, and next to her was Greg and Karin, Kenneth and Gabby on the other side of the table with Esteban. James quickly looked elsewhere and was glad Shepard started to talk.

"Alright people, thanks for coming," she said, giving her cup to Rupert behind her. Her movement revealed a pile of datapads next to her and Samantha. "First of all, Garrus has to be kept in the dark about everything we'll discuss here, understood? If any of you spill it out, you'll be on cleaning duty under Gardner's supervision as long as he wants."

"What if Gardner spills it out?" Tali asked.

"I'll let Javik decide of his fate," Shepard shrugged. Rupert mimed shutting his mouth and throwing away the key. "So, a bit of context first. Turians have a quite rigid social hierarchy, as you probably know. They have twenty-seven tiers, from not-even-citizen to Primarch. The higher the tier, the higher the responsibilities, much like in any army, alright?" A few people nodded. "It works just fine for, let's say, regular Turians, even out-worlders, exception made of Spectres – and Secessionists who have their own hierarchical system. Turian Spectres are technically out of their social order because they have to respond to the Council, not any Primarch. But, of course, Turians being Turians, Spectres still refer to their tier to determine who's the boss of whom. My problem is, Nihlus and Garrus have the same tier. Garrus is not really one to search for trouble with another Turian over what we might consider as petty rivalry, but Nihlus is. You probably noticed that."

This time, almost everybody nodded, even Legion. "So, to solve the problem, I have decided to recommend Garrus for his next tier."

"But not Turian," Solus pointed out.

"I'll let Javik decide of his fate," Shepard shrugged. Rupert mimed shutting his mouth and throwing away the key. "So, a bit of context first. Turians have a quite rigid social hierarchy, as you probably know. They have twenty-seven tiers, from not-even-citizen to Primarch. The higher the tier, the higher the responsibilities, much like in any army, alright?" A few people nodded. "It works just fine for, let's say, regular Turians, even out-worlders, exception made of Spectres – and Secessionists who have their own hierarchical system. Turian Spectres are technically out of their social order because they have to respond to the Council, not any Primarch. But, of course, Turians being Turians, Spectres still refer to their tier to determine who's the boss of whom. My problem is, Nihlus and Garrus have the same tier. Garrus is not really one to search for trouble with another Turian over what we might consider as petty rivalry, but Nihlus is. You probably noticed that."

This time, almost everybody nodded, even Legion. "So, to solve the problem, I have decided to recommend Garrus for his next tier."

"But not Turian," Solus pointed out.

"No but I'm his mentor, and 'turns out it counts for something, even if I'm a filthy Human," the Commander smirked. "Remember that super fun time when I was kidnapped to Bekenstein? Well, I've met Primarch Fedorian there and I asked him directly if I could recommend Garrus to spare me future headaches – I mean, why not? The guy was there after all. He questioned the Law Office for me and apparently there is nothing in their books preventing an alien mentor figure to recommend their turian protegee for a higher tier. It happened before and it just requires a lot of paperwork." Shepard turned to the counter and patted the pile of datapads. "Which I have here and that's why..."
your help is requested. I need depositions of Garrus' behavior and attitude in our micro social cell that is the Normandy."

Massani grumbled. "Is it mandatory?" he asked.

"No," Shepard shook her head. "Participates whoever wants to, there is no obligation. But, be aware that the Hierarchy will do a background check on you to insure you're not lying liars and they can contact you later on for clarifications and details. So be sincere. If you think Garrus is obnoxious and annoying, write it down. I won't edit a word, I won't even read it."

"Isn't that counterproductive?" Joker frowned.

"Truth is an ocean filled with the thousands rivers of all horizons," Shepard said, and it seemed like she was reciting something she had learned.


"Well you can be a giant murderous asshole and still makes sense," Shepard shrugged. "But we're not here to talk philosophy. If you wanna help, you have one week to complete the paperwork. Give your datapad back to Traynor when you're done, she'll transfer all of it to the embassy."

Lawson raised her hand. "Is anybody legitimate?" she asked. "I mean, I'm an ex-Cerberus top agent currently held prisoner. I doubt my testimony can be of any help."

"Yeah," Massani snorted, "and I'm a war criminal for those spiky assholes, between other things. And let's not talk about him," he said, pointing at Krios, "or that," he finished with Legion. The Geth's facial plates waved but there was no way to tell what it meant.

"I vouched for you all," Shepard replied.

"Meaning?" Massani insisted.

"Meaning if you're good enough to work for me, you're good enough to testify. Any other question?"

Kenneth raised his hand. "The background check," he said with his Irish accent, "how does it work for us in the Alliance?"

"Public records only," Shepard assured. "Though let it be known that I will give them the files Javik and I keep on the crew too. So the Hierarchy will know about your tendency to strip down when drunk." Gabby laughed next to her boyfriend. "Anything else?" Shepard asked. "No? Okay, you know where to find me anyway. Just don't forget, people: Garrus must not know about this. And avoid telling John too, he's a blabber-mouth. Thank you all for your time."

Most of the crew stood up to go to the counter and take a datapad, while some directly went for the elevator – Massani and Ashley, of course. James would have thought Tali wasn't going to help either but she grabbed a datapad just before Lawson and jogged out of the way. James could almost hear her snickering and that made him smile. It was good to see her in a better mood.

"Vega, come with me," Shepard ordered, pointing at the bridge leading to the canon room. James followed her, his datapad in hand, curious about what could grant him a one-on-one talk with the Commander. "I'll take a second team with me tonight to Korlus," she said, "and I want you to lead it."
James suddenly felt his throat tighten and his heart accelerate. Oh shit. "Huh, thanks, Commander but I'm not sure..."

"Oh yes I'm sure," she snorted, folding her arms. "I know what you're capable of as a soldier following orders but Anderson wants me to recommend you for the ICT. That means I have to know what you're capable of as a leader."

James rubbed his neck, uncomfortable. "I-I know but..."

"But what?"

But last time he had been in charge, everybody had died, basically. God, he could see Kamille fall before him right now, just by closing his eyes. He felt sick thinking about it.

"But what?" Shepard insisted.

"I-I don't think I can, Commander," James admitted.

Shepard stared at him, adding to the pressure and discomfort building inside him. She eventually looked at the mess hall and, to James' surprise, grabbed his arm to take him to the canon room. It wasn't the first time James went there. He had come from time to time with Ashley when they couldn't bare the ride down to fifth deck to reach their usual spot in the utility room. It was as warm as he remembered, noisy enough to cover whatever moan could escape them, and the red light gave a sensation of intimacy. Which was definitely weird with Shepard standing in front of him.

"I know what happened on Fehl Prime," Shepard said and for once James would have liked her to sugar-coat her words. "Shit happens, Vega. We can't control this kind of situation so we just have to roll with it and do what we can."

"I know all of that, Commander," James sighed, walking backward to a console to lean on it. "People served me the same exact bullshit over and over again since it happened."

"And it didn't help."

"No," James shook his head.

"Doesn't change the fact that it's true," Shepard shrugged, looking around.

"Did it help you?" James snorted. Shepard frowned. Bad move, Jimmy, he thought. Shepard wasn't your typical superior, she didn't separate herself from the rest of the crew. She was more accessible but that didn't mean she was everybody's friend. James had forgotten. "After Torfan, I mean," he added, his voice more reasonable.

Shepard kept staring at him for a few seconds. She clicked. "You lost what? Five men, all in the Alliance, right?" James nodded. "I've sent four hundred thirty-seven people and a dog to their death on Torfan, both soldiers and civilians, adults, teens and kids, so, no, it didn't help."

"I'm sorry, Commander," James hesitated. "I didn't mean to compare..."

"Yes you did, and your little attempt to hurt me to get me off your back failed, so, first, on a personal level, fuck you, and second, I won't tolerate it again. Am I clear, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Commander," James replied, head low.
"Good." Shepard stayed silent for a second. "Guilt will follow you all your life, Vega," she said, still pissed. "It will eat you up, until you can't look in the mirror." Was her pep talk supposed to help? Because James failed to see how. "So quit," Shepard continued, "or get your shit together, soldier. Your men might die and there is little you can do. It doesn't matter anyway because your job is to reach the objective, not protect everyone."

James couldn't look at her and lowered his head again, nodding to tell her he had received the message.

"Korlus, tonight, eight hundred," Shepard decreed. "Prep the mission and choose your teammates."

She didn't leave him time to answer – or protest – and walked out of the room. James sighed and stretched his neck, trying to relax a little. Maybe he should hit fifth deck and busy himself with work for a few hours, to calm down and clear his mind. The idea was tempting but preps came first, James decided. He keyed on the datapad and started to work on the mission.

Korlus was known as the "garbage planet". It was conveniently located in the Eagle Nebula, in between the Attican Traverse and the Terminus Systems, in the gateway system of Imir. The planet couldn't support life when it had been discovered and it had been used ever since as a giant dumpster for spaceships from all over the galaxy. The ships were dismantled in the numerous stations in orbit, all the parts still good to use recycled, but then the carcasses were tossed on the planet. The surface was covered in wastes, from burned metal to radioactive reactors damaged from the fall. A lot of scavengers still live down there, searching for forgotten element zero crumbs or anything valuable. Of course, mercenary gangs were legions on Korlus.

The current political climate, if you could call the never ending wars between gangs like that, was in favor of the Blue Suns. That meant James and his team could face a decent number of engineers. He would have liked to take Garrus with him for that reason but the Spectre had better things to do than take orders from a Lieutenant. It left James with Tali and Legion. Tali was his first choice but James had to admit Legion was a better asset. The Geth simply was more polyvalent. It also was a machine. James had to admit he didn't really see Legion as a person. EDI was different, she looked more human, she had preferences, humor even, she was smart and cunning. Legion was just a big, slow-minded robot, very efficient one on the battlefield but it lacked something James couldn't really define. If everything went to Hell and Legion had to be left behind, James wouldn't think about it twice.

So he had a tech doubled with a sniper with him, simple soldier, and he needed a biotic. There was a shortage of those on the Normandy at the moment, which left him with Javik or Kaidan. James didn't think about it for long and chose Kaidan. Javik was much more powerful, no doubt about it, but the recent demonstrations of his talents had kind of frightened James, to be honest. In London, Javik had clearly played with that monster coming out of Wrex before finishing it, as if that nightmarish creature had been nothing but a cute, tenacious puppy. The Prothean had had the same attitude against that crazy tattooed girl who had attacked them at breakfast without warning. It was evident Javik could have crushed her with his pinky but he had pushed her to her limits instead. To study her? For the fun of it? James didn't know and didn't want to take his chance with the Prothean.

It actually was thanks to him that Shepard had found about Korlus. Javik had a weird ability, he could read memories in people or even objects through touch – it had to do with quantum mechanic and alteration of the synchronicity of particles from what Liara had told him one day but James had mostly listened to her to be polite, not because he was interested. Once Crazy Jack secured, Javik had come back to the mess to help put some order. He had touched Wrex' usual chair, frozen for a second, and then had run to the elevator, Shepard following him in a hurry. It turned out Wrex had
written a journal at the table during his sleepless nights, a real handwritten diary containing recovered memories of his long life. James didn't have the occasion to read it, Shepard had given it to Tali once she was done with it, but the Commander had told the crew about a part on the genophage.

Wrex descended from a more fertile lineage than average. His father, Urnold Jarrod, had had thirteen sons in total after the Rebellions, which was a clear anomaly. Unfortunately, Jarrod had died on Tuchanka roughly five hundred years ago and only two of his sons had survived so far, Wrex, who had left the planet and lived as a mercenary for centuries, and Wreav, the current Warlord of the Urnold clan. Wrex remembered having been contacted by a young turian Spectre fifty or forty standard years ago, a classic merc job, protecting a research center on the planet Virmire in the Sentry Nebula – the planet was close to the Terminus Systems and an ideal raid location for countless mercenary gangs, so any settlement had to be heavily protected. The Spectre had been Saren Arterius and he then was working with a krogan scientist known as Okeer. From what Wrex had written, a lot of Krogans worked on Virmire and he soon figured out the base was a research center on the genophage. He had kept his mouth shut and a low profile because curious people tended to disappear easily around. One night, half of the base had been blown up and Wrex learned in the morning that Okeer had disappeared with his researches. Saren had been more than pissed but the center kept on running like usual. For a few days anyway, the time necessary for a turian fleet to arrive and wipe out all the personnel. Wrex had fought back, obviously, but he had fallen over a wall, head first on rocks. He had woken up a few days later with no memories of the last decade and stuck on the planet for several months.

Since Shepard was now working on the cure of the genophage, she had decided to track down Okeer. It hadn't been difficult to find him because he operated as the leader of a mercenary gang on Korlus – he even had been on the news recently because of his open war against the Blue Suns for a good chunk of their territory. Shepard had then decided to stop by the Eagle Nebula on their way to the Terminus – the meeting with Liara on Illium had been canceled due to an emergency on her hand.

James skipped dinner, too anxious to eat anything, and went ahead of his team to the shuttle bay to put his armor on and check his weapons one last time. Shepard arrived at eight PM sharp, followed by Garrus and Solus with his old duffel-bag. She looked at Kaidan and Legion but didn't comment. Esteban helped her put on her armor while Garrus, already in his heavy one, gave a hand to the Salarian with his. It was an odd choice for her team, even if Solus was indeed in charge of the cure of the genophage. He wasn't exactly in his prime years and his few missions for the STG didn't make a soldier out of him.

The elevator opened a few minutes later on Krios who walked out of it with determination. He stopped next to Shepard, squared shoulders and hands behind his back.

"Commander," he said with his hoarse voice, "I would like to volunteer for this mission. Korlus is a dangerous place and..."

"And you think I need your protection, Krios?" Shepard snorted, adjusting a strap. "Vakarian," she added before the Drell could answer, "remind me, how do I react to people who think I need protection again?"

"Not well, Commander," he answered, busy with Solus' armor seals.

"I am fully aware you do not need protection," Krios replied nonetheless, no emotion showing on his face or in his voice. "I simply wish to be of any help. I am not used to do nothing of my days and this situation proved to be tiring."
"Your job is to spy on Miranda and me, isn't it?" Shepard asked lightly.

This time, Krios frowned. "Is that the reason why you do not wish to trust me?"

"One of the reasons, actually," Shepard corrected. She turned to him and folded her arms – Esteban used the opportunity to check the back of her armor. "When were you planning to tell me you're a biotic, exactly?" The news startled more than just James. The Drell was a biotic? Was there something he couldn't do?

"I usually do not advertise my capacities," Krios replied calmly. "I am sure you can understand secrecy is an important part of my activities."

That shut Shepard's mouth. "Still," she grumbled. "I can't fight with alongside a guy I don't trust."

"If I may," Krios insisted, "how do you integrate any new member to your team, then?"

_Touché_, James thought. Krios wasn't the kind to go easy on people. The guy had completely replaced Wrex for the training of the crew and he was just merciless. But, strangely, also a better teacher than Wrex. Krios had a keen eye for finding people's weaknesses and he made sure his students would work on it. Sam had done crazy progress in hand-to-hand combat in the last couple of weeks thanks to Krios. The only problem with him was his skin, which secreted a poison that caused mild hallucinations – although some members of the crew didn't seem to mind it at all.

"A smartass, huh?" Shepard cringed. "Well let me tell you something, Mister..."

"Would it help you to trust me if I were to cut all ties with Nihlus?" Krios interrupted the Commander. Who frowned hard.

"Why would you do that?" Shepard asked, doubtful.

"I always do what is necessary to reach my goal."

"Which is?" Shepard insisted.

"Befriending you."

"Why?"

"You are quite fascinating."

Shepard found herself speechless once more. She was pissed, James could see it, but she decided to joke about the declaration.

"I am, aren't I?" she asked, turning to Garrus and Solus. The Salarian nodded but the Turian shrugged. Shepard snorted. "Fine, you can come, Krios. Now let's go before Korlus freezes over."

The Normandy couldn't stay in orbit around Korlus, there were too many stations and vessels waiting to be dismantled around the planet, so the shuttle ride was rather long, which didn't help James relax. He vaguely listened to the discussion initiated by Legion about philosophy, to which Solus participated eagerly – and Esteban too, to James' surprise. He had no idea his friend had an interest for such a dull subject. Sure, he had seen Esteban read a lot but James had never bothered asking him details.

The shuttle landed close to Okeer's lair, the carcass of a turian dreadnought so old James had never seen that design before. The air was heavy and full of toxic fumes. It smelled like chemicals and
ashes, which wasn't surprising considering the columns of black smoke visible all around. The sky had an orange tint behind the layers of gray fog. James couldn't distinguish the white circle of the sun anywhere – it was the middle of the day for this part of Korlus. His throat itched with each breath he took and his eyes burned with tears. He should have taken his helmet, he realized when he saw Shepard jump out of the shuttle with hers, followed by Garrus who sported the same look. Solus had a breathing mask and goggles to protect his eyes, like Krios. Shit. James could do without but as the leader of his team he should have thought about the protection of his men – well, Kaidan anyway because Legion didn't breathe. Wait, did it breathe? James didn't know the first thing about Geths. He should have asked more questions, he realized with a bit of panic.

The shuttle left them in the middle of a maze made of piles of debris of all sorts, mud and colorful pools of chemical on the ground. James took point, his heart pumping hard, Kaidan and Legion behind him, and made sure to not step into anything too liquid. Or steaming. Or moving. He heard gunfire and screams several times, jumping each time, but all the commotion was quite distant. It didn't take them long to reach the deep shadow cast by the carcass of the dreadnought. James stopped to wait for Shepard's team, who arrived a minute later. Without Krios.

"You lost someone?" Kaidan asked playfully. How the guy managed to be this calm was a mystery to James. He was so nervous, his finger had twitched on the trigger of his assault rifle a hundred times already.

"No," Shepard shook her head, her voice a little altered by the helmet. "Krios doesn't like, and I quote, to be a sitting duck in the middle of a very visible and noisy group of large targets. I disagreed because I'm very fit, not large." Kaidan smiled, amused. "He's around," she added. "So?" Shepard asked, turning to James. "What's next?"

"We have to find an entrance," James supposed, uncomfortable.

"Have to?" Shepard repeated. "Because you don't know how to go inside already, Lieutenant?" She didn't leave him time to answer. "You had hours to prepare the mission, you have an engineer in your team, and yet you have no clue on how to get in. Great job."

"I-I'm sorry, Commander," James stuttered. "I didn't think..."

"Obviously," Shepard interrupted him, folding her arms. "Granted, we have to improvise during a mission but that's when the plan fails, Lieutenant. You don't have one to begin with."

"I didn't think we had maps or something like that!" James snapped. "This place is a junkyard, there is no way a route stays the same for long."

"Why didn't you order a reconnaissance fly-by then?" Shepard insisted. "EDI can scan the surface from orbit, you're aware of that, right?"

"I didn't know I could do that!" James protested.

"It didn't occur to you to ask if you could?"

"You gave me the leadership of one team, not the whole mission!"

"And you always have an excuse, don't you?" she mocked.

James could feel the blood rushing in his head. He was too hot, sweating, he felt dizzy and his mouth was dry. Goddammit, he hated the pressure.

Wait, the pressure? Was Shepard more bitchy than usual because she wanted to see him react under
pressure? It made sense, James had to admit. Fuck, she had played him like a pro, but James didn't see how he could regain his cool now.

"Vakarian, take the lead," Shepard decided. "You go with Legion and..."

"Wait, no!" James interrupted. "I can do this, Commander!"

"Too late, Lieutenant. You're with me now," Shepard said coldly while Garrus regrouped with Kaidan and Legion. James just nodded, incapable of saying anything. This day kept getting better and better."Krios," she called over the radio, "change of team. Vega with us, Vakarian on point. Stay close." She then turned to Garrus.

"Yes, I know," he said. "In, salute, booze, out." Shepard clicked, not amused. "Anyway," Garrus continued, "give us a minute, stop when we stop, and so on, you know how it goes. I'll call if we need help." He turned to Legion. "You're on point but open the way with a recon drone. Alenko in the middle, I take the rear. I'll do the long distance shooting."

"Acknowledge," Legion nodded just before a drone spammed next to it.

The bright holographic globe went ahead while Legion switched for its assault rifle and the group quickly followed. James didn't dare to say a word. He looked around, vigilant, eyes burning because of the chemicals in the air, but didn't open his mouth and took point when Shepard gave the green light to move.

They entered the carcass by the flank, through a large opening in what was left of the plating, all rusty and burned on the sides. The entry hall, if you could call it like that, was clearly arranged to contain unwanted visitors, with heavily protected balconies and catwalks, crates and metal panels on the ground, but nobody was there for the meet and greet. Garrus' team had started to climb flights of stairs and they didn't seem to have found any resistance. The place couldn't be empty, James was hearing more and more gunfire as they went on. The noises were still distant but they definitely came from inside the dreadnought.

The only way went up. Between the toxic air, the temperature and the climb on stairs definitely not made for Humans, James was actually glad Shepard had decided to take it slow to spare grand-pa Solus. He realized when he reached the billionth level that he didn't feel so bad anymore – well he was kind of asphyxiating and sweating a lot, his heart pumping harder than usual but all of that was caused by the conditions, not by the pressure Shepard had put on him. That was kind of sad, James thought as he checked a long corridor open on one side to the void. Becoming a soldier was his childhood dream. He had always pictured himself as a badass Marine discovering new worlds and protecting the galaxy, the trusted and confident leader of a selected group of extraordinary men and women. It had worked, for a time, but Fehl Prime had showed him his limits. He could still be a great soldier but the leadership was just not for him.

"Cover!" Solus suddenly yelled.

James jumped behind a metal panel just as bullets started raining on them. A quick look informed him they had been followed by a group of seven Blue Suns mercenaries: one Asari, two Salarians, two Turians, a Batarian and, as impossible as it seemed, a Krogan in a different kind of armor, a muddy red instead of the bright blue of the gang. Maybe it was the distance or the rush of adrenaline but he seemed kind of small, James noticed – he had had his share of Krogans on Fehl Prime. That was a lot of priority targets. Strategy dictated to take down the biotics first, but only if they outnumbered the engineers, and everybody with a bit of experience knew the Krogan had to be eliminated very quickly. With the change of team, Shepard had lost her sniper and engineer – always useful against targets who tended to stay behind all the others. Solus had a Carnifex and an
M-9 Tempest with him, not exactly the kind of artillery useful in this situation. Fortunately, James had packed a few grenades and he threw one in the Blue Suns' ranks for starters.

The surprise counter-attack worked and gave Shepard enough time to shoot the Batarian. The grenade had hurt a Turian pretty badly and Solus finished him with two rounds of his Carnifex. His precision surprised James. He would have never bet on the old Salarian. Solus was the kind of guy to take you down with vicious remarks about your inferior intellect but he also knew how to use a gun, apparently.

James aimed for the biotic, eye on the scope, but his target suddenly fell behind her cover, swept down by a green flash. Krios. The closest Salarian barely had time to react before he was stricken by deadly and precise punches. He was still falling to the ground when Krios threw the other engineer against the nearest wall with his biotics and, at the same time, shot the remaining Turian in the back with a submachine gun. Holy shit. That was what James called efficiency.

Only the Krogan remained but his attention was focused on his dead colleagues. Shepard took the opportunity to stand up and held a hand in front of her in a ridiculous pose. At first, nothing happened, but the air started to wave around her. The Krogan shook his head and turned to her. The air trembled around him too and his image was strangely deformed, like smudged. That didn't stop him from aiming at Shepard. Solus was quicker than James. He grabbed Shepard and pull her out of the way by the time it took James to aim and fire. His bullets pierced the Krogan's armor but he was really hurt by long distance shots. Garrus and Legion. The Krogan wavered on his legs, badly hurt but still standing. Krios used that opportunity to jump on his back and beheaded him with a small sword. The Krogan finally fell.

Shepard helped Solus get up while Krios stayed near the dead Krogan, his hands joined in a very pious way. She didn't comment and quickly gave the order to move again. They soon reached Garrus' team, waiting for them near a big door. Shepard knocked on the Turian's plastron when she walked past him, to which he replied with a simple nod, and gave a pat on Legion's arm too. She then turned back to mess with Kaidan's hair before acting all serious and badass again.

It turned out the door was locked the old fashion way, with a heavy bar on the other side. Since they were paying a friendly visit to Okeer, they couldn't just blow the thing up so Shepard knocked on the rusty metal. It took a few seconds for a small panel to slide open on the black eyes of a frowning Asari.

"What?" she barked. "We're kind of busy here."

"Yeah, I noticed," Shepard smirked. "We took down a scouting team of Blue Suns mercs on our way."

"You want a medal?" the Asari asked, deadpan.

"No I'm good, thanks," Shepard joked. "I came to talk to Okeer actually."

"Busy."

"I know, and we can help solve that problem."

"I don't know you little girl," the Asari clicked, "and I certainly won't open the door for your group of wei..." She suddenly stopped and slightly turned her head.

"Open the door, please," a hoarse voice asked behind her. "I do not wish to send you kneel before your Goddess but I will if necessary."
The Asari swore but opened the door nonetheless. Krios was behind her, a sharp knife under her throat. James wondered how many weapons the guy carried under his trench coat.

"I'm starting to like you, Krios," Shepard said as she walked in, removing her helmet. The Drell stayed as impassive as ever.

They locked the door again, just in case, and the Asari opened the way for them through Okeer's lair. His men were indeed busy with an attack from the Blue Suns on the other side of the base and were all regrouped there, with their Warlord. Okeer was supervising the fight from some sort of laboratory with dozens of tanks full of colored water in which floated mini-Krogans. The smell was awful, chemicals mixed with flesh at different states of decomposition. James felt nauseous again. Okeer was at other end of the room, barking orders over the balcony, a holographic map of the battle next to him with blue and red dots indicating the position of the enemy. James had never seen a Krogan so big and so tall. Okeer was a moving mountain of muscle packed in an antic black armor. His skin was tanned and his plating dark, damaged by time and countless battles. Wrex would have looked kind of small and friendly compared to that Krogan.

"Warlord Okeer?" Shepard asked.

The Krogan didn't answer immediately, his attention focused on what was going on downstairs. "The right flank is open, you idiots!" he barked. "Bohi, the right! The right! Arh!" He looked over his shoulder. "What do you want, woman? I'm kind of busy, here."


"Aye aye, Commander," Garrus replied, already looking at the map. It didn't take him more than a second to come up with a plan. "Legion, with me. Alenko, you focus on our defense and everything too close to us. Krios, you... Where's Krios?" Solus pointed at an aeration grate opened in the ceiling. Even the Asari seemed surprised of Krios' disappearance. She quickly moved out of the way. Garrus clicked. "Well I wanted him to do that anyway."

"Right," Shepard mocked. "Be careful, boys." She focused again on Okeer as Garrus and his team left the room. James would have liked to go with them but he understood that Shepard needed someone else with her if something were to happen up here. "I've heard you worked on the genophage," the Commander said.

"You've heard wrong," Okeer grunted, still looking at what was going on downstairs. "I never worked on the genophage."

"I know for sure you were on Virmire forty-something years ago," Shepard insisted. "I know because Urdnot Wrex told me."

The roar of Legion M-98 Widow echoed in the room and was quickly followed by an explosion that illuminated the Krogan's face for a moment. Okeer snorted. "Your boys ain't bad," he grunted, turning to Shepard. He leaned on the guard-rail and crossed his arms. "I certainly was recruited by the fucking Council to work on the genophage," he said, "but I played those bastards and did my own research on Virmire in those shiny laboratories they built just for me. Why do you care?"

"I'm interested in a cure to the genophage," Shepard said. "There is a lot of money to make with something like that."
"It's useless," Okeer replied. "Krogans are fucking broke and they don't need a cure. They don't deserve it to begin with."
"I'm not doing that for the Krogans," Shepard shrugged. "My plan is to sell the cure to the best buyer. Could be the Council, could be someone else, I don't care. What people do with it after is none of my business."

"Can't help you."

"Think about it," Shepard insisted. "We could have a really lucrative partnership."

"Not interested."

"Alright. And what about you sell me your work then?"

"No."

Shepard forced a smile and walked to the guard-rail, on the other side of the table where the holographic map was displayed. She nonchalantly leaned on it, looking at the fight.

"Seems like you lost a lot of men," she commented.

The threat was clear enough for the Asari to put her hand on her gun but Solus was quicker than her. He shot him between the eyes without even blinking. Holy shit, James thought as the Asari fell to the ground. That was what he called ruthless. The guy had put on a Santa beard and worn his Christmas bonnet for weeks, for fuck's sake!

Okeer just grunted. "You think I'm afraid of you, woman?" he asked, disdainful.

"I know this fight will be pretty difficult for the both of us," Shepard admitted, "and I'd like to avoid it. That's why I have a much more convincing threat in my magic helmet." She straightened and turned to him, one hand on the guard-rail, the other on her hip. "Let me introduce myself: Commander Shepard, Council Spectre."

"Oh fuck me," Okeer grumbled with an annoyed head movement.

"I'm not really into Krogans," Shepard replied with a smirk. "So it's simple. You give me everything I want and I don't tell the Council how dangerous your activities are – believe me, I have a wild imagination – or, you're not reasonable and a whole turian fleet will come kick your ass in about, hm, two hours."

"That's not what I call a fair deal."

"Well you're the oldest Krogan alive, probably the oldest sentient being ever, period, so to me it's more like I'm preserving an irreplaceable piece of our galactic patrimony for a very affordable price. I just want a copy of your work, samples, stuff like that. You keep the originals, your business, and your life. That's a really fair deal."

"You know very little of the galaxy if you think I'm the oldest being alive, kiddo," Okeer snorted, straightening. "I want something in return."

"Like I said, you..."

"I want Saren Arterius," Okeer interrupted her.

Shepard lost her smile. That was the name of the Spectre with whom Okeer had worked on Virmire, James remembered, but also a friend of Nihlus – he couldn't shut up about how awesome they were together during the trip from Ilos to the Arcterus Station. Saren was the real thing, the
elite within the elite, but nothing to Shepard, or so James believed. Would she betray a fellow Spectre for Okeer's work though? There was no telling if his researches would help Solus after all.

Shepard looked at the Krogan for long seconds before folding her arms. "I want guarantees then," she said.

"I'll give you my most advanced test subject," Okeer agreed through clenched teeth, "a perfect Krogan. I spent over forty years collecting and selecting the best genes from the strongest, smartest, more skilled Krogans still alive and he has them all."

"Plus the genophage," Shepard remarked.

"Yeah, I told you, I don't care about a cure, but my test subjects proved to be more resilient, more fertile than your average Krogan. That can be useful to whatever the fuck you truly are after."

Shepard keyed with her index on her armored upper arm. "Alright," she eventually said. James felt disappointed, somehow. Shepard had condemned Saren to die for data that wouldn't even solve her problem. He knew it was a tough call and all the options had been bleak from the moment Okeer had refused to cooperate nicely, but, still, all that Krogan could offer wasn't worth a life in James' opinion. "Let me make a few calls", Shepard continued. She pointed at Solus as she walked to the door. "See with that guy what you have to prepare for me. Vega, you stay with them."

He didn't bother to reply.

It took hours to regroup all of Okeer's material, well enough time for Garrus and his team to take care of the remaining Blue Suns. The old Krogan had been true to his word and had given Shepard his most promising test subject. In a cloning tank. Full of an awfully smelly sticky liquid in which floated a Krogan the size of a cow – and weighting as much, if not more. Of course Okeer didn't offer to help with the transport and James, Garrus, Legion, Kaidan and Shepard had to take the tank down to the landing zone, then put it in the shuttle – which was definitely not big enough for this kind of thing plus people – and finally move it from fifth deck to Lab2. It was well past three in the morning when they finished.

"Isn't Javik able to lift that thing and carry it with his biotics?" Garrus asked as he stretched his back – Solus was already running tests on the tank with his omnitool.

"You gotta put all those fine muscles of yours to good use, Vakarian," Shepard smirked. His mandibles twitched in a weird turian smile. There was something there but James was too tired to care.

"I'll hit the showers and rest before training if you don't need me to move anything else," Garrus said, already unsealing his armor.

"No training, you've earned your morning. You too, guys. EDI, please notify Krios too." The Drell wasn't authorized to enter the laboratory and had abandoned them on third deck. "Try to sleep, Mordin," she reminded him but the Salarian was too busy connecting various cables to the tank to hear her – he was even humming. Shepard shook her head and walked out of the laboratory.

"Anyone hungry?" Kaidan asked, following her out. "I'm starving."

"Too tired," Shepard yawned, "but thanks." She hit the button to call the elevator.

"Huh, Commander?" James called, a heavy weight on his chest.

"Hm?"
"About today, the... the mission, I..."

The doors opened.

"Go ahead, guys," Shepard told Kaidan, Garrus and Legion, "and I don't want to see you before lunch. Good night."

They answered with more or less energy and yawning before disappearing. Second deck suddenly seemed terribly quiet. Shepard was staring at the elevator, arms folded, obviously thinking. James gulped. Here we go, he thought when she looked at him.

"No doubt you screwed up big time today," she eventually said, "but I also saw good stuff in your attitude, Lieutenant. You mostly have to learn how to deal with pressure and it's perfectly normal. We'll work on that. If you want to go to the ICT, that is."

James felt his heart jump in his chest and his throat tightened. He looked away. Shepard sighed.

"I was pushed to go by Anderson," she continued. "In the end it paid off, it really helped me both on a professional and personal level, but the ICT is not for everyone. I sincerely never met someone completely sane over the seven sessions," she snorted, "and I'm no exception." The elevator came back. Shepard stared at the empty lift for a few seconds. "If you want out, it's fine. You've got something, Vega, and you'll go your way, your rhythm. There is no shame in that."

Her words touched James more than he would have admitted. Shepard didn't give him time to think too much about it though. She jerked her chin in the elevator's direction.

"Jump in," she ordered, "and get some rest. I have calls to make." She turned heel and walked to the door of Lab1.

"Good night, Commander," James managed to say. She waved goodbye over her shoulder and disappeared at the corner. James sighed. What a fucking day.

TBC
Shepard seemed decided to catch up with her sex life and Garrus honestly didn't see a problem with that. He was even eager to help, he realized as the door of her quarters opened in her back, his hands on her hips and his lips on her neck. He didn't wait for her to walk backward and pull him inside the room. Instead, he lowered his hands and lifted her to his level in one swift movement. Shepard giggled against his skin but didn't stop her nibbles and kisses. She wasn't particularly heavy, not even half of his weight he supposed, but he pushed her against the wall of the bathroom nonetheless to get a better grip on her round and lovely bottom. He had to admit he was quite fond of this alien feature now. It had an interesting contrast between firm and squishy, and Shepard always reacted well when he touched her there.

She was particularly excited this morning, Garrus noticed when she arched her back to rub her chest against his. He had teased her during training earlier instead of passively wait for her to show any interest. It wasn't exactly how it should have been done, she was his mentor after all and had to initiate their encounters, but Shepard didn't care about social rules – the turian ones anyway. So Garrus had decided to test the waters and her reactions had been great so far. It was heartwarming to see her so demanding. It actually was terribly good for his ego. Not that Shepard hadn't wanted him before, she wouldn't have made a move if it had been the case, but she had always been kind of controlling so far, not really in the moment. Garrus had to admit she was terribly sexy then, but it didn't hurt to inverse the roles for once.

So when she removed her shoes with those funny little toes of hers and passed her legs around his waist, he didn't let her get too comfortable and carried her to the bed. She grunted to protest – she seemed to like to fuck against that wall considering how many times they had stopped there – but Garrus didn't care. Since he was in charge, it was the perfect occasion to introduce something new to their sexual encounters. He had wanted to try it since he had read about it in the manual but Shepard rarely left him enough time to bring the subject up. He didn't really know how anyway, and he had figured he'd make his intentions obvious enough for her to give her consent – or not but that wasn't a problem, they'd just move on to more conventional options.

He knelt before the bed – and trying to keep his balance with a wiggling Shepard in his arms wasn't the easiest thing to do – and put her on the mattress as gently as possible. Which failed miserably because she wouldn't let go of his neck and he fell on top of her. At least it made her laugh again. Garrus arched his back to rise up, his abdomen pressing against Shepard in the process. Her moan definitely made his cock tense but he repressed the feeling. That would be for later. He had to keep his head clear for now, otherwise he'd lose the momentum.

He kissed Shepard on the jaw, just where he knew it would make her move her head by reflex because it tickled, on her neck, along her clavicle to then follow the line between her breasts down to her stomach over her tank top, his hands following her sides to her bottom. Garrus pushed the shirt out of the way with his nose before kissing Shepard's tender skin around her belly button. He licked the strange little hole before moving down again. She sighed and parted her legs a little. Garrus raised his eyes to catch her gaze but he only saw the underside of her breasts and her chin.

"Shepard?" he called softly, not stopping his kisses. She moaned and he took that as a sign she was listening. "I'd like to try something."
"Yes," she replied and it sounded like her definite answer, not a question.

Garrus frowned and raised his head. "I didn't tell you what it is."

"Are you gonna eat my pussy?" she asked, her fingers caressing his hands.

"I wouldn't say it like that," he grumbled, "but, yes, that's the idea."

"Then my answer is the same," Shepard chuckled. "Just be careful with your teeth."

"Turians don't bite," he said, leaving a trail of butterfly kisses on her belly. "It's a stereotype."

Shepard vaguely approved but she couldn't have cared less, she was too busy enjoying the moment. It made Garrus smile a little – they'd talk stereotypes and racism another time. He passed his thumbs under the belt of her sweatpants and he loved the way she shivered as he pulled slowly the piece of cloth down, the way she bit her lower lip. He eventually had to step back to get it out of the way. Garrus got rid of his shirt while he was at it and took the gloves in his pocket to put them on. He kissed the inside of a leg as he leaned towards her, caressing the outside with the tip of his fingers. Shepard moaned and it was his time to shiver. That sound electrified him each time.

He nibbled at the underwear and traced a line to her crotch with his nose, brushing the fabric more than touching it. It was soaked wet already. The smell was strange so close, definitely alien, but not unpleasant. Garrus darted his tongue to follow the relief under the shorties. Shepard's legs twitched when he approached her clitoris. A nervous chuckle escaped him. He couldn't believe he was going to do that. Any good Turians certainly did not perform oral sex.

Garrus kissed again the inside of Shepard's thigh and removed her underwear with care – he had teared one off the previous week and Shepard had been pretty pissed after. She didn't oppose any resistance when he opened her legs again and Garrus took a second to look at her. Humans with her skin color defined themselves as white but they were more of a pinkish beige than anything else to any Turian. They could also change color, although it wasn't voluntary or any particular camouflage technique developed through evolution. No, their skin was so thin that a sudden blood influx due to excessive heat or arousal could actually make some of them pinker, or even red. Shepard's cheeks, ears and neck were very much red at the moment, her lips too, more than usual anyway, and a quick look at her labia showed an even more clear coloration. Garrus lowered his eyes again, incapable of not staring at her sex. He had seen it before, of course, but never openly and deliberately. And he was going to put his mouth there.

"You okay, Garrus?" Shepard asked, her voice soft.

"Huh, yeah," he replied, a bit nervous. "Sorry I stared."

"Believe me, I stared too the first time," she chuckled. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to, remember?"

"I know. I was just, huh, appreciating the view."

Shepard laughed, a little embarrassed – she didn't like to be completely naked, not for long anyway, and she often covered herself when he was looking at her. Garrus kissed her knee before leaning down again, her legs on his shoulders and his hands on her hips. Shepard had made a point to keep her pubic hair short since their first playtime in the shuttle bay. Garrus didn't care, she had hair everywhere anyway, thin little hair you could barely see, but he had to admit he liked to have a good view of his target. Sniper habit, he supposed.

He first started with a quick kiss just above her clitoris, which surprised her. The manual insisted
on how sensitive the area was and he didn't want to hurt Shepard so he kept his kisses soft and ephemeral. He caressed her waist as he slowly put a little more pressure on her labia, listening to her sighs and keeping an eye on her heartbeat through his visor. Garrus darted his tongue up, following her anatomy, the movement eased by her wetness. This time, Shepard moaned and Garrus definitely felt his cock twitch. He had anticipated a bit her taste but it wasn't so bad. He could get used to it, much like the taste of the sweat on her skin.

Garrus played with the different folds of Shepard's sex, his tongue slowly going up and down and around, but he avoided her clitoris. He busied his hands with light caresses along her waist, from her breasts to her bottom. He would have liked to tease her with his talons but her skin was too thin for that. Shepard started to move, first spreading her legs wider, then her hips slowly rocked under Garrus' mouth. He put a hand on her belly to keep her from moving too much. Shepard grabbed it and pulled it towards her breasts. Garrus chuckled. Message received.

He gave a more pronounced lick to her slit before moving slightly higher. Shepard released a long moan when Garrus' lips finally brushed her clitoris. The difficult part was really starting for him. Turians weren't good at sucking – it was kind of hard to create a vacuum in your mouth when you had a hole on each side of it. The trick was to clench the teeth and keep the mandibles tight against the mouth. The problem was, mandibles weren't made for that, they weren't even movable to begin with thanks to millions of years of muscle atrophy. Garrus had to practice in front of a mirror all week to be able to reactivate the muscles controlling those movements and his jaw had hurt more than once. But it paid off. As soon as he started sucking on that strange little bundle of nerves, Shepard clumped her legs tight around Garrus' head by reflex and shouted about God or something. Garrus fought hard his smile and started to lick her clitoris, gripping one of her breast at the same time with one hand and trying to keep her legs from crushin his head with the other.

Shepard was breathing heavily, moving a lot, her hips jerking every now and then, her knees shaking a bit. All of that eventually detached Garrus' visor. At first a little distraught to not have visual help, he decided to go with the flow. Moans and twitches were good signs, it seemed, while all the pressure Shepard added herself with her movements simply indicated he needed to do better. It took a minute but he eventually found a good balance between the sucking and the licking. He was completely mesmerized by how lost in the moment Shepard was, her eyes closed, one of her hand grabbing Garrus' while the other was on his head, her fingers trying to find a grip on his plates. Pearls of sweat rolled on her moist skin, helped by the waves her body made. And her moans, Spirits! They resonated in him, through his bones to his core, warming his body and his mind.

Which he wanted to avoid, actually. His back was tensed, his cock slowly hardening and pressing against his slit, but he knew he'd be pretty much useless for a couple of minutes when his orgasm would hit, and all his work would be lost. Shepard had to come first. She hadn't said a word about it but Garrus knew she had not reached orgasm in his company yet. It bothered him, sex was supposed to be a moment for sharing and so far he had only received. It was said in the manual that Humans largely differed from Turians regarding pleasure. Orgasms weren't automatic, some Humans even never experienced it at all, which was a great evolutionary flaw if you were to ask him. Garrus had had to do extended researches to find valuable information on the subject. He had been kind of disappointed on the lack of reliable scientific studies and he hadn't resolved himself to look at human porn. Having sex with Shepard was one thing, watching Humans do the do was another entirely. Besides, it rarely represented the reality of the act.

"G-Garrus," Shepard suddenly stuttered, her legs rising to put her feet against his spinal cowl. He hoped she wouldn't push too much because that could hurt.

"Hm?" he responded against her skin and Shepard gasped for air. She seemed to appreciate this
kind of low vibrations too. Good to know.

"Your..." She gulped. "Your finger. Put it in me."

Right, Garrus remembered, she had told him she liked to feel full, a job easily done by his cock but his fingers were a lot thinner. It would do for now, he supposed as he released her leg to tease her soaked folds with his index. His glove was made of a rather slick fabric but it had a metallic cap on the tip to protect the talon, which could be uncomfortable, he figured. But that was a better option than risking to reap her vagina off.

"Now Vakarian!" Shepard shouted.

"Yessir!" Garrus replied by automatism, surprised by her order.

He slid his index inside of her without difficulty and immediately felt her muscles clench around his digit. The souvenir of that feeling on his cock made his back contract even more and a moan escaped him. Shepard covered it with her own. Her hips were now rolling under him, so much he had trouble keeping his mouth sealed. He released her breast to put his arm across her hips to keep her from moving too much, and started to rub the pulp of his index against her inner walls. Shepard stopped moaning and breathing altogether. She arched her back, her legs shook against Garrus’ head, her muscles had spasms around his finger, and she eventually squealed after what seemed to be an eternity. Garrus just looked at her, amazed by her reaction.

He let her enjoy the sensations all she wanted and moved out of the way when she asked him to. Garrus sat next to her on the bed, adjusted his visor and leaned on his arms, leaving her time and space to emerge from her orgasm. He couldn't stop smiling like an idiot, even with his chin covered in her fluids and his back tickling from his own growing orgasm. It was strange but he didn't feel the need to release his cock and let go. The satisfaction to have made Shepard come was enough. He quickly looked at the clock on the bedside table. They didn't really have time to continue anyway, breakfast would soon be served. He'd be uncomfortable for an hour or so but he could live with that.

His eyes fell on the leather sheath containing the violin he had bought Shepard for Christmas and a pile of large and thin paperback manuals next to it on the console. It made Garrus smile a little more. He knew she had been practicing but it was indeed harder than what he had thought – the clerk had made it look like so easy in the shop! Garrus didn't know the first thing about music and instruments, all he had cared about was the sounds produced by that strange little wood box and its strings. Shepard was probably cursing his name each time she practiced. He wondered why she didn't ask help from EDI. The AI could probably learn how to play any instrument in a second and it wouldn't refuse to help Shepard.

Who sighed and stretched on the bed next to Garrus, making funny noises. Once done, she put her feet on the edge of the bed and pull on her tank top to hide her belly and sex. He really didn't understand her post-coital shyness, especially now. He had had his head between her legs for the last ten minutes after all.

"You're okay?" Garrus asked, turning his torso and leaning on one elbow.

"More than okay," she smiled, her cheeks still red. "You're sure it's your first time going down on someone? Because that was pretty awesome."

"It is," Garrus smiled, proud of himself, "but I have to admit I found tutorials during my researches."
"I know," Shepard chuckled. "EDI reported all of your infractions to the rules with zeal."

"It's not like I watched porn," he clicked. Damned AI. "It wasn't a surprise for you then."

"Nope. Well, your talents were a surprise, a very good one," she assured, patting his arm, "but I didn't think you'd go for it so soon."

"I've read most human women orgasm through clitoral stimulation," Garrus hesitated, "and we, huh, never really went there before. I mean, I saw you touch yourself but I didn't realize how important it was. So it was worth a try."

"That is adorable," Shepard said, marking each of her words. "Thank you for your efforts, Vakarian."

"My pleasure, Commander," he replied, amused and a bit embarrassed. Adorable? Him? Nobody had called him adorable for the last twenty years.

"I wanna tell you a secret," Shepard continued on the tone reserved for conspiracies.

Garrus leaned closer to her. "I'm listening."

Shepard bit her lower lip and a nervous little giggle escaped her. She turned on her side, her knees on Garrus' leg, and brushed the edge of his upper pectoral ridge with a finger. "It's a bit hard for me to reach the first orgasm," she whispered, her eyes catching Garrus' gaze, "but it gets much easier after."

"Oh really?" he asked in a breath, passing an arm over her waist.

Shepard nodded and rolled with him on the bed.

They arrived late for breakfast, so late Gardner had already started cleaning the kitchen with John. Javik was waiting for Shepard at his usual spot, not far from Lawson, Joker and Solus. The rest of the crew was finishing to prepare themselves for their shift, walking in and out of the bathrooms and their quarters. Krios saluted Shepard eagerly like every morning, and it never failed to amuse Garrus to see him try to get the Commander's attention – Drells were so weird. Gardner had saved Shepard her usual pancakes, eggs and coffee, while a plate of qairi with a fruit and vegetable mix awaited Garrus. He grabbed a handful of ration bars before sitting at the table. Shepard smirked when he aligned them on his tray.

"What?" he asked playfully. "I'm hungry."

"I see that," she smiled.

Javik rolled his eyes.

"People are starting to talk," he said, standing up, and it took a second to Garrus to realize Javik had spoken in Prothean. He wouldn't have guessed he could actually understand that language, even if he had been learning it since his arrival on the Normandy. A quick look on his left told Garrus the sudden use of a language spoken by few had poked the interest of the three others still at the table.

"People can go fuck themselves," Shepard replied with her usual tact. "It's none of their business."

"The opinion they have on their Commander is your business," Javik growled. And he left, yelling at the crew to make way. Shepard clicked and took her cup of coffee.
Garrus agreed with her, what they did together was between them, but the crew was mostly human and Humans didn't have the same definition of the word privacy. They often interfered with things that didn't concern them. Garrus could see why the crew would talk about him and Shepard. He was Turian and she was Human, to begin with. She also was his mentor and superior, thus holding authority on him. He had developed a real friendship with her while he still was a bit awkward around the rest of the crew. And she was a woman. Garrus had been around Humans long enough to witness the treatment reserved to what they called the weaker sex. A lot of things were excused from the average male behavior but women were criticized and blamed whatever they did – Traynor often complained about it when they were working in Lab1.

Javik's words bothered Garrus too. Turians didn't like rumors and gossips in general, and the captain of a ship would quickly remind everybody to mind their own business if something started to spread, but the crew of the Normandy was, again, mostly human. Shepard could warn the crew she didn't tolerate this kind of things but that would only encourage more rumors, some of the people seeing a confirmation in her words – "why would she try to defend herself if she is innocent to begin with?" and this sort of reasoning. Maybe it'd be wise to stop messing around after training, Garrus thought. Too bad. He really came to like their teasing once Javik gone and the following half-hour of sex.

"Something's wrong?" Joker asked, concern in his voice.

Garrus gave a quick look to the pilot. One would think it wasn't wise to poke the bear – the animal, not the gay man as Garrus had learned – and they would generally be right but Joker was in fact one of the few people Shepard tolerated in her personal life and who could therefore speak up his mind around her – outside business hours.

"It appears we are too often late," Shepard shrugged, seemingly relaxed. "No big deal."

"Yeah," Joker hesitated, "about that..."

"What? It's that bad?" she smirked.

"Well, you know, people talk and stuff."

"Do I want to know?" Shepard snorted.

"It's pretty graphic for breakfast," Joker warned.

"That's stupid," Garrus said. He felt like he had to intervene. He was involved after all. "I'm not into aliens."

"That's what I keep telling everybody but you know how people are," Joker winced. "I'm actually surprised rumors just started considering how much time you spend together."

"Gardner," Shepard growled.

"What?" the Sergeant yelped from the kitchen. "It's not me! Fucking with Wrex and Javik is one thing I can survive. You? Hell no, Commander."

Shepard stared at Gardner behind her cup of coffee for a few seconds. It made Garrus smile a little. Death glare number five. She liked that one.

John closed the washing machine, a dishcloth on his shoulder, and walked around the kitchen counter to come sit in Javik's chair while Shepard resumed her breakfast. He had been more discreet than what Garrus had anticipated so far. He had pictured John as a male version of
Shepard, someone stubborn and capable of everything to reach his goal, but he was kind of a regular guy. He did his job, talked to everybody – although he tended to avoid Massani and Javik at all costs – and was quite friendly, even with aliens. Garrus knew John was appreciated within the crew, he had talked about him with Traynor, Vega, Cortez and a bit with Williams too, but some people were more circumspect around him. Joker was one of them and he didn't mind showing a little hostility. Garrus had decided to keep an open mind but to also be ready to break John's face if necessary. He had witnessed him toying with Shepard on the Purgatory after all and he didn't believe it was a one time kind of thing.

"We have to talk, sis," the ex-Marine said, turning his back to Joker who made funny faces behind him.

"What do you want?" Shepard asked, trying not to smile.

John looked over his shoulder but Joker played the innocent. "I need money," he announced, turning back to his sister.

"Of course you do," Shepard snorted, "and you won't get any until you've paid your debts in full."

"It's not for me," John insisted.

"Right."

"It's for your niece."

Joker opened big wide eyes and Shepard stopped eating, as did Garrus. A niece. Dramatic punchlines must have run in the family, he thought, quite amused.

"I think this doesn't concern me," Lawson said as she stood up. "And I need to pee anyway." She frowned a little. "It'd be nice if you could find a more appropriate dosage for the truth serum, Professor," she added, a little annoyed.

"Will work on it," Solus promised but he didn't show any intention to leave too, nor did Joker.

"Nice one but my answer is still no," Shepard retorted, Lawson walking away.

"You can punish me all you want, sis, I don't care," John said. "Keep me as your slave forever, humiliate me, really, have fun with it, but don't punish my daughter. She has nothing to do with our issues."

That was text-book guilt-tripping, Garrus thought, staring at the mercenary. So long, open mind!

"Hmmm," Shepard feigned hesitation, "nope."

"Come on," John insisted. "I'm a shitty father, I'm the guy she sees once a year if she's lucky but, goddammit, I never fail to send money to her mother every month, and I'm late because I was in a fucking space prison! Oh, and I'm broke!"

"Not my problem," Shepard shrugged, digging in her scrambled eggs.

"Seriously!" John clicked. "She's a kid!"

"She's your kid, given that she exists to begin with," Shepard said, turning to him. "I don't have to pay anything."

"How can you say that after what we lived?" John asked. "Did you forget how shitty our childhood
was, not knowing our parents and having no money? I don't want that for my daughter!"

Shepard frowned and Garrus saw a real hesitation grow in her eyes. Damn, the guy knew how to push her buttons. He opened his mouth to protest but Solus struck before him.

"Doesn't have to pay anything," he said, pointing at Shepard. "Strong probability John not your brother."

"He is," Shepard replied lightly.

"Unlikely," Solus shook his head. "Could run DNA tests to confirm but phenotypes, blood types and rhesus too different."

"We are siblings," the Commanded coldly decreed all of a sudden, "and I forbid you to do any test, Professor. Is it clear?"

Solus lost his usual affable smile to stare back at Shepard. "Crystal clear, Commander," he said on the same kind of tone. "Have work to do," he then added.

Solus stood up and left the mess in silence. Garrus and Joker exchanged a look. Yep, they'd have to repair that. That would be a first.

"So," John continued, "about that money."

"Fuck off," Shepard replied. "I've paid enough in my life when it comes to you."

"That's rich coming from you," John snorted.

"Excuse me?" Shepard growled.

"Oh, look at the time!" Joker suddenly interrupted, looking at his naked wrist.

"Yep," Gardner added from the kitchen, "time to get back to work, Corporal."

John snorted and stood up to walk to the kitchen. "This doesn't concern you, dude," he warned over his shoulder.

"Dude," Joker repeated, offended, turning to Garrus. "He duded me. Can you believe it?"

"I am utterly shocked," Garrus shook his head to keep the diversion going but John had apparently decided to go all the way down. A quick look behind Shepard taught Garrus a part of the crew had been dragged out of their quarters by the dispute. It was also time to put an end to John's game. Garrus took his tray and was about to stand up to go to the kitchen when he caught Shepard's gaze. Death glare number three, "Don't You Fucking Dare Vakarian". As much as he wanted to help, she didn't want any. Garrus slightly nodded to show her he had understood and put down his tray.

"You heard me right, sis," John continued. "You paid enough for me? Fuck you! I spent ten years in the Alliance because of you!"

"Hey," Gardner protested, "you're talking to your Commander, Corporal."

"I'm talking to my sister," John replied. "She can be the fucking Queen of the Universe, I don't give a shit. She'll always be the cunt who sold me out to the Alliance to save her ass."

"I saved your ass from twenty years in prison, dickhead," Shepard retorted, frowning but keeping her calm. Lovely names, Garrus thought.
"No," John shouted, throwing his dishcloth in the sink, and Garrus didn't know if he was still toying with his sister or really angry, "you saved your ass from twenty years in prison and threw me in the army for ten instead! I had a deal with the DA, Jane, I gave her Gus and everybody I knew. I had two years to do. Not ten, not twenty, two!"

"A deal," Shepard repeated. Garrus couldn't say if she was surprised, pissed or hurt.

"Yeah!" John snorted. "You killed that cop, not me! I had nothing to do with that, so yes, Jany, I took the deal, but then, the Alliance showed up and made my life a nightmare for the next ten fucking years because I was a biotic too weak to be of any use to them! So thank you, really! Thank you for screwing my life!"

"And who got us in trouble to begin with?" Shepard snapped. "You hid your shit in our room, you moron! Who does that? It's stupid!"

"You want to go there?" John raged. "Bitch, your pimp gave me that job!"

"Finch was my boyfriend," Shepard corrected, "not my pimp, and he was your friend before that. He got you in to the Reds, and my mistake was to follow you in that fucking gang."

"Oh no, no no no, Jany. You got in because you were stupidly in love with that asshole!"

"It's not his name I have tattooed on my back."

That was an argument John couldn't refute or deform and he apparently knew it. It was messed up but Garrus was kind of curious on what he'd pull out next.

John took a step back and raised his hands.

"Fine," he said, "I'm the root to all evil, the black sheep of the family, and you're Saint Jane, as usual. Back to that cop you killed." Shepard rolled her eyes as she reached for her cup. "You beat him to death, sis. That's fucked up."

"Yep," she agreed before sipping her coffee.

"That's it?" John snorted, not believing what his sister was saying. Garrus was a bit baffled too, to be honest. Killing was part of their job, and they copped with it however they could, not necessarily in a healthy way, but coldly admitting she had killed a man with her bare hands and didn't feel a thing about it was worrying. "That's your defense?"

"What do you want me to say?" Shepard asked. "I'm sorry I killed that asshole? No, I'm not. I'm sorry I thought the army was a better option than a life as a street rat? No, I'm not, and I was considering enrolling before we got arrested anyway. I'm sorry to have dragged you in the army with me? Okay, sure, I'm sorry John, I honestly thought it was a good opportunity for the both of us. I'm sorry I ruined your great thug life in the making."

John stared at his sister for a few seconds and he then did something Garrus hadn't anticipated. He smirked, genuinely amused.

"Wow, you grew a pair," he snorted. "What did they do to you in the army?"

"They gave me the balls you didn't use," Shepard replied, deadpan serious.


Shepard looked absolutely offended and Joker had the same kind of funny face, mouth and eyes
wide open. Garrus didn't get it.

He supposed the situation was under control so he excused himself from the table. He had already taken a shower in Shepard's cabin but he had to save appearances for the crew, so he went by his room to take his kit and then headed for the men's bathroom. To his surprise, Massani was in there, leaning on the sink and only sporting a towel around his waist. Alenko, Donnelly, Cortez and Vega were there too, more or less dressed, exception made of Vega who was completely naked and covering his crotch with his hands. Garrus was suddenly a lot less inclined to take a shower in front of so many Humans, but also intrigued. Two hands were enough?

"They're done?" Massani growled more than he asked.

"Huh, Shepard and her brother?" Garrus hesitated. "Y eah, I think."

"Good." Massani turned to the other men. "You can go, gentlemen."

"Can I have my towel back now?" Vega asked.

"No," Massani replied, "and mind your goddamned business next time."

"I'll go on recon," Alenko offered. He had trouble keeping a straight face.

"I'll take the rear," Cortez added with an enormous smile. Vega squealed.

"Get out of here, fagots," Massani clicked.

"Fuck you old man!" Cortez replied from the corridor.

"What was that about?" Garrus asked once the bathroom cleared.

"Those idiots thought their Commander needed help," Massani replied, turning to the mirror. It was the first time Garrus saw his naked back. All the scars and tattoos made him a little nauseous – his eyes couldn't focus on anything, just like with that woman, Jack. Garrus recognized the human vertebrae pattern along Massani's spine though. Shepard had the same, although it wasn't complete like the old mercenary's. "How did it go?"

Garrus snapped back to attention. "They didn't kill each other or set the ship on fire," he said as he removed his shirt, "so I guess it went well."

He had thought for a minute that Shepard would go for the kill to keep her brother from ever talking to her like that, but she didn't really try to hurt him. Instead, she had stuck to the truth – her truth anyway. She had given very little to John to work with. That certainly was the way to go in this kind of situation. Garrus wished he had half the self-control of his mentor. He could have used it with his own sister. He had crossed the line that day and their relationship probably was beyond repair now – though he wasn't particularly willing to have a relationship with Solana to begin with.

"Did John guilt-trip my little girl?" Massani asked, looking at Garrus' reflexion in the mirror.

"Yeah," Garrus answered, uncomfortable. He really didn't want to drop his pants with the mercenary in the bathroom.

"He's always been like that, that little fucker," Massani growled, rubbing his chin, "always toying with his sister and people to get what he wanted. And Jany, she never said anything because it was her fucking brother, her only family."
"John seemed surprised when Shepard talked back, actually," Garrus commented, folding his arms.
"She talked back?"

"Yes. It was kind of amazing, to be honest," he added, "but I'm a poor judge when it comes to her skills. She always finds new ways to impress me."

Massani snorted. "Of course she does. She's Commander fucking Shepard, first human Spectre. Don't forget that, Turian."

"I won't, Sir," Garrus assured. Shit, he had called Massani 'Sir'. The old merc would never let him leave it down, if Garrus were to believe how pleased he looked.

"You're gonna take a shower with your pants on, Spiky?" Massani mockingly asked.

"That's an option I'm considering," Garrus admitted. "Are you leaving any time soon?"

"No," Massani snorted.

Then no second shower, Garrus decided. He put his shirt back on and walked out of the bathroom, somehow surprised the conversation with Massani didn't involve more insults and bird names. A quick look to the mess informed him Shepard and Joker weren't there anymore. Garrus probably had to go talk to Solus before his mentor, just in case, so he kept his sportswear and jumped in the elevator.

Solus was alone in his laboratory when Garrus arrived a minute later. Well, almost, Garrus thought as he looked at the tank at the other end of the room, next to Solus' reclining chair. The Krogan created by Okeer peacefully floated in his container, sleeping or in whatever state induced by the chemicals pumped into his body through a dozen tubes. Garrus had never seen a Krogan so young, but he was already quite big and strong, his hump well developed. He was also quite relaxed considering his flabby third leg. Garrus looked away, uncomfortable. Solus didn't seem to care, he was busy at his microscope station, swapping slides under the camera and taking notes.

"Hey," Garrus started, "huh, can I help with something?"

"No," Solus answered curtly.

"Okay..." Garrus looked around and his eyes eventually fell again on the Krogan. He couldn't talk to Solus like that, so he went to the back of the laboratory, took a cover from a cupboard and managed to hide the lower part of the tank with it. Much better. "So, I couldn't not notice your, huh, disagreement with Shepard and..."

"Does not concern you," Solus replied.

"It kind of does," Garrus corrected, walking back to the workbench. Solus straightened to stare at him. Garrus felt pinned down for his lie. "Okay, it doesn't," he quickly admitted, "but you and Shepard are good friends and it's stupid to hold a grudge over something so insignificant. She asked you not to run a DNA test, that's not the end of the world, Professor."

"But I'm right," Solus insisted. He took his datapad and moved to his computer.

"You don't know that," Garrus said, following him. "Humans v a ry a lot in appearance, even within the same..."

"I know," Solus interrupted, frowning. He keyed on a datapad for a few seconds and gave it to
Garrus. There were two graphs with horizontal lines of variable height on the screen. They clearly were different but Garrus didn't know what he was looking at. "DNA samples from medical dossiers," Solus explained, now back on his computer. "Didn't need to run test," he snorted.

"That's human DNA?" Garrus asked. "Weird."

"Only samples of genotype extracted through chromatography," Solus grumbled. "Not siblings."

"Okay, maybe you're right," Garrus conceded and Solus gave him a cold look, "but if Shepard doesn't want to know, you can't force her."

"Could be useful," Solus retorted, furiously typing on his keyboard. "John, Shepard's next of kin after all. Meaning Normandy can be his."

"I doubt the Alliance would allow that," Garrus thought out loud. "Or the Council. Or the Hierarchy. And even if John takes it to court, I mean, there is no way the guy can win, especially with this kind of evidence," he added, pointing at the datapad. "You know that, right?"

Solus interrupted his writing, hands above the keyboard, but only for a few seconds. "Don't like him. Unsettling. Upsetting. Manipulative. Worrying. Cannot work properly with him around."

"I don't see how he can impact your work," Garrus hesitated. Solus was already ignoring half the crew he deemed not smart enough for him so adding John to the list wasn't a big deal.

"Not talking about me," Solus grumbled.

"You're... worried about Shepard?" Garrus realized. It wasn't really a surprise, Solus and Shepard were friends after all, but the Salarian usually camouflaged his emotions behind his affable smile and a careless attitude.

Solus straightened and inhaled deeply. "Would appreciate to be alone," he said. "Have work to do."

"Alright," Garrus nodded, backing off. He knew when he had stroke a nerve. "I'm sorry, I..."

"Solus, we have to talk," Shepard interrupted as she walked in the room with determination. Joker was following as fast as he could. He exchanged a sorry look with Garrus.

Solus hid the datapad with the DNA samples before talking. "Not now, I'm busy."

"Then lock your door," Shepard retorted. She gave a quick look at Garrus and frowned. "What are you doing here, Vakarian?" she asked, but it was evident she already knew.

" Came to try to patch things up between us," Solus replied before Garrus could find an appropriate answer. "Miserably failed," he added coldly.

"Yeah," Shepard snorted, staring at Joker, "I got one of those too."

"Oh, look at the time!" Joker said, using again that diversion. "Garrus, buddy, it's time to get the fuck out of here."

"On your six," Garrus approved, walking to the door.

"Oh no," Shepard stopped them, "you're staying, because otherwise you two will try to give me another pep talk later and I'm not in the mood for that. So I'll be brutally honest with you all and be done with it. No question, no diversion, and no fucking mention of it, ever again, understood?"
"Yes, Commander," Garrus replied by automatism.

"I'm not a fan of Brutally Honest Shepard," Joker winced.

"Do I look like I care?" she asked.

"Huh, no, Commander," Joker had to admit.

She gave him a forced smile and turned to Solus. "I don't want you to run any DNA test because, if John is not my brother, all I did for this asshole would have been for nothing, and I really don't want to think about that. Okay?"

Solus stared at her for a few seconds. "Can understand that, yes."

"Good," Shepard nodded. "Otherwise, you're still my favorite Salarian ever. Drop on your knee once more with a ring and I'll say yes."

"What?" the pilot snapped.

"Moving on," Shepard decreed as she turned to Joker and Garrus. "That cop I killed? He raped me. Not sorry at all. I don't want John to know because I know he'll use that against me one way or another. You think it's a coincidence if rumors about us started when he arrived?" she asked Garrus. "No, believe me, it's classic Johnny, and you can be sure a lot more will follow."

"If the guy is such an asshole," Joker frowned, "why do you keep him around? Just throw him on the nearest asteroid and be done with it! Because as I see it, you're trying to save him, Shep."

Joker's argument hit just right, Garrus noticed as Shepard straightened. "But the guy won't change," the pilot insisted. "He will blame you for everything and he'll count on you to save his ass next time he's in trouble."

"I didn't hear about him for ten years," Shepard retorted. "He used my name only because his life was on the line."

"Excuses now, awesome," Joker rolled his eyes. "You know what? That's just like my mom used to do, finding excuses for everything my father did to her before she magically fell into the stairs during my first week at the academy."

That didn't sound like an accident at all, Garrus realized, but he had too little clue to understand everything. Shepard had them all though, by the look she had on her face. Garrus doubted John would try anything physical against his sister but who knew, really? Javik was convinced John had plotted something with Subject Zero after all.

"I'm sorry, Jeff," Shepard said, her voice so soft it surprised Garrus. "I..."

"Yeah," Joker interrupted her, "well, we all have shit we don't want to talk about, right? And I really don't want to talk about that. So let's put it all behind us and call it a day, okay? But be sure Garrus will beat the bitch down if he goes too far."

"Why me?" Garrus asked, frowning.

"Because I can't hit anything," Joker reminded him, shaking his hand centimeters from Garrus' face. "Vrolik syndrome, remember?"

"Oh, right."
"Anyway," Joker continued, ignoring Shepard's incoming protestation, "I want a threesome."

"Excuse me?" Shepard snapped.

"You, Mordin and I," Joker explained, and Solus raised an eyebrow in the back, "but because I'm not into guys or aliens or even sex, you can keep Garrus or anybody we agree upon for your panties parties."

"There is nothing of that sort between Shepard and I," Garrus quickly replied. Solus snorted and Joker rolled his eyes.


Shepard stared at Joker for a few seconds. "I give up," she suddenly said, hands up in the air. "I don't care, I'm going back to bed."

"Need company?" Solus joked to clear the air as Shepard walked away.

"You come, you end up with a dildo up your ass, Solus," she yelled from the corridor. He lost his smile in a fraction of a second.

The room was suddenly silent once the door closed. Joker cleared his throat after a few seconds. "So, not into squishy aliens, huh?" he teased with a smug smile on his face.

"I should go," Garrus suddenly decided.

He could still hear Joker and Solus laugh from Lab2 five minutes later.

TBC
Itti had not received the visit of an imperial officer for seventy years and he was both excited and terrified. Excited because he had thought Kjov, Mida and him were the last of their caste, terrified because he had never cared for a child and didn't know the first thing about them. Like his companions, he had been raised in seclusion on this remote planet by his peers and had come back once his military service accomplished because he had nowhere else to go. What he was forbade him from caring for children in the imperial nurseries, he was meant for violence and destruction, but he had been chosen to raise the first Avatar born in a hundred years nonetheless. It was madness and a part of him wished the officer had come to take him to yet another battlefield.

The shuttle landed on the ancient parvis now covered in grass and young trees, one of the rare places flat enough on their island for such a thing. Itti had never seen that model, but he had left the army a hundred and thirty years ago so it wasn't surprising. Technology was sparse and outdated in their home. Their caste was dying and nobody in the Empire cared much for them. Itti didn't care, he loves the quietness of the wooden halls illuminated by candles molded by his hands, the sound of his fingers on the paper of their old books, the laziness that came with the summer's heatwave. He didn't care for the technology and the fast path of the Empire. He didn't care for their wars and conquests either.

Ten soldiers in armor came out of the shuttle, weapons at the ready, before someone looking very official with his yellow robes and lean body dared to set foot on the ground. Itti sighed. People feared their caste, and they were right to do so, but an Avatar would never strike a fellow Prothean. They were weapons meant to inspire terror to the enemies of the Empire, meant to destroy cities and fleets in a matter of minutes. But the Protheans had taken the habit of distrusting what they couldn't control, and with the seclusion imposed to Itti's caste came a greater tragedy: the loss of knowledge. Nothing made hate grow faster than ignorance.

Another Prothean in less complicated yellow robes came out of the shuttle with a heavy metallic box in hands. Kjov, enthusiast as ever, took a step forward to take the box but the soldiers aimed at him and ordered him to stay where he was. Kjov looked at them for a second, knowing it wouldn't take him any effort to reduce all of them to a brown pulp, and stepped back. The box was placed on the ground between the two groups, with crates probably containing what was necessary to feed the baby for a while. The very official yellow robes man then spoke.

"Avatar Itti, by imperial decree you are now the sole caretaker of this new Avatar. You will provide for him and raise him to adulthood. You will present him to the Imperial Academy on his twenty-fifth birthday, healthy, educated and versed in the knowledge of your caste approved by the Empire." The Officer cleared his throat before continuing. "As you may know, the decline of your caste has been attested for over two thousand years, thus the Empire has decided that this child will be the last Avatar."

"It is not a decision the Empire can make," Kjov protested on Itti's left. "There has been long periods of time with no birth of Avatar in the past. One might think this child is the first of a new generation."

"Or maybe the Empire has decided to kill all future Avatars," Mida remarked. Mida shouldn't have
been allowed to talk in public, if you were to ask Itti.

"Silence!" the Officer barked. "Your insubordination will be reported, Avatar Mida."

"Please do," he coldly replied.

Itti rolled his eyes, a bit annoyed. Mida was as grim as Kjov was jovial. Living with the both of them was sometimes dreadful.

"The Empire honors me," Itti said before anyone could speak and make the situation worse. "I will not fail in my duty."

The Officer seemed satisfied with that answer and left shortly after with his men. Itti looked at the shuttle disappearing between the clouds in the evening sky and wondered how many stars were now part of the Empire. What would the Protheans do once all the stars theirs? How many times would that child have to destroy an entire civilization? Itti sighed. That wasn't something he wanted to think about.

Kjov and Mida were already looking inside the opened box on the ground when Itti decided to approached.

"I'll call him Javik," Kjov said out of nowhere.

"You can't decide," Mida grumbled. "Itti's in charge, not you."

"But it's a nice name!" Kjov protested. "I like it."

"It's a flower name."

"A nice flower name."

"He's destined to be a warrior, not a flower!"

"Mida, please, calm down," Itti sighed.

He knelt next to the box to take a look at the baby. The child was sleeping despite the commotion, so small he could fit in Itti's hands. The plates on his oversized head were still separated and soft, his limbs clenched around a cover in a primal reflex, the bulge of his ancestral wings showing in his back – they'd disappear over time – and his secondary eyes not fully developed yet. It was a baby alright, but Itti came to adore him immediately. He dared to touch his soft, chubby arm with a finger and felt his energy drained by the little guy, so much Itti got dizzy for a second. He quickly removed his hand from the box.

"Oh, you saw that?" Kjov squealed of excitation.

"Are you all right, brother?" Mida asked, tensed.

"I am," Itti nodded. "It seems Javik will be a powerful Avatar."

Mida clicked when he heard the name and Kjov laughed in victory. Itti just smiled and looked at the baby, a warm breeze coming from the ocean playing with the grass around them.

Javik slowly opened his eyes to meet the ceiling of his cabin, his throat tight and a weight on his chest. His head was buzzing and heavy, his mouth dry. He could still smell the salt of the ocean in the wind and hear the insects chirp in the night, the cracks of the wind turbine in the distance, feel the humidity on his skin. Itti had given him this memory the day they had parted ways and it was
still one of the most powerful Javik had to date. It was one of those he'd never put in a shard, much like the memory of all those little hands in his more than a hundred years later, or the day of his awakening on Eden Prime after a very, very long night, the red sky, the clouds of pollen in the wind, that shiny little spot escaping the planet. The metallic taste in his mouth. The despair. The hand offered to him.

"Get up," the alien had said to him – a Human, from what he had seen in its mind. It was a female, a soldier and biotic, much taller than him, only two eyes, two nostrils, with hair on her head, tender skin and flesh but a core as hard as diamonds. And her mind was compatible, but in a strange, artificial way that he didn't fully understand. He knew the Human had touched a defective Beacon, he had seen it, but he had no idea it could actually transform a primitive mind like that. She had absorbed a part of his memories when he had touched her – it wasn't supposed to work like that. She had seen glimpses of his life, a life he could never get back to. Fifty thousand years. He had slept for fifty thousand years. The Empire had fallen and primitives dominated the galaxy. What was left for him, the last Prothean?

The Human sat next to him in the grass, so close Javik could have snatched her weapons if he had needed one. Suicide was a dishonorable way to end his life but none of his peers could judge him now anyway. Still, Javik couldn't do that.

"I wish to die," he said, not even bothering to use the Human's language. She understood his simple dialect anyway, he knew it.

She looked at him, her eyes red and full of liquid – tears, he remembered. "I'll help you if it's really what you want," she replied in his own language, only a bit hesitant, "but not now. Give you a chance, Javik. Come with me. You can decide later. Please."

Javik looked at her for long seconds before lowering his eyes. She knew he couldn't do it. It wasn't a question of honor, it was a question of courage. He had killed and destroyed entire species but he couldn't put an end to the Protheans by taking his own life. His efforts would be vain because he was only mortal but he'd rather die on a battlefield than here and now. The Human was a warrior of some sort and she had fought worthy opponents during her life. Maybe Javik would find death during his travel with her. So he nodded and a laugh full of relief escaped the primitive.

Javik had yet to find his executioner and he didn't believe such creature would show up any time soon in this empty galaxy – colonization wasn't the Council's priority and they even feared an expanse that would discover new species stronger than them. Besides, Javik wasn't as eager to die as this day on Eden Prime. He had come to like Shepard and the people he worked with – most of them anyway. "Attachment leads to subjectivity, misjudgment and stupid behaviors," Mida had told him one day. Javik had never really believed in his words, but he had to admit attachment had prevented him from wasting his life. It was his attachment to Shepard that had kept him alive so far. She was his pupil, the last he would ever have, and he loved her the same way he had loved his precedent students, the same way Itti had loved him, with an infinite patience and an incomprehensible fear to lose a part of himself. In her lived his knowledge, his memories, a part of him. Losing her meant losing a part of himself.

"Isn't that love?" Wrex had retorted once.

It was a few weeks after their raid on Cerberus' headquarters and they were hunting down deserters on their way back to the Citadel in their brand new Normandy SR-2. They were on an ark ship that Cerberus had used to transport supplies, waiting in the mess hall for Shepard, Tali'Zorah and Alenko. Wrex was looting the cadavers of their enemies while Javik stood guard. The conversation had began on the fact that Javik had been very tensed lately and Wrex had tried to humor him a
"Protheans do not love like Humans," Javik had said. "Romantic love doesn't exist for us."

"Nor for Krogans," Wrex continued, pushing a Cerberus soldier on his back with his foot, "nor for Turians or Salarians, and I'm pretty sure most Asaris are too ice-cold bitches to love. As I see it, romantic love is an anomaly anyway."

"And the Quarian?" Javik asked.

Wrex had always showed interest for female looking aliens, especially if breasts were involved, and he had always liked Tali'Zorah's temper and silver tongue. He had started to court her lately, since the raid. Javik hadn't asked why and wasn't particularly interested in the answer anyway, but he supposed it had to do with the threat of an imminent death. He had himself believed he would die on that station for a few minutes and had sought Shepard's company in those last moments, holding her hand and watching the star they'd fell into while exchanging memories one last time.

"I'm an exceptional Krogan," Wrex joked. Javik snorted, a bit amused by the Krogan's bravado. "Seriously though, sure, I like the kid a lot but I'm not in love with her like in those craps on holo Tali's so fond of. Krogans don't love. We don't have that luxury anymore."

"But it's biologically possible," Javik remarked.

"It's stories," Wrex grunted, searching the pouches of the dead soldier, "tales of a distant past, before the nuclear winter and the Rachnis and the Rebellions. We don't talk about that, it gives people silly ideas but, sure, some crazy Krogans will fall desperately in love with an Asari here and there. Anomalies, I tell you. Dumb, stupid anomalies."

"You love her," Javik insisted for the fun of it.

"And you love Shepard," Wrex grumbled.

"She's mine and I'm hers. This has nothing to do with romantic love."

Wrex had stared at him for a few seconds before throwing a clip in his direction. "It would if you had a dick."

Javik had rolled his eyes and let the conversation die with the satisfied laugh of the Krogan. He missed him. Of course, Shepard was his friend and she was always glad to talk to him, but Javik didn't have the same kind of relationship with her than with Wrex. The Krogan was less complex, more brutal, direct. He was also able to lie to Javik and to hide things from him, while Shepard couldn't, not for long anyway. Wrex had been the first friend Javik hadn't known entirely – a true friendship à la Prothean required to touch the core of a person, to know them completely. It had taken him time to adapt but he had eventually managed to trust an ally without a copy of their mind in his.

He had found a more honest friend in Joker, despite his harsh words and sarcasm. Traynor was more sensible, more empathetic, and she had been the first to show interest in his language. Chakwas and Adams, the oldest Humans on board until recently, had gladly included Javik in their discussions, given him the quiet company he sometimes needed. Now Solus was also a friend, Javik believed, even if the Salarian could be too devious for his taste at times. It wasn't a good idea to befriend a man condemned to die soon, but Javik liked him nonetheless. He was ruthless, a quality Javik sought in his allies. Massani was out of the question. There was respect between them due to their mastery of combat and their common love for Shepard, but they would never be
friends. And Vakarian was too young, too immature. Javik saw a great warrior in the making in him but scratch the surface and Vakarian was a scared little boy who desperately needed the approval of his father. Or his mentor.

Although, Vakarian had gained confidence recently, thanks to a not so surprising influx of testosterone in his body. Solus had explained the phenomena to Javik the previous week – Javik hadn't asked for it but even him couldn't stop the Salarian talking. Turians naturally produced very few hormones related to reproduction. They didn't follow a cycle like Humans or Quarians, nor were always able to have children at a certain period of their life like the Asaris or Krogans. Quite the contrary, actually. Both male and female needed to get ready, to be properly stimulated through regular sex encounters for their bodies to produce more hormones, which would lead to the maturation of gametes. And since Shepard and Vakarian had been at it almost everyday since their last stop on the Citadel, the Turian had quite literally grew a pair.

It had little impact on his behavior, Javik had to admit. Vakarian just gave them a sarcastic comment here and there and was a little more cocky than before, no harm done. Javik actually liked the confidence boost. Vakarian had done great on Korlus from what Shepard had reported. Of course, he had known his mentor would be around if he needed help, but he had led his men with confidence and had kept his cool. That was a big difference from Erinle and Kasbeel. Vakarian was definitely on a good path, but he still needed to rely less on his mentor. That would prove to be difficult due to his nature. Shepard had made a mistake when she had sought intimacy and pleasure in the arms of the Turian, but Javik couldn't really blame her. She had needed someone she trusted with her life and respectful of her desires, someone capable of listening even to her unspoken words. Vakarian hadn't been her only option though. Alenko had loved Shepard since he first laid eyes on her and Wrex would have helped her if she had asked. Kryik too, probably, but in his case Javik was glad to not have him around.

"Javik?"

Shepard. He managed to lift his head out of the pillows, the world spinning unpleasantly, but the view of the door was blocked by the curtains. Shit. He must have been late for training. What time was it? He heard the door opening and Shepard walking to him.

"You're decent?" she asked, half joking. She knew he'd never show more skin than necessary. Shepard opened the curtains, not waiting for an answer. "Still in bed?"

"I forgot the time," Javik said, which wasn't exactly the truth. He straightened to lean on his elbows and felt dizzy, his neck stiff and his head heavy. A grumble escaped him.

"Something wrong?" Shepard frowned.

She knelt next to his bed but Javik waved his hand in the air to keep some distance between them. He believed he had a dream fever, nothing contagious or serious but he wouldn't be at his best today. Still, he had work to do. Shepard had arranged to meet with another Spectre, a Salarian named Cilat Hor, an expert in computers and artificial intelligences boarding the Normandy to help Vakarian with the prothean VI from Ilos. They were picking him up from a mining station in the asteroid belt of the Faryar system, Hourglass Nebula, and would have him around for as long as it would take for him and the Turian to crack the VI. Once the Salarian with them, Shepard wanted to head for the Pylos Nebula to check on sightings of Geths after a short stop on Omega – it was unusual for the Geths to leave the Perseus Veil and it needed investigation. Javik had much to plan and prepare: inventories, budget, a list of whatever Solus needed for his laboratory, and so on. He couldn't stay in bed all day, sick or not.

He tried to get up but the sudden change of position made his head spin. Shepard had good reflexes
and caught his hand before he could fall. The flash of memories hit Javik as hard as a punch.

Shepard felt terribly uncomfortable, with a little bit of anxiety hiding in a corner of her brain. Her guts were telling her they should stop there because it wasn't going to work. She wasn't aroused and Garrus was all awkward and hesitating again, touching and kissing her with no delicacy, no need, no desire. The dim lights and the music in the background didn't help at all. Worse, it reminded her of all those shitty dates when she was a teenager, with boys groping her and not caring at all about her. Garrus was trying, and that was sweet of him, but they just weren't in the mood for some hot sex on the couch.

"Garrus?" Shepard called.

"Hm?" he answered, his lips nibbling her neck.

"Let's stop there."

It took him a fraction of a second to straighten and put some distance between them, as if the contact of her skin was burning him. "I agree," he nodded, buttoning up his vest. Shepard sat correctly on the couch, putting her two feet back on the ground before leaning to take her beer on the coffee table. "I'm sorry, I..." Garrus mumbled but Shepard stopped him, rising her hand while she took a sip.

"Nothing to apologize for," she said. "We're not in the mood, is all." Garrus leaned on the back of the couch, his hands between his legs, shoulders crouched. He looked defeated. "Hey, it's okay," Shepard reassured him. "It's really not a big deal."

"It's been three days, Shepard," he sighed. "What's wrong with us?"

"Nothing, we're awesome," she smirked behind her beer, "Well, me more than you." He stared at her for a second. That made her chuckle a bit and her mood improved. Banters, she could do that to reinstate a bit of normalcy. "Listen, it's not your fault. I like to fuck in the moment, okay? After training is great because I'm all worked up and all. Ask Mordin for the details, I'm sure he'll be glad to explain everything about the hormones involved in the process. But, all I know is that all of that," she pointed to the cabin, "that's not working for me."

"For me neither," Garrus admitted. "My conception of a good time is basically a quick fuck in the showers of the Armex Arsenal Arenas."

Shepard couldn't help her laughter and it took her a good minute to recover. "Oh my God!" she eventually giggled, wiping the tears off her eyes. "I understand why you wanted to go there at Christmas."

"I didn't even go," he whined.

"Why?"

"Nobody to go with." Garrus sighed. "Besides, I didn't want to bump into an old colleague or anybody I knew. They'd have asked questions. 'Where were you the past few months?' 'Why didn't you send me an email?' 'Even the embassy has no idea where you are.' I couldn't answer to that and I didn't want to lie."

"Yeah, I get it," Shepard sympathized, patting him on the shoulder. "So," she continued to cheer him up, "when was the last time you fucked, actually? Before we did, I mean."

"Wow, huh... Before New Year for sure," Garrus thought out loud. "It was after a shift with Vinus
so a third day of the week but what week? Maybe three or four before New Year, I think."

"Wow indeed," Shepard giggled.

"That's what happens when you're an outsider," he shrugged, "but it never bothered me. Sex isn't high on my priority list."

"Yeah, your top priority is research," Shepard snorted before taking a sip.

"Actually," Garrus chuckled, "that's item number two."

"What's item number one?"

"Make sure you stay alive," he mocked. Shepard laughed and spilled a bit of beer on her shirt. She liked the smug smile growing on his face. "Anyway," he said, "I should go back to my quarters and try to get some sleep."

"I was hoping you'd put me to sleep," Shepard replied, shaking gently her bottle to get the last drops together.

"Like, carrying you to bed and tucking you in?" he humored her. "Because I can do that."

"No," she smirked, "sex helps me relax and it's easier to sleep after."

"Oh." He looked at her for a second. "Maybe we should give it another try."

"It's not necessary, Garrus," she said, putting the bottle on the coffee table.

"Wait, hear me out. We usually have sex after training, right? But, in the morning, there is also the urgency to be on time and the secrecy. We certainly enjoy sitting at the table for breakfast, knowing we've just had sex while nobody has a clue."

"Myeah, you're right," Shepard admitted.

"It's exciting because we could get caught," Garrus resumed.

"Well I was hoping I was exciting all by myself," Shepard mocked, "but yes."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you but you're not exactly my type." That didn't sting at all, Shepard thought. At least Nihlus had adored every inch of her body, if not worshiped. No, she shouldn't compare Garrus to Nihlus. That was a bad idea. "So," Garrus continued, "we hit the gym and see what happens."

"Isn't Vega in the shuttle bay around this time?" she asked.

"Precisely."

"It's tempting," Shepard conceded, "but that's a lot of work for a quick fuck."

"Who said it'd be quick?"

Shepard laughed, definitely sold thanks to the devious little spark in Garrus' eyes.

The rest of the memory was a lot messier. Shepard and Garrus went down to the shuttle bay after a quick change of clothes, and trained with Vega for an hour or so, teasing each other without making it too obvious for the Lieutenant. As soon as he had left, they hopped in the Mako and
fucked on the rough bench, gripping the harnesses, both facing the wall, his hands on her back, between her trembling legs, then face to face, their eyes locked together while she gasped for air, overwhelmed by the warm sensation growing in her loins. Her orgasm hit Javik like a groundswell and he had no choice but to push the memory away to not drown in the sensation, in the agony and the pleasure.

He fell on his bed, his hearts beating hard in his chest, his lungs desperate for air and his head spinning like a top. The contact of the fabric on his skin burned him. He was too hot and cold at the same time, the lights were too bright and the room was too dark, too noisy and too quiet, too full and too empty. He could hear Itti giving him a lecture, Kjov's warm laugh and Mida's stern appreciation, the thousands impacts of the rain on the roof, the feet of his students on the wooden floor, the flames devouring the mothers and their children, the terrified voices of an entire species as he destroyed their world. It was only flashes of the past, he tried to convince himself. It was the dream fever, only a stupid dream fever.

Salvation came with the water suddenly dumped on him, splashing everywhere, washing away the memories and slapping him out of his nightmares. Javik breathed again, gasping as Shepard opened another jerrycan to pour out the water on him. She gave an order, he heard her but her words were alien, inappreciable, and Javik didn't understand until the Turian showed up in his field of vision, with other bottles too. Javik didn't care if he hadn't authorized him to enter his quarters. All that mattered was the sweet relief of the cold water on his skin.

He didn't know how long the improvised shower lasted but every second was a blessing. Eventually, Shepard emptied the last jerrycan stocked under the workbench. Javik immediately felt hot again but it was manageable for now. The worst was behind him.

"Javik?" Shepard called.

He was too exhausted to open his eyes or talk so he just gave her a thumb up. He heard her snort.

"Do'os im vos," Vakarian said and it took a second to Javik to translate. You're bleeding, he had said. Dream fevers didn't make people bleed.

"I know, it can wait," Shepard replied in English. "I'll wake up Chakwas."

He stood corrected: dream fevers could make one's entourage bleed. Shit. He probably had pushed her mentally and physically. Protheans were stronger than what they looked like, even without using their biotics. He could easily broke a few human bones if he didn't pay attention. Javik wanted to apologize and take care of his student but his only option for now was to lay in the pool of his soaked bed. So did he, eyes closed, focusing on his breath, until Chakwas arrived with a medical briefcase, still in her pajamas and her hair all messed up. She couldn't do much. They had rarely found medical documents in any shard or archive because a Prothean like him was the result of thousands of years of genetic engineering that had solved most of their problems. Javik had never been sick during his life, had had no allergy or broken bone. The worst that could happen to him was a dream fever, the equivalent of a severe migraine in less evolved species, and all he could do was cool himself and let the fever pass.

Chakwas took his temperature and other vitals nonetheless, wearing latex gloves just out of the box to not touch him directly, and put cool pads on his head. It felt good, he had to give her that.

Someone knocked on the door and the sleepy head of Alenko appeared. "Can I come in? I've found the pool."

They didn't have a bathtub on board but Shepard had found an alternative, just in case: a kiddy
pool, with a beach printed on it, sand, fishes, palm trees, everything. Javik didn't care and let the
Lieutenant-Commander install it in his room. It took him a while to inflate it and he unrolled a tube
from engineering deck. Chakwas helped Javik and his sore muscles to move to the pool and he laid
down in it with pleasure, his head resting on the inflated plastic border and his feet hanging
outside. He didn't believe in Heaven or any equivalent but he was pretty sure he had reached it at
this moment.

"It would be better if you came to the medbay," Chakwas commented. "I could monitor your vitals
at all time."

"The worst is behind me," Javik replied. Besides, medbay reminded him too much of Eden Prime.
He never went there unless he really had to. "Go back to sleep," he added. "I'll see you at
breakfast."

"No you won't," Chakwas said. "You have to rest for at least a day."

"Can't. Work."

"Shepard can survive without you a few hours," Chakwas insisted but her voice was gentle – and a
bit mocking. "She can do your work too, she's been an XO for years."

"Months," Javik corrected. "And she spent half of them in the ICT for her exams."

"Still, she knows the job. Rest, Javik, that's all you're going to do today." He grumbled just for the
principle. "I'll check on you later."

"I'm fine."

"Later!" she said from the corridor.

"Call for me if you need anything," Alenko added. "I'll be in the mess hall."

"No," Javik said, an idea suddenly hitting him. He lifted his head to look at the Lieutenant-
Commander. "Clean the Mako. Disinfect it. Burn it."

"Huh," the Human hesitated, "okay."

Evidently Shepard wouldn't let Alenko burn the Mako or space it, she loved the damn machine too
much for that, but it was worth a try. Alenko feared Javik more than Shepard so there was hope.

The door closed behind Alenko and Javik let his head drop on the plastic cushion. He closed his
eyes and focused on his breath again, in, and out, not following any train of thought randomly
popping into his head or any memory. Chakwas came back around seven, before breakfast, and
brought him a bottle of strawberry juice with a bowl of porridge topped with blueberries and
banana slices. She made sure he ate it all before leaving his quarters. Javik slept for a few hours
and woke up when Solus came to check on him – or take notes, probably. Definitely. It was a good
thing the Asari wasn't here anymore, otherwise it would have been around him at all time. In his
continual babbling, Solus told Javik that the Normandy had docked on the station earlier. He had
briefly seen the new guy and he didn't like him, too polite, too patronizing, like he knew
everything. He eventually said that Shepard would have liked to come but she was busy with the
new Spectre and would be all day, probably. Javik asked about her injury. Just a cut on the back of
the head, Solus reassured him, nothing worrying, he had checked himself. Good thing half her head
was already shaved, otherwise it would have looked funny.

Solus left after an eternity and sleep came, once more. Unlike Humans and other species, Protheans
didn't dream. They remembered, but it was a conscious mechanism. They had to call a memory to
see it like a movie before their eyes. There was no flash-back, no daydreaming, no moments lost in
thoughts. T'Soni had once compared Javik's brain to a computer, storing and processing. A
computer didn't dream, but it needed to reorder files once in a while. Dream fevers happened in
those moments.

A deep, sudden shock wave woke Javik up. The lights were off but he could still see a bit around
him, especially everything still emitting in the infrared spectrum. Javik didn't feel like himself. He
felt light. No, weightless. He felt nothing at all, not even the clothes on his skin or the ground under
him. Javik fumbled around but didn't find anything solid, only blobs of water floating around him.
All his belongings were slowly drifting in midair. Javik tried to get up, only to remember there was
no up or down anymore. Gravity had disappeared. That was bad, because that meant the reactor
was offline. The emergency generator eventually kicked in and a few lights came back, little spots
forming lines to the nearest exit on the ground.

Javik didn't care about gravity, he had learned to live without, so moving around his room wasn't a
problem. He didn't bother grabbing a weapon or his armor, and went straight for the door. They
were automatically closed when the reactor shut down, in case of depressurization, but there was a
switch and a wheel for emergencies on the left. Javik opened the door just enough to pass and let it
close on itself as he pushed himself in the corridor to the nearest console. The AI couldn't hear or
see him when it was using the emergency generator as its primary source of energy, so they all had
to rely on the consoles spread all around the ship. This one wasn't online. Javik poked it but it
didn't light up.

"EDI?" Javik called nonetheless.

No answer. He tried the radio but it wasn't responding either. What the heck was happening? If the
reactor went down, the AI automatically switched for its internal batteries, which lasted long
enough for the emergency generator to kick in. Then, the AI would have enough energy to do a
complete check of the reactor and restart it, if possible. The AI was always online, always. It
managed all the life support systems, the ventilation, the temperature, everything. EDI had
responded even during the Normandy's reboot months ago, while they were searching the
spacestation over the galactic disk. Then the emergency protocols had worked but not this time.

The door behind him creaked and slowly but surely opened. Javik noticed the specific flare of the
Geth's eye in the darkness before he could see it. Legion was standing on its feet when it finally
showed up. Geth didn't need gravity.

"What is happening?" Javik asked before the Geth could talk and give him a stupid nickname.

"We are unable to run a diagnostic," Legion replied. "We cannot connect to EDI at the moment and
the Consensus is out of reach."

"Why that?" Javik insisted. Geths were supposed to always communicate between each other – or
between their platforms, whatever.

"EDI is offline and we are..."

A scream interrupted the Geth. It came from the reactor. Donnelly. Javik put his feet on the
console and pushed himself through the corridor to reach the door, Legion following him. The
commotion in the next room got worse. There was no time to open manually the door so Javik just
pushed it out of his way, his biotics deforming the thick metal panels with ease. The whole room
was red due to the emergency lights, the rings weren't spinning around the element zero core
glowing blue and debris floated around, little pieces of metal, drops of liquid, shards of glass,
Donnelly and Adams. The Quarian was standing but her head was low and her shoulders crouched. Javik came next to her but he didn't dare touch her, not today, not with his dream fever still crawling in the back of his head.

"Here you are," a twangy voice said.

Javik turned to see a tall and slim figure in the shadows, the back of its eyes reflecting the few light there was. A Salarian, in black armor, standing on both feet, his hand on Daniels' neck. The engineer was floating, lifeless, her face hidden by her hair.

Suddenly, a Human jumped from upstairs and threw a singularity at the Salarian – Shepard! But Javik didn't see if the attack hit the Spectre or not. The Quarian grabbed him by the neck with an iron fist and threw him against the nearest wall. The lack of gravity prevented a violent shock but it also didn't help him to respond quickly. The Quarian attacked with the knife she kept on her leg, helped by her magnetic boots but she still moved slowly. Javik pushed against the wall to reach the ceiling and "jumped" over the Quarian. Shepard was doing fine on her own, fighting the Salarian hand to hand, and Javik felt proud for a second. A second a massive silhouette used to sneak in, falling from upstairs. Its magnetic boots clicked when it touched the ground and it straightened for what seemed like an eternity. The Turian, Javik realized – he must have jumped from Lab1. And he walked on Shepard, his intentions crystal clear.

Shepard swore as she kicked the Salarian in the chest to gain a second. "Legion!" she called. "Get rid of the black orb in the freezer! Now!"

"Acknowledge," the Geth replied.

"You're not going anywhere!" the Quarian yelled, turning to Legion, her fingers already flying over her omnitool.

"Creator Zorah, please, we do not want to harm you," Legion pleaded.

"I don't mind," Javik said and he used his biotics to pin the Quarian on the ground. "You have your order, Geth!" Javik shouted. "Go!"

Legion turned heel and ran out of engineering deck. Javik turned just in time to see Vakarian fly through the room, pushed by a biotic field. He felt even prouder – she was taking down two Spectres all by herself – but he supposed a little help wouldn't hurt, so he projected the Salarian against a workbench with his biotics and knocked him out.

"And that's why I don't take days off," Javik said, folding his arms. By the look Shepard gave him, his comment didn't translate well when he was floating near the ceiling, bottom up. She was bleeding from her nose and lower lip, and she'd have hematomas for days on her face.

"Now's not really the best time to practice your sarcasm," she replied as he moved to the ground. "Stay sharp until Legion gives the all clear." She walked to Daniels to check her pulse. Relief showed on her face when the engineer grunted.

"What is happening?" Javik asked. "And, please, spare me the obvious."

"We docked on the station four hours ago," Shepard resumed, moving to Donnelly, "you were sleeping. Gardner needed something so I went out with Vakarian and we met that guy, Cilat Hor," – she pointed at the unconscious Salarian. "Something was off on the station, like a bad vibe, even Vakarian felt it, but, you know, small mining station in the middle of nowhere, people who had never tasted fresh food all around and shit we didn't pay more attention than that. The only
really strange thing I noticed was a black orb like all those we found. It's supposed to be prothean, so why the Hell was it standing there, in the middle of a salarian mining station?"

Like on Project Base, Javik could have remarked, but he simply nodded to show he was paying attention. He didn't want to hurt her unnecessarily.

"So I kept an eye on Hor and stayed with him and Vakarian in Lab1," Shepard continued, now checking on Adams. "The two geeked out for a while and..."

"I said spare me the obvious," Javik reminded her.

"Right," Shepard smirked. "Hor asked questions about Protheans in general and about you in particular. He said it was because he needed to understand the mind of the creator of the VI or some bullshit like that. Anyway, Vakarian and I avoided to talk about you, and shit hit the fan after we jumped into the relay network. I don't know what Hor did but the VI sort of exploded and the ship went dark and the reactor stopped. Next thing I know, Hor was running for the window giving on the reactor while Vakarian attacked me. He was like possessed or something, didn't have the same reflexes, the same fighting style, like somebody else was in his body, but I kicked his ass nonetheless."

"Meanwhile Hor came here and searched for me," Javik said. "And the Quarian was controlled too."

"I hope Legion can't be controlled," Shepard grumbled, "otherwise we're fucked."

"I hope the Drell can't be controlled," Javik added. "I am not afraid of the others." But he'd hate to fight to people he was supposed to take care of.

"You're afraid of Krios?" Shepard asked, but she wasn't amused, not at all. She had seen Krios in action and would rather not be his next target.

"He's quick," Javik admitted, "but even the quickest bug can be squished. Why do you think it's the orb?"

"Project Base, Viantel, now that station, the people on my ship," Shepard said before shaking her head. "It can't be a coincidence."

Javik stayed silent but he didn't disagree with her. He knew very little of the technology of his people and even less about those orbs. He had seem some all over the Empire during his mandatory army service, but they were used as decorative globs, not devices to control people. If it was, why didn't it also affect the Protheans? And Shepard? But she was right, it was too big of a coincidence. There was no reason for those orbs to have been on Project Base, a human station on a previously unoccupied asteroid, or on a salarian mining station in the middle of nowhere.

Legion came back, walking without haste. Javik saw Shepard tense but she had nothing to fear. He'd destroy the abomination before she could react.

"Shepard – Administrator," Legion unfortunately said, "the orb has been destroyed but the remains cannot be spaced."

"Why not?" Shepard asked.

"We are currently traveling through the relay network," Legion replied and its explanations stopped there because, of course, the reason why they couldn't throw away the orb was obvious to the damned machine. Javik didn't care. He'd ask Joker later.
Speaking of, a horrible shriek came out of the speakers and the voice of the pilot echoed in all the ship.

"Your attention please," Joker announced but his voice lacked his usual spirit. "I regret to inform you that we are dead."

TBC

Hi readers!
Did you wonder why it took more than two weeks for me to update? Well, I lacked a bit of motivation to work on this chapter, and that comes from the lack of feedback you've given me lately. I sure write for myself, but I share and publish because I think my story can actually give you a good time, and the only way for me to know you liked the latest chapter is your comments. Without them, I have the impression I'm sharing for nothing (yeah because I already know how Semper Fi goes and ends, I don't really need to write it to know), and there is nothing better to kill my motivation. So please, once more I ask you to give feedback, not only to me but to all the authors you like and work hard to entertain you. It's especially true if you notice a delay in publication. If a week or ten days have passed since the last update, hit that review button, hard, and take five minutes to share your thoughts. I guarantee you it will lift any author's spirit and a happy author can only be good for you, readers.
I apologize in advance if you have trouble with this chapter. I really enjoyed writing it because science but if that's not your thing, well, that's why I apologize.

Semper Fi
Chapter 47
Joker – 2

Shepard had that intense look on her face meaning she was processing what she had just learned. She knew very little about mechanics and absolutely nothing about quantum physics but that was normal. Her job was to lead people and kick asses, Joker's was to pilot her ship and it required a lot more maths than hers for sure. People had all the wrong ideas about maneuvering a spaceship, mostly because of movies – they never got it right in movies. You didn't just grab a joystick and yell some stuff like "incoming!" or "to infinity and beyond!". No. Joker's job consisted in calculating in real time trajectories and translating them with his magic finger on a keyboard in a language the ship understood. He was paid to solve equations with so many variables, they should have been illegal. He had spent eight years his ass on a bench studying physics and mathematics, then three at the flight academy, had gained a solid reputation as the Alliance's best pilot during his ten year career and, still, he was nothing compared to some legendary pilots like Enimonus Ottam of the Fourteenth Turian Fleet or Sil Sililis, Nkat Fok, Yud Aghth, Tat Teteorak and countless other Salarians. Salarians made great pilots. You could be sure that any mercenary or pirate gang big enough to have a spaceship in the Terminus had a salarian pilot.

Shepard frowned. She was done processing. "So we're out of space and time," she said cautiously, "which means we're dead, but... we're still here."

"Yeah, well, I don't really get it either," Joker admitted.

Theoretically, as long as you could maintain gravity and the necessary shields to insure you wouldn't arrived on the other side fried like a chicken nugget dropped in a nuclear reactor, your trip through the relay network wouldn't kill you. The determinant factor was gravity. Since the relays essentially deprived the vessel and everything it contained from its mass to make it travel thousands of times faster than light – a process also used with FSL-drives for travels between stars –, the only thread keeping you in the realm of reality was gravity. And because that fundamental interaction was so intimately entangled with time, without it, you ceased to exist in the four dimensional plan known as the Minkowski space – or spacetime, for the plebs.

The first thing Joker had learned at the flight academy was: "if your reactor shuts down in the relay network, you're fucked". A few dozens vessels disappeared each year in the relays like that, never to be seen again. There had been absolutely no classes in his curriculum about how to survive a shut down in the network and nothing guaranteed him the restoration of gravity would solve all his problems – that would be too simple. EDI was also down, and with her the buffer containing the data to transfer to the exit relay. Without those data, the relay could never give them a mass back. Maybe they could still get out but what would they be? Energy? Information? Fucked, that's what they'd be.
"Jeff," Shepard called, her voice calm and strong.

Joker snapped out of his thoughts. She was looking at him with those piercing green eyes of hers, confidence all over her face. Joker shivered and felt unworthy of her faith in him. Worse, he felt guilty to have thought they were doomed, to not have a solution already.

"Sorry," he mumbled, adjusting his cap to break eye contact. "I was thinking."

"That's good," she said. "I need you to think and I need you to make up some bullshit for the debrief if somebody asks you anything," she added, dead serious. "Be convincing but not too optimistic. Tell the crew we need to focus on restarting the reactor and then we'll see. We have to avoid panic and stupid reactions at all cost."

Joker nodded. He knew the drill. The last thing you wanted on a spaceship was a defeated crew thinking they all were going to die. And they were, no doubt about it, if they couldn't reactivate the reactor. The emergency generator wouldn't last for more than twelve hours. The air conditioning had already been stopped. The system purified and distributed the hot ionized air of the reactor chamber everywhere but it required a lot of energy, too much for the generator. Fortunately, the Normandy was very well insulated – it had been designed like that to improve the stealth systems. Still, it'd take ten hours for water to freeze in the ship, and the crew could wear their suits to stay warm longer. Another system had died with the reactor: the ventilation. That was okay, there was enough oxygen in the ship for them to not asphyxiate in a few minutes, and the diverse gas rejected, like dioxide carbonate, were captured the old fashion way with filters instead of being recycled. Air wouldn't be a problem for the next twenty hours. By then they'd be sleeping due to hypothermia anyway, so they wouldn't even notice the asphyxiation. Death would be like slowly falling asleep.

Mordin would probably be the first to notice the temperature drop. Salarians didn't stock fat and had a thin skin. They were very sensitive to the cold, and their favorite scientist was old, with a transplanted heart and a metabolism burning more calories in a day than Joker could swallow in a week. Garrus would be the next in line. The poor baby dinosaur had a thicker skin but very little self insulation – the average Turian had about three percents of their mass allocated to fat so you could say they were terribly dry giant turkeys. Garrus would also suffer from the lack of oxygen. Turian blood required a higher level of oxygen in the air than most species to keep the brain functioning so he'll be dizzy before long. Krios was some sort of space lizard so Joker supposed the Drell would also suffer from the lack of heat – would he become lethargic? Did Drells have warm or cold blood? Joker didn't know.

On the plus side, Javik, Tali and especially Legion would survive them all. Joker had witnessed Javik jump on ice planets countless times wearing only his ridiculously antic armor and not complain once about the cold, even when Wrex was shivering next to him. The Prothean claimed his people were invincible and Joker had seen enough of him in action to tend to believe him. Tali's suit could withstand outerspace conditions so she'd be fine as long as she'd had oxygen and batteries. And Legion, well, he didn't breath and the absolute zero wasn't a problem for him either. He'd run out of battery at some point, a millennium or so from today, so it was pointless to stress about him. Except for the trauma of seeing all the crew die slowly and freeze around him, and being condemn to drift between the plans of existence, of course.

There was no way Joker could make his speech "too optimistic."

It took around half an hour to get everybody in the CIC. Everybody except EDI. Shepard had dragged her body to fifth deck and locked it in a cell, just in case. Joker didn't like it but he understood why Shepard had done that. There was a high probability the prothean VI had fried a
few of her circuits and nobody knew how it would impact her. If she woke up in Terminator mode in the cell, they'd have a minute to prepare themselves.

Chakwas had patched a few people up during the last thirty minutes: Shepard and Garrus both had bruises and stitches, Greg, Gabby and Kenneth only contusions, Rupert had an arm broken due to his fall when the reactor had stopped, and Steve, Ashley and James had suffered minor scratches. The doctor had done wonders in so little time. Joker was grateful for that. Time was of the essence, they said.

Mordin wasn't there, Joker realized and so did Shepard.

"Where's Mordin?" she asked. Nobody answered. "Did anyone check on him?" she insisted, upset.

"I don't know if you noticed but we were kind of busy," Corporal John Dickhead replied, pointing at Gardner.

Shepard didn't say anything back, she just glared at her brother. She was right, now wasn't the time for a family feud, but damn it would feel so good to punch that asshole in the face. Javik grunted and pushed himself in Lab2's direction, floating in 0G as if he had done it all his life, followed by Legion. They opened the door manually and a nasty smell escaped the reserve, with drops of thick, sticky liquid floating between the crates and equipment. A roar came from the laboratory and something big charged through the reserve. It tried to tackle down Legion but all its efforts were useless because of the lack of gravity. The Geth stayed immobile as a relatively small chestnut and gray naked Krogan with not even the beginning of a hump tried to put him down.

"Enough!" Mordin yelled from the laboratory.

"But it's a Geth!" the Krogan protested, upside down and now trying to snatch one of Legion's leg from the ground. "I protect you, daddy!"

"Daddy?" half the crew repeated.

The Krogan looked at them with his big murderous baby blue eyes and abandoned Legion to push himself towards Garrus like a torpedo.

"A Turian!" he roared. "I kill the Turian!"

A green glow stopped him mid-air and the Krogan wrestled alone against Javik's biotics while Mordin got out of the reserve, trying to keep his equipment in order.

"Care to explain?" Shepard asked, folding her arms and falling to a hip.

"Couldn't keep him in the tank," Mordin explained, now helped by Legion. "Was drowning. Had to get him out or would have lost valuable subject."

"And the daddy part?"

"Impregnated with surrounding smell, mine, when released from the tank. Same process as for Salarians actually, only with sense of smell instead of vision. Wasn't planned. Thought you were a better option to be a parental figure if ever released."

John snorted and this time Zaeed, who had discretely sneaked behind him, slapped him in the back on his head.

"We'll see that later," Shepard sighed, "we have bigger fish to fry."
"I am not a fish!" the Krogan yelled. "I am Grunt!"

"That's a surprise," Garrus commented. "They usually say 'I am Krogan'."

It was a good one, Joker had to admit that, but he wasn't in the mood for laughing, nor was the rest of the crew.

Mordin and Legion eventually managed to close the door without breaking anything, and Javik's grip on the Krogan tightened until he stopped moving and squealing. Shepard waited a second to confirm everything was under control before talking.

"Alright crew," she said, "here's what happened: Cilat Hor, the Spectre we took on board a few hours ago, joined us with an agenda. His target was Javik but he seemed to have been controlled by something or someone else via the black orb we had in the freezers and the several Vakarian and I saw on the mining station before that. Vakarian and Tali also got possessed or whatever, but the destruction of the orb by Legion put an end to it." A few wary looks flew over the heads. Shepard saw them too. "I'll put them in quarantine after the debrief, just in case, if that can reassure you all."

"What?" Tali snapped. "Not in the same room! He's a dextro, I'll get sick!"

"Not now, Tali," Shepard stopped her with a raised hand. "Hor is in brigs, unconscious. I'll interrogate him as soon as he wakes up to get to the bottom of this. What happened on Viantel wasn't a single incident. Someone is after Javik, someone organized and with a technology we don't know or understand. I'm asking you all to be more careful in the future." Shepard let her words sink for a second before continuing. "Javik is the last known Prothean in this galaxy so the Council would rather keep him alive. He's not with us because we found him on Eden Prime, but because the Normandy is the safest place for him to stay."

"We crashed the first one in Cerberus' headquarters last New Year," Ashley commented. "How is that safe?"

"We're always on the move in the stealthiest vessel of the galaxy and he's surrounded by the finest," Shepard retorted.

"And he's able to defend himself," Javik grunted, still floating in the air. He hated when people talked about him. "Whoever they are, they can come. What I want to know is why the reactor stopped and how we can restart it."

"I know what happened," Garrus said, raising his hand. He waited for Shepard's nod to continue. "I suppose you all know I was working on the prothean VI we found on Ilos a few months back. It was giving me a hard time because it wanted to access the ship's AI and communication systems every time I activated it, so I built several sandboxes around it to prevent that sort of thing from happening. Think of it as a maze where the VI was trapped and it had to..."


"Right, so, huh, the VI was in fact an AI, Hor unleashed it in the Normandy, and I suspect there has been a conflict between the prothean AI and EDI, which resulted in a shut down."

Joker's blood froze but Samantha spoke before he could.

"A shut down is the best way for EDI to protect her core from an aggressive attack but then she restarts and runs a diagnostic. She can also restore a previous version of her core programming."

"She should have restarted, yes," Joker confirmed, "but she didn't."
She probably couldn't, actually. Maybe she couldn't get rid of the prothean AI just by restoring a previous version of her core, or something important had fried. Either way, they couldn't determine what the problem was while they were using the emergency generator. EDI used too much energy, she'd drain the batteries in an hour or so. If nothing was repaired then, they all were fucked. No, they had to restart the reactor before trying to fix EDI. The problem was, the reactor wasn't designed to work without EDI. She primarily operated it. Greg, Gabby and Kenneth were there to keep the machine running and do some fine tuning. There was no off/on button for them to poke. EDI controlled the reactor and the reactor gave her enough power to run, that was how it worked. The reactor was nothing else than a part of EDI, in some way, not the humanoid robot but the ship.

The reactor was like the heart of the Normandy – even if energy wasn't provided by the heart in a human body but whatever, that'd work for the analogy – and the AI's core was the brain. Without the brain to remind the heart to beat, you only had a dead body, and without the heart to pump oxygenated blood to the brain, you also had a dead body. So they sort of needed to practice CPR.

No, Joker thought, rubbing his eyes, stop anthropomorphizing your ship. The Normandy was a machine and machines could be tricked. What would he do on a less advanced vessel to restart the reactor if the VI had fried or been hacked?

Joker blinked. Of fucking course.

"Garrus," he said, interrupting Shepard who was talking about emergency protocols, "the VI you implanted in the Mako, it's still there?"

"There's a VI in my Mako?" Shepard snapped, turning to her protegee.

"Huh, yeah," he hesitated, "since Viantel. Did I forget to tell you?" Shepard replied with an angry stare. "It was necessary to have a better control over the direction," Garrus assured, uncomfortable.

"I need it," Joker said out loud to cover the upcoming argument. "I'll use it to restart the reactor."

"Oh!" Tali gasped. "Yes! That should work!"

"Wait!" John interrupted. Joker automatically frowned and Zaeed slapped John again. "Ouch! Come on old man, I know more about this than you!"

"What is it?" Shepard reluctantly asked.

"We're in the relay network with no gravity," John continued. "If you start the Mako, you also start its mass effect field. I'm no genius like some of you but it seems like a bad idea to have a micro-bubble of gravity in a vessel without gravity."

"That's... actually a good point," Joker admitted with an angry and disappointed sigh.

There was a good chance the Mako would be ejected out of the Normandy because of the mass difference – it would travel faster than the vessel, or slower, Joker wasn't sure. Either way, that would make a big hole in the ship and kill them all. Now that he was thinking about it, he had no idea how the Normandy would react when the reactor would restart. Gravity wouldn't come back instantaneously. It would take a few minutes for the rings to accelerate and make the element zero core spin at the right speed – which would be fun on its own without EDI's fine adjustments. Then they'd still need to polarize the core to shape the mass effect field in order to have the same intensity everywhere on the ship, otherwise the reactor room would weight more than the cockpit, therefore go faster and make another big hole in the ship, if not reaping her off entirely. Fuck. Joker started to understand why his professors thought a shut down of the reactor meant a certain death for the crew. It wasn't the loss of gravity that killed everyone. It was the reactivation of the
reactor.

"Joker?" Shepard called.

He rubbed his hands on his face to hide his despair but he couldn't think of anything sarcastic to say at the moment, nor could he put a big fake smile on his face. "I'm sorry, I need a break," he said, adjusting his cap. "I need to think."

Shepard looked at him for long seconds before nodding. "Alright, you have one hour. Vakarian, Tali, I want you both locked for now. Krios, you keep an eye on them. Solus..."

"Together?" Tali interrupted.

"Yes," Shepard confirmed, a little harsher than usual. "Vakarian's quarters are big enough for you two to cohabit for a few hours, you won't have to sterilize your room after and I don't have to put two people on watch duty. Are you going to question my decisions a third time, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy?"

"No, Commander," Tali replied, her back suddenly straight.

"Good. Solus, Javik and, huh, Grunt, with me. The rest of the crew will secure potentially dangerous objects. I don't want to see anything floating around, not even a pen. Don't forget to put a suit on and keep your helmet close. Dismissed."

Joker followed the crew through the elevator shaft to go to their quarters to retrieve his spacesuit above his locker. It was a simple piece of equipment, far from what astronauts had to wear at the beginning of the space age, but it wasn't comfortable either. It was practical and made to survive in space. For how long? Nobody ever talked about it. The Alliance provided suits to everyone working on one of their spaceship because so said the law, but everybody knew there wasn't much to do if the ship was sinking. Escape pods were only useful if you were in a one million kilometers radius of any planet or station – that was a really short distance by space standards – and you could forget about ships. No ship would rescue an escape pod, ever. You never knew what could be inside: sick people, pirates, a bomb, sick pirates with a bomb or any other combination. It was too big of a risk for a ship, the space equivalent of the Russian roulette.

Joker chose the lounge to get high. He wasn't the kind to drink alcohol until he'd roll under the table or to use pills, crystals or liquids, no, he much preferred the clear mind that came with a light herbal buzz. He had taken the habit of rolling a joint to relax after his exams in college and had had to stop once in the academy, even if it was legal, but Shepard had nothing against it – she had even smoked this kind of product herself when she was a teenager. Mordin had heard of the drug and wanted to try. As he had pointed out, he had a year left, two tops, so smoking a joint once in a while wouldn't really matter. Joker didn't regret to have shared with him. Doctor Doom was already a good fellow sober, with a mind racing in a hundred directions at a time, bouncing and jumping to new ideas, but the experience got even more surreal when he was high. Joker was pretty sure Mordin had composed a whole opera about molecules one night, and he had seen him work on pamphlets about inter-species sex, with handmade schematics s'il-vous-plaît. He had even made one for Joker – "of shipping ships" was the title.

Joker sighed and looked at the veil of smoke slightly disturbed by the movement of air. Did he like EDI? Yeah, definitely. Did he love her? That was a weird question. He had a tendency to forget EDI was more than a curvy android like everybody – that was the point of Cerberus giving a body to the AI controlling the ship, they had wanted to integrate her as a crew member – but deep down he knew she wasn't alive. She was a machine, like Legion. Both were conscious, they had self-preservation instincts, or programs, whatever, they had preferences and dislikes, thoughts and
opinions, but was it enough to be alive? Joker believed that what defined life was actually death. Mortality was the pivot of a life, it influenced everything from the moment a child realized they could die. But an AI couldn't really die. They could upload their mind elsewhere so that the loss of their body or platform wouldn't affect them much. Heck, they didn't even need a body. The Geths had their own servers, well protected, but they could easily infect the extranet in all Council Space or any other computer network in the galaxy – and maybe it was already done. Killing them was impossible just because they weren't alive in the first place.

So, no, Joker didn't love EDI. He liked her and treated her like a friend, but she was fundamentally too different for him to love her. That didn't change the fact that he cared for her and he was actually worried of the effect of the shut down on her. Computers didn't like to be suddenly deprived of energy, even AIs, and who knew what the prothean AI did to EDI? Did it try to merge with her? If so, what would be the result of that? Would it still be able to control the Normandy? Would it be hostile? Would EDI still be EDI?

The door slowly opened – hydraulic locks automatically sealed them, with or without power on – and Corporal Dickhead showed up with a plastic box under his arm, interrupting Joker in his me time.

"Hey," John said, "want something? Food, drink?"

"No," Joker replied more coldly than anticipated.


"Not possible," Joker decreed, stocking the bars in his suit's pockets.

John snorted as he came closer. "Alright, I don't like you either, too much of an ass kisser, but we gotta talk about getting out of there man."

"An ass kisser?" Joker repeated, offended. "Because I help my Commander and friend when her dickhead brother tries to fuck with her?"

"Oh please," John rolled his eyes. "You want to get in her pants, like half the crew it seems, so don't talk about help and friendship."

"You couldn't be more wrong," Joker mocked with so much disdain it must have been floating in the air too. "What do you want, Dickhead?"

"I thought about the whole gravity bubble thing," John said, standing next to the coffee table. "Let's be honest, the ship is fucked. I didn't go to school, didn't learn all that stuff, but I've been a pilot for the last six years and I figured some stuff out. If the reactor restarts, the ship will be teared apart, right?"

"Yeah," Joker admitted, bitter.

"It's because the ship is too big," John continued. "It takes time to shape the mass effect field. But, we have a shuttle. It's much smaller and it wasn't designed to fly with a polarized field."

Dickhead wasn't wrong this time, Joker thought. The shuttle's reactor created a bubble-like mass effect field to fly, a small sphere in term of gravity. Its creation was almost instantaneous. But
"almost" wasn't good enough. It may take a fraction of a second to deploy the field but the 
expending gravity bubble would still be ejected from the Normandy before it could have the 
appropriate size – and kill everyone near it.

"Won't work, question of time," Joker said. He looked at his joint and noted it was dead. He had 
almost finished it anyway so he stuffed it in his pocket. "Besides, we're twenty-four on board, 
twenty-five with Wrex. I'm not counting EDI because she can't be dissociated from her core, which 
is in the Normandy." Abandoning the ship meant abandoning EDI, period. It was useless to bring 
her body with them if her mind had to stay behind. "Make it twenty-four because Legion can find 
another platform somewhere else. And that means we leave Cilat Hor here too. You can't load so 
many people in the shuttle."

"Well sacrifices are made everyday," John shrugged. Joker stared at him for a second, anger 
disrupting his buzz for good. "Let's be realistic," John insisted. "The frozen Krogan? He's dead, 
leave him here. The baby Krogan? He's cute, sure, but who cares? Others can be made, from what 
I've heard. The Salarian? He's gonna die soon anyway. Same for Zaeed. Krios, Javik, their species 
are doomed. The Turian? Bangs my sister."

"The cripple? Useless," Joker added mockingly. "That's not gonna happen, Dickhead," he said, 
more serious. "Shepard won't allow it."

"Or she'll stay behind to save her people," John retorted with a smug smile. "And we're down to 
sixteen."

Anger didn't even start to describe what Joker felt at the moment. He was a non-violent kind of 
guy, partly because he couldn't hit somebody without breaking his own fist, partly because he 
believed violence was the weapon of the weak and unintelligent, but he would have enjoyed to 
brake Dickhead's face at the moment. Oh how much he would love to sacrifice his fits for that.

But Joker did not get the time to elaborate. A shock wave suddenly hit the ship, a horrible shriek 
running along the hull as the metal distorted under the compression. The wave hit Joker too and he 
felt nauseous and hot and cold at the same time, pushed and teared. It only lasted a second but it 
was enough for him to recognize the feeling. The same thing had happened when the reactor had 
shut down two hours ago, but he didn't hear the soft spur of the engine nor did the lights come 
back. The reactor was still offline, but their mass was back, with a sort of pull in several directions. 
That meant they had exited the relay network and that didn't make any sense.

Joker didn't wait for John to stop barfing. He pushed himself through the lounge and opened the 
door manually. He ignored the distraught and sick crew to float to the cockpit. The heat shields 
covered the windows during any travel through the relay network but they could fortunately be 
opened manually. Joker turned the crank on the left as fast as he could.

First of all, the sky was yellow-ish, which wasn't normal for deep space, it only happened when 
you were stupid enough to get really close to a star, and there were countless big spotlights all over 
the place, some round, some oval, some as flat as pancakes, in the middle of gigantic clouds of gas 
and dust stretched all over the place. And still the pulls, in front of the Normandy for the most 
intense. There was nothing there but a gigantic black sphere surrounded by yellow, distorted arcs 
of light. That wasn't nothing, Joker realized. That was a super massive black hole.

"Where the fuck are we?" Shepard asked, aghast.

Joker looked over his shoulder to see her entering the cockpit. He slid in his seat.

"I'd say the galactic core if I had to bet," Joker replied, strapping himself on his chair.
His voice was calm and confident but he didn't feel like it. If he hadn't had a job on which so many lives depended on right now, he'd scream and roll on the floor like a five year old watching Alien for the first time. The second thing he had learned at the academy was: "do not, ever, under any circumstance, approach a black hole you fucking moron".

"Can you open the right shield?" Joker asked as he retrieved the physical touchscreen used in case of emergency – no AI didn't mean he couldn't control the ship in some way. "I gotta slow the ship down before we hit anything." The ejection speed was theoretically quite slow by navigation standards, because you never knew what could be in front of you when you exited the network, but it was still fast enough to crash the ship.

Shepard opened manually the shield while Joker activated the rudimentary emergency computer. The schematics of the ship appeared on the screen with several gauges all around. Energy, gas, water, he knew exactly what was left. Joker opened a ship-wild radio communication.

"Attention crew," he announced, "to battle position. Starting deceleration in sixty seconds."

That would give everybody enough time to get to the nearest chair and buckle up. Shepard sat next to him in the copilot's seat.

"What's the plan?" she asked.

"Decelerate," Joker said as he checked the hatches, "stop the ship completely if we can or compensate the pulls otherwise, then restart the reactor and get the fuck out of here before one black hole or another eats us. I can do it without EDI and I don't want to lose time trying to fix her here. I'm not a big fan of radiations."

"The gravity bubble thing won't be a problem?"

Joker frowned a little. "Oh," he understood, "no, we're out of the relay network and apparently we have a mass again, so yay! No dislocation!"

He started the countdown. At zero, he rang the alarm and he opened the frontal gauges all at once. Joker was pushed in his harness as the ship shook. He gritted his teeth, his ribcage not enjoying at all the ride, and grabbed the touchscreen to stabilize it a little. What he read on it wasn't pleasing. The air gauges wouldn't cut it. They weren't made for brutal deceleration like that but for slowly moving the ship around if the mass effect field was down, the old fashion way actually. He could need the rest of the air later – he didn't want to use the nitrogen stocks – so he closed the hatches. Fortunately, the ship had lost most of its velocity and he could now use vaporized water as a deceleration gas. The droplets would freeze instantaneously in the vacuum of space and most of the tiny ice cubes would return briefly to a liquid state when they'd hit the heated hull – yay, friction! Some would stay solid though and those would hit them like bullets.

Joker opened the water gauges. The deceleration shock hit him before it started to hail on the Normandy. The sound it produced was incredibly loud. Joker could barely hear his own mental prayers to all the gods he knew, human or not – what difference did it make? He'd gladly convert to the religion of the first god granting him his wish of not dying here, even if it required him to throw virgins into a volcano. He wanted to live. He wanted to go back to Tiptree to see his sister again and take her in his arms. He wanted to tell his father what he thought of him. He wanted to visit his mother's grave and ask her to forgive him for his cowardice. He had looked away for so many years, only dreaming of escaping the hellhole he was born in, ignoring her suffering. She had been so proud to see him go to college but Jeff would forever be haunted by the fear in her eyes that day because she knew her life would get worse. Eight years later, one week after his admission to the flight academy, he had received an email from his father. "Your mother is dead," it said, "and I
won't wait for you to bury her."

The hail slowly stopped and Joker realized he had held his breath to the point his lungs hurt. He breathed in deep and, no, that wasn't the lack of air that provoked pain but broken ribs. That would have to wait. He wasn't done yet.

He keyed on the touchscreen to have a look at the damages the ship had taken and her trajectory. Like he thought, the Normandy wasn't aligned in the axis anymore, it was slightly spinning, so he corrected that before anything else, pushing a little here and there. Some hatches had been damaged and one of the gauge leaked gas, which would push the ship until it'd be empty.

A sudden noise on the hull made Joker jump in his seat. That was loud, he thought, and it got really worrying when another one followed. The Normandy was out of the ice mist now, there shouldn't be any other impact. Joker tried to look around and cursed the idiot who had thought so few windows in the cockpit was a good idea. He still got a good look at a black object flying over the ship. Joker had a bad feeling about that so he decided to sacrifice some energy to run the radar a few times. What he got back didn't please him at all. Countless bright spots appeared on the screen, some small, some big, some really big.

"Oh come on!" he ranted as he keyed on the touchscreen. "A debris field now? Give me a break."

The only way to avoid impacts was to make the ship drift with the rest of the field, and for that he had to accelerate the Normandy to get a relative speed of zero meter per second, which wasn't easy to achieve without an engine. But one thing was in his favor: space was, well, spacious. Debris weren't all agglomerated, the bigger were actually separated by kilometers. The Normandy SR-2 was only one hundred and eighty meters long so it wasn't too dangerous to navigate between the blocks. Joker maneuvered slowly until he found his balance near a debris as big as the Normandy herself. He kept his hands above the touchscreen for a few seconds, listening to his ship. The hull cricked and cracked a bit but nothing out of the ordinary – usually the noises made by the ventilation and the engine covered it.

"It's... a ship?" Shepard asked, looking at the debris above their head.

"A piece," Joker corrected. He had noticed it too. "Looks like a graveyard for spaceships."

"I don't recognize any model." Joker didn't confirm, it was useless. Well at least they had an idea of where all the ships lost in the relay network ended up. "Shit," Shepard swore under her breath.

"Tali can take over to restart the reactor," Joker said, pushing the commands away. "I have a couple broken ribs so I'll be in medbay."

"Yes, take some rest," Shepard approved as she helped him get out of his seat. "Great job, Jeff."

"I have to justify my pay once in a while," he joked.

Chakwas was pretty busy when Joker arrived in medbay. He grabbed a handful of painkillers, swallowed the pills without water – he was used to do that thanks to lifelong medications – and stayed out of the way while the doctor, helped by Miranda, patched a few people up. A screw had pierced a hole in Kenneth' leg during the deceleration. Samantha had a broken clavicle – she was small and the harness never really fit her. Mordin and Sarah were unconscious, too many Gs. Kaidan needed stitches in the back of his head. Could have been worse, Joker thought, but he still felt slightly guilty.

By the time Chakwas took care of him, the reactor was still offline. Joker flew through the elevator
shaft to get down to engineering deck, and he was surprised to see cables floating everywhere – even a water tube. Garrus and Legion were there too, each one working on a keyboard, while Tali was in the reactor chamber, fixing something and swearing a lot.

"What takes you so long, guys?" Joker asked.

"Editing the code of the Mako's VI," Garrus replied without raising his eyes from his keyboard. "And Legion's translating, checking and compiling. The last thing we need right now is a conflict between systems."

"Right," Joker remembered, "it's a turian VI." The first Normandy had been a turio-human ship but she had ran under the Alliance operating system. Joker felt like Garrus knew everything there was to know about it, but the SR-2 was a Cerberus creation, with a completely different kind of OS. "Need some help? I spent a few nights studying the OS' architecture after we stole the ship, just in case."

Garrus shook his head. "Almost done."

"You should go back to the cockpit," Tali said from the reactor. "We'll need you there."

"Oh, she said 'we'," Garrus mocked, typing furiously. "What an honor."

"Eat a bag of giant dicks, Vakarian!" Tali yelled back.

"At least I can," he replied.

Joker decided to quickly retreat as a spanner flew through the room in Garrus' direction. Everybody had their own way to deal with pressure and a friendly session of banters and bickering seemed to work for the two dextros.

Corporal Dickhead was in the cockpit when Joker arrived. He felt anger build up in his chest just seeing him there, floating innocently near the window.

"Get the fuck out of here," Joker commanded. "Next time I see you around, I'll..."

But Joker's threat was interrupted by a red light hovering just above the cockpit and the low vibration of an engine echoed in the hull. Joker froze as the light passed slowly over John, as if it was scanning the ship. It eventually moved, passing under the nose of the Normandy.

"What the fuck was that?" Joker whispered.

John waved at him to tell him to come closer and he pointed out something by the window. The angle wasn't great and debris floated between the Normandy and the far object, but he managed to see a gigantic blob of matter, vaguely spherical, like an asteroid or something like that, maybe even a protoplanet considering its size. There were little lights all around the surface if you paid really attention, which formed a network, like city lights seen from space. Small pieces orbited around it. No, Joker realized as he looked closely, the protoplanet was actually made of countless little pieces. One of them lit up like a Christmas tree and started to move. That wasn't just some pile of junk. That was a spaceship. Holy shit, Joker thought. There were people living in the galactic core, orbiting the accretion disk of a super massive black hole. And something was telling him they weren't coming their way to pay them a friendly visit.

"Guys," Joker called over the radio as he slid into his seat, "status."

"I'd like to run a few tests before..." Garrus said but Joker interrupted him.
"No time for that, buddy."

There were a few seconds of tensed silence on the line. "Alright," Garrus eventually replied, "skipping the tests."

"I'm launching the boot sequence," Tali warned.


Vibrations ran all along the ship and Joker cringed as his broken ribs protested. He started to feel a pull in his back growing slowly but steadily. It seemed like the ship was rearing up, but that was just his body trying to make sense of the gravity difference between the reactor chamber and the cockpit. The lights suddenly came back and the navigation system booted in front of Joker, holoscreens popping up all around. Joker's chest tightened. He had missed his puppies.

"Reactor stable," Tali announced over the radio. "Starting polarization of the core."

The previous vibrations were nothing compared to those ones. The hull cracked and hissed as gravitation waves contorted around the ship. It disrupted the debris around and pushed them away in a slow but inevitable chain reaction. The radar cleared but several fast moving objects approached. Joker saw the red dots whirl all around the ship, keeping their distance for now but for how long? If those only were recon drones like he suspected, the Normandy would be fine. Otherwise, well, they would have a problem.

"What's happening?" Shepard asked as she arrived in the cockpit.

"There's a ship approaching," John filled her in.

"And it's big," Joker added, looking at the radar. "Like, twelve kilometers by one big."

"Hostile?"

"I'm not really sure I wanna know, Commander."

The ship shook one last time, almost throwing Shepard and her brother on the ground. Joker gritted his teeth and made a mental note to raid the medbay later for another dose of painkillers. At least gravity was back.


"Your orders, Commander?"

Shepard drummed with her fingers on Joker's seat and for a terrifying second he thought she'd engage with the alien ship. It didn't please him but he understood her. She believed he was good enough to maneuver around the ship to get a chance to learn a bit about it. It could be crucial for the Council to know about this undiscovered alien species. That ship coming their way was roughly a third of the size of the Citadel and Joker wouldn't even imagine the firepower it held. Jesus, the biggest dreadnought of the turian fleet wasn't even two kilometers long.

"To the relay," Shepard eventually commanded.

"To the relay," Joker repeated by automatism, his fingers already flying over the holoscreens.
He maneuvered the ship out of the debris field and noticed the drones were following the Normandy. Joker pushed the engines to gain velocity as he started to calculate the mass of the ship for the jump in the relay network. The drones quickly abandoned their pursuit and the enormous alien ship disappeared from the radar – too far. Joker feared for a second that the relay wouldn’t answer his call because there was a slight risk this one was only working as an exit since they kind of were in a galactic dump where lost vessels ended up, but the relay granted him passage. Joker sighed of relief as he placed the ship on an acceleration vector and let the relay throw the Normandy in the network.

To infinity and beyond, he thought.

TBC
She knew. Mordin was sure of it as soon as he met Karin's eyes. There was judgment in them and a silent, useless question. Why would anyone do that? To live, obviously. Mordin had started the race of life with a significant disadvantage but that didn't mean he had to abandon all hopes and accept to lose. It wasn't a question of unfinished work or anything like that. It was dumb, selfish pride. If not for his formidable intellect, he would have been discarded due to his numerous genetic anomalies, so it was only normal for him to outsmart Death.

There was more urgent than Karin's judgment and worries right now. Gravity was still missing and the medbay was full of injured people – nothing too serious at first look, lots of bruises, cuts needing stitches, abdominal pain leading to vomiting, the usual. Mordin snorted for himself. When the loss of gravity had become "the usual", something was definitely wrong.

He unhooked the straps keeping him on his bed and reached under it for his semi-armored lab outfit. Karin had stripped him to his undersuit, exposing his chest and scars, but nobody was paying attention to him due to the commotion – Miranda was helping too. Grunt wasn't around. Last time Mordin had seen him, he had told him to follow Javik's orders so the young Krogan probably was with him. That didn't worry Mordin for the least. He was actually glad Javik could contain Grunt. It would have been better on a cultural level to let Wrex take charge of Grunt but Wrex was still in the freezers.

The tank was empty now.

Big white eyes caught his attention as Mordin straightened and, for a second, he didn't recognize the crew member. It was the Quarian. Mordin didn't interact much with her. Too stubborn, too full of herself – ah, youth! He had been a lot like her in college and he remembered fondly how good it had felt to know he was smarter than anybody else. But those years had come and gone, and now Mordin was facing a maskless Quarian for the first time of his life – better late than sorry.

Big white eyes circled with a dense pattern of little purplish dots, very faint gray iris probably invisible for anybody without an eyesight as good as a Salarian's, a low flat nose over very thin and darker lips, a pointy chin and round cheeks, with fading lines of the same colored dots on them and from the inner corner of her eyes to the back of her shaved head – he supposed, because she wore some sort of bonnet and her helmet. A single braid as thick as a finger floated on the right side of her face. And she was staring back, defiant, fierce, a little frown creating strange folds between her hairless eyebrows.

Mordin would have loved to play a staring game – Salarians were really good at those – but it could take long and he had better things to do, so he finished putting his clothes on as if he hadn't remarked the shattered glass of Tali'Zorah's helmet.

"Need a hand?" he asked as he jumped over his bed – weightlessness was awesome, period.

Well, for him and his old joints, not for his lab. All his adorable bacterias were probably drowning in their own stress hormones. The poor little things liked their gravity. Viruses too but they didn't produce hormones that could kill them. They would mutate, probably, mostly because the ship had received a certain amount of radiations each time the reactor had been down. Of course the hull
protected the crew from the most dangerous radiations – or the lack of one in particular, the One being heat – but a kinetic barrier assured a better protection, especially during a travel through the relay network.

It was actually the second time Shepard and Vakarian lived through this kind of situation, now that Mordin was thinking about it. It would be interesting to study how their organism was reacting – their risk of cancer had probably increased by a two digits factor. A study on several years would be necessary. Maybe Karin could conduct it.

"We're good," Karin immediately answered with a slight distance in her voice, "but you can check on Garrus in his quarters. I couldn't keep him in here with Tali also injured."

"Will do," Mordin nodded.

He had always liked turian physiology. The dextro-amino barrier was a fun challenge to take, and the interaction between the metal in their skin with the rest of their body just made things more interesting. You could actually corrode a Turian with the proper electrical potential difference between their inside and outside. It was a natural process in them, they rusted with age, but it could be accelerated. A few Primarchs and other important figures had been assassinated by the salarian intelligence with this method over the years. They had never seen it coming.

A dextro-amino bacteria vector had never been tested, for what Mordin knew. It could be interesting to test a few. The krogan immune system would violently react to the dextro bacteria so the penetration factor would be quite high. The white cells would digest the bacteria, break down the proteins of the shell so if a corrective gene was hiding in there, strong enough to resist the process, it would be carried to the spleen by the lymphatic system, and in the meantime it could be spread wildly in the body. Of course the dextro-amino acids could kill the weakest members of the species but Krogans were usually pretty resilient. They'd be sick and it could actually improve the penetration of the bacteria. It was promising. Mordin had to test that theory right now.

But, he remembered as he blinked, there were more urgent matters at the moment. He grabbed a dextro first aid kit in a cupboard and got out of the overpopulated medbay. In comparison, the mess hall was quiet and quite cold. Mordin pulled on his collar – he should have obeyed to Shepard and put on his armor earlier. There was a heating system in it but it was as good as its batteries. In the current situation, Mordin couldn't have recharged the batteries when needed so in the end he would have been cold in his armor. At least he had more mobility in his usual clothes.

It was the first time he set foot in Garrus' quarters – well, floated in Garrus' quarters – and the smell immediately reminded him of Veceno. Mordin's sense of smell wasn't really good, and it got worse with time, so for him all Turians smelled the same mix of hot iron, old leather and gun oil. He could perfectly picture his dear companion and her green markings – a color even rarer than blue – sitting at that table in front of the door, hunched on a sniper rifle, cleaning it by habit after a long day in the greenhouses. It reassured her to know her customized Mantis would be ready if she was suddenly called for duty. The Relay 314 Incident had been over for a decade at the time but she was still wary and always carrying a gun. But when Mordin was coming back home after a long day of interviews and research, she'd always let her rifle on the table and stand up to welcome him, rubbing her forehead on his and sharing a breath.

It would be quite amusing if Mordin suddenly did the same thing to Garrus but now wasn't the time for pranks considering the Turian wasn't alone. Shepard was with him, standing thanks to her magnetic boots, as well as Javik and Jeff, both floating.

And pictures, Mordin noticed. On the wall above a high table welded to the ground was a series of pictures of Shepard and the crew, taken from a high point of view. A quick look told Mordin Wrex
appeared on only one of them, with Shepard, so the Krogan had most likely been behind the camera. It seemed from the various expressions displayed that Wrex had first photographed Shepard when she wasn't paying attention, then had chased her for the fun of it. The background didn't look like the Normandy SR-2, some crew members were unknown of Mordin and those he recognized were younger so he supposed the series had been taken a few years ago – besides, he'd remember if Wrex had ever harassed Shepard all day with a camera. He probably would have participated during the few hours if took for his bacterias to incubate.

Shepard was paler than usual and obviously tired. Javik was his neutral self – the crew often mocked his bad temper but he was actually irritated only three point seven percents of the time on a daily basis. Even Mordin had a higher score than that. Where was Grunt? Under control, probably, knowing Javik. Jeff didn't look good either and he was stiffer than usual. Broken ribs, Mordin understood and it pained him. Three on the left and two on the right. He'd take care of that after Garrus’ injury.

Which wouldn't be fixed right now, Mordin decided after a quick look. The left leg of the Turian's undersuit was open up to the thigh, his spur broken a few centimeters above the calf muscles, blue blood pearling where the dark gray bone was visible. The lack of gravity deeply impacted the blood stream. Mordin could reattach the spur with staples and stitches, or more probably a stem, the sectioned part would still suffer from a bad blood irrigation, which could lead to necrosis and amputation of the spur, or the leg if it was too late.

"Can't operate at the moment," Mordin warned everybody – it was obvious for him but he had to say it out loud for the others.

"Do what you can then," Shepard sighed.

Mordin nodded as he took some sterile straps in the kit. He activated his magnetic boots to have a little stability to work.

"You have something for that?" Garrus asked through clenched teeth, taking the end of his spur out of the metallic part of his armor supposed to protect it.

"Oh, gross," Jeff commented with a disgusted wince. "Just leave it there, buddy, nobody wants to see that."

"Will keep it ready for surgery," Mordin reassured Garrus. He took the bloody spur and tucked it in his pocket. He'd have to sterilize it and put it in ice – much like a sectioned finger actually. Mordin started to clean the wound, perfectly aware of the tension in the air. Something was up but he couldn't ask Shepard directly. The direct approach rarely worked with her. "Have to reattach the spur," Mordin innocently commented. "Upper end of heel bone," he explained, tracing the location of said bone along Garrus’ lower leg till his heel, "passing between calf muscles. Quite deformed by musculature during second half of growth spurt occurring during military training, actually. Angle to the knee more pronounced in Turians from the Hierarchy." Still no reaction. "By the way, commonly admitted spur attached to the knee but not at all. Independent bone, attached with ligaments to ankle articulation." He pushed up on the heel to show the spur moving.

"Sonofabitch!" Garrus yelled, straightening. Jeff turned over, a hand on his mouth.

"Are you done playing?" Shepard asked, not amused.

"Simple anatomy lesson," Mordin replied with a shrug. He kept on dressing the wound, humming for himself while Garrus continued to swear under his breath. Tension rose, as planned. " Noticed lack of gravity," he eventually said.
"The reactor is down," Shepard confirmed.

Mordin nodded, eyes and hands on Garrus' leg. "Painkillers?"

"Yes please," Garrus grunted. Mordin raised his eyes to meet Garrus' and it sufficed for the Turian to understand his intentions. "Oh fuck me," he grumbled, his head dropping in the back, his fringes touching his spinal cowl. "I screwed up, okay? The VI I implanted in the Mako couldn't handle the polarization of the core because the Mako doesn't use that process, and it crashed, twice. That's why the reactor is down again."

This time, Mordin looked at Shepard, arms folded. "You'll wait till debrief for more," she decreed.

Ah. Mordin had thought Shepard would have been more sensible to her protegee's suffering since they joined in coitus, but he had clearly misinterpreted the situation. Garrus', on the other hand...

"For fuck's sake," the Turian cringed. "You're going to let him torture me until the debriefing? He'll know ten minutes before the others, big deal!" Garrus swiftly turned to Mordin. "And have fun, really, but I don't know shit either."

And Turians were trained to resist torture anyway. It would take him more than a broken bone to get a confession out of Garrus – well, another one. Shepard knew it, Javik too probably, but not Jeff.

"I agree," the pilot nervously said, biting on a finger nail. Ah, the sweet sound of victory, Mordin thought. "Tell them, it changes nothing."

"Will take it to the grave," Mordin assured. He could have chosen a better expression considering the hurt look Shepard gave him back. Well, he was going to die, in a year, two tops, it was inevitable and he was already glad to have stolen four bonus rounds from Death.

Shepard exchanged a look with Javik, a finger drumming on her upper arm. Like often, her heart rate was low and regular – Mordin could see the arteries under the thin skin of her neck quite clearly. Even under pressure and exhausted, she was calm, her mind studying all the possibilities.

To be honest, Mordin had thought Shepard was yet another human military between countless others when he had read her dossier. She was described as ruthless, quick, efficient, with a big mouth that had led her to some trouble with her hierarchy in her prime years. Most of the report on her was true, but it lacked the information a close friend could provide. Her biotic powers were largely underestimated, much like her intelligence. Shepard lacked an academical education, something Salarians revered over all, but that didn't handicap her at all. She knew how to surround herself with the good people, how and when to listen to them too. She also knew how to bullshit her way out of any situation, much like Mordin. It took a bullshitter to know a bullshitter after all.

So it was pretty clear to him she was just playing with his patience – Shepard had a role to maintain, she had to be the Commander in charge and Mordin didn't mind saving the appearances. They played oh so well together. Without being an intellectual match, Shepard was a formidable challenge.

"We're out of the relay network," she eventually said, looking at Mordin straight in the eyes, "in the Saharabarik system."

"Omega."

"Yes. The problem is, we entered the relay network seconds before exiting it."
The smallest known jump between referenced relays took you from the Sol system to the Arcturus Stream in three hours. That alone wasn't normal, but something else didn't make sense.

"Seconds?" Mordin repeated. "Have been in the relay network for hours since Hourglass Nebulae."

"Right," Shepard clicked, rubbing her eyes, "you were out. Joker?"

"So, huh," the pilot said, taking over and counting on his fingers, "we lost the reactor a few hours after our jump in the relay network through the Osun gate, we had the reunion, I took a break, Dickhead came to the lounge," – Shepard frowned slightly but Garrus seemed to approve the nickname – "then we inexplicably exited the relay network in the galactic core and I believe it's when you passed out."

"The galactic core?" Garrus asked, as surprised as Mordin.

That, Mordin had to admit, that was unexpected. Salarians had sent countless missions to the galactic core over the years, mostly autonomous probes but also a few inhabited vessels, and all of them had ceased to emit at some point. They simply disappeared once in the galactic bulge, pof, no trace at all. The Asaris had done their own experiments, the same thing happened over and over again. Once the Turians had joined the Council, they had deemed necessary to stop all exploration missions to the galactic core because it was simply too stupid and dangerous to keep sending gift bags to whatever was hiding there. A treaty had been signed, forbidding any research or attempt to reach the galactic core.

Even the Terminus Systems respected the forbidden zone, not because they feared the Council species and their bureaucracy, but because of the rumors of gigantic vessels coming out of the core once in a while. The Terminus may have had twelve mercenaries for every soldier the Council could align, but they had no order, no leader. Each colony, each city, each gang would have to fight alone against a new enemy and billions would die before they united their forces. The Terminus knew it and the Terminus had decided to not search for trouble – one of the many points of view they shared with the Council, actually.

"Yeah," Jeff winced. "We, huh, we didn't stay long but we still... orbited a huge black hole so..."

The "oh" Garrus dropped wasn't a good sign. Mordin had never been interested in astrophysics though and he had no idea what orbiting a black hole meant.

"So?" he insisted.

Jeff exchanged a look with Shepard. The Commander inhaled deeply. This time, Mordin saw the stiffness of her posture and the tension on her face.

"We lost two years," she said as she released her breath.

Mordin frowned slightly.

"Yeah," Jeff explained, avoiding eye contact, "so, space and time are entangled, one can't exist without the other because time is just another dimension and the all of that. And gravity curves both, which means the more massive an object is in space, the more it impacts time, so the slower time gets around. And a black hole is super massive, obviously, otherwise it wouldn't be a black hole, so... Yeah... Two years."

A chill ran along Mordin's back. He'd have to research a bit on the question and do the maths himself but he trusted Jeff on the matter – he was the most capable in arithmetic on the ship after Mordin and, as the pilot had pointed out a few times, he "knew his shit".
Two years. That was incredible! Faster-than-light travels actually had an influence on the crew of a spaceship, it slowed down aging, not a lot but enough to scrounge a few months of life expectancy. It was one of the reasons Mordin had accepted to work on board the Normandy with Shepard – another way to cheat Death. And he had gained two years! Well, not really. He wouldn't live long, but the rest of the galaxy had had two years to progress while the Normandy had taken a detour by the galactic core. Two years could represent a huge gap in science and Salarians were nothing but excellent in research. Maybe a break through had happened, maybe his work would benefit from it. This was so exciting!

"We received a message from Omega before we had to stop the reactor," Shepard continued, all commanding and serious. "Apparently, everybody thinks the Normandy sunk."

"Yeah," Jeff smirked, "they were pretty surprised to see our signature pop up on their scans at the relay exit. Fuck, I'd be surprised too."

"I don't see how this is funny," Garrus coldly replied.

He was upset, Mordin noted as he finished the dressing around the Turian's calf. Strange. Garrus wasn't particularly attached to what was left of his family, his allegiance to the Hierarchy was rather weak, most of the people he could call friends were with him on this ship and he couldn't really talk to the others due to his Spectre status anyway. He didn't lose anything by disappearing for two years, contrary to some crew members. Jeff had a father and a sister, Karin a brother, Greg three daughters.

Oh. Tuccio.

Mordin felt a bit guilty. He always forgot about Tuccio. He liked the child, she was adorable and curious, but Mordin didn't feel particularly attached to her. He was a Salarian after all. Evolution and society had led him to not care for his progeny, as a male it wasn't his responsibility. He showed interest in Tuccio only because he knew Aria would kill her if the child was useless to her. Mordin may not have felt like Tuccio's father and did not experience filial love towards her, but that didn't mean he had to condemn her to death. So he played Aria's game and let her think she had power over him. It had both served them when Mordin had infiltrated Omega for the STG fifteen years ago – well, seventeen years ago now. Aria had a tendency to be more chatty with the people she thought she owned and Mordin had taken full advantage of her flaw. Asaris. Always thinking they were better than the others.

"It's not," Shepard agreed to release the tension, "but you know Jeff, always cracking a joke when he should shut up."

"Yep, that's me," the pilot confirmed with a sorry smile.

Garrus looked at his mentor straight in the eyes for long seconds before giving up with a resigned sigh. There was a high probability coitus would happen later, Mordin supposed as he started to put his equipment back in the kit. Turians always sought for intimacy and comfort in a situation like this one – although, Mordin doubted any Turian had ever faced and survived a trip to the galactic core so statistics wouldn't help him predict anything right now. But, considering all the data he had collected on Shepard and Garrus lately, coitus was still a pretty obvious option after a good night of sleep.

Javik hadn't talked so far and his presence would certainly have been required elsewhere considering the situation – he was second to Shepard and in charge of the crew, between other things. Obviously he had been informed of the time jump earlier and it didn't seem to disturb him. But what were two years compared to fifty thousands? Javik was somewhat used to fast-forward in
time. No, he was here for another reason.

A council.

Jeff had discovered the anomaly and informed Shepard. Not knowing what to do, she had turned to the one person she knew understood her perfectly, without judgment.

Mordin wondered how Javik felt about it – how was it like to know entirely a person, down to their most secret fears and desires? Salarians usually had a good knowledge of their friends, it was easy for them to deduce psychological traits from habits and details, but each society and culture had taboos. Talking as an individual of the future was something no Salarian would ever do. The clan and its allegiances mattered, the species mattered, but not the individual. Protheans had a similar approach, from what Mordin had gathered. Instead of clans, they had had castes, workers, soldiers, rulers, reproducers, and they believed they could overcome any situation as one united people. Therefore, the individual was expendable, even more when their memories could be shared and remembered collectively.

How extraordinary the Protheans' way of sharing information was! No wonder why they were so scientifically advanced when they could simply learn everything there was to know about a field just by the touch. And what a shame that Javik had been a soldier. Mordin could have learned so much from him!

Shepard's council usually involved Wrex too but the old Krogan was indisposed at the moment. And Garrus had to know – had to learn too.

Would his year under Shepard's supervision be terminated once the Council informed of the reappearance of the Normandy?

How would the Council react, actually?

They probably thought Shepard had gone rogue – a theory supported by a mercenary strangely looking like her working in the Terminus Systems. Shepard would have to prove her good faith and it wouldn't be too difficult. There were plenty of methods in forensic medicine to determine the exact age of a cadaver and it could be transposed to samples, Mordin supposed. For example, the skeleton of a Salarian like him was mostly constituted of cartilages but it rigidified with time. The overall percentage of those tissues could easily give an age to an individual.

Although Mordin couldn't pass those tests without compromising his ethnically problematic choices regarding his health. He may not be able to help Shepard with his body but he could still give her advices.

So he should have been in this council from the beginning but Mordin understood that Shepard wanted to take things slowly. The situation was extraordinary, caution was required. Besides, he knew she would have come to him eventually, at least to envisage the reaction of the crew. Which would be bad, there was no denying that.

"A patrol will probably come by," Shepard continued, "but they won't be able to come too close to the ship nor board her due to our cruel lack of gravity. Legion is working on fixing the VI, he said he'd need a few hours to restart the engine. I want to use that time to let the crew digest the news."

"The faster, the better," Mordin nodded. It was stupid to let them in the dark for too long. Coming forward would show Shepard's sincerity too. It could help but some individuals would still be a problem. "Will prepare light sedatives, just in case."
"Good idea," Shepard approved with a sigh.

"Use the Krogan," Javik advised.

"Yeah," Jeff snorted, "I'm sure he loves to tackle down people."

"Speaking of people," Garrus said as he buttoned the leg of his undersuit down, "they'll want someone to blame." He gave a quick look to Shepard. "I know it's not your fault, it's nobody's, but it's easier to cope if there is a culprit."

"Einstein," Jeff interrupted. "It's all his fault." Mordin snorted but Shepard didn't find it funny.

"Huh, who?" Garrus asked.

"Human theoretical physicist," Mordin eagerly answered, "father of the general theory of relativity, pre-human spatial expansion so-called 'modern' physics and quantum mechanics. Human discoverer of the mass-energy equivalent formula."

Garrus' mandibles twitched a little. "Of course," he mocked, adjusting his undersuit on his calf.

"I'll take the blame," Shepard said. "I'm in charge."

"Technically," Jeff intervened, "I screwed up. I placed the ship in orbit around the black hole and I forgot the impact it could have on us."

"It doesn't matter if we orbited the black hole or not," Garrus corrected. "We were in a zone where time is slower compared to the rest of the galaxy anyway."

"True," Jeff admitted, "but I'm still the pilot and..."

"Did you make the ship exit the relay network in the galactic core?" Javik sharply asked to cut the discussion short.

"No," Jeff frowned, "I didn't even know there was a gate there!"

"Then the fault lies with the captain of the ship," the Prothean decreed and his words were final.

Jeff didn't insist but he looked tormented by the decision. He didn't like the idea of throwing Shepard under the bus because she had nothing to do with the situation either.

If there were a culprit, that would be Cilat Hor, the salarian Spectre who had unleashed the prothean AI into the ship. It had been a deliberate action from what Garrus had reported.

Although, Shepard had talked about a sort of control, so Hor may not have been fully aware of what was going on. Mordin hadn't had the occasion to talk to Matriarch Luko M'Tasa after Viantel, he had been too busy fixing Shepard's shoulder at the time, so he didn't have anything to compare...

Wait, no, he could interrogate Garrus and the Quarian. They both had briefly been controlled through the black orb. Then he would pay a little visit to his fellow compatriot in brigs.

Shepard rubbed her face with both hands. "How long will it take you to prepare your stuff, Solus?"

"Ten minutes," he estimated. "Will pretend have to drug Jeff to take supplies from medbay."

"I could use some painkillers, actually," the pilot winced.
"Me too," Garrus reminded Mordin.

"Fifteen minutes then."

"Fifteen minutes it is," Shepard sighed. "I have to talk to Vakarian. Dismissed."

Mordin took a few pills from the kit and gave them to Garrus before leaving his quarters. Javik was already gone, probably to check on the crew, but Jeff was waiting in the mess.

"Medbay?" Mordin proposed.

Jeff shook his head. "I have to go back to the cockpit, just in case." He gave a quick look over his shoulder. "Besides, I have to talk to you about something, in private."

"Be right back then." Mordin suddenly stopped and took the broken spur out of his pocket to hand it to Jeff. "Can't take it to medbay, because of Quarian."

"Oh, super gross," Jeff winced but he took it with caution nonetheless. "Oooh it's still warm," he realized, horrified, as Mordin turned to medbay. "Ooooooh I'm gonna be sick."

Mordin only spent a minute in medbay and retrieved all he needed, humming innocently. Karin and Miranda were still busy so Mordin was practically unnoticed. Jeff gave him back the broken spur with a disgusted noise and showed him the way. Mordin deactivated his magnetic boots to follow him to the second deck through the elevator shaft. He turned right at the exit by habit and decided to check on his lab while he was at it. The door between the reserve and his lab categorically refused to open, which meant the area was compromised.

Fuck, Mordin thought, fuck, fuck, fuck. He always tried to stay positive and to see problems as new challenges to overcome, new routes to discover, but, if his lab had been blown up, he would have lost months of work. And he didn't have time to lose everything and start over, even with a two years bonus. Fuck.

Mordin inhaled deeply to calm down. There was nothing he could do at the moment and anger wouldn't solve anything. He had to focus on the next task, focus on what he was capable of doing, so he turned heel and went to the cockpit to find Jeff, seated and watching a long stream of words on a small screen.

"Any news?" Mordin asked.

"No," Jeff sighed, "I'm just trying to keep up with Legion's work on the VI. Seems like he asked for an update of his databases to the Consensus while I wasn't looking and now he's converting their technology to upgrade the VI Garrus used in the Mako." He rubbed his eyes. "Which means the Normandy, a human-made ship based on a turio-human secret project with proprietary code from a terrorist organization, will run under a turian VI taken from a drone, adapted for a Mako, re-adapted for a ship in, like, one hour, and doped with geth code. Man, we're never going to pass the next inspection."

"Well within Omega's standards," Mordin guaranteed with a friendly pat on his shoulder.

Jeff smirked, his eyes sparkling with malice, and repositioned his cap. It sufficed to lift Mordin's spirit.

He had for Jeff the same feelings he once had for Veceno or his cousin Tal, a deep connection, both intellectual and spiritual. Humans would call it love but they tended to call every form of attachment with the same word, and it was too tinted by their culture and reproduction system for
them to consider another form. Turians would call it friendship, and again the term didn't suit
because of all the cultural implications the word carried. No, Mordin didn't have any desire for
Jeff, he didn't even want to touch him but he needed his presence. Jeff was good company, a
company Mordin could hardly go without nowadays.

If Mordin had been younger, he would have asked Jeff for a partnership. A salarian partnership
wasn't as restraining as a turian one. It required the interested parties to share their living quarters
and meals together – depending on the social agenda, of course – and to be present for one another,
to care for one another. Mordin believed it wasn't a big deal for a Human and he didn't even ask
Jeff to love him back, his friendship was enough, but he was too old for this sort of things. It would
be unfair to Jeff; Mordin couldn't ask him to live with him when he had so little time to offer back.
Besides, Jeff had joked when he had proposed a three parties partnership involving Shepard, only
to release the tension of the situation. He wouldn't commit to this kind of relationship. It had been a
bit cruel of him to even mention it but Jeff was unaware of Mordin's feelings. He hadn't been
malicious, just oblivious. Very much human actually.

"Wanted to talk?" Mordin asked, picking a few painkillers in his well furnished pockets for Jeff.

"Yeah," he replied, "it's about Corporal Dickhead."

"I'm all ears," Mordin said, his curiosity poked. "Well, metaphorically speaking."

Jeff smirked again and gulped the pills at once before talking. "The guy is trouble, we know that."
Mordin nodded. "I think Shepard knows it and she's always looking out for his next dick move but
she'll never admit it publicly. Anyway, I had the pleasure to discuss with the asshole earlier and he
proposed to abandon half the crew, Shepard included, to save his ass. I'm pretty sure now he
wanted confirmation his plan would work when he came to me in the lounge before acting on it."
Mordin nodded. "And then I had to get back to the cockpit to stop the ship and all. I went down to
medbay for my poor ol' ribs and Dickhead was in the cockpit when I came back. He's not supposed
to be in the cockpit, ever, and usually EDI locks him out of the rooms he's not authorized to go to,
but she's down so there is no control, he can go everywhere."

"What did he do in the cockpit?"

"I don't know. I was about to ask but then that recon drone or something passed over the ship, and
we had to get the fuck out because of a gigantic alien ship coming our way."

That rang a bell. Mordin had lived long enough on Omega to have seen new alien species pop up
once in a while, and also to have heard the rumors of all the unknown ships cruising through the
Terminus. Each system in Council Space was protected by a few ships detached from the turian
fleet, and more awaited near the local relay for reinforcement, but the Attican Traverse was a zone
of expansion where each species had to deal with their own security, and the Terminus had no such
forces. Each colony, city or settlement had to protect themselves. They were easy targets and some
regularly disappeared, leaving nothing behind, not even a survivor to tell. Mercenaries were
responsible ninety-nine percents of the time, but the remaining one percent couldn't be explained
like that, hence the rumors.

It was perfectly logical that the galaxy was actually inhabited by more than a dozen species. The
Council knew it too and had forbidden the opening of new routes and relays to prevent the
discovery of other species – which happened anyway, especially in the Terminus. As a result, only
technologically weak species could appear, species that had just discovered spacetravels and mass
effect fields. So far only the Humans had joined the galactic community that way since the treaty
and the Council's method had proven to be right. Humans sure did start a war but Turians would
have won if the Council hadn't intervened. The plan worked, but only with a specific category of
"Gigantic?" Mordin repeated.

"Yeah, enormous," Jeff confirmed. "Twelve kilometers by one from what I could read on the radars, and it wasn't alone, there was like a whole swarm of those all combined together in some sort of super structure behind. And, you know, since time is slower for them relatively to us, maybe they've been there for billions of our years and God only knows how advanced they are to survive in the galactic core. Shit, can you imagine that?"

There was a trace of excitement in Jeff's voice but also fear, a lot of it. Mordin chose not to talk about the rumors of gigantic ships appearing once or twice a century in the Sahrabarik system. The probability to fall upon one was too low to excessively worry Jeff. Instead, Mordin focused the conversation on a closer problem.

"Think was trying to highjack the Normandy?" Mordin asked, starting to prepare a few syringes of light sedatives. When Jeff frowned, he clarified: "Dickhead."

Jeff sighed, uncomfortable. "I don't know, man. I wish I just were paranoid, you know, because if my guts are right, shit, Shepard doesn't need that in her life and the guy could be dangerous for us."

Mordin noticed once more Jeff's hands moved a lot when he talked. It made him smile a little. Pilot habit, maybe. "Javik has doubts."

"Javik has doubts about everyone," Jeff snorted.

"Had doubts about the tattooed girl," Mordin insisted. "Didn't need to touch her to be right. Good judge of character in general and fierce protector of Shepard. Garrus also defiant of Dickhead."

"And Zaeed too," Jeff added, "but you gotta see the pattern there. We're all guys who care a little too much for Shepard. We're biased. Ask Ashley or James and they'll tell you Dickhead is a nice guy with a thing for sarcasm. I bet they also love to see someone finally talking back to Shepard."

Jeff was right. They couldn't be fair with John because of their attachment to Shepard, but they didn't have to be fair.

"Not a trial," Mordin shrugged to make the discussion look casual. "Won't decide of Dickhead's fate. Just have to be more cautious around him."

He already had a few ideas to cockblock Corporal Dickhead. He had started his list as soon as he had realized who that man was and the time had come to use them. Well, for now they were stuck in the Normandy but he was confident in their odds to survive this day.

"Yeah..." Jeff rubbed his chin, his eyes on the screen for a few seconds. "You think I should tell Shepard?"

"Yes," Mordin approved with conviction. "Should know, but not now. Has too much on her plate and who knows what will happen to us all in the next weeks."

"You're right."

"Rarely wrong," Mordin innocently commented.

Jeff gave him a small smile in return. Then lost it the next second. "You have a spot."
"Hm?"

The pilot pointed at Mordin's pocket and indeed there was a spot of blue blood on the fabric. Mordin fumbled a bit and took the broken spur out. Jeff lost three shades of pink.

"Oh God, can you stop waving that thing under my nose?"

"Forgot about it," Mordin admitted, putting it back in his pocket. It could wait, and he was kind of amused by Jeff's reactions, to be honest.

He finished the sedative shots and tucked the small syringes in another pocket before going back to the mess hall – due to the quite elevated number of injured, Shepard had decided to move the debriefing close to medbay. Legion was absent but its work was more important than the reunion. Besides, it was a machine. What were two years to it?

Grunt, now wearing a bath towel around the waist, floated to Mordin with excitement and even gently bumped his head with the Professor's. That little gesture of love surprised Mordin. He was a Salarian, Grunt a Krogan. Even if the child hadn't been exposed to the culture of his people and their hatred for Salarians, he should have shown some reservations to a parent of another species. Okeer had been around the tank a lot longer than Mordin after all, and the prenatal smells were as important as the ones surrounding the baby at birth.

But Grunt wasn't a baby. Mordin had estimated his age to fifteen standard years, not even one year old on Tuchanka.

Maybe a late impregnation had different results.

Wrex would have been of great help on the matter, Mordin thought. It made him sigh a little. It wasn't the first time he missed that damn Krogan and that certainly wasn't the last now.

"... two years," Shepard announced and Mordin snapped out of his head.

Another man of another species should have carefully watched the crew during all of Shepard and Jeff's explanations but it took Mordin only a second the evaluate the risks. Those who didn't care: Miranda, the Quarian, Massani, Dickhead, Grunt, Gardner. Those truly disturbed but who wouldn't react badly: Alenko, Karin, Donnelly, Greg, Cortez, Westmoreland, Campbell, Samantha. Potential risks: Vega, Daniels and Williams. Unknown: the Drell.

The silence that fell on the mess lasted well over the second Mordin had needed and, of course, Williams was the first to talk.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Language," Javik reminded her by automatism.

"Go fuck yourself!" Williams spat, turning to the an unimpressed Prothean. "My family probably thinks I'm dead!"

"Probably," Javik confirmed.

A provocation, Mordin understood as he watched Williams' anger explode on her face. Javik had preferred to take the blow instead of leaving it for Shepard. Mordin saw the Prothean move before Williams even started to throw her fist at him. Javik caught her forearm while she was still extending it and used her own force against her to make her pivot in the air. Williams still had her magnetic boots locked though and the sudden movement made her fall to the ground, her back
taking a weird angle in the process. She yelped both in surprise and pain.

"Be angry all you want," Javik told the crew while Grunt applauded, "but I will not tolerate violence."

"So we're supposed to keep our mouth shut?" Daniels angrily asked as Vega and Alenko helped Williams to get up.

"I know the situation is difficult," Shepard said with her commanding voice. It always reminded Mordin of the STG and, quite frankly, it made him shiver pleasantly. "I know you all lost precious time with your family and friends. I can never give you the time we lost back and I'm sorry for that. But it's done and there is no going back." She let that sink for a few seconds. "I've asked you a lot lately," she continued on a less tensed tone. "I asked you to fight for Omega and to raid Cerberus' headquarters with me. We lost a lot of good men and women that day, and we were all resigned to die when we lost the first Normandy. We got lucky and managed to get the fuck out of there but I asked you to put your life in danger, again and again with each new mission. Because that's your job, soldiers," Shepard reminded them coldly. "You did not join the army to go on a cruise. You did not agree to follow a Spectre for the sighting. Your job is to follow orders. Mine is to make sure you all come back alive and I still see you all standing after what happened today." She straightened her back. "Yes, we lost two years, but we're alive. We collectively survived an accident with a one hundred percents death rate. You all accomplished formidable work today and I'll make sure you're rewarded for it."

"That'd be great if you had any power left, Commander," Williams snorted through clenched teeth. "You also disappeared for two years. What did the Council think of that?"

"We couldn't contact the Council yet," Shepard replied, hands behind her back. "The quantum entanglement communication system uses too much energy and we're still running on the emergency generator. It will be done when possible. For now we have to focus on restarting the reactor and Legion is working on it."

Mordin had thought the Quarian would have said something then but she stayed quiet in her corner, as far as possible from Garrus despite the makeshift filtering mask she had.

Williams' mouth deformed into a bitter wince.

"I quit," she said, calmly but with contained anger. It surprised a lot of people, even Shepard. "Keep your fucking reward, I don't care, I'm done with you, your bullshit and your fucking attitude. You ruined my life for the last time, Shepard."

Williams didn't wait and turned heel to go to crew quarters, Alenko following her to try to reason with her. Vega also wanted to go but he stayed with the rest of the crew, staring angrily to Shepard. The Commander didn't show any particular emotion.

"Anyone else?" she asked. Dickhead raised his hand. "Not you, you still owe me over a million credits."

He did not protest or mention his supposed kid, Mordin noticed, and by the look of Jeff and Garrus, they both noted it too.

Gardner shrugged. "Can't complain, I signed up for the adventure. As for our families, I know it must have been hard on them but the Commander is right, we're alive. Think how happy they'll be to know we're still kicking it."
"And the Alliance," Cortez smirked. "They'll owe us two years of salary for one day of actual work."

"Oh shit, your salaries," Shepard realized, horrified at the idea that she had to pay for the non-Alliance personnel on board.

That made a few people smile and laugh. Mordin believed nobody would say or try anything else from now on. It would take time for everybody to adjust to the new situation, and it wouldn't be easy. A lot of problem actually awaited them but for now they had earned a break. What was a day compared to two years, after all?

TBC

Note
This is the fifth draft of this chapter, which explains a bit why it took me so long to update Semper Fi. Life has been a bit chaotic lately, and I couldn't write when I actually wanted to. I can't promise anything for the next weeks/months. The story will be updated whenever I can update it.

And I made a survey about Semper Fi too: goo.gl/forms/CIfesW1Qxm It's about your reading habits and what you think of the plot, the characters, stuff like that. If the link doesn't show up, you can find one on my profile or on the tumblr I've made for Semper Fi too.
Joker's crutch helped a little but walking with a broken spur was a pain in the ass – or the whole leg, actually. It was kind of crazy but Garrus missed the absence of gravity, especially now that he had to walk all the way to the communication room. From day one he had thought the Normandy SR-2 had terrible design flaws and the location of that room was one of them. Lab2 was sealed due to a breach so he had to pass through Lab1, or the complete mess that was Lab1, dangling wires from the ceiling, artifacts on the ground, broken or not, shattered glass and papers all over the place. It would take him days to clean it all and sort what was still useful from the rest.

Garrus gave a quick look to the black monolith on the ground next to his computer station, still shimmering green in defiance, intact despite everything that had happened today. Would the prothean AI still be functional? Was it really into EDI's core, like Joker and Traynor thought? How were they supposed to separate it from EDI? The Council had banned any sort of research on artificial intelligences, so of course every species did their own secret experiments, but Garrus had never learned how to proceed in a situation like that. What was it to begin with? He was pretty sure the merger of two AIs, one of them behind thousands of years old and from another civilization far more advanced, wasn't covered in any manual.

Maybe the Geths knew. They were AIs after all, that kind of made them the experts on that matter – although being a Turian didn't make Garrus an expert on everything turian. He sighed and kept moving to the door. That wasn't even his problem. The Normandy wasn't his ship and he didn't even like EDI in the first place.

But Shepard did, he thought as the door opened on his mentor, leaning on the wall in front of the communication room, her arms folded and her profile a bit deformed due to contusions and bruises. Garrus felt guilty. He was responsible for that. Shepard had told him it wasn't his fault, he had been controlled by something or someone, but that didn't make a big difference to him. He should have been able to fight back, to break the spell or whatever. But, instead, he had attacked her and hit her and it had felt good. It was the worst part of it all. Garrus' memories of the events were confused at best, but he remembered how liberating it had felt to let everything go, to fight without restriction, to hurt Shepard, his enemy.

Deep down, he knew those feelings weren't his. He had come to love Shepard the same way he had loved Elin – adoration, that's the word Shepard would have used instead of love, he remembered. He respected her for her strength of character, for her blind obsession to be faithful to her bosses regardless of the consequences for her. He admired her wile and her experience in combat, and even more when she managed to avoid a confrontation all together when she could. He envied how easy it was for her to lead her people, to inspire them to be their best. He cherished the few moments of abandon she let him see, the laughter, looks and smiles they shared, either in an awkward embrace after sex or in plain sight, in the middle of the mess at dinner. He felt lucky and proud to be one of the few Shepard could call a friend. So it pained him even more to see her like that, knowing he had hurt her.

But he wasn't allowed to talk about it anymore, Shepard's order. She had told him it wasn't his fault, and she was responsible for most of his own injuries anyway, so there was no reason to linger on the subject. They had better things to do than feel shitty over something none of them could
have controlled in the first place. She was right, and Garrus had been once more impressed by how she could compartmentalize and move on, but it'd take time before he could let go.

And it didn't help that he wanted badly to kiss and caress Shepard, to be kissed and caressed in return by her soft lips and many fingers, to make her moan, sigh and tremble, to bury himself in her and enjoy her warmth, the pressure on his cock, the marvelous release shaking her sore body telling him he had done something right, for once. Sex would make him forget for an hour that fucking day and all the problems they were facing now, it would also wash the pain and fatigue away for a moment, but Shepard would never say yes, not in those conditions. No comfort sex, she had been very clear on that.

It should have been a deal breaker, even for a Turian as disrespectful of the social norms as Garrus, but he had accepted nonetheless. Having sex with Shepard, his mentor and friend, didn't only feel good, it had felt right, a normality Garrus had missed since his first day as a Spectre. He snorted. He was seen as a rebellious young man by his people, a loner avoiding social events and jibbing following rules, but in the end he was a Turian raised in the Hierarchy. Granted, he had had few friends but he had sought intimacy with them like any normal Turian. He hadn't fought Elin's influence nor discouraged her interest in him. He had blindly followed Shepard, even when he had disagreed with her, just because she was his mentor. Maybe Garrus was rebellious by Hierarchy standards, but he was pretty sure he was a joke for any other Turian – and an alien wouldn't even see the difference, he'd bet.

"Something's wrong?" Shepard asked, somehow annoyed.

Garrus blinked, not understanding where her tone came from. He hadn't talked yet or done anything... Oh. Right. The snort.

"Just pitying myself, Commander," he shrugged with only one shoulder because the other arm had to support his weight with the crutch.

Shepard relaxed a little. She was tensed and exhausted – and covered with bruises, Garrus clearly saw. She was also waiting for the crew to crucify her. Shepard had anticipated a shitstorm after the debriefing earlier but not much happened. Williams had quit and stormed out, some people were clearly uncomfortable and a bit lost, but nobody had yelled or threatened to do something else. And Shepard didn't see this lack of reaction as a good sign, she probably thought the storm would hit later so she awaited it anxiously. Great. He'd have to be extra careful as to not trigger anything – he was too tired and sore to deal with an argument with Shepard right now.

Although, she could use a moment of relaxation generously offered by yours truly, Garrus thought. That meant lying to her though, and he doubted an hour of awkward and potentially painful sex was worth the risk.

"Any news?"

"No," Garrus answered, shaking his head, "everything is fine." Shepard frowned. "As fine as it can be considering the situation," he corrected.

It had taken over three hours to Legion to relaunch the reactor and not a problem had showed up so far. The engine was running smoothly, the mass effect field was deployed and stable, gravity was back, as were the ventilation, the air conditioner, the communication system and the all of that. Not even a tube had exploded due to ice, and the damages were mostly outside, on the hull, but nothing that couldn't be fixed on Omega within a few days. The inside of the ship was a mess though, and it would take some cleaning and fixing. But, considering the last twenty standard hours, or two years, whatever, everything was fine.
"Your leg?"

"Not exactly brand new but functioning," Garrus replied, lifting his foot a little to prove his point.

Solus had reattached the broken spur in ten minutes with a stalk and some staples. Garrus wasn't authorized to put weight on his foot for a week and had to keep an eye on the coloration of his spur, but that was it. He had been pretty lucky in the end. It could have been a lot more serious. If Tali'Zorah's spanner had hit him in the knee instead of the spur when the mass effect field had collapsed at their exit of the relay network, Garrus would have had to spend months in recovery. Ironically enough, the Quarian would probably stay in quarantine for a while since Garrus' flying spur had broken her mask. That'd teach her not to throw her tools around.

Garrus dared to look at Shepard in the eyes. She was probably going to tell him to fuck off or something like that but he had to ask.

"And you?"

Shepard stared at him for long seconds, slightly frowning, but she eventually sighed when she understood Garrus wouldn't let go.

"Fine," she reluctantly answered. "Been better but fine." She turned to the communication room. "Traynor, you're done?"

"Almost, Commander," the Specialist replied from inside.

Case closed, Garrus thought as he leaned too on the wall. He could see Traynor from where he was, busy with the quantum entanglement communication device. The thing needed some calibrations from what Garrus knew. Even if he understood the science behind the machine, he had little to no knowledge of how it actually worked. Particles were synchronized on the quantum level, yes, fantastic, lasers were probably involved in the process but he really didn't care at the moment.

It took a few minutes for Traynor to give the all green – her left arm was immobilized due to a broken clavicle and it didn't make her work easier.

"Do you want me to stay to refine the parameters during the communication?" Traynor asked as Garrus followed Shepard. "EDI usually does that but..."

"It's fine," Shepard interrupted. "Dismissed, Specialist. This conversation is between the Council and us Spectres."

"Of course," Traynor nodded, a bit intimidated.

Garrus gave her a poor smile to cheer her up a little. He liked Traynor. They often worked together since she was fluent in Prothean and knew a lot in programming. Garrus had considered asking her to use their first names but almost everybody called Traynor by her last name, regardless of ranks and relationship – only Joker and Solus called her Samantha, sometimes a shorter version, Sam. Maybe she didn't like her first name, Garrus didn't know and he didn't want to ask in case it was rude or something. If she ever started to call him Garrus, he wouldn't protest though.

Shepard sighed and rubbed her forehead while Traynor walked out. "Wait, Traynor," Shepard called. "See with Javik for a shore leave on Omega tonight. We all need booze after today."

"Gladly, Commander," the Specialist approved.
She walked fast and with a clear stiffness out of the corridor that amused Garrus a little. Booze was a fantastic idea indeed, he thought.

"Get your skinny ass in here Vakarian," Shepard barked.

"Yessir," Garrus slightly mocked as he limped his way in the communication room.

It hadn't suffered much, Garrus noticed. A few screens were damaged or on the floor but nothing dramatic at first sight. The door locked itself behind him when Shepard entered her ID and encryption key in the computer. Each Spectre had their own, renewed on an irregular schedule, with a set of biometric information to include to authenticate the identity of the caller. Shepard's sure were outdated, as were Garrus', but maybe someone on the Citadel would be curious as to why two Spectres missing for two years suddenly called from a ship supposed to have sunk. Garrus would definitely be curious.

He entered his own ID and encryption key and they waited. It always took a minute for the quantum entanglement communication device to connect but this time there was no telling how long it would take – or if anyone would take the call.

"So, shore leave, huh?" Garrus asked as he leaned on the workbench to rest his leg.

"Yeah," Shepard sighed, "and don't find yourself a serial killer this time, okay?"

"Ah," Garrus snorted with humor, "good one." Shepard smirked but didn't try to push the conversation further. "I was contemplating the idea of relaxing with you, actually," he said.

"Me?" Shepard asked mockingly. "Have you seen my face lately, Vakarian?"

"Seen mine?" he joked.

"In my nightmares, sometimes."

Garrus chuckled but that one hurt a little. He had feared Shepard would completely close on herself but she could still joke as long as it wasn't too personal, apparently.

"Well I picture it between your legs, to be honest," he replied, deadpan serious.

"Wow," Shepard nervously laughed, "easy there, big guy."

"No, really," he continued, playful, "it's a perfect fit and the choking hazard really works for me." This time, Shepard laughed for good and Garrus felt his chest warm up. Until he remembered he wasn't exactly honest with her. "I could do with some sexy distraction, honestly," he said more seriously. "I know you're against sex for comfort and I'm not asking you for that, but I think we both could use sex to relax after today."

"The line between comfort and relaxation is pretty thin in this case," Shepard noticed, her cheeks a bit red.

"I know," Garrus admitted. "That's why you're the final judge of that. If you want to have fun, perfect. If not, well..." He shrugged to signify it didn't matter. "It's up to you."

"You could explore new territories," Shepard suggested after a few seconds of silence. A diversion. That didn't sound good but Garrus didn't want to insist.

"You said no serial killers," he joked.
Shepard smirked. "There's plenty of hot turian mercenaries on Omega, and if you're into weird
kinks involving almost dying, I'm sure it can be arranged."

"I've almost died enough for one day."

"Oh we died," Shepard corrected, "we totally died, from what Joker tried to explain to me. We
ceased to exist in the Miko-something-something plan of existence so we're technically, and
probably legally, zombies."

"We're what?" Garrus asked.

"Zombies," Shepard repeated. "The living dead rising from their graves to eat brains. Never heard
of that? It's a pretty big part of pop culture."

"Human pop culture," Garrus added. "And nothing of that makes sense," he continued to keep the
conversation light and flowing. "First, you can't be a living dead, you're either dead or alive. Then,
why do you bury your dead? You're polluting perfectly good ground." Shepard opened her mouth
to protest but Garrus interrupted her to finish. "And why would zombies eat brains? There are
easier organs to harvest, especially in your squishy kind."

"I don't know," Shepard shrugged, "it's science fiction anyway. Why would a corpse pollute the
ground?"

"Because it's full of metal."

"Turians are full of metal."

"Humans have iron in their blood too."

"Yeah but we don't rust." She blinked. "I think." She didn't seem very convinced but she kept
going. "What do you do with your dead if you don't bury them? You burn them?"

"No," Garrus shook his head, "Turians don't burn well and the fumes are toxic, actually. We leave
the bodies to the animals in the doedarumen."

"Oh." Realization hit her. "So you mean, all those skulls and bones hanging above us during Uder's
ceremony, it was actually people let there to rot?"

"Yep."

"Romantic," she winced.

"Romanticism is a silly concept for Turians. It makes as little sense as your zombies."

"I know," Shepard mockingly approved. "I never expected flowers or chocolates from you, don't
worry."

"It's part of your courtship process, right?" Garrus asked. "Do I have to do that?"

"If you do, I'll shove whatever you buy me up your ass."

"This is getting interesting," he joked.

Shepard smirked but her attention was caught by the quantum entanglement communication device
coming to life. She turned to walk to the center of the room, Garrus following her slowly with the
crutch. The hologram started to form, full of statics and blurry area, but the general shape of a
Salarian appeared nonetheless. It wasn't Councilor Valern though, Garrus noticed, too tall and the long dull robe with a hood wasn't like him. Their face was in the dark, a few reflections shimmering in their big black eyes. They had some sort of pale tattoos on their cheeks and chin. Definitely not Valern.

Had he been replaced? Councilor was a pretty stable job but there were still three ways to replace one of them. First, death, obviously, and a certain number of Councilors had been assassinated over the centuries. A major shift in politics in their own species could also work. For example, each new elected Primarch had the right to call for a conclave to replace the turian Councilor. Deon Fedorian had done that and convinced his peers to choose Sparatus to represent their species. The last case involved the Councilors themselves. If they couldn't work together, they could ask for a replacement but that meant all three of them had to resign. It had never happened and Salarians were famous for their complicated and shady politic system so Valern had most likely been replaced after the rise of a new powerful Dalatrass somewhere on Sur'Kesh.

"Commander Shepard," the Salarian said, their voice like a whisper. That didn't sound good, Garrus thought. Shepard should have been addressed by her Spectre title and he shouldn't have been ignored like that either. He may have been under Shepard's authority – or was he still? no idea – but that wasn't a reason to dismiss him like that.

"Sir," Shepard replied with a sharp salute. "May I speak to the Councilors? It's important."

The Salarian looked at Shepard for long seconds in silence, hands behind their back. "You may not. Only Spectres have the privilege to talk directly to a Councilor about urgent matter. Send your request for an interview through the official channel."

So they had been fired, Garrus understood. That wasn't surprising considering they had been absent for two years for the rest of the galaxy. And it could have been worse. The Council could have decreed them rogue agents, especially with a clone of Shepard playing mercs in the Terminus.

"I don't have time for that, Sir," Shepard replied bluntly. It surprised the Salarian. "I have important news. Cilat Hor is..."

"Dead," the Salarian interrupted coldly, "or is he going to magically reappear like you just did?"

"He's very much alive, Sir. He's currently my prisoner because he tried to kill us all. He caused a shut down of the reactor of my ship while we were in the relay network."

"It's impossible. Spectre Hor was a trusted agent of the Council."

"He may have been influenced or controlled," Shepard insisted. "Our on-board computer died in the process too but I'm sure we can find something to convince the Council we're telling the truth. The Normandy has been ejected into the galactic core, some sort of purge of the network from what I understood, and we cruised for an hour or so close to a super massive black hole. We managed to restart the reactor and come back to the Sahrabarik system hours ago. Omega noticed us at the relay exit and they have sent a patrol. We were granted permission to dock for repair. It should take us three to four days to repair and restock, then I'll gladly head back to the Citadel and explain myself directly in front of the Council."

The Salarian stared at Shepard for longer this time, still ignoring Garrus – did the communication device properly work? Maybe he didn't appear on the Salarian's side.

"The Council cannot help you," the Salarian eventually decreed. "Have a good day, Commander Shepard."
And the communication was shut down, leaving both Shepard and Garrus stunned in the middle of the communication room.

"What the fuck just happened?" Shepard asked after a minute of silence, not even angry.

"I think we're fired," Garrus answered.

"But..." Shepard turned to him and she looked more offended than anything. "It's unfair! I'm willing to explain everything and to bring proof. They should at least listen to me!"

Garrus only nodded. He agreed with Shepard, their lay-off was cavalier at best. Granted, the situation was extraordinary, three Spectres didn't magically reappear every day, especially with a story like theirs. Maybe they should have brought Cilat Hor to comm room, maybe he would have been taken seriously, but Shepard hadn't wanted to take that risk, even with the orb destroyed. Or maybe contacting the Council first hadn't been Shepard's brightest idea.

"Fuck them," Shepard decided, interrupting Garrus. He had to take a step aside to avoid her hands thrown up in the air. "I'll become the best goddamned space pirate of the Terminus, I don't care! We'll be space zombie pirates!"

Garrus snorted but he quickly realized Shepard's eyes were red and watery. She was about to cry. For a second, he looked elsewhere and pretended he hadn't noticed, but his visor kept on giving him her vitals and it didn't look good. Garrus hesitantly put a hand on Shepard's shoulder and her first reflex was to push him away, as expected. He grabbed her wrist, so tiny in his hand, and she turned her head, refusing to look at him. Garrus didn't force her. He let her calm down for a minute and released her slowly, leaving her with a new mark on her delicate. Shepard took a deep breath.

"We'll head back to the Citadel as soon as we can," she commanded, her voice still shaking a bit. "I have asses to kick."

"Maybe we have another option," Garrus said, taking a step back.

"I was joking about the whole pirate thing," Shepard grunted.

"Oh, really?" he mocked. "And here I was, already picturing myself feasting on brains, listening to Javik's plans to conquer the Terminus and restore the Prothean Empire while Solus drugged us all. Damn shame, Captain." Shepard clicked and the little movement of her head told Garrus she was rolling her eyes. "I was thinking about my uncle, actually," he said more seriously.

"The Primarch?" Shepard asked, turning to Garrus. She had choked back her tears, he noticed.

"He's not supposed to help Spectres," Garrus continued, "or even a family member, and maybe he won't, but it's worth a try, don't you think?"

Shepard thought about it for a few seconds before rubbing her face with both hands.

"Okay," she sighed, "okay, do it."

"Aye aye, Captain."

He limped to the console and connected his omnitool to it. The contact information he had may have been outdated but, with a bit of luck... An entering call popped-up on the screen less than a minute later. Garrus mentally thanks the Spirits and all the gods he knew, and transferred the communication to the quantum entanglement device. The hologram of his uncle appeared as Garrus and Shepard walked back to the scanner.
"Garrus?" Deon asked, his voice broken with fear and hope. He seemed to have aged ten years and had a new piercing on his left fringe, a single ring this time.

"Hi, uncle," Garrus saluted, a weight on his chest. He hadn't thought of it but his disappearance had probably caused a few problems for his relatives too – if his father had even noticed his absence, but Deon must have told him. Councilor Sparatus would have informed the Primarch for sure. And by the look on Deon's face, he was relieved. No doubt he would have pinched Garrus' mandibles if he had had the chance, and the thought of that annoying gesture of affection made Garrus smile a little. "Sorry, took me a while to call," he joked.

"You little shit," Deon dryly laughed but quickly lost his humor. "I worried sick, you dumb kid! Where the fuck have you been? Everybody thinks you're dead, you – giant idiot!"

"Long story," Garrus said. "I'm calling because I need your help, uncle."

Deon straightened. As expected, the query didn't please him. He looked at Garrus for a few seconds then eyed in Shepard's direction. She stared back at him, chin up, eyes still red, bruises all over the face. Deon clicked but quickly recomposed himself.

"Are you pregnant?" he asked with a conspiratorial smile.

"Yes," Shepard replied, rolling her eyes, "I carry the impossible hybrid spawns of your nephew."

Garrus could tell she was only playing along to please the Primarch. Truth be told, he didn't find the joke funny either. He was not irresponsible to the point of knocking up a friend – he couldn't with Shepard anyway but still.

"I knew it," Deon smirked. "What can I do for you, my darlings?" Shepard clearly frowned this time. "It's not exactly easy for me either," Deon defended himself, a bit annoyed, "so excuse me for trying to not freak out."

"I'm sorry, uncle," Garrus apologized before Shepard could give him a piece of her mind. "I'll explain everything to you later, I swear."

"All right. How can I help you?"

Garrus exchanged a look with Shepard, and she took a step back to let him talk. Awesome, Garrus thought.

"The Council fired us," he explained.

"Officially, you're on a very long undercover mission," Deon corrected. "But, yeah, you're fired, and you should be grateful they didn't put a bounty on your heads for going rogue."

"We didn't and..."

"You'll explain later," Deon sighed, "yeah, I heard the first time. So you want me to influence the Council for your reintegration, I suppose?"

"We just want a chance to talk to them," Shepard said.

"That would be considered as influencing the Council," Deon insisted, "but, sure, I can do that. Anything else?"

"Huh," Garrus hesitated, uncomfortable, "considering our assets must have been frozen or
redistributed, and we have to do repairs and refill the stocks..."


Money was a concept that eluded most Turians, especially those never leaving the comfort of the Hierarchy. Money was just one of those complicated alien concepts when everything was provided to a citizen. Housing depended on your job and marital status, bonds were exchanged for food in stores or for meals in a communitarian kitchen anywhere in the Hierarchy. The same bonds were used for clothing or anything else, but they weren't considered as a currency, like the Council credits. Everybody was given the same amount of bonds, whatever the tier, and you couldn't capitalize on them – it wouldn't even occur to a Turian to pile them up for later, which was the reason why Turians were usually terrible merchants.

Turians were taught money was nothing else than a resource to use with parsimony if they ever were to live outside of the Hierarchy, and there even were classes for newcomers on the Citadel regarding the management of their budget. Garrus had found it quite similar to the bond system in the end so it was only natural that the same injunctions fell upon the matter. A responsible Turian never asked for extra bonds because the system was just and generously provided for everyone. A responsible Turian living outside the Hierarchy never asked for extra money either because they had to know how to manage their resources. Begging was not an option.

"I'm sorry uncle," Garrus repeated, head low.

"Where are you?"

"We're heading for Omega."

"An agent will contact you," Deon assured, already keying on a screen outside of the holographic window. "I want to know the full story," he continued, not even looking at them. "This could very much cost me my head and I like my head where it is. I need to know everything to be prepared, understood?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Good. We'll be in touch then."

"He was pissed," Shepard commented once the communication over.

"Yes he was," Garrus confirmed, cracking his neck to release the tension, "but he'll help us. I'll write the report and compile some data to support our story."

"It's not a story," Shepard frowned, "it's the truth."

"I know, but would you believe it if you hadn't lived it?"

Shepard sighed, annoyed. "Probably not. Alright, I'll deal with Omega, we're docking soon."

"I'll talk to the agent," Garrus added. "Might be easier, Turian to Turian."

"You?" Shepard snorted. "Volunteering to talk to people? Wow, that trip to the galactic core did things to you, Vakarian."

"It's the painkillers, don't get used to it."

Shepard smiled and patted him on the arm as she walked out.
It took over an hour to Garrus to gather the data miraculously saved by the different computer systems on board the Normandy since the shut down of the AI and write a detailed report explaining what had happened during the day. The whole thing reminded him of C-Sec. It was weird to not have Chellick around, breathing down his neck every five minutes and making sure Garrus wouldn't say or do something that would compromise the whole unite. Executor Venari Pallin, the head of C-Sec and the Turian with the higher tier on the Citadel after the Councilor and the ambassador, had little patience when it came to youngsters crossing the line, even if that meant finally getting results. Garrus wasn't the only one Pallin had kept an eye on, C-Sec was full of Turians not really suited for a proper life in the Hierarchy, but it sure had felt like it.

Pallin had succeeded to Argoth Vakarian, Garrus' father, and shared a lot with the old fart. They both were "by-the-book" Turians, so respectful of the rules and laws, it was surprising they could do any work at all. No wonder they had become such good friends during their twenty-two years of service together in C-Sec. Argoth had been older though, with a higher tier, and he had naturally endorsed a mentoring role towards the brilliant and promising Pallin. Maybe Pallin had felt obligated to care for his mentor's son, or maybe he really didn't like rebellious agents in his well-oiled organization. Either way, Pallin had placed Garrus under Chellick's authority, in a division requiring more work on a computer than on the ground.

Garrus honestly hadn't cared for the lack of action. It had pleased him to not have to talk to his colleagues or to not have to watch their back during an intervention. His loner reputation had discouraged any attempts from his unite to spend more than the required time with him, and it had been just fine. Even during the Cerberus attack on the Citadel, he had counted on his Mantis and nothing else, nobody else, by reflex. Chellick had found him eventually, but Garrus had kept moving on without paying attention to him. The whole missile-in-the-face situation had actually been Chellick's fault. He had been shot in the leg, in the middle of a plaza, and Garrus had had to abandon his position to rescue him. Then he had also been shot by an inferno bullet which got stuck in his armor's plastron, and as he fell, the missile had knocked him off. Without Chellick, Garrus would have dealt with what was left of the dozen Cerberus soldiers and the Atlas by himself like countless times that day and moved on. Instead, he had woken up in the middle of a C-Sec precinct, half his face almost reaped off, and had had to listen to Pallin scolding him for what had seem like an eternity.

"Don't you have something better to do, Sir?" Garrus had retorted.

Pallin had looked at him with contained rage. Garrus had known he was right. The Executor shouldn't have wasted his time trying to discipline a lower rank officer like Garrus in the middle of such a mess. He had had teams to coordinate, assaults to prepare, the whole Citadel to take back.

"This is not over," the Executor had threatened and he had walked away, barking orders.

Garrus had managed to get back on his feet, stolen a couple of painkillers, stimulants, ration bars and water bottles, grabbed his Mantis and gone back to the battlefield.

"Hey, Ugly." Garrus frowned and raised his head to stare at Corporal Dickhead walking towards him down the bridge in the CIC. "There's a Turian asking for you at the airlock. Said he was a friend."

"Thanks," Garrus reluctantly replied. He hit sent on the holoscreen and straightened his back. He hated to use the computers in the CIC because the workbenches were too low but Lab1 was just too much of a mess. "Is Shepard around?"

"Yessir!" Dickhead mocked with a sharp salute. "Corporal John Shepard, fifth fleet, engineering division, at your service, Sir!"
"The other Shepard," Garrus clicked.

"Oh that one! She went on shore leave with the others." John smirked and folded his arms the same way as Shepard. It was unsettling. "So?" he asked.

"So what?"

"How does it feel to be abandoned by the glorious Commander Shepard now, hm?"

"She did not abandon me," Garrus replied coldly, "I had a report to finish." He grabbed the crutch and started walking to the airlock. John followed him.

"Hm hm, hm hm," he nodded, "sure, buddy, whatever makes you sleep at night. That's seriously compromise your chances to fuck her tonight though."

Garrus chose to ignore him and walked out of the Normandy as fast as he could with the crutch. There were a lot of Turians around the ship but only one obviously waiting for someone in the middle of all the tumult – workers all over the place, a dry dock with construction cranes and transporters of various sizes around. Only one was obviously waiting, leaning on a crate and looking around. He was a bit small for a Turian, not as much as Kryik but certainly under the standards, with a muscular body under colorful clothes more common on the Citadel than on Omega. His skin was fair and had the greenish undertone from levo colonies, with mauve betthen tattoos on his mandibles. He didn't come to meet Garrus, letting him limp all the way down instead, and didn't offer him his arm either. That started well.

"Hi," Garrus said, "I'm..."

"I know who you are, kid," the Turian sighed. "Why do you think I'd be there otherwise?" He had a strong accent from Syglar and some nerve. How could he call Garrus a kid? The guy didn't seem old enough for that.

"I don't know," Garrus replied, "target practice?" The agent frowned. "Dressed like that, I don't see any other explanation," Garrus mocked.

"You're a funny one, aren't you?" the Turian said, looking at Garrus straight in the eyes. "Lantar Sidonis."

"Garrus Vakarian."

"I know," Sidonis sighed annoyed. "So, I see you started to repair and I was supposed to take care of that. Who's the contractor? You have a bill or something at least?"

"No idea," Garrus admitted, looking around, "Shepard dealt with that."

"Where is she?"

"Probably in a bar. If I had to guess, I'd say Afterlife."

"Can you contact her?"

"Trust me, it's not a good idea right now."

"So I have to work with you?" Sidonis frowned.

"Yes, you do," Garrus clicked. "I happen to also be a Spectre and my mentor trusts me enough to deal with you."
"Yet you need the help of the Hierarchy, Spectre," Sidonis remarked. "Aren't you supposed to work for the Council?"

"Aren't you supposed to take your orders and do your job?" Garrus retorted.

"Oh I will," the agent assured. "I know what I'm doing, contrary to some."

"And what are you doing, exactly?" Garrus snorted.

"I usually help people disappear," the Turian grinned, "and that can be interpreted in many ways."

An extractor doubled with a termination agent then, Garrus thought. He never imagined the Hierarchy had men like that in the Terminus Systems but they probably were interesting source of information, and it never hurt to eliminate rogue elements.

"We can leave for Palaven in an hour, you, Shepard and me," Sidonis added more seriously.

"And the crew?" Garrus asked. "The ship?"

"Not part of the deal," Sidonis shrugged.

"Shepard will never accept."

"She doesn't need to."

"Ah," Garrus laughed, "good luck with that."

"No trip to Palaven then. Fine by me. It could get ugly. I feel the urge to punch you in the face for some reason."

"The feeling is mutual."

Sidonis smirked. He keyed on his omnitool. "My contacts. Send me the bills. Don't contact the Hierarchy. Everything goes through me. And keep your head low while you're on Omega. The Council never officially decreed Shepard dead but her absence in the Terminus has been noticed and I've heard some really crazy theories."

"Anything about her becoming a mercenary?" Garrus asked, checking the contact information Sidonis had just sent him. They were officially off the clones case but it didn't hurt to ask.

"Nothing like that, no," Sidonis shook his head.

That surprised Garrus but maybe the Council had eliminated them without telling Shepard – why would they inform her anyway? The situation was already complicated enough for her, she didn't need to know copies of herself had been killed by a colleague.

"Alright, my work is done," Sidonis said, finally getting his ass off the crate to stretch his back, "for now at least. Keep me posted and don't talk about whatever you did for the past two years."

"I wouldn't know what to say," Garrus replied, bitter, but Sidonis didn't get it. He didn't know what had happened, Garrus realized now that he was thinking about it. Deon had probably judged unnecessary to give too much information to a sleeping agent, the last link of a long chain. That explained why Sidonis gave him attitude. The guy probably thought Shepard and Garrus had fucked up a mission pretty badly. Turians didn't like failure, not at all, and Garrus knew all about it.
He didn't apologize to Sidonis for his attitude though and limped his way back to the ship – he didn't feel like finding Shepard and the rest of the crew anyway. Javik would probably be on board, keeping an eye on Corporal Dickhead. Solus might already be back in his lab with his uncanny new kid. Maybe Joker was around too, although he might crash in bed early considering the day. Surely Tali’Zorah had confined herself in her cabin, checking her vitals every five minutes – Garrus still didn't feel sorry about that. That didn't leave a lot of options to just sit and talk shit to relax but that would have to do.

Garrus found Krios in the mess hall, sitting at the table alone, a cup of steaming hot beverage in front of him. He seemed lost in his memories, like often. Krios was too alien for the crew. They had tried to integrate him by asking questions but the assassin didn't like to talk about him and refused to tell stories based on his contracts. He didn't seem to have an opinion on galactic politic, one of the favorite topics of the Humans on board, and didn't believe in debates in the first place. Krios also rarely talked to women due to his culture. Drells had a matriarchal society, like the Salarians. Their men were very respectful of the women but would never talk to them if not addressed first. And there was a lot of women on board. Krios usually never looked at them either, which had been interpreted in many ways by the crew who tended to leave him alone more and more since he had joined them.

Garrus sat in front of Krios. The Drell blinked twice, a sign of surprise for his species, and Garrus mentally thanked the Spirits to still be alive. Everybody in C-Sec knew it was a very stupid idea to startle a Drell. Those roaming the galaxy and the Citadel had often been trained by their hanar masters to do their dirty work – assassination, most of the time.

"Vakarian," the Drell saluted.

"Krios," Garrus nodded in response. "You're not out, celebrating?"

The assassin looked at Garrus for long seconds before lowering his eyes to his cup – you had to be very patient to maintain a conversation with a Drell. "I am not the effusive kind."

"Me neither," Garrus smiled. "I mean I don't mind a little music and a few drinks," he continued, leaning on his chair, "but all those people around, making noise and moving? It's tiring after a while. I'm much more comfortable sitting at my workbench, cleaning my rifle and sipping a beer."

Another few seconds of silence. "I had pictured you to be more social."

"I'm really not," Garrus chuckled. "What made you think that?"

"Your behavior. You are well integrated without the crew."

"It wasn't always like that. My first months on board were a bit difficult, to be honest. Wrex dragged me a few times out of Life Support to share an after-dinner drink with the rest of the crew."

Several seconds passed but Krios didn't talk. Garrus wondered if he had triggered a memory or if the Drell was just terrible with small-talks.

"You play card games?" he asked. "We have really good Skilian Five players on board."

"I do not mingle with people," Krios replied. "I kill them."

A chill ran along Garrus' spine. "If you plan to kill us all," he warned, "you missed your chance today."
Krios blinked slowly. He then turned his head slightly and raised a hand. "Pardon me, I did not express myself correctly. I do not wish to create bounds with people. Anybody has a price, and death is often cheap."

"So you don't want to kill someone you know," Garrus resumed. Krios nodded. "But didn't you say you were ill and didn't have much time left?"

"In substance, yes."

"This job you took, keeping an eye on Lawson, it might be your last, right?"

Krios thought for a moment. "I see your point. Those people might be the last I interact with, therefore I will not have to pray for them."

"Yep," Garrus smiled, "so why not mingle a little? They're good people once you know them."

"It would be useless," Krios replied, quite fast this time.

"Why?"

"I will be forgotten."

Garrus would have liked to push a little more but Shepard appeared at the corner of the elevator shaft behind Krios, a paper bag in her hand. She was still wearing her uniform and didn't seem drunk at all.

"Ah good, you're here," she said, walking to Garrus' quarters. "There's a breach in my cabin so I'll have to sleep on your couch for a few days."

"You should sleep in crew quarters," he warned her. "It'll be cooler."

"Nope," Shepard decreed as the door opened. "Tit for tat buddy."

Great, Garrus thought. He'd have to bury himself under blankets and hope Shepard wouldn't snore — and since Cilat Hor had broken her nose again today, that was not going to get better.

"You were saying?" Garrus asked, turning back to Krios.

"Nothing of importance," the Drell replied.

He stood up and took his cup with him to Life Support, leaving Garrus alone in the mess. So much for small talk, Garrus thought. He drummed on the table a second, listening to the ventilation and estimating all the cleaning-up there had to be done in the mess — he was not going to volunteer on this one, that was for sure. He heard voices, laughter coming from the lounge, Joker and Solus he'd say, but he didn't feel like jumping on that wagon. Besides, he had to talk to Shepard about the agent he had met earlier.

Garrus limped to his door to find it locked. Cohabitation started well.

"Huh, Shepard?" he called.

"A minute!" she shouted through the thick metal panels.

Garrus patiently waited for the hologram to turn green, even if he could have hacked it in a few seconds. His cabin was definitely chilly when he entered, but that wasn't surprising considering the ship had ran on the emergency generator for nearly ten hours — two more and they would have
been screwed. Garrus didn't have much and everything was secured so at least he wouldn't have too much to pick up from the ground here.

Shepard was in front of the table, her back on him, the top of her uniform removed but she had kept her sport bra on, which hid a part of her tattoo. Her skin was colored in red, blue and even a bit of green here and there, her elbows were scratched and her right shoulder seemed a bit swollen but nothing dramatic by her standards.

"Still feeling naughty?" she asked, not turning to talk to him.

"Now?" Garrus replied, surprised. "Sure, but I thought you'd..."

He shut up when she turned, his attention caught by a protuberance along her leg in her unzipped pants. Garrus' back suddenly tensed and a pleasant shiver ran down his groin.

"Is that...?" he asked, noticing how red Shepard's cheeks were, a bit of white flashing where she was biting her lower lip. She nodded as her grin widened.

"Thought we could use some fun."

"Spirits," Garrus said as he abandoned the crutch to reach her, "yes!"

He cupped her face with both hands to kiss her the human way, mouth against mouth, lips pressing and parting to reveal her moist and flexible short tongue. It didn't put off Garrus this time and he even welcomed the strange, full-bodied taste and smell that came along, pricking in his mouth. Shepard passed her arms around his neck and stood on tip-toes to make it easier but Garrus still had to bend over to kiss her. He wanted more, he wanted to feel her skin against his so he released her to remove his jacket and tunic, breaking the wonderful contact with her lips only a second, and lifted her with ease to sit her on the table. Shepard laughed and moaned when Garrus started to kiss her neck, his hands caressing her sides as gently as he could in his impatience. She passed her legs around his waist and suddenly pressed him against her.

"Nope," he yelped, pushing her back a little and holding his breath. Spirits, he could already feel lymph leak down his slit.

"What?" Shepard asked. "What's wrong?"

Garrus carefully inspired by the nose, eyes closed, and tried to relax as he exhaled. Shepard's hard boots in his back didn't help.

"It's going too well," he admitted. "Just a sec."

"Too well?" Shepard repeated, amused. "That's flattering."

"It's not!" Garrus protested, looking at her.

"I can make you come with a dildo in my pants and two kisses," she bragged, leaning on her arms. "Believe me, that's flattering."

"Not for me," he grumbled. "I'm supposed to have a little more control than that."

"I thought the point of having fun was to abandon all control," Shepard teased, pressing her thighs against his waist.

Her rubber dick brushed against Garrus' skin through the fabric and he shivered. He closed his eyes
The tip of Shepard's tongue brushed his chin. Garrus shivered again when she kissed him there, a little bit of teeth involved. His back was so tense he couldn't move without releasing his erection so he stayed very still. Shepard darted her tongue again to trace a line to his damaged mandible, moving down to the first gad, and gently used her teeth again to tease him. Garrus barely noticed her hands going down, too focused on her kisses along his jaw and neck sending nice tingles in all his body, but clearly felt the damp fold of his pants swinging between his legs, the buckles tinkling a little.

"Shepard," he whispers against the salty skin of her head.

"Shhh," she replied, her hand massaging his groin. "If you want control, I'll take control. Would that work?"

Garrus nodded and trembled as her fingers brushed his slit. He was glad she wasn't Turian. Their skin may have been thick enough to resist their talons but some areas were definitely softer and easier to break. Turians didn't use their hands for penetrative acts for that reason, so the feeling of Shepard's slim fingers sliding inside of him was a bit frightening at first, but Garrus quickly relaxed as she started to move them, gently rubbing his balls with the pulp, the back of her phalanges pressing against his erection. He could feel the cool air on the tip of his cock each time Shepard pushed a little more to the front, opening his slit in the process.

He had never done that, being penetrated before his first orgasm, and it felt amazing. His head was spinning a little, so he closed his eyes and rested his head on top of Shepard's, and caressed her waist gently. Her kisses were softer now, light and elusive, just enough to send shivers along his neck. Garrus could have stayed like that for hours, enjoying the warm waves of pleasure pushing and pulling inside of him, but Shepard started to push a little more and a little quicker. Pressure built up again, shaking Garrus head to toes. He quickly needed to abandon her waist to lean on the table with both hands, his legs trembling each time Shepard's fingers pushed to the front, and his orgasm followed shortly after, his cock sliding out, the blissful sensation of all his muscles relaxing at once overwhelming him.

"All good?" Shepard asked between two soft kisses on his neck.

"All good," he confirmed in a delighted sigh. Her fingers were still fidgeting inside of him, and his cock pleasantly twitched in rhythm with her ministration. Spirits, why didn't they try that sooner? Not that penetrating her wasn't pleasurable, because it really was, but this? This was awesome.

"Second round?"

"In a minute," Garrus burbled.

"I bought a model that moves on its own."

"Don't they all?"

"I wouldn't know," Shepard chuckled. "I..."

A 'whoosh' interrupted her and froze Garrus' blood at the same time. The door. He had forgotten to lock the freaking door, and here he was, in Shepard's embrace, half naked and his cock out. Shit.

"Ah, Vakarian!" Solus joyfully said but he didn't let anyone time to talk. "Was looking for you.
Lab2 breached and contaminated, needs repairs before can sleep there again. Crew quarters would have been fine, but not with Grunt. Not using the first module of your cabin, yes?" He chuckled. "Forget I ask, obvious. Will stay with Grunt for a few days. Shepard too, I believe? Won't be a bother, promise, won't even notice we're here. Leave you to it now. Laters, roomies!"

And he left, locking the door behind him. Garrus was mortified, head buried in Shepard's neck like a kid, but apparently she found the situation funny.

"Don't laugh," he whined. "This is embarrassing enough as it is."

"Sorry," Shepard giggled. "At least now you have an excuse to call him by his first name."

"That makes the situation sooooo much better," Garrus grunted, "thank you Commander."

Shepard laughed and Garrus couldn't help his smile. There were worst ways to put this endless day behind them, after all.

TBC

Note
Another month between 2 chapters! Again, life has been the priority, and now I have to find a new rhythm to write. The good news is, I actually started chapter 50 before 49 (well it was supposed to be chapter 49 but I decided to add a Garrus POV to put an end to that mini-arc) so that means less work for me, woohoo!
The survey is still open and that'd be really cool if you could take five minutes to answer to it (you know, the five minutes you won't spend on writing a review anyway *wink wink*). It's still here (and on my profile and on tumblr): goo.gl/forms/CLfeSW1Qxm
The day wouldn't end. It jibbed and slowed down as the sun set. Brilliant sunset, there was no denying that, with magnificent clouds illuminated by thunder, charcoal gray on a yellowish green sky fading into an interesting shade of dark purple punctuated by a few stars. Soon the lights in the streets would be dimmed and the galaxy would rise in the sky, perfectly visible even in the heart of Cipritine, the most populated city on Palaven. Anderson had been quite amazed by the spectacle – you could hardly see any stars from Earth due to pollution of all kinds – but today's would be bitter. As much as he wanted this day to end badly, it would be another failure for him, with no solution in perspective.

Anderson sighed. He had faith in Humanity, and he had taken the burden of leadership on his shoulders precisely for this reason, but he couldn't deny he envied the Turians at the moment. Their dictatorship was much more efficient than all the political nonsense Anderson had had to deal with for the last two years. Once the Primarch had decided something, a decision made with or without assistance from his administration, he just had to sign a paper and everybody followed through, no question asked, no endless discussion, no back and forth with ministers and lobbyists. Damn lobbyists. Money and interests weren't part of the equation on Palaven.

Twenty-eight days. They had been at it for twenty-eight days and still no concrete solution was in sight. Goyle was trying her best to conciliate both parties but it was an impossible task. The Hierarchy wasn't asking for much and the Alliance was ready to ploy on a few subjects to show good faith but the United Nations would never accept to let Humanity become a client race of the Turians.

"You can't be serious," Anderson had said, breathless.

Tevos, the asari Councilor, had been dead serious. Sparatus, her turian peer, was standing next to the window, looking at the Presidium, hands behind his back.

"This is a gracious offer from the Hierarchy," he said, not even looking at Anderson.

"This is slavery," Anderson replied.

"Tutoring," Tevos corrected, her voice cold and harsh. "Humanity has joined the galactic community thirty-eight standards years ago," she started.

"A lifetime for some," Valern reminded everybody.

"You wanted to expand," Tevos continued, "we let you settle in the Attican Traverse. You wanted an army to defend yourself, we let you pile up ships and weapons. You wanted tread routes and a strong economy, we did not interfere either, but Humanity is not a novelty anymore, Admiral. You can no longer use the youth of your species to excuse your mistakes and justify your greed."

"Our greed," Anderson repeated, hardly believing what he had heard. "All we want is a place in the galactic community."

"And you want it now," Tevos said, "we know it, but it doesn't work that way."
"You lack stability," Sparatus continued, still looking by the window. "Your recent political crisis is one example between many others."

"And you're not innocent in that matter," Anderson remarked.

Shepard had left the office less than an hour ago, her pockets emptier than when she had arrived. The USB drive she had given to the Council contained proof that Udina was in bed with alien interests in his run for the seat of Prime Minister, the head of the Alliance. It was forbidden by Council law to interfere with alien politic so his fresh victory would be ruled out as soon as the data would be leaked to the media.

"I agree with you," Anderson continued, "we need stability, we need to build something solid, but your intervention will cost us years. Worst, it will cost you trust."

"Because you think we're stupid enough to get publicly involved?" Valern asked.

"I know the truth," Anderson threatened.

"And why would you tell the truth when it would ruin your chances, Admiral?" the Salarian insisted.

"My life, you mean," Anderson snorted. He leaned on the sofa, showing more confidence than he felt. Shepard also knew the truth but she'd never betray the Council – getting rid of Udina was her idea in the first place. Anderson was the only liability here, and the only way to make sure he wouldn't talk was to kill him.

"Don't be dramatic, Anderson," Sparatus mocked over his shoulder. "Why do you think we summoned you in the first place? We want you to be Prime Minister."

Anderson forgot to breath for a second. Prime Minister, him? He had refused to run for the position when what was left of the Alliance's government had decided to elect a new Prime Minister instead of following the chain of command – a good lot of them had gone down after Hackett's revelations about Project Base so nobody really knew who was supposed to have the supreme honor to lead Humanity. Anderson was a man of action, not a politician. His job may have required him to give orders and make decisions on the fly, but he had always been a subordinate. Even as an admiral, he had to respond to his superiors – currently missing. Dealing with the Earth embassy on the Citadel during the absence of Udina was already a nightmare with all the paperwork and the insubordination of the civilians, and Anderson couldn't even imagine how it would be with billions of lives under his responsibility.

Three billions, four hundred and eighty-two millions, six hundred and ninety-eight thousands to be precise, a fifth of the human population throughout the galaxy. The Alliance didn't only protect them, the Alliance assured regular liaisons with the most isolated settlements, shipped cargoes for those not yet autonomous, made sure nobody would be left behind.

But what would happen if a civilian, a politician, were to become head of the Alliance? The populace on Earth didn't care much for colonization. It had been an obsession for the ten first years in the galactic community but people were now complaining. Earth needed to help the colonies a lot, with food and supplies of all sort. People thought it should have been the opposite: the colonies were supposed to make life on Earth easier. There was a general disinterest for what happened outside of the Sol system, when it wasn't a clear annoyance. That meant an Alliance controlled by Earth would have to slice its budget left and right. Expansion would slow down and even stop altogether at some point. Settlements and colonies would be more and more isolated, giving even more reasons to the Council to not consider Humans as major players. Generations of sacrifices
would have been made for nothing.

"You want to build something solid, to quote you," Valern continued, "you want stability, and we can provide that for you if we work together."

"Under the Hierarchy's tutoring," Tevos added. "They will provide Humanity with the necessary structure to grow strong and be a reliable member of the galactic community."

"All we have to do is to install the right people at the right places," Sparatus said, "and we believe you are the man for the job." The Turian turned, his face hard to see in contrast with the brightly lit Presidium behind him. "Do the right thing for your people, Anderson. Humanity needs you."

Anderson, resigned, had accepted and followed the Council's orders since then. He had watched from a distance the scandal of Udina's campaign funding unfold. He had joined the temporary Alliance government when offered and risen to take control when the Council had told him to a few months later. He had reintegrated Hackett to the Alliance and put him in charge of the forces on the Citadel, pushed Anita Goyle to resume her work as the Earth ambassador, and followed orders, carefully, discretely.

"Humanity is young," Anderson had said in front of the whole United Nations a year ago, "and we are making mistakes. We need guidance. We need a stronger alliance with the Council species, and the Hierarchy is offering us a chance to grow under its protection. The Turians once were our enemies, it is true, but they are now our allies and they want us to succeed. They recognize Humans as a force to recon with, but they're afraid our impetuosity will be our doom – and the Council's. We are but intrepid children, careless in a galaxy full of danger. We need to grow up. We need maturity. We need the experience and the knowledge of those more advanced and wiser than us."

It hadn't convinced a lot of people but a compromise had emerged after months of negotiations nonetheless. Earth was afraid the Turians would take control of everything, so the Sol system had been excluded from the protectorate. The Hierarchy would only help the Alliance, not Earth. But even with this condition secured, the UN was bickering on details. Anderson's delegation had been invited twenty-eight days ago on Palaven to polish the final treaty with the Conclave Major, the reunion of all Primarchs through the Hierarchy. And now the twenty-eighth day of negotiation was ending. Another failure. Turians hated failure and the Conclave Major was growing tired of waiting. Anderson feared he would have to take drastic measures to put an end to this masquerade.

The door of the vast office allocated to the human delegation opened in Anderson's back. Most Turians dropped everything at sunset to go back home, even the politicians, and Primarch Fedorian had insisted since the beginning to respect this tradition. Nothing good came from exhaustion, he had said, and Anderson had to agree with him. The delegation was escorted out of the Parliament every evening and their office sealed until the morning.

But Anderson didn't hear the usual warning from a guard telling them they were invited to get out. This time, he heard the delegation protest vigorously. Anderson turned to see Primarch Fedorian himself at the door. An impressive piece of Turian, that Deon Fedorian. Tall, like all of them, his skin was of a darker brown than the common tone, with black spots at its thickest. His blue facial tattoo, the same kind as Shepard's protegee, gave a bit of color to his gray eyes, but what had always impressed Anderson was his piercings, directly into the bones of his fringes and jaw. Silver chains linked rings on the left side of his face. It was rare to see Turians with jeweleries because it was forbidden for them to wear any during their military service and they tended to keep that habit, but the few who did often went to such extremes. One of the Primarchs who had come for the Conclave had a series of golden spikes screwed all along his median fringe, another had little balls
of silver incrusted into his carefully carved bones. Anderson could only imagine how painful it could be.

"You cannot be here while we're on session, Primarch!" a representative of some lobby or another yelled.

"I didn't come to interfere with your debates," the Primarch replied, rolling his eyes. "Although, it's sunset and we all hope you'll come to a decision tomorrow. Not that we, Primarchs, have better things to do than waiting and waiting for you to stop bickering about the inevitable, mind you."

Bad move, Anderson thought as half the delegation started complaining. They didn't need a reminder of the Turians' supremacy in this case. Anderson was sure they were in for another week of negotiation now.

"Prime Minister," the Primarch continued, "I need to talk to you."

Complaints, again, because the Primarch was clearly trying to influence the Prime Minister and the all of that, of course. Anderson followed Fedorian out of the room with pleasure. He was actually glad the day was over. Another meaningless argument and he would have lost his patience for good.

"If it's about the delay, Sir..." Anderson started but Fedorian shook his head.

"No, not at all," he said. "The longer Humans take, the stronger our point, actually," he admitted, turning heel.

Anderson frowned a little and followed Fedorian through the corridors. The Primarch was right if his intentions were to prove Humanity needed tutoring, but he was forgetting that the negotiation was actually damn fast on the galactic scale. Asaris could bicker over the terms of a contract for centuries, and even the ever so quick Salarians could nitpick for months. Twenty-eight days was nothing compared to that.

"What is this about, then?" Anderson asked.

"Let's say it's a surprise," Fedorian answered over his shoulder. "A good one."

But for who? Anderson thought.

The Primarch's office didn't look like an office at all, more like a living room. It wasn't ridiculously spacious nor luxurious, it didn't have a great view or any piece of art. It was warm and comfortable, full of light, no desk, just large sofas with several consoles in between, papers neatly classified on the shelves around. The only symbol of power in the office was an antic sword in a glass case on a wall, a short but large blade slightly curved. Turians were masters of warfare but they had put down blades to switch for guns quite recently in their history – they had developed weapons capable of shooting projectiles for their first battles in space, during the Unification War. Such swords were banned in Council Space so Turians only carried knives with them but they still had to learn how to use them during boot camp. There was no doubt Fedorian could hack and chop his enemies with that blade if necessary.

Fedorian didn't sit. Instead, he showed the way to a small corridor with a fridge and shelves full of food and liquors. The corridor leaded to a dark, cramped room with a large blue luminous circle on the floor and its twin on the ceiling. A quantum entanglement communication device, Anderson understood. The technology had been a work in progress for decades in laboratories all over the galaxy – whoever developed a faster way of communication would gain an incredible power over
the other species – but it was a Human, Prisha Jayashankar, who had solved the problem a decade ago. Of course, industrial espionage had happened and the Turians had been the first to deploy the quantum entanglement technology. The other species had kept on working on it though and now all major players had their own network, but the Turians had taken the lead in this domain nonetheless.

The Primarch keyed on a holoscreen and the machine woke up. He stayed out of the circle though and Anderson imitated him. A hologram formed in the middle of the room, two silhouettes, one taller than the other, one human and one turian helped by a cane or something. Anderson' chest tightened as the hologram was refined. Shepard. Exhausted and beaten up but it was her, standing next to her protegee, with that determined look on her face. Her nose was broken and swollen, like half her face, but it was her, exactly like Anderson remembered her.

The Council had told Anderson the Normandy had disappeared a few weeks after they had noticed her absence. The communication specialist on board, Traynor, had to update their position at each exit of the relay network, but the Council hadn't received a single message from the Normandy in days and even quantum communication wouldn't work. The Normandy had last been seen in the Faryar system in the Hourglass Nebula and had never showed up in the Pylos Nebula, where she was headed. Logically, the ship had sunk in the relay network, but the Normandy was the stealthiest frigate of the known galaxy so there was a slight chance she was still in one piece, somewhere. Knowing Shepard, there was a good reason why she had decided to go dark, but she'd reappear at some point.

The Council wasn't as optimistic as Anderson though. He had had to ask them relentlessly to not declare the Normandy sunk or Shepard a rogue agent – or dead, like the rumors in the Terminus said. Fortunately, Tevos didn't believe in either theory and Sparatus had let her convince him. The ever so cautious and paranoid Valern had insisted until he had been replaced by another salarian, former Dalatrass Esheel, a hard woman determined to bring balance back in the Council. Esheel would have liked Shepard dead, because a Spectre on the loose was a liability, but Tevos and Sparatus didn't let her have it her way, infuriating the Salarian even more. Shepard had been the subject of many arguments within the Council, and surely her reappearance would cause another problem.

Anderson himself was conflicted. A part of him wanted her dead. There was nothing worst than a good soldier missing in action, the wait for the inevitable was unbearable, and he was still resentful about her cavalier way of throwing Udina – and Humanity – down the drench. Anderson knew Shepard's allegiance fell to the Council but he would have never expected her to hit the Alliance so hard the first occasion she had gotten. But another part of him was relieved to have news.

"No offense, Sir, but you're too late."

Anderson hadn't been able to help his laugh, while his Captain, Steven Hackett, had taken the offense pretty badly – to be fair, it certainly had been the worst week of his career. In front of them was a tall young woman with short dirty hair and piercing green eyes, all bloody and muddy after the fight, smoking nonchalantly a cigarette. When most of the soldiers in the camp looked completely exhausted and utterly disgusted, she stood straight, her face a hard steel mask no emotion could deform, exception made of anger. She could be angry. Her platoon had been thrown on this rock with inaccurate intel. The Alliance had greatly underestimated the batarian presence on Torfan, and the fleet had had to temporarily retreat to gather more resources, leaving Major Kyle's platoon to hold the position. The fight had mostly been in close quarters, in underground facilities. It had been a slaughterhouse.

"Second Lieutenant Shepard," Hackett had roared, "you will address your superiors with more
Shepard had arched an eyebrow, not impressed at all by the Captain. "Respect is earned, Sir," she had replied calmly but coldly.

And with that she had turned heel. Hackett would have liked to courtmartial her right here and now but Anderson had convinced him otherwise. Kyle had also argued in her favor. Without her, the raid on Torfan would have been a disaster – a bigger one. Shepard had managed to hold her position to allow retreat of the troops and had taken the leadership when Kyle had abandoned all hopes. She had pushed her men room after room, cleared corridor after corridor, until they had all stood ankle-deep in batarian blood. Three days and a clever news headline later, Shepard was the Butcher of Torfan. Anderson had stopped by the mess hall to talk to her about the ICT.

"What you did on Torfan," he had said, "is what we expect of the few who succeeded in this school. You'd fit right in."

"Who tells you I wanna do that again?" Shepard had asked, not even looking at the pamphlet on the table between them. She wanted to smoke, obviously, playing with her lighter to busy her hand.

"Nobody," Anderson admitted, "but you could have quit or asked for a discharge like your superior, Major Kyle, or all the men who survived. The Alliance would grant you a comfortable check to move on after what you did."

"I'm not a quitter," Shepard replied, somehow annoyed.

At the time, Anderson didn't know about her brother and her deal with the Alliance, and she had refused to give him any sort of explanation. He had assumed she was afraid of losing the generous grant the Alliance gave to any soldier after ten years in the army. He had assured her it wouldn't happen but she had just shrugged it off. Anderson had insisted about the ICT every occasion he had gotten during the rest of the trip back to Arcturus Station, and had sent weekly reminders to Shepard after that. She never answered back so he had assumed she had flagged him as spam, but she had showed up at the Villa for the next session nonetheless.

Anderson had managed to place her under his command and had watched her become the person she was ever since. He was proud of her accomplishments and of her on a personal level. The feral young woman he had met had become a great leader, a fantastic soldier and a better person, one of the few people in this galaxy Anderson cared about. It had been painful to know her missing for two years, even after her betrayal, and it now was evenly painful to see her inanimate hologram. Shepard was alive – or was she? Maybe this image had been taken months, years ago, maybe Fedorian was just trying to play on Anderson's feeling to get what he wanted. Anderson wouldn't let that happen.

"They called me two hours ago," the Primarch said, looking at the hologram, a hand on the console. "They're alive."

By the tone of his voice, Anderson knew Fedorian wasn't playing an act to manipulate him – or he was the best goddamned actor of the galaxy.

"Where are they?" Anderson asked.

"Omega, for now. They have to repair their ship before coming back to the Citadel. That'll take a few days."

Anderson nodded. "What happened?"
"That's something I cannot tell you," Fedorian winced. "I shouldn't even tell you Shepard is alive, but she's your protegee, so I'm making an exception – just don't tell anyone."

"She was one of my subordinates," Anderson replied, straightening his back, "nothing else."

Fedorian didn't seem convinced. He abandoned the console to walk around the hologram. "Turians have a rather loose conception of family," he said, hands behind his back. "Blood doesn't make family, there is no strict affiliation, nobody cares who are your parents because you have to prove what you're capable of, the all of that." Fedorian exchanged a look with Anderson through the hologram and Anderson nodded. "This one, Garrus, is the son of my best friend, but I raised him as my own. He chose his tattoos because of me, you know?" he said, touching his cheek. "We're free to choose whichever we want nowadays, there is no real attachment to any colony or city anymore, and new citizens usually take the tattoos of someone significant in their life, often a parent. So when Garrus told me he had chosen the tattoos I had, it filled my heart with joy and pride."

Fedorian stopped and looked at the ceiling. If Turians could cry, he would have fought his tears back, Anderson believed. "Shepard may not be family to you but she's important, she's a part of you as much as Garrus is a part of me."

"You're mistaking, Primarch," Anderson insisted. Shepard never had been his adopted daughter. A subordinate he liked, a friend even at some point, but Anderson had never consider himself as a father figure to her – not that she would have accepted the idea anyway. "Maybe our respective concepts of family are too different for us to agree on any term," Anderson continued, "but I'm glad to know she's alive nonetheless. Now, the question is, will you use her against me?"

Fedorian genuinely laughed, his silver chains bouncing in the movement.

"Geez," he sighed with a smirk, "are all Humans this paranoid? I can't open up with one of you without being accused of having an evil master plan in mind. No wonder you have trust issues."

"You're not exactly easy to follow," Anderson commented.

"Ha!" Fedorian snorted, amused. "That's a good one coming from a member of an unpredictable species." Fedorian shook his head a little. "It never was my intention to use Shepard to influence you, Anderson. I thought you could use good news, is all." He shrugged and went back to the console to stop the holographic projection. "Never mind."

"Thank you, Primarch," Anderson felt obligated to say as Fedorian showed him the way back. "It is good news."

"For us, indeed," the Turian agreed, "but not necessarily for the Council, or even for Shepard and Garrus. I don't know what awaits them."

"Can't you do something?" Anderson asked.

"No," Fedorian shook his head, "no no no. I may be a Primarch but I cannot intervene. They're Spectres, they're out of my jurisdiction."

"But Shepard will be under the Hierarchy's protection as a Human and Vakarian is a Turian, family to you even."

"It's an embassy's work to represent and protect the people in Council Space, not a Primarch's, family or not. It'd be wise if you stayed out of this too, by the way. The Alliance is known for its interferences and now is not the time to be stubborn. Leave it be and believe in the system."

"The system is not exactly impartial," Anderson commented.
Fedorian laughed, acid. "Spirits, you're a ray of sunshine, Anderson. Working with you will be a delight."

"If we manage to find a compromise."

"I may have an idea or two to make it work, actually," Fedorian said as they reached his office, "but the sun is low on the horizon and we're not supposed to talk about it now – or at all. And my daughter should be here any minute now, for, you see, I'm babysitting tonight."

Anderson arched an eyebrow, having troubles picturing the Primarch taking care of a toddler, just as the door opened on a Turian with the same tattoos in a dark semi-armored uniform. Anderson supposed it was Fedorian's daughter, considering the baby she had in her arms and a bag stuffed with toys on the shoulder. One of her eyes was of the bright green usual for prosthesis, which gave her a strange gaze. She noticed Anderson and stared at him.

"Speaking of," Fedorian rejoiced, arms wide open, "isn't it my favorite grandchild?"

The baby gestured the same way towards his grandfather, his tiny underdeveloped mandibles flapping in a toothless smile. Anderson had never seen a Turian so young in the flesh before and found the baby unsettling – he wasn't used to kids, was mostly wary of them in general, and this one was clearly alien. The child didn't really look turian, to be honest. The head just started to elongate in the back, so the neck was still rather thin. No fringes, just ridges along the head – they would grow during adolescence. The spurs were barely visible under the brightly colored tunic the child was wearing, and the cowl had yet to grow too, although vertebra crests started to deform the attire along the spine. Anderson supposed giving birth to a spiky little being wasn't in the best interest of the mothers, so evolution had done its job, thus typical traits appeared during the growth of a young. Turians were considered fully developed in their early thirties.

"You only have one grandchild," Fedorian's daughter reminded him. "Are you busy, Sir?" she then asked, all serious, probably because her father seemed still on official duty.

"No worries," the Primarch answered, taking the kid from his mother's arms to cuddle with him, "nothing work-related here, and I don't want you to be late because of me."

"Yeah, we wouldn't want that to happen again," the daughter rolled her eyes, abandoning protocol for good. She handed the bag over to her father. "He's clean and fed, no game past nineteen and in bed by twenty. He should wake up around thirty but leave him fall back asleep."

"I think I raised more kids than you, my love," Fedorian commented, rubbing his forehead against the chirping baby's who was patting his grandfather's face. The daughter didn't like the reminder.

"Issem will pick him up at sunrise," she said coldly, turning to the door. "And no sweets," she added over her shoulder before leaving.

"If your mother thinks she can stop a Primarch from spoiling his grandchild," Fedorian chuckled, lifting the baby up in the air, "she's wrong, ah ah!" And he started to spin on his heels, the kid laughing along with him. Anderson had troubles remembering why the Alliance considered Fedorian to be a ruthless ruler to approach with caution.

"Thank you again, Primarch," Anderson said, hands behind his back. "If you'd excuse me, I have to review a few points with Goyle for tomorrow."

"So you don't want to know my awesome plan to get what we want?" Fedorian asked, propping the baby under one arm as if it was a bag of potato.
"What you want," Anderson corrected coldly.

"What we, the Hierarchy, want," the Turian precised, walking to the sofas. He put his grandson down between big cushions to make sure the baby wouldn't fall before standing again. "Have a sit, Anderson," Fedorian commanded. "We have to talk and foreplay are over."

Anderson frowned but obeyed nonetheless as Fedorian went back to the corridor. The baby looked at the strange alien the Human was, as if he had just realized he wasn't alone with his grandfather, and eventually chirped on an anxious tone. Fedorian reassured him with soft words from the kitchenette and came back a minute later with a tray on which stood a bottle of water, another one with a fizzy bright pink liquid, two glasses and a bowl of green fruits the size of strawberries. The baby grabbed his grandfather's robe and climbed on his lap as soon as Fedorian sat down. The Primarch passed a reassuring hand in the back of the boy.

"Distilled water," he pointed out, "absolutely tasteless but it won't kill you." Fedorian served himself a glass of the pink liquid and sipped it before talking again. "When the Hierarchy found out Turians weren't the only species around, we were thrown into a war that cost us a lot, as you certainly know. We won, with little help from the Asaris and the Salarians, because war is in our blood. That's what we do, we're conquerors. We've always been at war and it's what unites us. The Hierarchy wouldn't stand three days without a fight somewhere, without a colony to take back or an enemy to defeat. And as it turned out, once the Krogans defeated, we had plenty of new territory to conquer. A whole galaxy." Fedorian stopped a second, interrupted by his grandson trying to grab the glass. "We could have taken what we wanted," he continued, putting the glass out of reach of the baby and giving him a fruit instead. "We were in a pretty bad shape after the Rebellions, outnumbered by the Asaris and the Salarians and who knew what new species they could have found to fight their war, but it would have been possible, on paper. We just had to wait twenty, thirty years, forty top, time to heal and prepare. But we didn't. We healed, we prepared, and we called back the troupes a few weeks before the assault. Do you know why?"

"No," Anderson replied. He had never heard of the Turians' threat on the Council after the Rebellions. A part of him didn't believe it. The other part wasn't even surprised.

"Because, ultimately, it's not in our best interest to defeat all our enemies," Fedorian revealed. "Like I said, no war, no Hierarchy. If we wanted to keep our people united, we needed to have a goal, a threat over our heads. That's why the Turians became the Council's army. Our role as protectors of the Council gave us plenty of occasions to fight."

"I thought foreplay were over, Sir," Anderson said, not really interested by the history lesson nor seeing the point of Fedorian's long introduction.

The Primarch smirked and eased himself on the sofa, watching closely Anderson with piercing eyes. "But it's the best part of the chase, isn't it?"

Anderson tensed and kept his mouth shut. Was it all a game for Deon Fedorian? Was the surrender of Humanity just another war, fought in comfortable offices this time, for the Primarch of Palaven? In any case, he was enjoying every second of it.

The boy hiccuped, and the Primarch became a devoted grandfather again in a blink of an eye. He lifted the baby to place him against his chest, head on his shoulder, and gently patted his back.

"We concluded the pact with the Volus during the Rebellions but, up until we became the Council's armed force, our deal was taxes for protection," Fedorian kept on explaining. "We didn't have money at the time, still don't within the Hierarchy, and it was evident we needed a strong economy if we wanted to be more than canon fodder in the eye of the Asaris and the Salarians. Our
ties with the Volus were reinforced then, they used their talents to build us the second largest economy of Council Space, and thus we were offered a seat in the Council. The Volus gained citizenship within the Hierarchy and we gave them a seat in the Parliament for each colony they had. Now," he continued as he stopped the baby from playing with his silver chain, "come the Humans. You had no chance to win during the Relay 314 Incident, yet you fought to the point of gaining a solid reputation of blood thirsty fanatics, and it's not getting better with time. The Cerberus terrorist attack on the Citadel two years ago reminded everybody Humans were still a threat."

"The Alliance has nothing to do with Cerberus," Anderson reminded the Primarch.

"Didn't they infiltrate your army and take advantage of you?" Fedorian asked. He put his hands on his grandson's head and whispered. "They fucked you from behind, that's not nothing." Fedorian freed the baby before continuing. "Anyway, Humans are disorganized and divided. You're selfish, that's why, but you still know how to unite for the greater good."

What Fedorian wanted hit Anderson.

"You want a war," he mumbled the chest thight, not believing his own words.

Fedorian smiled coldly, chin high.

"We want a war," he confirmed, "and by we, I mean you and me, pal."

"You're crazy."

"No," Fedorian shook his head, "I just made a – ah, let me summon it for you. Humans want a war to be united again, to make the people of the Sol system care again about what happens in the rest of the galaxy, to demonstrate how powerful they are. You, David Anderson, want a war to make your people look like good little canon fodder in the eye of the Council, to look organized, docile and in need of protection, helpless and non-threatening. Weak. Because you'll lose that war. And the Hierarchy wants that war to show the good people of Earth that we are not the enemy, and to take you as our client species to eliminate the threat you are. We can't exterminate you, so we'll integrate you, it's as simple as that."

"No," Anderson replied, "I refuse."

"Your successor will agree then," Fedorian snorted, "and their successor if needed, and their successor, and so on. You'll become our client species, one way or another, and the tie will be stronger if we work together."

Anderson clenched his fists. He couldn't even threaten the Primarch to reveal this crazy plan to the Council to stop it. The Council might have been in bed with Fedorian to begin with, and Anderson was on Palaven, in Cipritine, in the fucking Parliament. He'd never get out of this room alive if he refused.

"You want a war to weaken us," he said through clenched teeth. "I was already giving you command of most of my troupes with the current pact, but if we follow your plan, Humans will be at your mercy."

"The Volus don't complain," Fedorian retorted. "They focus their energy on something else than warfare – something they weren't good at to begin with but my point still stands. Think about it, Anderson, think about what Humanity could achieve freed of your constant thirst for blood. Let us do the fighting, give your people a chance to grow."
Anderson refused to answer. Fedorian clicked again.

"We'll include a secular way out option," the Primarch insisted. "Every galactic standard century, Humanity will be offered a way out of the pact. Vote, roll a dice, look at a sign in the sky, whatever, the decision will be yours and finale, no question asked, and we'll stay good neighbors."

"Millions will die."

"Yes."

"You'll sacrifice your people to..."

"No," Fedorian interrupted, "we won't fight each other. I told you, you have no chance against us, and a war between us would defeat the very purpose of this war. We have to unite at some point, Humans have to fully embrace the Hierarchy if we want to achieve anything. No, you'll fight the Batarians. Your two species have a past, they're strong enough to be a real threat to your army, you both claim many colonies and strategic resources, no, really, they're perfect for the job. You just need to find a way to start this war. It shouldn't be hard."

"You have nothing for that?" Anderson snorted, acid.

"Of course we do, it could be done in the next hour if you'd like, but we prefer to let you control the timeline." Anderson stayed silent once more. Fedorian didn't seem to care. His grandson was trying to climb on his shoulder and he helped him, keeping a hand on his back just in case the baby would lose his balance. "You'll have the same privileges as the Volus," Fedorian continued. "One seat in the Parliament for each colony, and I believe you have a lot of those, so we're giving you a lot of power within the Hierarchy. All Humans will be granted tier one by default and will be able to climb the ladder up until tier three, thus gaining citizenship and the responsibilities coming along. You'll pay taxes, rule in your home system but give us full authority when it comes to extra-territory decisions. Your army will support ours, and we can even come up with mixed divisions supervised by Humans. The Hierarchy will require Kaladran to be taught throughout human territory but will not interfere in education otherwise. No control of the medias either, nor your economy. Expansion sill can happen but must be approved by the Hierarchy first, and that's it. We're not asking for much."

"You're asking for a war," Anderson reminded the Primarch, looking at him straight in the eyes.

"Yes, we do," Fedorian said, "and I will command my people to die for yours, Anderson. Maybe my daughters will die, or the grandson I'm holding will. If it's not them, it will be someone I know, along with thousands of strangers." Fedorian was interrupted by the baby grabbing his mandible this time. He patiently pushed the little hand away and the baby started to chew on the gloved finger. "You're new at this," Fedorian continued, not minding the toothless attack, "but this is ruling. When billions of people depend on you, you stop thinking about the individuals and you do what you have to do."

The Turian wasn't teaching Anderson anything new. He had followed the Council's orders for the same reason, because he had Humanity's best interest at heart. Anderson had agreed to place the Alliance under the Hierarchy's tutoring because he wouldn't have had to deal with protecting the colonies and securing thread routes anymore, thus giving more time and money to development. It would be the same with Fedorian's plan, but on a larger scale. The war would exhaust Humanity, drain its resources and men, leaving them defenseless, but it would also give them time to grow stronger, without worrying about the next attack since the Turians would protect them. Peace within Humanity was a fantasy Anderson couldn't even imagine, war ran in human blood as much as in turian blood, but the plan would allow Humans to sit and think. They'd be too hurt for a long
time to do anything else. This was a formidable opportunity for Humanity.

But the price was a terrible one.

"The negotiations must fail," Anderson muttered, cold to the bones. It was preferable. Engaging in a war with the Batarians while discussing a protectorate treaty with the Turians made no sense, and the Council would intervene. Humanity had to slip on the wrong path before anything else, be the defiant and arrogant child older species thought she was, play the rogue for a while. More troupes on the colonies close to the batarian border, a few incidents, and tension would rise. War would be so easy to start.

"They must," Fedorian confirmed, looking at his grandson carefully studying the chewed finger, "but that's the easiest part of the plan. We just have to sit back and wait."

Anderson sighed, suddenly feeling old and tired, a headache growing in the back of his head. He barely noticed the knock on the door.

"Sir," a guard announced as he entered, "we're sealing the Parliament. Would you like to stay a little longer?"

"No," Fedorian shook his head, "it's time to go home. I'll be down in a minute, thank you."

"Sir," the Turian replied with a sharp salute before leaving.

Fedorian propped the baby against his chest, grabbed the bag and stood up.

"I don't have to tell you this is between you and me, I suppose."

"No," Anderson confirmed, resigned.

"Good. I'll have you escorted to the Guests District." Fedorian took a few steps but stopped and turned on his heel. "Do you know why I was chosen to talk to you, Anderson?" he asked, his voice less assured than usual.

"You're the Primarch of Palaven," Anderson answered, "you represent the Conclave Major and speak for the Hierarchy."

"No," Fedorian replied. "I was chosen because I knew your weaknesses." Anderson closed his eyes. Shepard. Fucking Turians. "I was the most able to hurt you if necessary, but I'm glad I didn't have to do that." Fedorian seemed to wait for an answer but Anderson refused to give him that. "Well, have a good evening, Prime Minister," the Turian eventually said.

Anderson spoke as the Primarch reached the door.

"One day, you'll pay for all of this, Fedorian."

"Yes," he said, as tired and bitter as Anderson, "I will."

The last ray of sunshine disappeared behind the horizon as the door closed.

TBC

Notes
1 – Alright, a word about the situation. I'm working full time now and have freaking long days. I'm tired when I get home and don't have much time for myself anymore, nor the energy to devote to my hobbies. So I write during the weekends but, depending on what I have to do and the usual lack
of motivation, the process is slow as fuck. Now I'm a little more used to the rhythm of life I have so I'll try to write in the evening when I can but I can't promise you anything. Just bear with me and read Semper Fi again, pretty please?

2 – I actually did that during work (well, I listened to SFi with the phone, which is pretty awesome and terrible at the same time, awesome because I don't really have time to read otherwise, and terrible because vocal synthesis is horrible) and noticed a few inconsistencies. I'll try to ninja-correct that while you read again SFi.

3 – Speaking of, I, hm, kind of mixed the canon events of Torfan and Elysium, I guess? Shepard talks about it in the last James chapter. I'll correct that too at some point.

4 – The survey is still going on. If you didn't take it yet, please consider giving 5 to 10 minutes of your precious time to do that for me since most of you won't ever leave a review. Still here: goo.gl/forms/CIfexW1Qxm

5 – Speaking of reviews, they save lives, you know? And they motivate the authors, just sayin'.

6 – Oh and you should visit the tumblr I made for SFi, me-semperfi. Tumblr. Com. You'll find info, ficclets and illustrations there.

Thanks for reading!
He couldn't sleep. For weeks now he had felt restless and irritated, and knowing he couldn't solve his problem right away made it worse. His time was up, Saren knew it, but he couldn't do shit about it. The Council had called him. Saren couldn't ignore them. He may have been one of their top agents, granted with far more freedom than other Spectres, but he couldn't do as he pleased either. When his masters called, he had to answer. That was the price for unlimited power.

And Saren was glad to pay it. It was a small inconvenience compared to all the benefits coming with his job. Freedom, money, power, he had it all now and he'd rather kill himself than go back to his life before his nomination. He had briefly tasted both benefits before, although never all at the same time, and he knew all too well the bitterness left by their disappearance. He'd never let anyone take away what he had worked hard to get, not even the Council.

Not even age, Saren thought as he looked at his hand, dry and bony. It rapidly started to shake and he closed it in a fist. He could manage a few more weeks – he could and he would. His body had been his worst enemy for years now, he was used to dealing with it. Meditation and stretching helped a lot to improve his control, but it took time – and being alone, so that wasn't an option. He would manage anyway, like always.

Saren turned his head to the dashboard and the clock automatically lightened up, sensing his movement. Less than an hour before hitting the relay, then two more to reach the Citadel – speed was controlled around the station. Saren could ignore the speed limit but it'd be at his own risk. He'd rather arrive alive.

A small symbol on the corner of the dashboard informed Saren that he still had to open Barla Von's latest email, received at the change of relay in the Eagle Nebula. The Volus was Saren's personal banker and he kept an eye on all of Saren's investments throughout the galaxy. It somehow made him think he could call whenever he wanted, most of the time for nonsense. Lately, someone was trying to kill him. Saren had told him he'd investigate once on the Citadel to calm him down but Barla Von couldn't be so easily persuaded and had continued to press Saren to do something now. As a result, Saren had stopped opening Barla Von's emails. Stupid little Volus. Didn't he have better things to do?

There was no point in trying to rest now so Saren pushed the cover to get out of bed. He was half out of it, feet on the metallic ground, his body hurting everywhere, when the bed moved behind him. Two arms embraced him and the soft cheek of his mistress came to rest on his shoulder with a sleepy sigh.

"Still three hours until we reach the Citadel," Saren said.

"Hm hm," they moaned before yawning but they didn't move.

Stubborn little thing, Saren thought, unamused. He would have liked to come alone to the Citadel, but they had found all the excuses possible to tag along. It had been so long since they had been on the Citadel. They had so many people to see and meet, and it could be a great opportunity for more work and new leads and this and that. But, truly it resumed to a piece of information they had heard about two weeks ago from a reliable informer at C-Sec, despite all of Saren's efforts: "Shepard is
The name sufficed to irritate Saren. He should have known the little pest wouldn't give him the pleasure of staying dead – or missing, he was okay with missing too. She had never been officially declared dead by the Council but nobody had seen her for more than a year last time Saren had taken an interest in her. Rumors back then talked about the human Spectre found dead somewhere in the Terminus, in a bar to be precise, on a mining asteroid in the Haskins system. A Turian had supposedly killed her and a bearded human male after an argument. Saren had no idea what Shepard and her annoying pilot were doing at the edge of the galaxy, but he had been glad to hear the news. Shepard had always been an annoying wildcard in his game, doubled with a liability. She knew too much – well, suspected too much, she had no proof of anything – but the real danger was in the power she had over Nihlus.

Nihlus, Saren sighed. He wished he knew where the fuck Nihlus was in the first place.

"Did you get any rest?" they asked softly.

Damned be their perceptiveness, Saren thought as he pushed the arms away. He stood up and the cabin lit up, revealing the nice tidy place it was. A bit cold for him in his naked state though, so Saren walked to the closet to pick up a fresh reinforced undersuit and his usual white light armor. Next to it was one of the black suits he had worn so often in the past years. Saren hesitated. He had worn white as a symbol of his power most of his life, even when he had started to decline, but at some point he had had to take refuge in the black – it hid his loss of mass better than any other color and camouflaged his shaking. He looked at his ghostly hand on the cowl of his armor, trembling a little, and then switched for the suit and the cape going with it.

"Go back to sleep," Saren commanded as he started the tedious job of dressing up.

"Can't I worry for my lover?" they asked shyly.

Saren repressed a laugh. Lover. They weren't lovers, not from his point of view anyway. He saw their relationship as a means to ensure his investments were safe. He had bet a lot on the child and he'd hate to stupidly lose so much time and money. Keeping them close to him was the most efficient way to monitor them. He had to play pretend, and sex was part of the game. They couldn't know he had no interest for them as a companion. Saren had discovered long ago that attachment and love were the most powerful bonds he could use to secure an investment. People would willingly do crazy things for their loved ones, whereas a deal made out of fear could be broken. This investment had turned to be more valuable than any other so far so Saren didn't mind the extra work. It payed off.

Saren turned and smiled gently.

"Aren't you sweet, Liara," he said.

The young Asari blushed, their cheeks darkening, as Saren held his hand to them. They stood up, naked as usual, insensitive to the cold, and took refuge in his arms. Saren kissed them on the top of their head and embraced them for a moment. He gave a quick look at the dashboard. Not enough time for a proper 'romantic' moment but it would do. He caressed their arm with the tip of his talons, knowing it wouldn't hurt them, just prickle along the way. Liara shivered but didn't move otherwise, and Saren continued his little game, adding just a bit of biotics to the touch. Asaris had evolved in an environment rich in element zero and their ability to detect biotic fields had played a crucial role in the survival of their species. When all the flora and the fauna of the planet somehow
used biotics to hunt you down, you needed to detect them. As a result, asari skin was layered with eezo sensitive cells. Activated in a precise way, they delivered a shiver that could easily become a pleasant feeling. A little more and it was ecstasy.

Liara giggled. It pissed Saren off.

"Wasn't I supposed to go back to sleep?" they asked.

"Maybe I can put you to sleep," Saren jokingly replied. "A little sweating would do you good," he added, pinching their hip.

Liara yelped and slapped his hand, laughing. Saren was only half-joking. His short military career in the Hierarchy had given him a repulsion for unfit bodies of all kinds. He had successfully managed to get Liara to work out enough for them to lose some excess weight but they'd always be curvy, voluptuous by asari standards, with heavy breasts and round hips. It was no surprise considering their mother. Benezia had had the same body type, full and generous, but more rigid due to time. Liara was still soft and warm, flexible, tractable.

Saren rose Liara's chin with a finger to kiss them on the lips, a long, deep kiss while he played with his talons on their lower back. Liara moaned, eyes closed, and put their arms around his neck. With a bit of effort and a sudden pain in the back, Saren passed his hands under their bottom to lift them, releasing a bit more of his biotics. Liara didn't protest when he pushed them on the bed and abandoned their lips for their skin. When they tried to caress him, Saren pushed their hands away and pinned them over their head. Liara giggled, amused by the bossiness of their lover, but in truth Saren preferred to stay in control. This wasn't for him anyway – he'd fuck later if he felt like it, the Citadel didn't lack in terms of sexual services. Maybe he'd pay a visit to Sha'ira. They knew what he liked and never failed to deliver.

Saren used all his talents to bring pleasure to his lover, exhausting them for the day to come. He played with the hypersensitive skin of the belly, the hips and the legs, used his talons as much as his biotics, made blood pearl here and there just for the fun of it, licked and bit their neck until Liara begged for mercy. When they did, he slid his hand on their lower back and released enough biotics to saturate their whole nervous system. Liara came again with a scream of delight as the biotic wave ran through them. In other circumstances, Saren would have used this opportunity to push himself into the quivering flesh of the young Asari and enjoy their warmth and softness as he'd keep them overwhelmed by using more of his biotics, but he wasn't even hard at the moment. He was just tired, sore, and he wanted to be done with it, so he just pushed another wave of his biotics through the exhausted body of the youngster, kissed them on the forehead and left the cabin for the cockpit, grabbing his clothes on the way out.

Saren stayed alone in the cockpit for the rest of the journey to the Citadel, munching on ration bars out of habit more than hunger. In truth, he let the autopilot do most of the job – he had paid the high price for that salarian VI and he intended to put it to good use, dammit – but he liked to think he'd be there if anything important happened. Of course, nothing happened. In a crowded space like around the Citadel, protocols dictated to open all communication channels and let the VIs work together to minimize piloting mistakes. Saren was left with nothing to do but watch and think. The Council may have summoned him on the Citadel, but they hadn't told him why. It was unusual. A summon was just a formality. Most of the time, Saren didn't have to actually show up in front of the Council, they could converse through quantum entanglement communication. When his presence was required, he usually had to work on the Citadel for a while, but the Council would then inform him of what was going on. Not this time.
And Shepard was alive.

That couldn't be a coincidence.

Saren would always remember the day Nihlus had talked about her for the first time.

"This is my candidate," he had said, excited, putting a datapad on the coffee table. "Commander Jane Shepard."

Saren didn't move from the sofa to take a look at the files. He didn't care. He didn't understand why the Council had asked Nihlus to be part of the selection committee in the first place.

"Take a look," Nihlus insisted, pushing the datapad in Saren's direction. "The Butcher of Torfan," he made the nickname ring. "She's pretty awesome for a Human; lots of action, intelligent but just the right amount of crazy, highly adaptable..."

"It is none of my business," Saren interrupted and it was true. The Council had not solicited his opinion this time for their ridiculous little pet project, so why would he waste time with it? "Besides," he added, sipping his glass of asari honey wine, "you sound like you want my approval. Aren't we passed that, Nihlus?" he reminded him reproachfully.

"Ah, don't be all butthurt, Saren," Nihlus clicked, amused. "You'll always be my mentor."

"But if she's selected, you'll be her mentor."


Saren frowned. He had tried for all Nihlus' formative years to get him out of the influence of the Hierarchy but the damn kid was loyal to those fanatics. Why? Saren had no idea. Nihlus had been given shit since his first day at boot camp because he came from a secessionist colony, and he had been looked down by many Turians over the course of his Spectre career, but he was still trying to conform to the will of the Hierarchy. Saren had stopped trying to understand. He had given Nihlus all the attention he had needed, all the support and the love a mentor could give, yet it hadn't been enough.

"Control her or make her fail," Nihlus continued thoughtfully, leaning on the couch, his enhanced eyes so green in the dim lights of the false night. He kept silent for a moment. Saren imitated him. He didn't want to talk about the all of that. "I'd be a great mentor though."

Saren choked on his drink. Nihlus smirked, pleased with himself.

"Her mentor was the Anderson you had to evaluate years ago," he said. Saren grumbled. "Well, not mentor as we see it," Nihlus continued, ignoring his mentor's rant, "but he still took care of her military career, pushed her in the right direction even if nobody gave a fuck about her." He shut up, looking away.

So that was the reason behind Nihlus' choice, Saren realized. He was seeing himself in Shepard. Both brats nobody cared about, thrown into some shit or another they had no control over, saved by a strong mentor, gaining ranks and honors. It was too obvious.

"Don't," Saren said. Don't do that to yourself, he wanted to say, don't do that to us, but he didn't. It was useless. Nihlus had already made up his mind.

"It's too late," he confirmed, avoiding Saren's gaze. "I submitted her file to the Council yesterday. It's up to them now."
"Before or after we fucked?" Saren asked, bitter. Nihlus didn't answer.

Saren played with his drink, making the last few drops swirl in the glass. He was pissed. Of course Nihlus would have been pushed by the Council to take an apprentice at some point, but it was too soon – if such a time would ever come. Nihlus was a brilliant Spectre, resourceful, intelligent, cunning, competent, but he wasn't the type to become a mentor. He was the type to be monitored forever and to take with you in death if you wanted to avoid problems. Saren knew it, but he wasn't sure the Council was aware of that flaw. Maybe someone, somewhere, wanted Nihlus to fail and to take the first human Spectre down with him. It wouldn't surprise Saren if the Hierarchy was behind that.

But it was only conjectures. Nihlus wasn't the only one submitting a candidature to find the first human Spectre. And if Shepard was chosen, Saren would just have to find a pretext to tag along on their first few missions, to make sure Nihlus kept his head cool. That would be fucking easy, Saren thought as he looked at his protege. Nihlus had a serious problem when it came to attachment. Maybe Saren had to make sure his bond with Nihlus was stronger than any other he'd create with that Human – or anyone.

"You look pissed," Nihlus commented, still avoiding eye contact.

"I am," Saren replied, "but not for what you think."

"Huh, why then?"

"I won't be able to make you bounce on my dick as often as I want to in the future, that's all," Saren replied as if it had no importance.

Nihlus laughed. "You don't even like Turians," he said, more comfortable. "I've seen you fuck countless Asaris over the years, heck, even earlier tonight, but not one Turian."

"It's true," Saren nodded before finishing the wine. "You've been the only one since I left the Hierarchy."

He caught Nihlus' eyes and let that sink. Nihlus would be fifty in a few years. It meant he'd have to settle down with someone since he kept trying to be a good little Turian falling in line like anybody else in the Hierarchy. It wasn't rare for mentors and their proteges to form a partnership. Saren was a bit old for Nihlus and he'd rather be fucked by a Krogan than follow the Hierarchy's traditions, but he could justify his sudden change of heart with a classic Chosen One narrative: Nihlus had opened his eyes, Saren had to admit he couldn't live without him and that sort of bullshit. It'd work, Saren knew it as he watched Nihlus hesitate. Nihlus loved to be the only one.

"What about your asari fetish?" he asked with humor but also uncertainty.

"We can find an agreement," Saren shrugged. "Neither of us is a one partner kind of guy after all. Don't you like to fuck Humans?"

Nihlus drummed on the sofa as he thought. Saren didn't say anything else. He waited a bit before refilling his glass and sipped it in silence. It was a weird thing to worry about, even by Nihlus' standards. Monogamy certainly wasn't a turian concept due to their social rules regarding friendship. Partners had to raise children together, make them good little citizens adoring the Hierarchy, but nothing forbade them to fuck with whoever they wanted. It was even expected from partners to maintain friendships with other Turians, as long as it didn't jeopardize their duty to their children, the community and the Hierarchy, because once the kids gone to boot camp, partners would part away and find new people to breed with, again and again, until death came. Such was
their devotion to the Hierarchy.

"This is why I asked the Council to not work with you anymore," Nihlus eventually said. Saren felt anger rise but he didn't show any sign of it. Nihlus looked at him in the eyes. "You want to control everything, everybody, including me."

"I only have your best interest in mind," Saren had simply replied.

Nihlus had snorted, angry, and left Illium right away. He eventually became Shepard's mentor some time later, but Saren had played his game well and he managed to tag along on the test mission on Eden Prime. After the disastrous loss of the prothean beacon, Saren refused to join Nihlus and Shepard for their confinement on Palaven for a few months and went back to Illium. He saw Nihlus another time before a long break, during the investigation regarding Benezia's business on Noveria led by Shepard. Nihlus had only been there to assist his protegee. His lack of motivation to work against his mentor had probably saved Saren's ass. Nihlus had pushed Shepard to drop the investigation and they parted ways. Saren kept an eye on his protege over the years but didn't receive an email from Nihlus until after his rescue on Ilos. Saren had then thought Nihlus was back on track after all, mostly because Shepard had a turian protege of her own, but Nihlus actually swayed between Saren and Shepard, putting him off balance a little more each time. And when the bitch had disappeared, Nihlus had finally cracked.

Saren would make her pay for that, one day, regardless of the troubles she could throw him into. Maybe he had been summoned because she had brought evidence of his crimes from her vacations. Maybe Saren was flying right into a trap and would finish the day in prison. That wasn't going to happen, he thought as the VI started the landing protocols. Saren would rather die than be taken alive, and he'd kill as many as possible before that. No one would take freedom from him.

"Saren?" Liara asked from the door of the cockpit.

"Yes, my love?" Saren replied by automatism. He made an effort to turn his seat around and smile to the youngster. They were wearing a tight and plain green and white dress covering them chin to toes, the proper kind of clothes for someone their chaste age, yet Saren found it exciting. How many times had he come to their office while they were wearing this kind of garments, only to have a rough fuck on their desk? He couldn't say he disliked this kind of afternoon meetings, especially when he was with such charming and innocent company. "You look lovely," he added.

Liara blushed lightly and brushed something off their dress. "Well, it's a game, isn't it?" they asked. "I'm supposed to be a helpless child knowing nothing of business, so I dress like it." They rose their eyes to Saren's, blushing furiously this time. "But I plan to do some shopping for tonight."

Saren smirked and stood up to come closer to Liara. He kissed them quickly on top of the head. "I'm looking forward to that," he said. He hid the fact he could be dead by tonight. But if he lived, fucking his so-called lover would be a nice way to end the day.

Liara went their separate way once on the Citadel, and Saren headed for the embassies district, where the Councilors' offices were located, patting his gun from time to time to make sure it was still there, concealed under his cape. Gun regulation was a vague concept on the Citadel, mostly because it was impossible to convince a Turian to not carry weapons, and because biotics could snap your neck whenever they wanted. As a result, almost everybody was armed, but it didn't mean anybody could open fire at will. C-Sec preferred to take down shooters than to take them to the nearest precinct. Space was sparse on the station after all, and nobody wanted to allocate some to new prisons.
Everybody agreed to say the Presidium was the safest and nicest part of the Citadel – although far too expensive for the large majority of the population. Saren hated it nonetheless. Not because it was clean and quiet, but because walking between those curved walls made it evident the Citadel was a spacestation and he couldn't bare it. All those corridors and alleys and streets reminded him of his early childhood, when he was trapped on a small mining station drifting from asteroid to asteroid. He had hated the metallic walls, the artificial lights and the recycled everything – air, water, waste. People.

Two other Spectres were already waiting in Councilor Tevos' antechamber when Saren arrived, an Asari and a Salarian. He knew them – he knew every Spectre, just in case. Soran Disyus had the record for longest undercover mission – and consequently longest Spectre assignment so far. They had infiltrated a mercenary group in the Terminus for over two centuries, giving information about their raids and targets, and supposedly saving countless lives in nearby colonies in the Traverse.

On another sofa sat Peek Ftralf, an old Salarian missing an eye. He wasn't ex-STG like most salarian Spectres but from the Intelligence Division. While the Special Tasks Group was all about infiltration and secret operations, the Intelligence Division dealt with information that couldn't be stolen. Basically, the STG handed them devices or people and their job was to break them, one way or another – mostly the other. Ftralf was nothing other than a torturer.

Disyus and Ftralf nodded their salutation to Saren, studying him as much as he had studied them, and they all came to the same conclusion: if they had to work together, the mission would require them to retrieve information. Saren frowned slightly. Maybe Disyus and Ftralf had to retrieve information from him, but the Council would need more than two Spectres to get him to talk.

The door of Tevos' office opened on Executor Venari Pallin, the head of C-Sec. Saren reached for his gun by reflex, adrenaline flooding his body, but Pallin simply saluted the Spectres with a courteous nod before retreating inside. Disyus and Ftralf followed him. Saren didn't show any hesitation, even if he wasn't entirely sure of what was going on.

"Thank you for coming on such a short notice," Tevos started but they were interrupted by Esheel. "It's their job to come when summoned," she said haughtily.

Tevos glared at Disyus instead of their colleague but Disyus didn't take it personally. The sudden change of salarian Councilor the previous year had created a few tensions within the Council. Valern had officially been replaced because of a lung cancer, but it didn't take a lot of neurons to figure out the Salarians had deemed him too weak to counter the growing turio-asari alliance. Esheel was the perfect choice to fight back. At thirty-three years old, she wasn't exactly young by salarian standards, but she had been the most influential Dalatrass on Sur'Kesh since her ascension to power at the death of her mother. She had controlled four fifths of the planet, either herself or by allegiances due to extremely well planned marriages. Sur'Kesh was basically her turf and Salarians were smart enough to know not to fuck with her.

She had had to resign from her Dalatrass position to become Councilor though, but Saren was pretty sure she still kept an eye on what was going on back home – her daughters and nieces and cousins would tell her everything anyway. Esheel was a much tougher adversary than Valern, no doubt about it, and she had opposed her colleagues each time she could. So basically at any given occasion. Saren had heard Esheel was a real pain in the ass of the galaxy. Exploration had almost
stopped, investments weren't going well, expansion to the Traverse was at a halt. A lot of people weren't happy, but it was evident Tevos was the most unhappy of them all. Sparatus just seemed resigned. No doubt he had received orders from the Hierarchy.

Tevos inhaled deeply, eyes closed, before talking again.

"As you may already know, Spectre Shepard and her protege have come back," they said, their voice falsely under control. It wasn't a surprise for Saren but the two others Spectres had been in the dark. Not everybody had an obsession for that destructive bitch, Saren tended to forget that. "The Normandy resurfaced two weeks ago in the Sahrabarik system," Tevos continued. "Shepard agreed to head back to the Citadel after a few necessary repairs and the Normandy arrived yesterday in our system. The ship has been redirected to Station Five."

Saren tensed just hearing the name. Station Five was one of the five asteroids in the Widow system converted into military bases, as a means to defend the Citadel. One was operated by the Asaris, Two by the Salarians, and Three to Five by the Turians. Any ship redirected to any of those stations were as good as dead. That meant the Normandy was grounded.

Or it was a very elaborate ruse to get him. Maybe too expensive for hunting down a single man, considering. Saren started to relax and even to appreciate the moment. It wasn't about him. It was about Shepard and she was in deep shit.

"The human Spectre claims to have taken a short detour by the galactic core," Esheel continued before Tevos could speak again, "which resulted in her absence for two standard years from our point of view. I have to admit it's a rather imaginative explanation for disappearing without a trace and endangering the security of the galaxy." Tevos snorted. "She possesses the only known Prothean still alive," Esheel insisted, not even turning to her colleague. "That alone is problematic. Who knows what she could do with him, or what our enemy could do if they ever put their hands on him."

She obviously never had met Javik, Saren thought. He had pity for the fools who'd try to take him down. Javik was an Avatar. While all Protheans were biotics, and trained due to their mandatory military service for the Empire, Avatars were something else entirely, weapons genetically engineered over thousands of years, which powers were beyond comprehension. Saren had seen little about the Avatars, but enough to fuel his nightmares for years. He had seen armies reduced to a bloody pulp, cities suddenly blown away, continents ravaged by gigantic waves, planets crushed like a ripe fruit in the fist of a child. There was no telling where an Avatar's powers stopped. Saren shivered. In a way, he was glad the only one still existing was devoted to an agent of the Council.

"Your job will be to determine if Shepard is lying or not, Spectres," Tevos resumed, speaking louder than Esheel. "Study her proof, question the crew, even go to Omega to interrogate whoever you want, I don't care but find the truth on that matter."

"Executor Pallin will also be part of the investigation team," Sparatus added, finally opening his mouth. "We exceptionally authorized him to use all of C-Sec's resources if necessary."

Esheel snorted, confirming what Saren thought. That bad smell came from the dirty butt of the Executor. It was obvious he was working for the Hierarchy and he'd find whatever the Hierarchy wanted him to find. Saren looked at Disyus and Ftralf, a seasoned spy and a heartless torturer. Ftralf, he understood. The guy could retrieve any information out of anybody, but Disyus? They were more suited for undercover operations – although Saren didn't know the full expanse of their abilities. Tevos had picked Disyus, that much was obvious, the Hierarchy had chosen Pallin through Sparatus, and Esheel had added Ftralf to the lot, maybe hoping someone would not cooperate. But what of Saren? Who had assigned him to the investigation? The Council was well
aware of his partiality toward Shepard.

Oh, Saren realized, that was it. One of the Councilors, Esheel he'd bet, wanted someone biased to make sure Shepard wouldn't get completely clean out of this mess. Saren slightly turned to the salarian Councilor and gave her a small nod. He'd leave a few stains, no problem. The ex-Dalatrass just blinked slowly in his direction, which was enough of a confirmation.

The rest of the meeting was of no interest but Saren played along, listening politely and nodding when it was appropriate, trying not to think about the growing pain in his back. He would have liked to have a word with Esheel before going to Station Five and consequently stayed behind as the room was cleared, but the Councilor ignored him and walked to her office, guards on her heels. Saren frowned a little but he could understand – the distance was necessary – so he headed for the elevators. Disyus and Ftralf hadn't waited for him. Saren stood in line for the next elevator. He kept an eye on the light crowd of the embassies district but everybody was going on and about their own business.

Until the turian ambassador showed up, surrounded by his bodyguards. Pallin was following his mentor and predecessor, Argoth Vakarian. Saren clicked. Vakarian was a pain in the ass he had had to deal with for years, always in the way with his laws and principles. Vakarian hated Spectres and their lack of rules, and hated even more turian Spectres, and barefaces, and biotics. Saren was all of that, plus an alien fucker and a deserter – all favorites of the then Executor. Vakarian would have arrested him on sight if he had had the authority back in the days, and he had been actively working to grant more power to the Executor – it seemed it had payed off since Pallin had been asked to work with Spectres. But Vakarian had resigned a few years ago, Saren didn't know why but he certainly did celebrate that day with several fellow Spectres at their favorite bar.

But Vakarian was back on the Citadel now, and with a promotion. He had been nominated ambassador in chief the previous year, making him the second most powerful Turian on the Citadel, the man speaking for all the turian ambassadors, the voice of the Hierarchy. He was basically the new boss in town, considering Pallin had been his protege and Sparatus his subordinate for years in the army. Saren snorted. And Turians dared to think they were better than the others, that their political system was exempt of all the corruption and favors so common in their neighbors' internal affairs. It was all a joke, that's what it was.

Vakarian came to a halt next to Saren, standing so straight his spine must have hurt. He was taller than Saren, gray of face with piercing green eyes – natural greens, not enhanced –, blue markings across his ridiculously handsome face, sporting the long blue robes of his function. Blue was such an aggressive color for Turians – it was blood, violence, sex, all those primal needs their society was built on. Saren hated it – on Turians.

"Spectre," Vakarian said with a nod of the head.

"Ambassador," Saren replied. Curious how they were now alone in front of the elevator, the guards keeping the crowd at a respectful distance, Pallin standing behind his mentor, like Nihlus had done for years. Saren suddenly didn't feel like playing Vakarian's obvious game. "What do you want?" he asked. "And speak quickly, I know it must hurt you to talk to me."

Vakarian frowned, clearly disgusted. "You'll clear the turian Spectre working under Shepard's command," he said and it was not a request, it was an order. A very illegal order. The ambassador in chief was interfering with an official investigation of the Spectre Bureau, commissioned by the Councilors themselves. Oh this day kept getting better and better.

"I'm afraid I still have integrity, Ambassador," Saren replied as the elevator's doors opened. That must have hit Vakarian hard.
And it did, considering Saren was suddenly shoved into the elevator, followed by the ambassador and a very uncomfortable Pallin. Vakarian grabbed Saren by the collar before slamming him against the wall.

"You will do what I tell you to do, scum," Vakarian spat.

"Argoth," Pallin yelped, putting a hand on Vakarian's arm, "calm down!"

"Scum?" Saren repeated with a smirk. "I'm so hurt, Ambassador."

Vakarian looked at Saren straight in the eyes for a few seconds, furious, but eventually released him, not without another push against the wall.

"It's an order from the Hierarchy," Vakarian said, straightening his robes, and it seemed to Saren that it wasn't the truth.

"I do not take orders from the Hierarchy," Saren replied.

"Today, you will," Vakarian barked, "or that useless piece of shit you call your protege is dead."

Nihlus.

Anger rose and with it Saren's biotics awakened. He felt his fingers prickle, electrified by the sudden surge of power. It was so tempting to use his gift on Vakarian, to throw everything at him and reduce him to a lifeless puppet, so tempting Saren was already concentrating the energy in his fist, but Pallin pushed his boss back.

"Think about what you're doing, Spectre," he said calmly, looking at Saren, but he quickly turned to Vakarian. "You too, Argoth. Calm down, for fuck's sake!"

Vakarian gritted his teeth but didn't reply. He kept staring at Saren, evenly furious. It was a lie. It must be a lie. Why would Vakarian, why would the Hierarchy have Nihlus? How could they have him anyway? He was missing, had been for over a year, even the Council didn't know where he was. It was a lie. They didn't have Nihlus, they couldn't hurt him. And if they did, by the Goddess, Saren would kill them all.

The elevator stopped after an uncomfortable minute of tensed silence.

"Clear the turian Spectre," Vakarian repeated, "it's an order."

"Argoth, enough," Pallin pleaded, pushing his mentor out. He gave a sorry nod to Saren before exiting the elevator too.

Whoever that Turian was, he'd go down with Shepard, Saren decided.

Station Five was all you could expect of a military base run by Turians: everything was clean and in order on the surface, but would be a deadly trap if necessary. It wasn't the first time Saren came here, but that didn't mean he felt comfortable walking in the middle of all those damn armed fanatics. Nobody dared to look at him in the eyes but he knew what they were thinking. Spectre. Bareface. Biotic. Saren straightened, ignored the pain and walked faster, Turians making way before him.

He found Disyus and Ftralf with Pallin in a very Spartan office in the detention area of the station. There was a large table in the middle of the room, with a holographic projector in the middle, and piles of datapads around, one for each investigator.
"Thank you for joining us, Spectre Arterius," Pallin said, and he seemed still embarrassed by what had happened earlier. Saren brushed it off and stood on his side of the table. "So, good news for us, the Normandy's running with a skeleton crew, only twenty-four people at the moment. One member left on Omega, Ashley Williams, ex-Alliance turned gun for hire, but we can deal with her later."

"Why did she leave?" Ftralf asked.

"She quit unexpectedly," Pallin answered, grabbing a datapad and scrolling through its content. "It seems she disagreed with Shepard's management of the situation." Interesting, Saren thought as Pallin put the datapad back on the table. "Another Spectre was on board the Normandy, Cilat Hor." The hologram of a Salarian illuminated the room. "Shepard picked him up from a mining asteroid in the Faryar system, Hourglass Nebula, a few hours before disappearing. He's a computer and artificial intelligence expert."

"I know him," Disyus said, raising slightly their hand. "He helped me on a case involving the Geths."

"There's a Geth in the crew," Ftralf commented.

"Yes but the preliminary reports by Spectres Shepard and Vakarian say Hor was..."

"Vakarian?" Saren interrupted. Speaking his name brought his picture on the hologram and there was no doubt possible. Spectre Vakarian was the spitting image of Ambassador Vakarian, regardless of the disfiguring scars. That explained Vakarian Senior's attitude. He wanted to save his son's ass. How could a by-the-book Turian like him go this low? Helping his kid get out of a curious situation could bring big trouble for Argoth Vakarian. That was fantastic news.

"Yeah, well," Pallin continued, uncomfortable. "Spectre Vakarian may be related to the ambassador in chief but he's been nominated a few months after the attack on the Citadel, almost three years ago, where he demonstrated extraordinary skills and initiative."

"Oh right, I remember him," Disyus said, snapping their fingers. "The kid who took down over five hundred Cerberus soldiers on his own during the attack."

"Stopped by a missile in the face," Ftralf added, turning toward Disyus with a smile. The Asari nodded, their traits more lively than before. There was something here, Saren noted. Disyus and Ftralf knew each other, were friends even maybe. The Salarian turned back to Pallin. "Wasn't he a C-Sec officer?"

Blessed be the Goddess.

"So you were his boss at the time, Pallin, didn't you?" Saren smiled, barely containing his excitement. Pallin looked at him, tensed. "Clearly you cannot be part of this investigation, Executor," Saren continued. "Argoth Vakarian was your mentor and predecessor at C-Sec, and you have ties with his son too, as his former superior. You're biased."

"Because you're not?" Pallin snorted. "Everybody knows you hate Humans and Shepard in particular."

"At least we're sure I won't help her get out of this mess," Saren replied, looking at the others. "I have my doubts regarding the impartiality of this committee."
"I won't help Vakarian," Pallin assured.

"I'm with Arterius," Ftralf suddenly said, and it surprised Saren. He had not planned to get help from the other two Spectres. Instead, he had readied himself to fight them. "I think you cannot be part of this investigation, Executor," the Salarian continued, then turned to the Asari, who hesitated a bit before wincing.

"You have to admit it's strange that you got to work with us on a case that involves your ex-subordinate and son of your mentor. That only would be suspicious by turian standards."

"Did I fail to mention Ambassador Vakarian tried to coerce me into clearing the name of his son this morning after our meeting?" Saren added. "Didn't he, Executor? After all you were a witness to the scene."

And with that Pallin was forced to go back to the Citadel. Saren was glad to see him walk out of the door. With Pallin out, he could take control of the committee.

"Now, I believe we..." he said, straightening, but Ftralf interrupted him.

"None of us is neutral in this matter." Disyus nodded with a smirk and Saren couldn't deny it. "Councilor Esheel asked me to make sure the Normandy's crew would finish the day in prison," the Salarian explained. "The STG learned last year that Shepard was working with Mordin Solus to find a cure to the genophage. Obviously Shepard didn't decide to do that on her own, she's following orders, but Councilor Esheel cannot accuse Tevos and Sparatus directly, so she wants to punish Shepard and Solus instead."

"Councilor Tevos asked me to save Shepard's ass," Disyus then told them. "I believe it's for the same reason, because Shepard is hardly the first Spectre to disappear without giving any news. Tevos and Sparatus want to protect their asses. If Shepard walks free, Esheel can't do shit."

"Pallin was obviously for Shepard," Saren continued, "and I wouldn't mind throwing her in prison indeed. So, it seems two of us remaining here are in favor to..."

"I'm not," Ftralf interrupted again, and this time it irked Saren. "I work for the Council, not for Councilor Esheel alone." Saren snorted. A Spectre with integrity now! What a funny concept. "We're going to investigate regardless of what the Councilors asked us personally," he decreed. "Our duty is to the galactic community first, not personal interests of temporary leaders."

"Always so righteous," Disyus sighed. Ftralf looked at them with a slight frown. Disyus smiled. "Don't worry, I was planning on doing my job properly anyway."

"Arterius?" Ftralf asked, turning to Saren.

Saren had to agree if he wanted to stay in the committee. Ftralf would be happy to throw him out like Pallin. After all, Saren had admitted to being biased.

"Very well," Saren said, resigned.

"Good," Ftralf nodded stiffly. "I propose we conduct individual interviews of each crew member on our own," he said, stacking his datapads. "Then we'll regroup and discuss. Shouldn't take more than a week."

Fantastic, Saren thought grimly as he followed the Salarian out of the room. Stuck on Station Five for a week, exactly what he had hoped for. Surely he would be able to go back on the Citadel at some point, but that only was a small consolation. "Who will have the honor of the first tête-à-tête
with Shepard?" Saren asked nonetheless.

"It would be better if we hear her last, actually," Ftralf replied. "Let her stew for a while. If she
gave orders to her crew, a narrative to follow, it'll increase her stress to not know if they followed
the script. We can catch her like that."

"Shepard's tougher than that," Saren disagreed. "I know her, I've worked with her. The more
pressure on her, the better she gets. She won't break easily. Besides, we have to know her story to
compare it to her crew's."

"Fine," Ftralf reluctantly agreed. "Go talk to Shepard first. It might upset her enough to make my
work easier."

Saren snorted but didn't add anything. He went on his own in search of the room where Shepard
was waiting, and found it behind two Turians standing guard. Shepard was sitting on the other side
of a high table when Saren entered. He didn't recognize her at first, with her shorter and
asymmetric hair, but it was her despite the new scars and the tiredness oozing from her. She
straightened when she saw him and squared her shoulders, her eyes regaining the coldness he
knew.

"Spectre Arterius," she saluted, putting her hands on the table.

"Shepard," he replied. No 'Spectre', no 'Commander'. Even she would understand the message.
Saren took his time to sit down and scrolled through the datapad in silence for a moment. Shepard's
only answer was to blink once in a while. "So, you came back."

"I never left," she replied. "Our detour by the galactic core took us eleven hours in total, but we
shortly orbited a black hole and consequently lost around two standards years. I gave the
navigation logs to the Council."

"Yes, yes," Saren nodded, continuing scrolling, "but it's hard to believe and logs can be forged."
Shepard didn't show any sign of agitation or anger. "I'm no expert but everybody knows an engine
failure in the relay network means the sinking of a ship. How come you miraculously survived
this?"

"I'm no expert either," Shepard agreed. "My pilot is more suited than me to answer to that question,
but, from what I understood, there's a purge system in the relay network. Damaged ships are thrown
out into a space grave or something near a black hole. It's also in the logs."

"Convenient." Shepard didn't flinch. All in due time. Saren remembered the pilot, Jeff Moreau, a
smart little piece of shit, a cripple too, devoted to his Commander. "You claim the engine stopped
because of another Spectre on board, Cilat Hor."

"More or less. He unleashed a prothean VI my protege was studying. The VI fried the Normandy's
and the engine consequently failed."

"But Cilat Hor has no recollection of the events," Saren commented. "He doesn't even remember
boarding the Normandy."

"We believe he was controlled by something or someone through a prothean artifact we kept on
board, some sort of black, shimmering orb. We encountered those orbs before, on Project Base,
Viantel, and the mining station where Hor was, just this year. Well, in 2192 anyway."

Saren put his datapad on the table. "Your story is difficult to believe."
"I know, but it's the truth."

"What about Nihlus?" Saren asked.

Shepard lost a fraction of her confidence. "What about him?"

"Where is he?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," she replied. "I saw him for the last time on Arcturus Station six or seven weeks before my trip to the galactic core." She hesitated for a second. "Why do you ask?"

She worried about Nihlus, Saren understood, and in all honesty, it surprised him for a second. Shepard had always refused Nihlus' love, even if she had used and abused him. She had pushed him away each time he had tried to bond with her in a significant way, played with him, thrown him out of balance. But she worried nonetheless. Did she miss her toy? It sickened Saren, but he recognized an opportunity when he saw one.

"No reason," he said lightly, obviously lying, and he saw Shepard worry, her face more tensed, her fingers twitching a little. He refrained his smile, more irritated than he should have been. How could she? She had no right to worry about Nihlus, not after her countless rejections. Fucking bitch, he thought as he composed himself, looking at her straight in the eyes. He'd take her down, one way or another.

TBC

Note
I'm not dead! I'm just exhausted and it took me nine (9) attempts to find Saren's "voice". Plus 2016 sucks. Work sucks. Everything sucks, even the end of this chapter. But it's done. DONE. Also, I've finally found a reliable betareader, aka my sister. She already edited all the chapters but I didn't put them on the Internet yet. I'll do that in the following weeks, because I also want to change a few things here and there. Nothing game-changing but little awkward stuff mostly at the beginning of the story. You won't have to read it all again, don't worry (although, if you decide to do so, I won't stop you).
As always, SUPPORT IS NEEDED. Seriously, I spent my summer thinking "nobody reads nor enjoys Semper Fi anyway" because I received so few reviews for the last chapter. I'm serious. I thought that for months. MONTHS. And you, people who binge-read all the story, or download it to read it on your favorite device, could you write a few lines once in a while too? That would be really, really appreciated.
Intelligence had always been an important part of warfare, but Turians didn't really believe in it. They needed to know the enemy and their number, sure, but the preferred tactic always had been to overwhelm the enemy with a bigger, better army. To avoid leaks of information, nobody was told more than what they needed to know. Only high ranked had a good view of everything happening. Given that, it was no surprise new recruits weren't trained to deal with interrogation techniques. It was a mandatory course only from tier fourteen.

Garrus shouldn't have followed it during his military career, but he did in fact take it. Major Elin Fori had deemed it necessary for all her men to know how to resist the temptation of talking. Twice a year for twelve years, Garrus had been exposed to various questioning techniques from all known species and had a few scars to prove it. He had talked a few times, especially in his young years, but overall Elin had been pleased with his results.

So Garrus had been totally unprepared for the beer Spectre Disyus had slid in his direction like they had been old pals reuniting after a while. Garrus had stayed dubious all along their chat, for nothing. Disyus didn't try to trick him. They just listened and asked questions on certain parts of the story but that had been it.

Garrus was familiar with the "good cop, bad cop" technique universally shared by all police forces through the galaxy, so he mentally readied himself for the second Spectre, a Salarian missing an eye named Ftralf. The guy was a lot less friendly than Disyus, but he didn't play the bad cop either. Ftralf made Garrus repeat for hours his story, parts of it, constantly jumping from one point to another on the timeline to catch inconsistencies, but there were none because Garrus was simply telling the truth.

Ftralf left and dinner arrived, simple military rations like Garrus had eaten twice a day for all his mandatory service. He missed Garderm's food, but he knew he had it better than the others – at least he was a Turian fed by Turians, while the rest of the crew was probably eating levo ration bars. Except Tali'Zorah. Garrus had to admit he liked the idea of the Quarian surrounded by Turians way less tolerant than him. That'd teach her a lesson, for once.

And nobody else came to his cell for four days.

On the fifth day, a Turian Garrus had never seen before arrived, wearing black head to toes, cape and headscarf included. He was a bareface but what made Garrus uncomfortable was his thin, deformed fringes combined with his white skin. Quoranis syndrome. That was not an anomaly the Hierarchy tolerated, because it often came with other various disorders. The man wasn't wearing the standard uniform of the station, or any kind of uniform, so he probably wasn't working for the Hierarchy or any turian-related organization. Was he another Spectre? The Council wasn't obligated to recruit Turians only from the Hierarchy after all.

"By the Goddess," the bareface spit, "you do look like your father, Vakarian."

Garrus frowned. "I actually take from my mother."

The Turian shrugged before sitting at the table. "You Turians all look the same anyway."
Did he not know he was Turian? Garrus wondered. Although, he had used an asari saying, so maybe he hadn't been raised by Turians. It happened.

"So," the Turian continued, scrolling on his datapad, "nice scars." Garrus's hand twitched but he controlled himself to not touch his face. He was used to it by now and nobody paid attention to it on the Normandy, but any other Turian would notice it. Turians loved symmetry too much to not frown upon such scars. "Vakarian and Pallin send their regards, by the way."

"Vakarian and Pallin are pretty common names," Garrus started, a pit in his stomach, but the Turian interrupted him.

"Your father the ambassador and your ex-boss."

"Ambassador?" Garrus repeated, doubtful. "My father isn't..."

"Oh yes he is," the Turian interrupted again. "Since last year, I believe. It's not really surprising considering he and Palaven's Primarch have been in a partnership for years."

Garrus didn't like the subtext. "I know the Primarch and I can assure you he's not the kind to promote his friends if..."

"You know the Primarch too?" the Turian asked.

"Yes."

"So your ex-boss, your father and his friend all had high positions before your nomination to Spectre," the Turian commented. "Interesting."

"I earned this nomination," Garrus replied, uneasy.

"Yes, the attack on the Citadel in 92," the Turian nodded, keeping his calm, "I know."

And he kept on scrolling on his datapad for several minutes. It amused Garrus a little.

"May I ask your name?"

"You may not," the Turian replied, finding his datapad more interesting than the man he had to interrogate.

"You're a Spectre," Garrus eventually said, his patience running low.

"Brilliant deduction," the Turian mocked.

"Obviously not from the Hierarchy."

The Turian rose his eyes. "Is that supposed to hurt me?" he asked with a smirk. "We're not all proud to be brainwashed, you know?"

"I'm not brainwashed."

"You were raised in a system telling you what to do and how to behave at any given time," the Turian replied, uninterested. "If that's not being brainwashed, then I'm not a bareface."

"What is this about?" Garrus asked suddenly. "Aren't you supposed to interrogate me about our disappearance?"
"I've heard enough about that," the Turian shrugged. "You'll be happy to learn your fable checks out and that my colleagues have decided to cut the investigation short."

"So what are you doing here?"

"Your daddy asked me to clear your name," the Turian answered, and it hit Garrus hard. That was impossible. Argoth Vakarian was too by-the-book to do this kind of thing. He had sent his own daughter to the Cabal because she was a biotic, so Garrus was pretty sure he wouldn't lift a finger if his son was in trouble. "But," the Turian continued, "I wonder if you're cut to be a Spectre in the first place."

"What?" Garrus frowned.

"Do you know how Spectres are recruited?" the Turian asked.

"They can be handpicked but the more traditional way is through the candidature calls the Council makes when required."

"But you were recommended at a time no call was open."

"I didn't know," Garrus replied, uncomfortable. And that was perfectly true. He had never asked anything about his nomination – he hadn't even been aware of it until he had been summoned to the Council's chamber.

"Venari Pallin recommended you," the Turian kept going. "Pallin, who's been your father's protege and successor at the head of C-Sec."

"Too bad for your theory," Garrus snorted, trying to look more confident than he really was, "my father hates Spectres with a passion."

"Oh I know that very well," the Turian smiled, "believe me, but, again, the Primarch is a friend of your dad's, and we all know Fedorian is incapable of keeping his nose out of the Council's business."

The door slid open just as Garrus was about to answer. A C-Sec agent was standing between the two guards, someone he had never thought he'd see again. Denian Chellick. With his fair skin, green enhanced eyes and Ohpan tattoos, the second most common tattoos within the Hierarchy, Chellick was indistinguishable from the mass of Turians working at C-Sec, especially when he wore his uniform. The only trait that characterized him was his lack of diplomacy, something that had got him in troubles a few times during his career. He had stagnated as a detective for years, claiming he liked the endless hours and lack of recognition too much to try to be promoted. Garrus had been assigned to Chellick's investigation team after his first few months at C-Sec and five different units.

Garrus had already a solid reputation as a rebellious little shit back then, but Chellick had seen worse in his career. He had used it as an advantage and let Garrus work alone as much as possible, still keeping an eye on him to avoid any problem. The composition of the team had also helped. Besides Chellick and Garrus, only one other Turian was assigned to the squad, Vinus Mapian. It had greatly reduced the social pressure Garrus hated, and working with Salarians and Asaris had been interesting and eye-opening.

"Spectre Vakarian," Chellick started, looking over Garrus' head and staying very official, "the Council is summoning you. I'll accompany you back to the Citadel immediately."

"I'm not done with the interrogation," the Turian in black said, not even turning to the door.
"I have my orders, Spectre Arterius," Chellick replied. "If you're not happy with it, go complain to the Council."

The bareface looked furious for a fraction of a second but regained control. He then turned to the door.

"Your name, Officer. It'll go nicely with my complaint."

"Certainly, Spectre," Chellick obliged, standing at parade rest. "Commander Denian Chellick, Investigation, at your service."

"You're free to go, Vakarian," Arterius said, dismissing him without even looking at him.

Garrus didn't wait for a change of heart and jumped out of the cell. Chellick made it clear now wasn't the time for talking and pushed him through the corridors of the station. A C-Sec shuttle was waiting for them on the docs. Chellick didn't relax until the door was closed.

"I hate coming here," he sighed as he sat down. "You never know what those trigger happy Special Forces can do." He banged on the wall behind him and the shuttle took off.

"The Seventy-Ninth flotilla is part of the Special Forces, you know that?" Garrus asked, a bit annoyed.

"My point exactly," Chellick ranted. He scratched the back on his neck and gave Garrus a quick look before staring at the window. "Welcome back, I guess, Spectre."

"Huh, thanks, Commander?" Garrus hesitated, uncomfortable. Commander was the second highest position possible in C-Sec. Chellick now controlled the whole investigation division and had to respond only to the Executor.

Chellick gave him a shrug in response. "Lots of high ranked died during the attack three years ago, had to replace them eventually and, sadly, I am a capable man, with more brain than most. And you?" Chellick asked, jerking his chin in Garrus' direction. "Spectre, huh?"

"Yeah," Garrus replied, and he didn't feel quite proud of himself. One day he had been summoned, the next he had been waiting for the Normandy on the docks, with no chance of going back to the precinct. Not that he really cared at the time.

"Nobody gave us an explanation, you know?" Chellick continued. "You disappeared one day and that was it. Rumors said you'd been fired because of your attitude during the attack, or that you just had quit since you're a weirdo. But Spectre? Nobody would have bet on that."

"I wasn't allowed to say anything or contact anybody," Garrus said, looking at his feet. "Listen, Chellick, I'm..."

"Don't say you're sorry," Chellick interrupted. "You followed orders, for once, and I'm glad you did."

It hurt but Garrus felt like he had earned that one.

"So, huh," Garrus hesitated, "do you know anything about the investigation?"

"What investigation? Arterius'? No." Chellick shrugged, still looking by the window. "I was told to get you out of there, that's what I did, and the rest is none of my business."
"Was I really summoned by the Council?" Garrus asked, doubtful.

"Yes. Has to do with the Executor's arrest, I bet."

"What?" Garrus yelped.

"Pallin's accused of the murder of Barla Von, a volus banker with dirty little claws. Happened last night." Chellick sighted but that didn't improve his mood. "The thing is, everything points at the Executor but he claims to be innocent. He says he's been set up."

"He wouldn't be the first to say that," Garrus hesitated.

Chellick looked at him harshly. "Pallin is too much of a Turian to lie to his mentor and to the Councilors."

"I know," Garrus insisted, trying to avoid the subject of his father, "but..."

"But what?" Chellick cut Garrus short. "Pallin is innocent until proven guilty, or did you forget that, Spectre?"

"I didn't forget but..."

"Your shiny title doesn't give you every rights! This case shouldn't even involve you damn Spectres. What message does that send? C-Sec can't be impartial and has to rely on a bunch of glorified guns for hire to deal with a homicide? And look who they chose," Chellick snorted, pointing at Garrus. "Mister Bonkers himself, thinking he can stop a terrorist attack on his own with his little guns!"

"I didn't..."

"I've been shot because I was trying to get your sorry ass out of this mess," Chellick spit.

"I know," Garrus repeated, but he didn't have time to apologize.

"You didn't follow protocol and went on your own on a killing spree like a maniac," Chellick roared, angry for good. "Twice!"

"I was trying to..."

"Kala died because you weren't there to protect them like you were supposed to! They needed support and you weren't there for them, for your team!"

Garrus couldn't look at Chellick, crushed by guilt. He had known the fate of his asari teammate when they hadn't welcomed Garrus back after his long stay at the hospital. It had hurt a bit at the time, but so many agents had died during the attack that Kala Amari had just been a name on a long list. Garrus had dulled his mind with work and the few painkillers left from his prescription, trying not to pay attention to the looks people were giving him. It's the scars, he had thought, because it was easier to blame it on the scars than admit he had done something wrong.

"You should have been court-martialed for your shit, Vakarian," Chellick eventually said, resentful, "not promoted."

Garrus silently agreed.

Needless to say the rest of the transport was tensed, but, Chellick being a rigorous man, he didn't leave Garrus on his own once on the docks. He led Garrus to Councilor Tevos' office, not talking
all along, and was invited to enter too. Garrus understood why when he saw all the people in the room. The three Councilors were present and had summoned the commanders of each C-Sec division, plus two or three odd looking people Garrus suspected to be Specters. And his father. That was bound to happen, Garrus thought. The chief-ambassador had to represent and protect the citizens of the Hierarchy.

The room was packed with Turians, but for three Salarians, the asari Councilor and a Human in C-Sec uniform visibly uncomfortable in the middle of so many aliens. He was rather tall for a Human male, quite muscular, dirty blond hair. The patch on his shoulder indicated he was a Commander. That surprised Garrus. Humans were the smallest minority in C-Sec and none had even been close to a position this important when he had left a few months ago. No, almost three years ago, Garrus mentally corrected. He gave another look at the room. No Shepard. Where was she? Arterius had said the investigation was done, so why wasn't she here? Why would he be cleared and not her?

"Ambassador, Commanders, Spectres," Councilor Tevos called, "we are in a dire situation. The Executor, Venari Pallin, has been arrested early this morning and charged with murder with premeditation."

"Don't forget who's the victim," the Salarian Councilor said. Garrus remembered them from the brief chat they had had after the little escapade to the core of the galaxy. He still didn't know their name though. "Barla Von is an important Volus."

"Was," Tevos corrected.

"Was, whatever," the Salarian brushed it off.

"And a third tier citizen of the Hierarchy," Sparatus added, "since the Volus are a client species of the Hierarchy."

Tevos nodded before continuing. "Barla Von also died on volus ground, near his embassy, which means Hierarchy Law can apply if the culprit is a citizen of the Hierarchy, in accordance with the Sovereign Justice Treaty of 900 CE. Otherwise, the culprit will be judged and punished following Council Law."

"It means Pallin, if proven guilty, will be executed," Argoth Vakarian explained for the few people in the room not familiar with Hierarchy Law. He didn't seem moved at all, Garrus noticed. Pallin was Argoth's protege, but Argoth had never been effusive, even with his own kids. He delivered his rare compliments the same way he expressed his disappointment: with a cold, mechanic voice, like any respectable Turian should.

"That's a bit extreme, don't you think?" the only Human in the room commented.

Argoth turned slightly in his direction but didn't deign look at him directly.

"And who might you be?" he asked.

That made a few Turians repress a grin. The Human noticed – he was probably used to take shit from his colleagues at C-Sec, especially if they felt he hadn't earned his position.

"Commander Bailey, Enforcement."

"Well Commander," Argoth said with a tone usually reserved for children, "I'd gladly hear your views on prison sentences and the good they do to society, if they were relevant."

That was just gratuitously racist, Garrus thought, noticing the oldest Turians in the room silently
approving. He had known his father wasn't exactly friendly towards Humans, but Garrus would have never guessed his animosity went so far.

"Ambassador," Sparatus sighed. Argoth straightened and shut up but the deed was done.

"The charges against the Executor are troubling for the stability of the Citadel, and Council Space at large," Tevos continued. "C-Sec is historically a turian institution, always led by a respectful citizen of the Hierarchy. The position comes with a lot of responsibilities..."

"And influence," the salarian Councilor added. "The Executor has full authority when it comes to the Citadel's security, he doesn't have to ask permission for anything, which means he can suddenly decide to relax the controls at customs and let anybody enter the Citadel, or, to the contrary, ground all ships for security reasons." They turned to Argoth. "We owe you that, I think."

Argoth nodded, pleased with himself. Of course his dad had tightened the rules during his time as the Executor, Garrus thought. That wasn't even surprising.

"That's why the Executor must have good judgment," the Commander of Customs intervened, "we all know that, and a person without that quality wouldn't even be considered for the job."

"Two problems, Commander," the Salarian retorted. "First, you assume the Executor is always a Turian capable of doing the job. Secondly, sixty-eight percents of C-Sec agents are Turians."

"So?"

"So Turians follow orders, Commander, and do not question them."

"And?" the Commander insisted.

That wasn't a problem at all for a Turian, but blindly following orders could finish badly depending on the orders. Elin had made sure all her recruits knew that and had encouraged them to have a better judgment. She had always favored the soldiers like Garrus with more independence and free will than the others.

"The point is," Tevos said loud enough to shut the Salarian's mouth, "the Council cannot let C-Sec fall into the wrong hands."

There was a tensed silence for a few seconds.

"Human hands?" Commander Bailey eventually asked.

"Or salarians, apparently," the salarian Councilor added, looking at their fellow compatriot in C-Sec uniform – the Commander of the Network Division, probably. Garrus didn't know him but Network was full of Salarians. Tevos rolled their eyes while Sparatus ignored the comment. The Councilor continued. "Giving C-Sec to another species would shift the power balance of all Council Space, especially if the new Executor happens to be..." Dramatic pause. "...of a lesser species."

Bailey grunted. "No worries, I'm not interested in the job."

"The Council doesn't chose the Executor," Argoth explained. "The Executor is groomed by their predecessor."

"Oh so it's like a dynasty then," Bailey snorted, "even better. And what happens when you chop the head off of the next in line?"
"That never happened before," Argoth replied, straightening but relaxed.

"But Vakarian's here," the Commander of Customs intervened again, turning to the Councilors. "He's Pallin's predecessor and he did a great job back in the days, I remember. Can't he replace Pallin until we find a new Executor?"

"Sadly no," Sparatus admitted. "The Hierarchy trusts him as their ambassador in chief and the Council cannot go against this decision."

"This is why C-Sec is temporarily placed under the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance Bureau," Tevos announced.

The news was not taken well, considering C-Sec had a long history of hatred for the Spectre organization due to their autonomy and lack of regulation. And Turians usually couldn't stand Spectres either, for more or less the same reasons. Garrus felt bad for Councilor Tevos, on whom all the attention was focused.

Not all, Garrus realized. Chellick was looking at him, furious again. He was probably thinking the Council would put Garrus in charge but the idea was just ridiculous. Garrus was inexperienced, much too young, and he didn't want the job in the first place. He was perfectly happy following Shepard.

He wondered where she was again.

"We understand your concerns," Sparatus said, raising a hand to catch the attention of the small crowd, "and this is why we chose a turian Spectre to replace the Executor." He pointed at a woman greyish of skin with the purple Ahra tattoos, wearing a tight set of purple and black civvies from the colonies. She seemed more or less of the same age as Argoth. "Pea Belite," Sparatus presented her, "sixteenth tier, Spectre for eight years, but formerly a commander in the Hastatim."

The reactions were a little better this time. The Hastatim was a division of the Special Forces, in charge of restoring peace within the population whenever rebellious cells were detected. But it wasn't the police. The Hastatim didn't deal with prevention, only with repression, hence its unofficial name: the execution squads.

At least the message was clear: Belite wasn't going to let C-Sec fall into chaos.

"So what is he doing here?" Chellick asked, pointing accusingly at Garrus who would have liked to go back to the galactic core at that moment instead of being the center of attention.

"We wanted you all to meet Spectre Vakarian," Councilor Tevos said. "He knows C-Sec for having worked in the force for four years, and this is why we chose him for a related assignment."

"We told you," the salarian Councilor continued, "whoever controls C-Sec has a lot of power, so it is possible someone will try to take advantage of the situation, or even provoked said situation."

"You mean Pallin could have been set up?" Bailey asked.

"We cannot exclude this possibility," the Salarian nodded. "This is why Spectre Vakarian will infiltrate C-Sec and be our eyes and hears. He will work in collaboration with Spectres Belite and Bau."

The third Salarian in the room rose his hand. He was taller than Belite standing next to him, his skin all dark shades of gray, and wearing a black and yellow armor. Garrus had seen him around C-Sec a few times during his short career. Jondum Bau had several brothers and cousins in Network
and he didn't mind asking for a little help from time to time. It was a safe choice, Garrus thought. Bau still was a Spectre, but he was known in C-Sec to be somewhat tolerable.

"Spectre Bau is in charge of the investigation on the murder of Barla Von," Councilor Sparatus announced.

"It's C-Sec's job to investigate, Sir," Chellick objected, straightening.

"It would be in normal circumstances, Commander," Belite agreed, speaking for the first time, "but one of yours is accused of murder. It's better if the investigation is led by someone outside of C-Sec."

"It's ridiculous," Chellick insisted. "A single C-Sec officer has more integrity than the lot of you Spectres."

"Is that why corruption has been a rampant problem in your organization for the past decade?" Belite asked.

"It started when Humans were allowed to join the force," the Commander of Customs snorted.

"Ah, yes," Bailey mocked, "it's always the Humans. Damn, I had forgotten for a minute. Thank you for reminding me, Septus."

"Shut up!" Tevos suddenly yelled, surprising everybody in the room. All Turians fell to attention by habit. "Stop bickering and get to work, all of you!"

"Yessir!" the assembly replied at once.

"Spectre Vakarian," the salarian Councilor called as everybody was leaving the room, "stay for a minute."

Garrus obeyed but noticed the look Chellick gave him over his shoulder. He would have a lot more of those in the near future. People thought he was a quitter, and quitters weren't usually welcomed back in the force. Plus a good lot of his ex-colleagues probably remembered his little stunt during the attack. Garrus wondered how long he'd have to work at C-Sec. His throats tightened. Did that mean he wouldn't work with Shepard again? Technically, he hadn't finished his year of training under her supervision, but would the Council take that into consideration? For them, two years had passed after all. Would he be on his own now? The idea made Garrus nauseous.

Councilor Tevos waited for the doors to be closed before standing up and walking to a small cabinet full of liquors. They filled a glass and downed it in one go.

"Seriously?" the Salarian mocked.

"Esheel, please," Sparatus sighed.

Tevos held their hand up to make both of their colleagues shut up, poured another glass and emptied it the same way. Garrus felt sympathy for them. Dealing with Turians wasn't easy for an alien or anybody not following properly the rules of the Hierarchy.

"Now," they said, discarding the glass, "you must have questions regarding the investigation on your disappearance, Vakarian."

"Yes Sir," Garrus replied, falling at parade rest by habit. "I'd like to know where is my mentor, Sir."
"Shepard has not been reinstated to her former position yet," the Salarian, Esheel, announced.

"Why?" Garrus asked, cold to the bones. "I've been cleared, she should..."

"Spectre Arterius isn't convinced by her arguments," Councilor Esheel said stiffly. "Until the matter is resolved, Shepard will be on home-arrest. She is not to contact her crew or go near her ship. Any attempt to leave the Citadel will make her a traitor to the Council and..."

"We're still working on the details," Sparatus interrupted coldly.

"And the crew?" Garrus asked before Councilor Esheel could intervene – they frowned in their colleague's direction nonetheless.

"Dismissed until a decision regarding Shepard is reached," Sparatus replied.

"The Alliance agreed to keep the Normandy on their docks for the time being," Tevos continued, walking back to the sofas to sit down.

Esheel snorted but didn't comment.

If the crew was dismissed, what would happen to them? The Alliance personnel and Massani would be fine, but Garrus was pretty sure having Javik or Legion walking around the Citadel freely was a bad idea. And what about Grunt? He wasn't registered, and how would they explain the situation anyway? "This is Grunt, a tank-grown super Krogan created with the genetic material of at least fifty of the most wanted mercenaries of his species in the past two centuries. He likes chocolate milk, bed time stories, genocides and his daddy, which is a Salarian by the way." Yeah, that would go smoothly.

And Lawson? And Krios? And Tali'Zorah? And Wrex, floating in the breeding tank in Lab2? What would happen to them? One thing was sure though: Garrus wasn't going to worry for Corporal Dickhead. But Shepard would.

Garrus straightened. "I'd like to take charge of the crew until you decide of Shepard's fate, Sir."

"Are you sure, Spectre?" Tevos asked. "You'd be responsible for all of them."

"He's too young," Esheel grunted.

"Spectre Vakarian clearly feels responsible enough," Sparatus retorted, "otherwise he wouldn't have talked. I'm in favor."

"In favor," Tevos nodded.

"I am not but it's not like you two care," Esheel snorted. They then turned to Garrus. "Very well, Spectre. If any of them creates the slightest problem, you'll be responsible and will have to respond before the authorities."

"Yes Sir," Garrus replied.

"Oh and the Council won't pay," Esheel added, smiling. "It's all on you, Spectre."

Garrus suddenly hoped he had been paid during his two years leave.

"They will be released tomorrow, once the paperwork done," Sparatus informed. "There will be a meeting that you should attend."
Garrus nodded.

"Regarding your assignment," Tevos changed the subject, "we expect of you to keep a low profile. Do not present yourself as a Spectre and do not use your authority unless it is absolutely necessary."

"Officially, you were on leave for medical reasons," Sparatus continued. "Now you're back on the Citadel. The embassy is working on finding you an apartment suitable for your fourteenth tier."


"Fourteenth," Sparatus insisted. "Your tier has been upgraded two weeks after our last contact with the Normandy. At the time we didn't know something was wrong."

"But, Sir, who recommended me?" Garrus asked, concerned. No Turian he had encountered during his few months on the Normandy could have done that.

"Your mentor did," Sparatus replied as if it was evident.

Garrus briefly felt overwhelmed. He had never really paid attention to his tier and had given up the idea of gaining responsibilities when he had been nominated Spectre, but Shepard had recommended him nonetheless. She had done that for him, she had found him good enough for the next tier. And it had probably not been easy for her to do so since she was an alien, a Human even. She had fought the system for him.

Garrus inhaled as he straightened, pushing his thoughts in the back of his head. He knew he had more urgent to deal with, but he couldn't help himself.

"Am I allowed to see Shepard?" he asked.

"Yes," Sparatus approved.

Again, it didn't please Esheel. It wasn't surprising considering the way they had talked to Shepard during their brief discussion three weeks ago. Something was telling Garrus that the salarian Councilor wouldn't mind doing without a human Spectre.

Garrus was relieved nonetheless. He probably wasn't allowed to talk to Shepard about her crew or anything related to his work, but he would anyway. She was his mentor. He owed her respect and diligence.

And Sparatus knew that, Garrus realized. He knew Garrus would talk to Shepard, keep her on the loop. Maybe he expected it from Garrus even. Why giving him the permission to see her otherwise?

"We realize it's a lot to take in for one day," Sparatus said, obviously wanting to put an end to the discussion. "You're free to go, Spectre. See with the embassy for your accommodations and report to Commander Chellick tomorrow."

Garrus saluted and left the room, heading for the turian embassy, hoping his father wouldn't be around. He really didn't feel like having an argument with him right now. Garrus wanted to be done with his obligations and to go find Shepard. Was she still on Station Five? Maybe she would be released with the rest of the crew tomorrow. If so, Garrus wouldn't be able to see her today. He had to thank her and show her his support. He had to tell her he'd take care of the crew, of the ship, that he would take care of everything while the Council debated. She just had to take this minor step back as a well deserved vacation, and she'd better make every second count because she'd be back to work in no time.
Argoth Vakarian was standing in the lobby of the embassy, obviously waiting for his son. Garrus pushed back all he wanted to tell Shepard and walked to his father, resigned, stiff, and a bit frightened if he was honest with himself.

Argoth didn't say a word. Instead, he invited Garrus to follow him to his office with a gesture of the hand. Duty first, Garrus understood. He hated his father for that at this moment. Argoth had always put duty over his family. Why did he commit to Narea Vakarian, Garrus' mother, in the first place, if he had had no intention to care for his partner and children? Because it was expected of him to have a family? Because he couldn't commit to Deon Fedorian? Garrus had never found an explanation and just thinking about it again angered him. Duty first, dad, he thought bitterly as he squared his shoulders and looked right in front of him.

"Thank you for your time, Ambassador. You must have more important to do," Garrus said, referring to the difficult position of the Executor. Argoth also had to be fair to Barla Von. He had been a citizen of the Hierarchy after all, therefore the turian embassy was as much responsible of him as the volus'.

Argoth looked at his son with his piercing green eyes for a moment before turning to his desk.

"I do indeed, Spectre," he replied, bitter. He cleared his voice. "It is the rule for newcomers to stay in a community center while the embassy finds them proper living quarters," Argoth continued, sitting behind his desk, "but considering your status and the needs coming with your function, we agreed to bypass the usual procedure." He paused for a second, expecting his son to make an unpleasant comment, but Garrus didn't give him this pleasure. "So," Argoth kept going, looking at something on his computer, "you have been granted an apartment for one in the Kithoi ward, close to the Presidium Junction. Since the apartment is the property of the embassy, it comes fully furnished and you are not allowed to customize it. Personalization is authorized. You have to keep it clean and tidy – inspections can and will be conducted randomly. There is no restriction regarding food but be aware random health checks will be performed."

That was the speech for newcomers on the Citadel, for freshly dismissed soldiers seeking adventure out of turian space, or for the Turians who were coming back to a civilized place. Garrus had heard it before, and he found it very restrictive. Of course, any citizen of the Hierarchy was part of the reserve, so everybody had to stay healthy and in shape, but he was a Spectre. He served the Council, not the Hierarchy – not directly anyway. If anything happened on the Citadel again, Garrus didn't have to follow the orders of the Ambassador in chief. So all those rules about his diet, weapon safety, community duties, all of that wasn't for him.

"Sir," he interjected, "I will not..."

"Yes you will," Argoth violently interrupted. Garrus felt his heart jump. He was five again and had missed the target. "You will comply, Spectre. You are undercover and the Hierarchy grants you our help, so you will comply to the rules of our community. You will comply and obey and shut your mouth."

"No," Garrus replied with determination after a second of silence, his voice shaking a little, "I won't. I don't have to. I don't take orders from the Hierarchy."

"This is no place or time to be difficult, Garrus," Argoth said coldly.

"I am but merely following the rules, Sir," Garrus retorted, not feeling the confidence he hoped he showed. "I am a Spectre, therefore I take my orders from the Council. The Hierarchy agreed to support me during my mission, and that's what you, as their representative, will do."
Argoth did something Garrus had not expected. He laughed. It was a laugh of surprise and disbelief, quickly turning to something more sour and sinister. Argoth leaned on his chair, keeping his hands on the desk.

"But you need more than support, son," he mocked. "Look at the mess you're in, Garrus. You were accused of desertion."

"We've been cleared," Garrus replied, grinding his teeth.

"You, yes. That Human, Shepard, no."

"Not yet."

Argoth rolled his eyes. "Councilor Esheel wants her head on a spike. She won't get it but Shepard will never be a Spectre again. It's better that way, Garrus. Humanity isn't ready for such responsibilities anyway."

"You don't know her," Garrus spat. "You have no idea..."

"I know she almost got you killed," Argoth interrupted, furious. "For two years, Garrus, two years I thought I had lost my son, my last child! She is responsible and I will not forgive her."

"It's not her, it's the job, dad!"

"You don't know what you're talking about, son."

"I do, for Christ's sake!" Garrus yelled and the human swear words surprised Argoth enough to shut his mouth. "Like it or not, I'm a Spectre, and I'm good at it, I'm fucking good at it, dad. And I have to thank Shepard for that. Granted, she's not the best teacher I ever had, but she's a great mentor. She gave me space and freedom and confidence. She trusts me with her life, dad."

"Your community, your people trust you with their life too," Argoth argued. "Working for C-Sec is an honest job, Garrus, a good, respectful job. You will come to like it, eventually."

"What?" Garrus frowned, all his fake confidence gone. "I'm not going back to C-Sec."

"You will."

"Temporarily, yes, but as an undercover Spectre."

"Permanently and as a regular officer. At first, of course. I do believe you have the potential to accomplish much despite your terrible temper." Garrus snorted. "This isn't funny, son," Argoth said, standing up.

"Oh you're right, dad, it's fucking hilarious," Garrus replied. His head was spinning and he wanted to barf. "You went to the Citadel when I was eight and barely showed up in my life after that, and now you want to control me? To tell me what to do? To be a concerned parent? It's hilarious, really." Garrus raised his hand to stop his father from talking. "You know what? I don't care. Do your job, I'll do mine, and hopefully we won't meet for another four years or six or whatever."

Argoth kept his mouth shut. Garrus nodded and headed for the door. His father spoke just before he reached the sensors.

"Did Arterius ask you how you became a Spectre?"

The ground opened under Garrus' feet. Arterius had said Argoth had commanded him to clear
Garrus’ name, to drop the charges. It had infuriated the turian Spectre enough to make him start an investigation on Garrus’ nomination. Garrus had thought Arterius had just a problem with the Hierarchy, which would be understandable since he was a bareface with a birth defect, but it was more personal. Argoth had voluntarily provoked Arterius, knowing the Spectre would make Garrus’ life miserable. And if he found out Garrus had been pushed for his nomination as Spectre by his father's friends, what would happen? Would the Council tolerate it? Would the Council fire him?

"Arterius may be a good-for-nothing bareface, but he's pugnacious, I'll give him that," Argoth continued. "So, you see, it's just a matter of time before you come back to C-Sec. Venari did recommend you, after all, maybe not because of me, or Fedorian, it had more to do with getting rid of you after what you did during the attack, but it would be the same for Arterius, and he'll plead his case to the Council. He's one of their best agents so they'll listen to him."

"I did a good job," Garrus mumbled, incapable of looking at his father. "I gained a tier."

"Yes, well," Argoth snorted, "you were recommended by a Human for that, and that Human will be accused of desertion, possibly treason even. You may have done some extraordinary things but they won't count. The shame of your mentor will occlude them."

Garrus found it difficult to breath. "Why?" he managed to ask nonetheless.

"I won't let my last child die stupidly," Argoth replied.

But Solana is alive, Garrus wanted to say, Solana is alive and well. He had seen her on Arcturus Station a few… Or was she dead? Had she died during Garrus’ absence? Was he really Argoth last child?

"Now, Spectre," Argoth said sarcastically, "I have more important to do."

Garrus should have been furious but he found himself exhausted. He didn't try to argue, he didn't fight back, he just walked out of the embassy and kept on walking in the Presidium. So that was it? His career as a Spectre was basically over? He could go to the Council to explain the situation, maybe try to convince them he was fine, he could still work for them, and gladly with that, but would they listen? Esheel would not care, Tevos might be sympathetic to the cause but the decision would ultimately be Sparatus’ – so Deon Fedorian’s, really. Deon had been pretty pissed when Garrus had asked him help, he had even said it could very well cost him his head, so he probably wouldn't mind getting rid of the problem. He also had been relieved to see Garrus alive. Maybe he'd rather have Garrus alive and confined to C-Sec than having to worry again for him and waiting for his certain death.

And Argoth hadn't called Deon by his first name. "Or Fedorian," he had said. And Deon had had two rings pierced through his fringe. He had gotten the first at the dissolution of his first partnership, a few years before Garrus could go to boot camp, so logically it meant his partnership with Argoth had also ended during Garrus' absence. It wasn't difficult to imagine that very same absence was the reason behind this second dissolution, especially if Argoth blamed Deon's for pushing Garrus into the Spectres. Had he done that? Garrus didn't think so, but he wasn't sure of anything at that moment. He was just tired and he wanted to see Shepard, to make sure she was okay. It may well be the last time he could see her after all.

Garrus ignored the dozen emails he received during the rest of the day and wandered in the Presidium, ruminating his bad thoughts. At some point he sat on a bench and just stayed there, contemplating the ignorant passersby, preoccupied with their own problems – a lost necklace, a needed heating unit stabilizer, a newly discovered fossil. Life seemed easy for them, far from
Garrus’ preoccupations. Had they been accused of desertion? Probably not. Did their father intervene to get them fired from their job? One chance in a million. Would they forcefully be separated from the person they loved?

A ping from his omnitool shook Garrus up as the lights started to dim in the Presidium. He wasn't feeling better but it was time to stop sulking so he opened his mail box. The embassy had sent him several emails about community rules and events, and the location of his new apartment. There was also a short email from Chellick telling him three standard uniforms had been delivered to his place and giving him the address of the precinct. Belite and Bau had also tried to contact Garrus and wanted to see him as soon as possible. Someone from the bank was delighted to know Garrus was alive and would like to meet in person regarding the problem of his unpaid taxes in the last two years. Finally, the newest email contained the address of Shepard's apartment.

Garrus' heart skipped a bit but a strange detail rapidly calmed him down. The expeditor was marked as unknown. Who could it be? Joker? Garrus knew the pilot had gone to the apartment a few times, but he would sign his email – besides, he probably still was in custody on Station Five. The same applies to Javik or anybody in the crew Shepard trusted enough to give them personal information – so, basically, nobody. Could it be the Council? One of the Councilors, more likely, Tevos or Sparatus. But the anonymity wasn't logical. They had allowed him to see Shepard, and Garrus could have asked them the address, so there was no need for secrecy. Who else knew about the apartment? Kryik for sure, but why would he help Garrus in any way? The Alliance, maybe? That was an interesting idea. Garrus decided to investigate in his spare time on the mysterious expeditor as he headed for Silversun Strip on shaky legs.

As a matter of fact, Garrus knew the location very well due to the presence of one of the Armax Arsenal arenas he used to go to before the attack on the Citadel. Turians were fond of those arenas and usually went there after work to have fun, but Silversun Strip's was particular due to its location. It was in the middle of a newly opened district dominated by Humans. As a result, Garrus had almost been the only Turian around. It had provoked a few problems with casual players who didn't like the competition of a trained soldier, but Garrus hadn't cared. He didn't like to see civilians without training play war games, but it wasn't his place to tell them to go home or get good.

It was strange to think he might have crossed path with Shepard in those avenues before though. Sure, she hadn't often been on the Citadel, but she had an apartment a hundred meters from the arena. Garrus had often come, sometimes had spent every night of the week there, and it seemed to him it was the kind of place Shepard would spend her free time in – with Wrex, he thought, and with Joker cheering from the terrace. The idea made Garrus smile a little.

There was a burger place right in front of Shepard's building, another detail that made Garrus smile. He knew she liked that sort of greasy food so he bought her two of the biggest burgers the place had, with half a liter of soda and an ice-cream with that brown sauce he had tasted once. He vaguely noticed nobody had looked at him strangely for ordering such a meal but he didn't care and crossed the street. Garrus found two C-Sec officers in front of Shepard's door on the fourth floor, a Turian and an Asari. That made him snort. They wouldn't be able to stop Shepard if she decided to get out, but it also was a good sign. It meant she was home, otherwise C-Sec wouldn't have wasted two officers like that.

They asked him who he was and what he was doing here. Garrus gave his name and status despite Tevos’ warning not to use his authority freely, and the C-Sec officers let him pass. He rang the bell nonetheless and waited. His throats tightened when he heard Shepard's voice over the intercom.

"What?" she barked, exasperated, and Garrus had never felt so happy to be yelled at before.
"It's Vakarian, Sir," he replied by automatism.

There was a moment of silence but the door was eventually unlocked. Garrus entered and immediately felt back against the door, almost dropping the food. The place was huge, ridiculously so. There was a fireplace and a water wall, immense windows barely obstructed by blinds, a balcony and two sets of stairs, long, low sofas where at least a dozen people could sit, a kitchen bigger than his quarters on the Normandy and that was only what he could see. Even Deon's apartment in Cipritine wasn't that big. Even the Normandy had less volume than this apartment. It was crazy and really, really unpleasant.

"Upstairs!" Shepard's voice called from somewhere on the left. "Master bedroom!"

Garrus stayed as close as possible to the wall, as if the ground in the middle of the apartment would fall at any time, and managed to get upstairs. There was another living room there, again with huge sofas, and two bedrooms on the left. The first was empty so he walked to the second one on shaking legs. The master bedroom was empty but for an enormous bed, a chair in a corner and a gigantic television on the wall. Still keeping close to the wall, Garrus found a dressing room and a bathroom next door. Shepard waved at him from a bubbling bathtub in the floor, a bottle of beer next to her on the ground with a towel.

"N-nice place," Garrus commented, holding the door frame as if it was a safety line.

"You hate it," Shepard grinned. She seemed okay, as far as he could tell. Her head was freshly shaved on the left and her bruises had completely disappeared. She looked tired but it had to be expected considering the last few weeks.

"I hate it," Garrus confirmed with a poor smile, relaxing for the first time in days. He showed her the paper bag containing the burgers. "Dinner," he announced.

Shepard smiled. "What would I do without you, Vakarian?" It warmed Garrus' chest.

Shepard then patted the ground next to her and Garrus took a few cautious steps in the bathroom. The walls were dark and overall the room wasn't that big, but it was still too big for him. The men's bathroom on the Normandy was smaller than this one, made for a single person – or a couple, maybe, but it was way too big for decency nonetheless.

"Nothing for you?" Shepard asked as she studied what was in the bag.

"Not hungry," Garrus shook his head, slowly heading for the closest wall. "It's been a shitty day," he explained when he saw Shepard arch an eyebrow.

"Tell me about it," Shepard sighed.

Garrus would have liked to talk to Shepard but he realized that it would probably just add salt to her injuries. He had been reinstated, not her. He had an assignment, not her. He had been screwed over by his father, he thought morosely, not her. She didn't even have a father to begin with. She didn't seem to care but still.

"Come on," Shepard said, already eating a couple of fries and pointing at the tub. "Jump in and relax. We'll deal with all that crap tomorrow."

"You seem awfully relaxed considering today," Garrus commented to avoid the subject of the tub – and he was right anyway, Shepard was way too calm.

"I ate a brownie," she shrugged. "Now, get your skinny ass in the tub."
"A brownie?" Garrus repeated, anxious just at the idea to be this close to a bathtub.

"A space brownie," Shepard replied as if it explained everything. "I never really get drunk and I don't want to risk alcohol poisoning just to feel better, I can't smoke thanks to Solus, so, yeah, space brownie."

"So, huh, you're high?"

"Yep. A dream come true, isn't it?" she grinned.

"Not exactly," Garrus retorted. It was strange to know Shepard wasn't in total control of her actions and words. It was even a bit stressful, to be honest, frightening in a way. Maybe he should stay to make sure she wouldn't do something stupid during the night. Garrus had seen enough Humans wasted to know it could get ugly.

"Are you coming or what?" Shepard insisted. She pointed to the water when Garrus frowned.

"Huh, Turians don't float that well, Commander," he felt obligated to inform her.

"It's a jacuzzi, Vakarian," Shepard mocked him gently. "You won't drown in that little water. Look."

She then stood up and indeed water only rose to her thighs, but Garrus barely noticed it. Shepard was completely naked and she didn't seem to care at all for once. He knew he shouldn't stare but he couldn't take his eyes off her, off the tantalizing drops of water running along her soft skin, off the myriad of freckles peppering her shoulders and breasts. He had never noticed that before and now he could only saw that, saw the slight asymmetry in size and shape between her breasts, the curve of her hips, the darker coloration of her pubic hair.

He wanted her at that moment, he realized. He wanted to caress her and kiss her and have sex with her, even in that bathtub if she insisted, but he couldn't. She wasn't one hundred percents with him due to the drug she had taken and Garrus would never take advantage of her like that. He was feeling guilty now for having looked at her. He shouldn't have.

"I should go," he said, turning his head to the shower cabin. "Stuff to do in the morning."

"Oh," Shepard replied, disappointment piercing in her voice. "Okay."

"May I come back tomorrow?" he asked hesitantly. He shouldn't have told her that. He should have asked if he could sleep on a sofa, or any room small enough to not trigger a panic attack, not that he had "stuff to do". It only reminded her of her situation.

There was a "plof" and Garrus supposed Shepard had sit down in the bathtub again.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," she said.

Her buzz was over, Garrus understood when he heard her voice and he felt like crap. He nodded nonetheless, still avoiding to look at her, and walked out.

TBC

Note
A chapter so soon, whaaaaaat? Turns out it's easier to write when I know people actually want to read the story. So thanks to all the readers who took the time to leave a comment last time. Oh and being on vacation also helped a good deal, but I managed to write during this first week
back at work so I take that as a good sign for 2017. Will we see the end of Semper Fi this year? Who knows, really.
And also, I didn't edit the story yet. I watched a lot of series during the holidays...
Alright, we all know I didn't write a lot for the past year (that's a euphemism) and I'm probably more pissed than you about it. Heck, you might even have forgotten this story existed, or most of what happens in it. I know I do, that's why I started reading it again from the beginning... and stopped somewhere in the middle of the first chapter. This story needs a serious rewriting work, and that's what I'm gonna do this summer.

I've wanted to do that for a few months actually, ever since I asked a competent betareader to correct the text. You didn't see anything change? That's normal, I never uploaded the corrected version. It's been sitting in my Google Drive since December, waiting for me to go through it again.

I didn't do that because of many factors, the first one being I just have no energy whatsoever in winter and I'd go to bed right after work if I could during those cold months (bonus point for living in Switzerland and having 220% more cold months than anybody else it seems).

The second factor has been my roommate, who's been a dick since December. I've been on edge because of her since the end of fall, the situation is still not resolved but at least now I'm ready to move out if necessary.

Third factor was my glorified and very expensive typewriter, aka my Surface Book, which basically made everything more complicated and infuriating since March (thank you Microsoft for your useless Anniversary update of Windows 10). I'll spare you the details (all of that can be found on my tumblr if you want to read me rant about life in general by the way) but I literally just got it back in running order today, hours before I typed this announcement. It's been really frustrating.

Fourth reason: Mass Effect Andromeda. I don't know for you guys but this game was a big disappointment for me (I took days off to play it over a long weekend, urh). I thought it'd give me the kick in the butt to go back to Mass Effect but it didn't. Big let down.

Fifth reason: I slowly but surely drifted away from the fandom despite my love for Mass Effect (plus everybody is now talking about MEA and I don't care for MEA, honestly) (so does BioWare too apparently, ah ah...) (yes my humor sucks, so what?). It's hard to get back on that ride. I started a new playthrough but I had forgotten ME1 was so ugly. That killed my enthusiast a little. (And I recently bought the new Zelda so it might be a while before I go back to ME).

Anyway, while I'm at it, I'm going to change a few things that may or may not impact the story as you know it. A lot of time has passed for me, as a writer. I've developed new headcanons, I read a lot of awesome hard sci-fi, I learned a lot of cool new scientific stuff, etc, and I'd like to enrich Semper Fi with all of that. So some minor stuff will change. Some major stuff too, because I don't like how certain things have been developed, how certain characters are basically never exploited correctly (or at all). Because of that, I'll write new chapters and interludes, I'll change how some characters are presented and used. I know this might be really annoying for you guys because things will change, but, since it's been a long time, maybe it's the occasion to read Semper Fi again? I'm honestly counting on that to give you an improved story with better development, better characters and a better universe.

Also, I really need this second draft to be interested again in my own story. Like I said, it's been a long time, I too have found new interests and ideas. I don't want to leave Semper Fi half finished or just to give you a vague summary of how it's supposed to end. I am determined to finish this story, but for that I have to go back to the beginning and rewrite a few things. Not everything, Jesus fucking Christ no, but the story need this and I need this.
I'll try to keep track of what has been modified on the tumblr dedicated to Semper Fi (I might forget, honestly, but I'll try).

Thank you for your patience.
Hitto

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!