In the chaos of the ongoing First Contact War, the Alliance is contacted by a resistance cell comprised of captured humans on Palaven, and Shepard is drafted for a covert mission to make contact. Her cover lands her where? The Vakarian household, of course. (Imported from ff.net at long last, in all it's original, fanservice glory.)
Chapter 1

Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife!
To all the sensual world proclaim,
One crowded hour of glorious life
Is worth an age without a name.

-Sir Walter Scott

Chapter One

Shepard

Of all the ways to be woken up, being thrown from a berth to roll across grated metal decking was not one of the more pleasant. Shepard felt the breath shoved from her lungs as her chest hit the deck plates, her head ringing as the back of her skull bounced off the corner of a footlocker. Her limbs shot out, spreading out her weight and momentum to slow her movement and stop herself from rolling again. Fingers hooked around the leg of a desk, that was blissfully secured and bolted, and the world stilled itself for a moment, long enough for her to grasp her surroundings.

Klaxons were blaring, red lights flashing in sync with the alarms. All around her, her bunkmates were righting themselves after the initial lurch, cautiously gripping various secured handholds against a repeat. Which, of course, came promptly on the heels of the first abrupt tossing.

This time, she was awake and prepared, and braced herself against the desk as the world turned upside down, too fast for the artificial gravity to compensate and a half dozen marines were sent flailing into what was supposed to be the overhead. She kept her grip on the desk leg, hanging in mid air for a moment before letting herself drop into a crouch on the overhead-turned-deck.

“What’s going on, Shepard?” Jenkins had a palm pressed to a gash over his left eye. She took a moment to glance at him and visually inspect the injury - bleeding profusely, as head wounds did - and discern he was mostly unharmed, as were the others. She registered the throbbing at the back of her own head then tucked it neatly into the back of her mind as irrelevant. Adrenaline was running high, and she took a moment to reign in the flood of sensory information that came as a
result.

“Hell if I know,” she responded. “Woke up the same way you did.” Even as she answered, her eyes were scanning the trashed berthing quarters. The unsecured footlocker that she’d bashed her head on had clattered ‘down’ to land near her, falling open to spill various items of personal nature. Everything not secured in place was now strewn around their feet. The bulkheads vibrated, the whole compartment shaking intermittently without any sign of a pattern. Concussive shudders made the interior plating tremble. Something was hitting the hull of the ship directly, which meant the ship’s kinetic shielding was down.

As if reading her thoughts, the ship offered a precarious dip, and all of the marines went sliding portside for a moment before sliding back. The only other female present, Maverik, swore loudly, cursing the ship’s engineers.

“If engineering hasn’t fixed this by now, something’s keeping them from fixing it,” Shepard ventured. A lurch was all the warning they had before ‘up’ and ‘down’ began to flip once more. Training took over for all of them, letting themselves fall ‘up’ before curling into a ball and using their own body weight to turn themselves on their own centers of gravity and land neatly, if heavily, on their feet.

So, kinetic shields down, ship taking fire, life support systems probably also compromised if the gravity was twitching this badly. Engineering personnel either incapacitated or dead, since Shepard knew that if the artificial gravity was unfixable, it would have simply been disabled. Maneuvering in zero gravity was easier to deal with than random gravity swaps.

Added to that, it was feasible that the bridge and whatever current rotation of officers it held were also out for the count, given that no shipwide announcement had been given. If the shipwide comm had been knocked out, then at least the officers would have received orders via omnitools or private comm channels. Both, as far as Shepard could tell, were silent.

The occasional, familiar shiver that crept through the deckplates and up her legs told her that the SAS Lincoln was returning fire, so the battery stations were still secure. There was nothing else worth considering—aside from the essential crew, Shepard and her team had been the only passengers. The Lincoln was a an armed frigate, but she was alone.

So, in a nutshell, it seemed like they were possibly already royal screwed before she’d even managed to get out of her PJs and brush her teeth. Wonderful.

All of this had passed through Shepard’s mind in the time it took her to dart to the lockers set into
the bulkhead by the hatch, where hardsuits and weapons were secured, her team directly on her heels. With the ship shaking all around them, alarms drumming into their ears and the rising sounds of their vessel taking a thorough beating, the six individuals stripped -modesty a commodity forgotten long ago- and suited up. They snapped weapons into place even as they strode out into the corridor, Shepard in the lead, each with their favored sidearms in hand.

For a surreal moment, Commander Kastanie Shepard was not aboard the SAS *Lincoln* ferrying herself and her team to their first assignment out of Alliance Marines Special Forces Academy, but instead was back on a much smaller, much older ship. And she wasn’t flanked by five of the Alliance’s best and fiercest, but rather her little brothers-

Discipline and necessity had the memory locked away almost in the same nanosecond it had sprung up, right alongside those unimportant bruises. Experienced marines hand-picked for N7 status did not lose their heads in a combat situation to indulge in a bit of sob-story nostalgia.

“Captain should have comm’d us by now.” The comment came from the team’s communication’s specialist, Boon, who was tapping away at his omnitool. He spoke using the private channel that linked all six black Onyx hardsuits. There was a trill audible to all of them. “Hm, well that explains it. Shipwide comm system is down,” he said, echoing Shepard's earlier thoughts. "And there’s a broad-array jamming signal keeping most personal lines shut down.”

Whatever responses or curses were eminent in response to this announcement were swallowed when there was yet another warning tremor before the world flipped upside down again. It was barely enough time for them to slap at the controls on their wrists, and heavy clicks signaled that the strong electromagnets in their boots had sealed their feet to the deck a half second before they were all hanging upside down. With heavy, metallic clunks they walked ‘down’ the side bulkheads until they were standing on the overhead. More clicks as the magnets were turned off. All of it done with deceptive calm, as if they handled malfunctioning artificial gravity wells daily. And for four months out of the two years of their elite training, they’d done exactly that.

“Really need to do something about that,” Maverik groused, referring to the gravity shifts.

“Engineering first,” Shepard agreed, and began moving down the corridor, shifting to walk alongside the bulkhead, weapon drawn and ready. The team moved with as much ease as they had during the long years of training. Each had been an individual of surpassing ability and skill before being selected for the Alliance’s special forces program and now, after three years of training together and honing their specialties to a level most would consider godlike, they moved with a fluidity that bordered on psychic.

“Lifesigns,” Jenkins warned at the same time Shepard’s eyepiece flashed a warning. Information was sliding across her lumagel heads-up display, the small glowing square hovering over her left
eye one of the only sources of light as, suddenly, the underfoot bars of lighting flickered and died. Almost in sync, six lights sprang from the barrels of various firearms.

“Where?” All of them had heads-up pieces that told them the easy, but incomplete, answer. Jenkins was a master at deciphering the nuances of information that could, with the proper broadcasted signal, be forged and manipulated into giving false leads.

“Up ahead,” came the reply, without hesitation. Shepard glanced around, spotted an open hatch, and waved her team towards it. They filed into the room, Maverik and Boon clearing it before the others followed. Shepard dived in last.

“Human? Batarian?” Shepard asked once they were out of sight, edging to the edge of the hatch to peer down the corridor.

“Turian,” he replied tersely. Normally an overly exuberant, almost foolhardy individual, Jenkins was fully capable of buckling down with the rest of them, though most wouldn’t believe it to meet him outside of a combat situation. Their mentor and trainer, Captain Anderson, had once said it took a special kind of stupid to be any level of ‘N,’ let alone N7. Jenkins certainly qualified.

“How far?”

“Just down the next sector, starboard.”

Shepard swore. Of course, they’d be right in the way of where she needed to go. She glanced around the room they’d taken refuge in. She signaled, and Boon -the comm specialist- swapped places with her. She went to inspect a wall panel. Memorization of standard alliance military ship schematics was something every Alliance marine was drilled in, for good reason. Memory told her that the panel in front of her should cover one of the access panels to the vents that pumped and circulated air throughout the ship.

“Maverik,” she called, and the shorter woman was there instantly, Spotting what Shepard was looking at and setting to removing the panel without any further explanation. A few moments later, and the controls were exposed and circumvented, the access panel popping off with a hiss.

“Boon, Carver, you’re staying here- let me know if those turians move.” The two she’d named nodded. “Maverik, Jenkins, Sakino, with me. Go to contained enviros.” Six sets of visors set into their helmets were lowered and sealed, personal atmosphere controls turned on, and the four
marines filed into the open access panel. Since the ship was still ‘upside down’ as far as the structure was concerned, they were essentially moving underneath the ‘floor’ rather than the overhead as they would have been if the vessel’s artificial gravity had been pulling things towards the proper direction. Disorientating for a normal person, just another day for the three N5s and the one N7.

Between the memorization of the ship schematics and Shepard's sense of orientation, she led the other three marines swiftly and relatively silently -an impressive feat given they were all in full armor- through the ducts towards engineering. The only issue came when, in the middle of climbing up a shaft that would normally have required descending instead of ascending, the gravity chose to again reverse itself. The four of them took a moment to tell their instincts that no, they weren’t going back the direction they came even as they all began shuffling down rather than up. Feet and legs were braced against the walls of the shaft hard enough to keep them from sliding freely as they all, one by one, skidded down to the level below.

A few more turns brought them to another access panel. The narrow confines meant and Shepard did the tech work this time, since Maverick was behind Jenkins. Once the panel was quietly popped free, Shepard tossed a flashbang grenade into the room below, drawing the panel shut against the blast that would blind, deafen, and temporarily disorient any nearby person and temporarily scramble tech they may be sporting.

As soon as the grenade's high pitched whine had faded, Shepard kicked the panel free. She cautiously stuck her hand down into the room below, omnitool vidcam activated and sending a live feed directly to her helmet's HUD.

“Clear,” she announced when both her biosign detector and vidcam eyes told her there was nothing moving below. She dropped down through the vent access, landing solidly on her feet, habit making her bend her knees to absorb the impact. She checked the room again before waving a signal above her head, and the rest of her team dropped into the room behind her. Moving like synchronized swimmers, they checked corners and shadows for any stealthed individuals that might have somehow escaped sensors and Shepard’s eyes.

Then, and only then, did they turn their attention to the bodies.

“I count five. That’s the whole engineering team,” Sakino announced, after he’d checked the last corpse for vitals. They’d all been able to tell on sight that there was no one alive, but his medic specialty demanded he check anyway. As if there were a way to survive a throat being sliced open near down to the vertebrae.

Maverik was already at the main controls. “Huh...clever bastard,” she was muttering. She flicked a glance down at the senior engineer, dead at her feet.
“What have you got?” Shepard asked as she came up beside the shorter woman.

“He jacked up the artificial gravity on purpose. Communications must have already been jammed— he did it to wake us up. Saved our asses. That turian team we almost ran into was probably on their way to us.”

Shepard felt no true emotion, a mere proverbial flag in place of where typical human responses would normally occur— guilt, gratitude, respect. All things she’d save and feel later when she could afford to be emotional.

“How’s life support?”

“Not tampered with. Thankfully, the scaled dipshits need oxygen as much as we do.”

“That might change. Keep personal enviros going for now.” She frowned at the pane of thick plexiglass that separated the engineering room from the drive core and, beneath it, the churning rotators of the artificial gravity well. She could well guess what the turians were after... Alliance intel had done their damnedest to keep it a secret even from the highest-ranking of their own that they had finally cracked the encrypted data Shepard herself had brought back from Citadel Space less than a year ago. It had been that mission, to obtain schematics to an experimental new drive system, that had gotten her nominated for the infamous N7 training at Arcturus. It had been that, or a court martial—technically, the mission hadn’t been hers to begin with, she’d just given Captain Anderson a hand.

The SAS Lincoln was the ship test driving the new Tantalus drive core, the product of that mission. Officially, it was just a military transport taking a team to their new assignment, but anyone with a brain would note the destination (a back-water dirt farming colony), the names and rankings of the marine team aboard, and raise an eyebrow. Or brow-plate, as was the case, as apparently something about them had raised turian red flags.

“Maverik, set the gravitational shifts to a random pattern, and have it send us - and only us - a signal when it’s about to flip. If we know when the gravity’s going to swap poles, it won’t hinder us as much as it will mess with them.”

Maverik was grinning behind her visor. “Yes, ma’am.” Fingers flew over the controls, sensory chips embedded in her fingertips and the exterior of her gloves let her interact with keys that normally required contact with the mild electric current all human bodies possessed in order to register being activated. The exterior chips simulated this current, and the chips in her fingers
helped translate pressure through the hard gloves. All in all, very complex set up for something as simple as touching, but it could mean the difference between life and death for a spacer.

“Done,” the woman announced a few moments later. “I’ve linked it to our comm channel, Commander. It’ll ping us five seconds before the next shift, at random intervals no more than ten minutes apart, no less than five.”

A tight nod of acknowledgement. No praise for doing what any enlisted engineer worth her salt could do in her sleep.

“Can you get a read on the CIC from here?” It would be a matter of how much the turian boarding party knew of human tech. Looking for herself at the ship’s ‘black box’ of data history, the turians had apparently known enough to calibrate an EM pulse strong enough to get past the ship’s kinetic barriers...and that meant they probably knew a hell of a lot more.

“CIC is sealed, looks like from the inside. XO Dunley was off-rotation in his quarters, so my guess is Captain Chevik is locked on the CIC deck. Med deck and auxiliary crew quarters are already locked down as well.”

Standard procedure when dealing with a boarding party. All essential areas of the ship were sealed off, the idea being to try to trap the invaders in the corridors, which could be vented and then re-pressurized. Shepard frowned- it was obvious why engineering hadn’t been locked down, since the turians had gotten there first. Why hadn’t Chevik vented the corridors? On a ship this small, all that would have been needed to be secured before opening the access hatches would have been the CIC, engineering, crew quarters, and the med deck. Check, check, check, and check. The only room that hadn’t been locked down was compartment where she and her team had been snoring. Shepard frowned.

“Something’s not adding up. We need to get to Chevik. Let’s go.”

They used the hatch this time, after Sakino waded through tangles of broadcasted junk intended to clog their sensors and verified there were no boarding parties in the corridor. Once out of engineering, she had Maverik seal the door behind them. Wouldn’t it just be convenient if the turians figured out what they’d done to the gravity and undid it?

“CIC,” Shepard declared, the declaration terse, and they moved on.
The rest of the ship was eerily silent. No matter how long Shepard had lived in space - her whole life - she'd never get used to the unnatural silence. The vessel had stopped giving the controlled shudders that signaled the torpedo bays releasing their volleys. Counting back in her head, Shepard realized it was possible they were simply out of armaments. She'd prefer that to the alternative - the invaders had gained access to the battery systems, or the battery crew. Near the same time, the violent shaking that followed the hull being bombarded had also ceased. None of the four marines were sure if this was a good or bad sign.

Regular reports from Boon and Carver let her know that while the jamming was too concentrated for them to track the turians movements exactly, they were able to tell them that there were two parties roaming the corridors, and a third trying to get into the crew quarters - but only after they’d swept through the quarters Shepard and her team had so recently vacated. Shepard had frowned at the news - not out of worry for her fellow crewmates, but out of confusion. Turians were, from what little the humans knew, big on ranking structures. It went against everything they normally seemed to stand for, to go for the little guys rather than trying to get at the captain.

The hair on the back of Shepard’s neck stood on end the closer they got to the bridge without seeing any sign of activity. Soon as they got near, the one patrol that had been hovering near the CIC moved off. Soon as they saw that, they stopped.

“Shitscales are up to something,” Jenkins muttered, scrutinizing his omnitool readouts. “They’ve knocked out the sensors on CIC deck. I can’t even get a bodycount on whose inside.”

“I don’t like this,” Shepard said needlessly. In this sort of situation, there tended to be only one course of action that seemed to work for her: Do the absolute opposite of anything anyone would expect.

“Jenkins,” she said suddenly. His eyes snapped up to her from his screen. “Get us to the turians’ point of entry.” He quirked an eyebrow behind his visor. She continued, “Maverick, tell Boon and Carver to move to better cover than that room. In the vents.” Her instructions were relayed by Maverik as Jenkins pulled up a projected display of the ship. Tucked as they were into a maintenance alcove in the corridor, with Sakino keeping watch, very little of the orange glow escaped into the corridor.

“Their access point was here,” he said, pointing to an area directly between the ship’s two main engines, which was also directly beneath engineering. Their own engine signals would have masked the turian’s boarding pod’s emissions, even if the initial EM pulse hadn’t knocked out most of their systems, letting them dig their claws directly into the cargo compartment directly beneath engineering with relative ease. One of these days, she was going to have a talk with the designer of military crafts and ask why, exactly, he’d put such a vital part of the ship in such an accessible location.
“Then that’s where we’re headed,” she told them. No questions, no looks of ‘you’re insane,’ no hesitation. The Commander led, they followed.

There were two more gravity shifts, a ping on their comm channel alerting them the promised five seconds beforehand, plenty of time to activate the gravity locks on their boots. They kept out of sight, sent an acknowledgment when they received confirmation that Boon and Carver had moved to a better location. Boon had even managed to get them near a maintenance terminal, and was attempting to revitalize the ship’s sensor systems to tell them what the hell was going on in the CIC.

Careful approach got them to the storage room beneath engineering undetected. Jenkins sliced through the dense informational static being broadcasted and managed to tell them that there were three turians guarding the access point. Shepard sent Sakino into the vents, and a few moments later the nearly inaudible sound of an electrical discharge preceded the turian on the left seizing and convulsing before he dropped.

‘The laws of their biology may be different,’ Anderson had once told her. ‘But the laws of physics aren’t. Pump enough electricity through something alive, and it will not be happy.’

The other two turians turned to the direction of the electrical overcharge's origination, even as they dived for cover. That cover being the corridor Shepard, Maverik, and Jenkins were guarding the other end of. The turians were dropped by two more charges, launched from modified sidearms specifically developed for shipboard firefights, the little aerodynamic nodes neatly planted below those alien ‘tentacle-spike things’ atop their heads.

“Sakino, hold position, guard our retreat if we need one.”

“Copy.”

A warning ping had them slapping their gravlock controls and waiting until the world had shifted around them again before continuing. Shepard tried not to be morbidly amused at the almost comical way the turian corpses flew past her head to flop heavily down onto what was now the deck. Drops of blue blood, leeking from nostrils, went splattering. A few streaked across her visor.

Once on board the turian pod, she realized two things; one, it wasn’t a pod. It was the actual ship, a small one, clearly designed specifically for exactly what it had done, to sneak and stab. The second, was that the design was shockingly...human. No scales on the wall, no slime and smoke on the
floor. Realistically, she knew it wouldn’t have been quite so sci-fi, but then again, who could have said for sure? The only turian ship interiors humans had seen first hand had been burning debris.

The compartment they’d first entered had been obviously designed for one thing; hosting the giant ‘can opener’ that had been raised through a hatch in the ship’s hull to attach to the SAS Lincoln and carve out a nice big opening, to which they had then sealed an access tube with convenient rungs. She couldn’t help but grimace in revulsion; it was a favorite tactic of Batarian slavers. Little as she thought of turians, she’d never heard of them sinking to slaver methods before.

There was, however, one advantage to this scenario, and that was that there was already an elegant procedure perfected, refined, and practiced by Alliance military personnel; blow shit up.

“Charges,” Shepard said, holding out one hand even as she holstered her weapon to free her other and release her own grenades from her belt. As the resident demolitions expert, this particular bit of fun fell to her, and she didn’t bother suppressing the anticipatory grin at the thought of the blaze of glory to come if cooperation wasn’t forthcoming in the second part of her plan. Her teammates kept the modified grenades coming, and she adhered them to strategic points around the soft-sealed opening. The peeled-back flaps that the charges were tucked behind would create an ideal path of least resistance for the explosion, channelling the worst of the blast out in a flat ring, doing minimal damage to each ship while very definitely removing the Lincoln’s unwanted hitchhiker.

At her instruction, Maverick began jerry-rigging a trio of flashbang grenades, linking them together and rewriting their codes on the spot. It was a trick the tech had shown Shepard their first week training together, and Shepard had the woman working on perfecting it since. The improvised EM pulse generator would knock out communications for several minutes, and tended to show up on sensors as a mere power overload, sending the engineers in search of a blown circuit breaker or surge buffer instead of insurgents.

“Hostiles approaching, Commander,” Jenkins warned.

“Then let’s get out of here,” Shepard replied, setting the last charge and linking them all to her omnitool. One press of a button, and they’d all go off simultaneously.

Quick and quiet, they climbed back through the opening and slipped past the still very-dead form of the two turian guards they’d tossed through, as well as the four from their initial encounter. It would take a moment for the approaching turian patrol to verify that the two guards were gone, not simply vacant from their posts. A short moment, but it would be enough.

She’d ordered radio silence while they’d been aboard the turian ship. No point in risking tripping
any alarms set to detect unauthorized transmissions. Now, as she settled in behind a bulkhead with Maverick and Jenkins keeping watch, and a hidden Sakino providing another line of defense, she'd re-opened communications.

“Carver, I need you to get back down into engineering and be ready to seal the aft cargo bay hatch on my command. Permanently. Boon, tell me you’ve got access to CIC communications.”

“You owe me a drink, Commander.” Boon’s grin was audible in his voice.

“I owe you a hooker and an open bar, LT. Patch me through.” Absently, she tried to remember if Boon preferred blondes or redheads. Hacking through the pea soup she’d seen earlier in such a short amount of time was nothing shy of damned impressive.

There was a crackle, and then the unmistakable sound of Chevik’s Eastern-Europe roar. “-cowardly, uncouth, vile tactics from batarians, but I had thought the turians had a spec more honor than this!”

“It is a fool who turns down an advantage in a time of war for the sake of preserving what their enemies consider ‘honorable.’” The reply was undeniably turian, the vibrating sound of dual-vocal cords giving a very distinct sound. Shepard was pleased- it would make things much simpler now that she knew the turian had a omnitool VI translator with an dialect easily understandable by humans. Her own turian translator was...less than accurate at times.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Shepard’s voice cut through the tension-loaded air of the CIC. There was a heartbeat of startled silence, and Shepard imagined the turian who had spoken snapping his avian head up, predatory eyes searching.

“Who is this?” The turian demanded. “I have your Captain on his knees, human. You would prove wise to answer me quickly.”

“With pleasure,” Shepard’s fingers danced over the command to set off the charges. “This is Commander Shepard, and I’ve got a proposition for you.” She nodded to Maverick, who returned the nod and tapped at her own omnitool. The lights overhead flickered faintly as, a ways away on the turian ship, Maverick’s mac’guveyered contraption went off. “You get the hell off my ship, and I don’t vent yours of all atmosphere. You have seventy seconds.” It would take a hundred and five seconds for Maverick’s toy to run out of juice.
There was a pause, likely as the turian captain attempted to contact his ship. There was a growl that, were Shepard a normal human, would have made something small and monkey-shaped in the back of Shepard’s brain scurry for the nearest tree. Instead, she grinned. Quietly, in her ear, Jenkins informed her that his biosign readings had the turians retreating from the CIC. The static was clearing up, and Shepard brought up her own sensor readouts to watch their approach. Five from the CIC, three from the crew quarters, three from the main battery. Shepard’s throat tightened - she had thought there’d be six on board, at most. She was lucky she’d gotten a turian captain who apparently valued his people enough to not risk her bluffing.

The turian invaders here hauling ass. The timer ticked down to thirty seconds by the time they began snarling past the trio of humans set beside the causeway to the cargo hold, heavy weapons up and ready. If they decided to fight back now, it wouldn’t matter, and the humans knew it; better to show they were willing to risk a hull breach. Last minute chest-puffing as the humans brandished the weapons and the turians passing them made lunges at the pink mammals in hardsuits, snapping toothy jaws and flaring mandibles. Only one went past at a controlled, fast walk that for a human’s shorter legs would have been a mild jog.

This last turian’s uniform had one thing the others’ didn’t, a deep cobalt blue sash around his middle, and blue bands around his arms. He stopped in front of Shepard, and behind his visor she caught a flash of blue. Whether he’d picked a random human to stop in front of or if he somehow knew she owned the voice that had threatened him, she couldn’t say. But he stood there, immobile, while they stared at one another. Despite both pair of eyes being hidden behind polarized visor, she knew their gazes were locked.

Unexpectedly, with ten seconds to go, the turian spoke, “I am Captain Nomos Vakarian. You will remember my name, human, as I will remember yours.” Then he turned, and sprinted. The moment he was through the cargo bay hatch, Shepard addressed Carver, “Seal the doors.”

There was the sound of hydraulics working, then a hiss as a chemical compound was released into the locking mechanisms that would melt and fuse the working. Nothing short of a full crew, some powerful machinery, and several hours of labor would get that hatch open again.

Shepard waited a few heartbeats. If Captain Vakarian was stupid enough not to seal off the compartment with the ‘can opener’ the instant his people were aboard, then any deaths resulting from what she was about to do was on him. She hit the command on her omnitool, and the resulting explosion rocked the Lincoln.

A scant few moments after the rocking had settled, the shipwide comm clicked on, and Chevik’s accented voice filled the air, “Shepard! Get your ass up here now!”

Shepard couldn’t help it - she laughed. Maverick and Jenkins joined in, Sakino’s own chuckle joining theirs as he emerged from his hidey hole. She wasn’t sure how or why, since she’d just
saved the ship and everyone on board, but she knew she was about to have her ass chewed, and her team knew it too. Somehow, that knowledge, joined with the euphoria of surviving something that should have had them dead half an hour ago, sent them over the edge.

“*Shepard!*” Chevik howled again, which only made it worse.

“Check on the crew,” Shepard gasped between laughing chokes. “I need to go make sure Chevik still has both his balls.”

“*Commander Shepard!*”

“Least we know he still has both lungs,” Maverick snickered. Shepard grinned, shook her head, and headed down the corridor. For once, the thought of an impending ass-chewing didn’t make her grimace. It was just good to be alive. Even if she had, apparently, made her first life-long enemy of another species.

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**Garrus**

If it weren’t for the color, it would have been one of the more gruesome sights he’d ever seen. And given his service in the turian military during one of the bloodier segments of the Contact War, and subsequent employment as Citadel Security, that was saying something. But as it was, the red that coated the walls just looked like an exuberant child had gotten ahold of a bucket of bright crimson paint.

“How many?” He asked, voice low and grating. Human or not, these dismembered corpses had deserved better- anyone would have deserved better.

“Five,” the young crime scene analyst informed him. “Looks like more, since they’re in multiple pieces, but...we count five. Three adult females, an adolescent male, and a male child.” The analyst looked over his shoulder at the scene, his shoulders twitching in disgust. “I don't mind telling you, Officer Vakarian, I’m no pro-pyjak freak, but this is...” Words left unsaid were sometimes just as telling as when actually spoken.

“Yeah, it is.” The two males took a grim moment to survey the utter brutality. Then professionalism took over, and from then on it was as if they were discussing lunch selections. “We’re still missing two. The adolescent and child females.”

“Cellius and Resinion have teams doing sweeps of the complex now.”

“You’ve got things taken care of here?
“Yes, sir. Just figuring out what pieces go together and prepping them for shipment back to Alliance Space, after forensics gets what they can.”

“Then I’ll join the search. Make sure I get copies of everything by the end of the day.”

“Sir.”

Moving through the blood-splattered room, C-Sec Investigative Officer Garrus Vakarian felt the urge to lower the visor on his hardsuit helmet to block out the smell. The bodies might not have been turian, but he didn’t care what species you were- dismembered corpses never smelled pleasant. He managed to resist the temptation long enough to cross the room and duck through a door leading to the rest of the dilapidated complex that had been the most recent hiding place of those known only as the Traders. They’d popped up in other sectors of Citadel Space almost as soon as the Contact Wars had begun in earnest. No amount of credits, dedication or public outcry had stemmed their flourish of success on the black market. He supposed it was true- something new and different would always be valued above the old and familiar, especially when it came to the forbidden.

Human slaves, provided for all manner of depraved fantasies, were definitely forbidden. Most turians - and other races- agreed on this, not despite of their animosity of the new race, but because of it. A conflict with a less worthy species would have been classified as an ‘ongoing squirmish’ rather than a full-out war. Garrus supposed that had something to do with why the batarians and vorcha were so ruthless in their support of the Traders- new kids on the block, and already the humans garnered enough grudging respect to be a step above the ‘annoying vermin’ label that the aforementioned species seemed unable to escape.

Granted, not all subjects of the Turian Imperial Senate agreed with this assessment. Some would classify the humans as below the batarians and vorcha. Personally, Garrus thought that any species that could hold their own against the turian military for as long as the Alliance had, deserved at least a nod. Then again, there were the krogan. They’d more than held their own, and had required the intervention of the salarians to be brought under control. And the best most turians could bring themselves to do was ignore the krogan race altogether.

Proud, noble, warrior-race that they were, if there was one thing turians did not do well, it was lose. And they had come very, very close to loosing to the krogan. Some said they were nearing that same point with the humans. Garrus disagreed- it was more like they were too evenly matched, and both sides were running out of resources and -more importantly- excuses. Pressure had been building for years to put an end to the war that hardy anyone could even remember the original reason for. The Council especially had begun hinting heavily that it might not entirely hate the idea of a second military race. It was no secret that should the turian government ever have really wanted it, Citadel Space would have been theirs. A second species to balance out the turians was, in the estimation of many, not a bad idea.

‘The Human Dilemma’ many had taken to calling it. As far as Garrus was concerned, the politicians on Palaven and the Councilors on the Citadel could debate all they wanted about this ‘dilemma.’ Garrus’ job, and only job, was the security of the Citadel. And right now, that security was challenged by the first incursion of a major black market movement in a long, long time. The Traders didn’t deal only in humans- if they did, Garrus had a suspicion that pressure to take them down might not have been as intense, Human Dilemma or no. The fact they also dealt in asari and turian slavery made them a very high priority.

The halls and rooms Garrus searched were standard for the places the Traders squatted in. No power other than what cables from generators provided, the smell of feces and urine from multiple
species clinging to the walls and the air. Bits of debris had been piled in corners long enough that their original origin was indistinguishable. And of course, there were the bloodstains. Red, blue, orange, purple. Krogan (or human), turian, batarian/vorcha, asari. Morbid rainbows splashed everywhere.

Reports came in over the security channel fed directly into his headpiece, the small lumagel screen suspended in front of his face providing bits of data now and again that he read and catalogued and dismissed with minimal attention- until a little red light began blinking. His mandibles tilted down and flared slightly, a typical turian expression of combined concentration and -sometimes- disapproval. A few taps at his omnitool, and the readout from his heads-up piece transferred down to the larger projection on his arm. A heat signature, in the room he’d just exited, that didn’t match the emissions from the de-activated generator that he thought had been the room’s sole occupant.

It was probably nothing, but just in case...

“Cellius,” he spoke into the open channel. “Might have found something.”

“There’s a heat signature in the room I just exited. The de-activated generator there didn’t match the emissions.”

“On our way,” the officer replied. Signals in the standard-issue C-Sec hardsuits would guide Cellius and his team to him, no problem. Garrus flicked off the channel. If his suspicions were right, he didn’t want the faint radio chatter to scare them off.

Back in the room, he brought up the heat-sensor program again. The room was bare, no furniture to hide behind. The signal sent him to his left, and walking in the direction it led him brought him to the far back corner, a grated window dimmed the weak artificial city light dappling the filthy floor. One of the wall panels was off-center, the corners not quite aligned with their moorings. He stood still, watching the panel for a long moment.

There was a sob.

Garrus suppressed a sigh. The sob had sounded young. The last thing he wanted was to expose the missing -or not so missing as the case may be- human child to more trauma, but at least she was alive.

He reached out one taloned hand and pried the panel free. Huddled inside the hidden alcove that was revealed behind the dingy square of panelling, was a small human female clutched in the arms of an older female. At least, he was pretty sure they were both female. Both were slender, with longer lengths of the stuff called ‘hair’ growing from their scalps. Wide eyes were red rimmed and glossy, with wet tracks down their cheeks. The smaller female gave a cry and clung tighter to the adolescent, who was staring at him with an expression that even he could tell was defiant. Some things translated across all species- unwavering stares, facial bones and muscles rigidly set, lifted chin, all spoke of ‘do your worst.’

Turian knee joints bent horizontally as well as bending vertically, allowing him to rotate his lower legs somewhat outward, avoiding skewering his thighs on his spurs as he crouched down. Coming to eye-level with the adolescent, he sighed quietly. The smaller one was working into a full wail, and the two of them were clutching each other tight enough to leave visible red marks on otherwise pale, sallow skin. Garrus hadn’t seen too many living humans, but he’d seen enough of them to know that their skin wasn’t supposed to be that sickly, almost transparent shade of yellow-pink.

Slowly, very slowly, Garrus held out a hand, palm up, talons relaxed. He kept his mandibles pressed firmly as close in as they would go. Flaring them, a turian grin, tended to send humans into shrieks of fear, he’d learned.

“Things is good,” he said slowly, the sibilant sounds coming out almost like a hiss. It was one of
The few human phrases he’d dragged out of a C-Sec linguist, an asari with a known pro-human standpoint. One of these days, he’d get ahold of the rumored VI translator chips supposedly programed with a working, comprehensible catalogue for one of the main dialects used by the Alliance. But for now, clumsy phrases would have to do.

The little one had stopped her climbing wail at his words. The eyes of the older one widened almost comically. He extended his hand further.

“No hurting,” he promised. He pointed to himself with his other hand. “Rescue.”

They were both staring at him now, frozen with fear and uncertainty. Moving slowly, Garrus reached to one of the hardpacks at his side, and retrieved a nutrient bar. Having two of the five powerhouse species in Citadel Space based on dextro-amino acids, rather than levo, had inevitably led to various corporations developing Unimo bars. ‘Universal amino’ acids had been the work of both food manufacturers and pharmaceutical companies, creating a molecule that utilized both sides, rather than just the right (which resulted in dextro) or left (resulting in levo). The result? The brown, slightly sticky, tasteless brown bar he was currently removing from its wrapper and slowly extending to the females.

The little one moved first, faster than he was used to seeing from the mammalian race, quick fingers darting out and snatching the foodstuff before his arm had even stopped moving. Deft digits had torn the bar in half, shoved one half in the other girl’s mouth, and the remaining portion in her own. Chew, swallow. All before he’d quite registered that the umino bar was gone from his hand. Frankly, he was surprised those blunt little teeth had been able to work through the leather-like bar so quick.

Sharp hearing picked up the sounds Cellius and his team nearing as he pulled out another two bars, handing one to each female. Still watching him like caged animals, they devoured the offerings.

“In here,” Garrus called when the sounds of approach got louder, and the two pairs of human eyes snapped to the door. Cellius came into view a moment later, flanked by two turian C-Sec officers Garrus didn’t recognize and an asari he did, though he couldn’t recall her name to save his life.

“They don’t look injured,” he said, looking back to the humans.

“They don’t look injured,” he said, looking back to the humans.

“Then let’s get them out of here,” Cellius’s voice, deeper, gruffer, grew louder as he came up behind Garrus. “I’m sick of the stink of this place. Reeks of human and vorcha.” He bent down and reached for the females, clamping one three-fingered grip around a thin white limb. Shrieking, the one he’d grabbed—the smaller one—lashed out, teeth finding purchase between his thumb and left finger. Cellius swore and raised his other hand—

Garrus intercepted the blow, catching the larger male’s forearm in an iron grip. Cellius growled, mandibles flared and jaw dropped to let loose an insulted hiss.

“They’re scared enough as it is,” Garrus told him, shoving him away. He looked to the two victims and sighed—what little progress he’d made with patience and the unimo bars had been lost. Slowly, he reached towards them, expecting the shrieking. He wished he had the time to be patient again, but if he didn’t do it now then others would come and make things worse. The best he could do was get his arms around the bigger female, letting her keep ahold of the smaller one. Once they realized he wasn’t trying to separate them, as Cellius had, their cries dimmed somewhat, though the little one kept biting the air in his general direction, trying to catch any stray talons or flesh that came too close to her quick mouth.

The bigger female surprised him, clamping a hand over the younger’s mouth and hauling her close
against her, whispering something in her ear as Garrus lifted the both of them easily. Abruptly, the smaller human went still, raging howls reduced to quiet sniffles. The adolescent female looked up into his face, finding his eyes and visibly swallowing. With visible effort she managed to say two words, voice sounding hoarse and flat. It took him a moment to remember what they meant, and he was taken aback by the wave of pity that swept through him.

‘Thank you.’

As it turns out, finding the girls had been the easy part. The challenge had come with the paperwork that followed. Mostly, because there really was no set protocol for dealing with humans on the Citadel. Aside from those that were brought there illegally, there were no humans on the Citadel, and most of the ones they found were dead. Also usually in pieces. No one wanted to take responsibility for the young aliens, least of all a busy police department.

In the end, it was decided that since the turian government already had a system set up for handling humans, the two survivors would be shipped to Palaven. The life of a *quellen*, or captured bondservant, was not one to be relished, but the girls would be fed and clothed and have access to medical care, at least. It was the best Garrus could do.

Between arranging for immediate medical care and transportation to Palaven for the two females, the extensive report he had to write, debriefing the Captain of the the next cycle, reading and accepting the reports from the lower-ranking investigators who had been involved, checking himself through his own medical routine to guard against unfamiliar pathogens from other species, it was well into what should have been the middle of Garrus’ sleep cycle before he was able to stumble through the doors of his modest apartment. He wanted nothing more than to shed his hardsuit, scrub himself down with fresh buffing cloths and soak under a hot spray until he fell asleep in the very shower stall. The Spirit of Torment, it seemed, had other ideas.

Greeting his exhausted self when he entered the bedroom was a rapid staccato of beeps and clicks, letting him know in no uncertain terms that not only did he have a message, but it was a high priority message that would brook no procrastination on his part. He debated on silencing the alert and passing out anyway. Then he considered all the things it could be, and knew that wondering would keep him awake despite his exhaustion.

And so, Garrus was halfway through divesting himself of his boots and greaves when he froze, the name of the sender of the message finally filtering through his numb brain. Newfound energy shot through his limbs, opening the message with a speed that, ten minutes ago, he would have sworn was impossible after the draining day he’d had. There was only one reason why Imperial Admiral Terondis Almonus would be sending him a missive. Trepidation gripped him as he read the words glowing on his screen in abrupt, precise script. Reaching the end, he let loose a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

Not dead.

Garrus was almost ashamed of the flash of mixed disappointment and relief that replaced the momentary rush of awakeness. His father may not be fond of him or his choices, but he was still his father, and there were worse parents to have.

Then the reality of his father’s situation penetrated his haze of muddled emotions, and despite himself he winced on Nomos Vakarian’s behalf. Captured by humans? Perhaps death would have been better. Even if he was treated well, even if the humans somehow had umino bars on hand, the political and social fallout that would follow once he was rescued...

And there was no doubt in Garrus’ mind that he would be rescued. If nothing else, the message
mentioned pending negotiations to trade the life of his father and his surviving crew for a few key human prisoners of war. What the missive didn’t mention, curiously, was how this had happened. Whatever misgivings Garrus had about Nomos as a parent, he had none about him as a captain. There was a reason Garrus had served his mandatory six years in the Hierarchy Military then promptly signed up for C-Sec. No elder son relished the task of filling a father’s large, illustrious shoes.

Releasing a rumbling sigh, Garrus reached out to rub the junction of his neck and cowl, where a knot of tension had begun to build beneath where the plates of metallic carapace met. A good turian would leave things alone, be appreciative that an honorable Imperial Admiral had been thoughtful enough to inform the son of his most decorated captain of said captain’s capture and potentially impending death.

Garrus, as he was fond of quipping, was not a good turian.

Briefly, he debated leaving it until morning. Glancing at the time dismissed that notion- the individual he intended on contacting would be up, probably just barely, but still. The volus required little sleep compared to most other species.

“You guess correctly.” Tapping a few keys, Garrus forwarded the volus a copy of the Admiral’s message. “I’m sending you something I received today. I’d like to know more about it.”

“More, you say?” The volus raised three fat fingers, stroking one of the flesh-flaps. “Very well. I assume my...gratitude for your generosity, after this, will be permitted to abate?”

“If you’re able to find out anything useful, then yes.” Never let such a valuable resource as the best information broker in the Widow Nebula off the hook entirely, especially when he owed you. Garrus’ phrasing left plenty of room for interpretation, which the volus took in stride.

“Of course. I’ll see what I can do. Will tomorrow be sufficient?”

“That will be acceptable.”

“Then I bid you a fine evening. Do get some rest, Vakarian- you look like vorcha shit.”

Then the connection was severed, and Garrus allowed himself a short laugh. If the volus’ statement was accurate, then he looked a far sight better than he felt. When the last of his armor had been pried free, cleaned, and set on the shelves designed specifically to hold the pieces, Garrus allowed himself to fall into the large nest-like bed of thick, padded leather suspended on a long, oval ring. Despite his anxiety over his father’s predicament, the turian had no trouble finding sleep.
Originally posted to FF.net years and years ago. It is just now being re-posted to Ao3 in its entirety, mistakes and all. Enjoy!
Chapter Two

For a long while after stepping off the transport at Shanxi’s sole remaining outpost station, Commander Kastanie Shepard simply stared out a smudged window at the ruined landscape. Her thoughts swirled and refused to settle, orbiting a single concern; whether or not the end of the day would see her merely chastised -again- or sans a military career. She would have been willing to bet that the Alliance would not dismiss someone of her caliber and training over something as minor as what had occurred in the days following the _Lincoln_ ’s attack. This wasn’t bravado speaking, it was sheer factual assessment of her abilities and value.

That bet, however, had gone out the window when she’d been swooped up from the medical station on Arcterus a bare day after the _Lincoln_ had limped into port. Her military police escort had told her in no uncertain terms that she would be coming with them, now, no questions, no talking, just come. She’d gone, asked no questions, and simply wondered. And, if she were honest with herself, worried herself grey. She had nothing else but this life. If it were taken away because she’d
made the mistake of speaking her mind just once too many...

She’d wondered many times if she would have done things differently, if she could have gone back...

The answer, every time, was hell yes.

“You cannot be serious!” Shepard planted her hands on the CIC’s central grid unit- the flat, glowing tabletop that showed in minute detail the ship’s status, both internal and external.

“You will not question me, Commander, not after you nearly blew everything to hell! Months of planning, lives put on the line and lost- for nothing! Why? Because you couldn’t follow standard protocol!” Chevik was in rare form. The Russian man was known to blow hot and cold by turns, with little or no reason. Now, however, he was hissing between his teeth, eyes narrowed, face nearly purple.

Apparently, the Lincoln had been a trap to capture a turian stealth ship, exactly the kind that had latched onto the Lincoln’s ass like a leech. The stealth ship Shepard had blown a hole in. The Alliance brass had decided to not inform the onboard special ops team about this trap. Why? They needed to ‘act natural.’ Apparently, someone upstairs had thought ‘natural’ for an elite team was sticking their thumbs up their assholes and waiting quietly while their vessel was boarded by enemy forces. Shepard was still trying to swallow that bit of logic.

“They fell for it once, they’ll fall for it again,” Shepard argued. “There’s no reason to go off half-cocked after them, not when we don’t know if they’re heading back to a fucking fleet!”

Chevik’s brilliant plan, to save face, was to chase after the turian stealth ship. Or rather, try to. The remaining engineer and the pilot were convinced they could track the trace elements from the explosives Shepard had used to blow the softseal hatch.

In the end, Shepard had been confined to quarters until the turian ship was tracked and her skills were needed. Then, after the Lincoln disabled the enemy ship, Shepard was to lead her team and board and secure the captured vessel, whether she agreed with the plan or not.
The result, three days later, was encountering the wounded turian ship...with a turian frigate most definitely not damaged. By some lucky miracle, the Lincoln won the encounter, mostly because it seemed that the stealth ship had possessed little in the way of weapons. But they’d paid for it - a hole blown in the hull had sucked three crewmen out into an airless death.

And, like a good wind-up marine, Shepard had led her team onto the same disabled ship she’d boarded three days prior, ignoring all good sense and instinct. They paid a heavy price for taking Captain Vakarian into custody, Jenkins highest of all...

Shepard’s hand went to the ragged hole in the left bicep of her hardsuit. The hole would have gone through her head, if Jenkins - rash, stupid, laughing Jenkins- hadn’t shoved her out of the way and taken the burst of rounds from a turian assault rifle through his chest. Only the one shot had gotten past him to find her arm.

Sometime during her inner reverie, a man had stepped up beside her, mirroring her stance to similarly stare out at the crumbling buildings that had once been humanity’s pride and joy, their first colony. Shepard spied dark, swarthy skin out of the corner of her eye, broad shoulders, an unrelenting stance, and gave a slight quirk of her lips when she recognized her old mentor. They stood in silence for a good long while.

“It’s been almost three God-damned decades, Shepard.” The man spoke more as if to himself than to her, still staring at the view. Despite humanity’s determination in spreading, this was one colony that had never been fully revived after its - however short- beating by orbital bombardment. After so long, what the bombs had missed, time had eroded. Coupled with the fact that the turians knew the location of this infamous outpost, Shanxi was a very unappealing candidate for rebuilding and investment.

“How old were you, when this whole thing started?” The question caught her offguard.

“Three, sir.” She paused. “Give or take.”

“Birth records for spacer kids were never all that accurate,” the man said absently. “And they haven’t gotten much better. Priorities have been elsewhere. The Alliance has evolved around this war, and humanity with it. I wonder, if this war ever ends, what will we do with ourselves?”
“Trade a rifle for a shovel, sir.”

The man turned with a raised eyebrow. “Why a shovel?”

She shrugged with her good arm. “To bury our dead, then plant some corn. Or potatoes.”

He laughed, and it surprised her. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen her mentor crack a grin, let alone actually laugh. The newly-minted Admiral Anderson was a good man, but a tired one. If anyone deserved the kind of retirement that was only seen in old vids (‘movies’ she thought they were called), the kind that featured a beach and a brightly colored drink, it was him.

Eventually, his amusement abated. He moved away from the window and she fell into step beside him.

“How’s your arm?” He asked, and she bit her tongue against an impatient retort. She still had no idea why she’d been brought to this all-but-abandoned outpost, but she hadn’t gotten to where she was by lacking patience. And she trusted Anderson. It was hard not to- he was that kind of man.

“Healing,” she said simply, trying to pretend her bicep wasn’t throbbing. If it wasn’t life threatening, she didn’t need pain meds. “Would prefer it if I’d never gotten shot in the first place, but... Medigel is a wonderful thing.” She shoved aside the recollections of failing to spot an enemy, and paying for it with a hole through her arm. And a dead teammate.

“I tend to think the medical personnel might also have played a hand?” He was amused again. She wasn’t sure whether or not to be worried. He didn’t wait for an answer before adding, “I trust the son of a bitch who shot you is a smear somewhere?”

“A very blue smear,” she confirmed with a dark grin of her own, which quickly faded. Jenkins, visor shattered, eyes wide open, chest a pulpy mess-

Resolute, she turned her thoughts from that path. There was nothing she could do now. The rest of her team had been given the standard few days off for mourning and ‘therapy.’ Which, if she knew her people, came in liquid form and in bulk. As for herself, she settled for adding a particular Alliance captain to her personal black list. If Chevik ever ended up in an alley with her, alone, things would not end well for him.
Hearing her thoughts head down that dark path again, she pulled herself back to the present with an effort.

“If I may ask, sir...?"

“What the hell we’re doing here?” He summarized her question for her, and in plainer terms than she could get away with. She nodded. He gave a sigh. “I won’t lie to you, Shepard- I don’t like it.”

“Don’t like what I’m here for, or don’t like that it’s me?” Professional though they may be, Shepard had no illusions that were it not for the uniforms, their relationship would have more resembled family than superior and subordinate. Her blunt response earned a mildly amused snort.

“Both,” he admitted. “I can’t deny it’s a grand opportunity, but something about it strikes me as too convenient...” he shook his head. “You’ll see what I mean at the briefing.”

Another nod. Patient, she may be- lacking a healthy sense of curiosity, she was not. She’d assumed this summons had been in regards to her insubordination to Chevik, before and after the mission. Walking onto the CIC after confirming Jenkins deader than dead and planting her fist in her Captain’s face was guaranteed to bring repercussions. Her fingers itched, and she bit the inside of her cheek against asking further. If Anderson was holding his tongue, he had his reasons.

The halls they walked down were grey and dingy despite evidence of regular scrubbing and repainting. Pale overhead lights flickered, and a few windows had been boarded up, if neatly and painted the same color as the walls. Anderson’s earlier comment about the Alliance being built on this war came back to her. It was true, but it also couldn’t last. No society could exist in a constant state of conflict. Resources were beginning to go thin, and the race to find new habitable planets with farm-able land and mine-able resources had recently reached a whole new level of urgency. Things like new windows for dilapidated, strategically unimportant outposts were pretty far down the list.

And yet, when Anderson finally showed her into a room, it lacked for nothing. The floors were gleaming new linoleum, the walls freshly plastered, the long wooden table polished to a high gleam. No pale, sickly lights overhead, but good strong lamps, almost bright enough to be daylight. The chairs were leather, and each place was set with a datapad and stylus, and a glass of ice water. Each place was flanked by a straight-standing individual, medals and insignias picked out in gold thread flashing in the light.

Ah. One of those briefings. It had been one of Shepard’s goals to avoid ever setting foot in one of these types of rooms, with these types of people. It was one of the reasons she’d taken the path she
had. A small reason, but a reason nonetheless. She was the kind of person who did the jobs that
won people promotions and elections, without those people ever lifting a finger beyond signing the
sanctions that allowed her to legally kill people. She was a tool, and she was fine with that. But a
hatchet belonged in the toolshed, not the dining room.

At that moment, surrounded by more brass than even her nightmares had held, wearing a scuffed
hardsuit with an unrepaired hole still gaping on her left bicep, Shepard felt like a very out of place hatchet.

At least this probably wasn’t about Chevik. She’d never heard of a dismissal or a reprimand being
given in front of three Admirals and a General before. She was good- she wasn’t that good.

“Commander Shepard.” One of the three men in the room she actually knew greeted her with a nod
once salutes had been snapped and returned, and she’d been given permission to fall into a more
casual stance.

“Admiral Hackett. Good to see you.” And it was. He’d been a Captain, with Anderson, and one of
the men who gave regular seminars at her N7 training, the last time she’d seen him. The other man
she knew was a military consultant by the name Donnel Udina. While Hackett’s presence was
somewhat reassuring, Udina’s was not. The man gave her a terse nod and no more, which she
brought herself to return only for Anderson’s sake.

The rest she knew only by reputation. Admiral Kastanie Drescher was a household name on every
human colony, a legend on Earth, second only to the late Jon Grissom. When the research and
reconstruction team assigned to Relay 314 had been slaughtered, a single frigate limping home to
bring the warning, it had been Admiral Drescher who had pushed the Second Fleet past all
technological explanation to arrive in time to rescue Shanxi after only an hour of attack,
coincidentally enough coming to the rescue of the first-strike team that Anderson and Grissom both
had been a part of.

The Admiral was also her namesake, given that she’d been born on a cruiser in the Second Fleet the
year the Admiral had been given the post, her father having been a stalwart supporter. Despite
that, Shepard had never met Admiral Drescher before this moment.

The other two individuals present gave Shepard pause, mostly because they were not Navy or
Marine. Brigadier General Jack Nielson was a mountain of a man, both in physical stature and in
terms of political and military clout. What the man wanted done, happened. Period. Partially
because the President of the United Alliance Nations was his brother-in-law. Also partially
because, as far as Shepard knew, the man knew his shit.
The other warm body was a mystery. No military insignia or rank or uniform. Shepard didn’t recognize her face, and she was relatively certain she would remember the woman’s chocolate-and-roses complexion. Over the centuries, nationalities had blended so thoroughly that it was uncommon to see such a strong example of what had once been known as ‘African-American.’ The red suit she wore complemented her skin nicely, and her dark hair was pulled back into a severe twist. Given the settings, those things weren’t surprising. What did make Shepard raise the proverbial eyebrow -since her actual face remained impassive- was that the woman was armed to the teeth, although subtly. Sidearm under the jacket, back up at her ankle, probably another at the small of her back, and Shepard was going to bet on knives in wrist-sheaths as well. And she wouldn’t be surprised if this was considered packing light, where this woman was concerned. Shepard knew that if it were her, this would have been the bare bones minimum for stepping outside.

The woman noted Shepard’s scrutiny, and gave a small smile.

“Agent Gianna Parasini,” she said, stepping forward and extending a hand. ”Alliance Intelligence Service." Her grip, when Shepard shook it, was firm. She stepped back, offering nothing more, and Shepard’s training held her too tightly to ask. Yet.

“Good, that’s everyone,” Udina clapped his hands, rubbing them. The sound of dry, rasping skin on skin made Shepard twitch, but she followed along as everyone took seats. She ended up at the end of the table. Rather than feeling in the lead, though, she felt severely scrutinized. To mask her discomfort she picked up the datapad, and thumbed it on. Flashing warnings in red letters informed her, just in case she hadn’t already guessed, that the contents were classified.

“Before we begin,” Udina started, still standing. “Let me say that it is gratifying to see such cooperation here. This is no minor matter, as we all know. I would also like to say-”

“Udina. Sit down. You can make your speeches after we’re done.” Nielson, too, had picked up his datapad and was perusing it without even looking at the consultant.

Everyone present blinked. No one liked Udina, but the man hadn’t gotten to where he was by not being absolutely superb at his job. The fact that Nielson was being so dismissive of his posturing told Shepard that whatever this was about, Udina was not key. So then, why was he here?

“As far as anyone outside this room knows, Shepard, you are here to be further debriefed on your actions aboard the Lincoln ,” Nielson went on. He gestured to Udina. “If questioned, Udina will confirm this.”
Ah, now that made more sense. Standard debrief with her direct brass on Arcturus, and now the big guns wanted to poke and dissect her brain. Having a military analyst present made sense. Especially given her actions in the subsequent days after the initial sneak-attack. All this made sense, except...

The fact that Chevik wasn’t here, and Nielson’s words regarding ‘anyone outside this room’ had her waiting for the other shoe, as it were. It didn’t take long to drop.

“As for those of us inside this room, we will be discussing a different matter.” Nielson directed a pointed look at Parasini, who inclined her head before pulling out a few datapads of her own from the briefcase that had gone unnoticed at her feet.

“How much do you know about what happens to humans captured by the turians?” Parasini leaned forward on the table, hands clasped, eyeing Shepard with an unwavering gaze.

“Not much more than everyone else does,” Shepard responded. “Military affiliated persons are executed, and civilians just disappear, usually with no evidence of bloodshed. Theories range from slave labor to demonic rituals.” She paused. “The part most people don’t know is that occasionally we find a drifting pod loaded with dead civilians confirmed as missing, varying amounts of time beforehand. All naked, though nicely laid out. The pods have no tech, no atmosphere, just a shell with a homing beacon.”

Parasini nodded. “More or less, yes.” Shepard raised an eyebrow. More or less?

“Recently,” Hackett continued for her. “One of these pods was seen near New Eden.” He named one of humanity’s more recent colonization attempts. The planet had proved uninhabitable after it was discovered that certain plants had a tendency to spew toxic pollen into the atmosphere.

“I take it this pod had something extra?” Shepard ventured. Hackett nodded, and Parasini pulled out an OSD chip, and slid it across the table. Shepard caught it, and at a nod from Parasini, she slid it into the port on her datapad. Instantly, a screen demanding Shepard’s fingerprint popped up. Somehow not surprised that someone like Parasini would have access to Shepard’s records, including fingerprints, she pressed her thumb to the pad on the lower corner. A moment later, and information was scrolling down her screen.

Shepard frowned as she skimmed it, ignoring the eyes on her. The datapad was a mishmash of languages. Common, as well as the pure forms of the languages that merged to form Common-English, Spanish, Italian, a smattering of Mandarin. Most of them Shepard was at least familiar
with, if not fluent in. Dates, instructions, longitude, altitude, measurements, weapons specs, notes on what looked like turian anatomy. And coordinates. Lots of coordinates, all of them in Citadel space.

“This...” Shepard looked for the right word. “This is some Easter egg.” She looked up. “This was on that pod?”

“Specifically, it was coded into a civilian woman’s subdermal implant, one for regulating hormone cycles. As far as we can tell, all other types of subdermal implants are removed once captured.”

“Guess even turian males don’t want to deal with a woman during those three days of the month,” Anderson spoke for the first time, and earned a few token chuckles.

Shepard spared a grin, then went back to perusing the data while asking, “Have we confirmed if any of this is legit? These coordinates...they could be traps.”

“Most of them are too far into Citadel space to risk anything but a recon mission,” said Hackett, queing up his own datapad. “What we have confirmed, however, is the location of the turian homeworld.”

That took her a moment. Some people, upon hearing this, might have experienced swelling dreams of a war ending, of the final triumph over the enemy. Shepard was more practical. She glanced down at her datapad, found the tidbit of info she was looking for, and was mildly surprised.

“That’s not as far inside Citadel space as we thought it would be,” she commented, bringing up the section of the message that detailed the turian home planet. “‘Palaven,’ ” she read. “The rest of this stuff...it looks like instructions... Requirements, recommendations, blueprints.” She scrolled down further, and gave a low whistle. “And that’s definitely more turian terminology than we were given at N7 training, let alone basic or AIT. There’s even some grammar templates in here.” The sketchy VI program a very few people possessed for understanding turians had been extrapolated from stolen templates of the language utilized by the Citadel races for common correspondence. What Shepard held was information on the turian’s native language. She lowered the datapad, and glanced at the faces around the room, all looking at her expectantly. They all knew the question that was on her mind, the one she wouldn’t let herself ask. They’d tell her soon enough. She’d played this game often enough to enjoy not dancing to the tune they’d planned out. She wouldn’t let them goad her into asking.

Anderson chuckled, a dry, humorless sound. He knew her well enough to know her thoughts. “Parasini? This is your brainchild.” Nodding, the woman leaned forward yet again, fixing Shepard
with a pinning gaze.

“There was another message, with this datapacket. It confirmed that human civilians who are captured by the turians go through a screening process. Some are taken to industrial or agriculture planets and used for labor. Some, a more select group, are taken as part of a cultural tradition and used as household servants in some of Palaven’s aristocratic circles.”

Shepard blinked. “So, slaves.”

“More or less.” Parasini consulted her own datapad. “They’re referred to as ‘quellen.’ According to the datapacket, it’s a term dating back to the hunting-pack days of the turian race. Innocents of the enemy were taken and put to use, rather than killing them. When the conflicts ended, the quellen were released to return to their lives as if nothing happened.”


“Honorable? The vultures take good, honest people and work them to death, then ship them into space to be forgotten, not even a decent burial.”

Shepard said nothing, but she was thinking back to a report she’d been privy to some time ago, when a distant relative of an acquaintance of hers had turned up on one of those pods. The bodies had for all appearances seemed well treated in life. And a pod intended to be forgotten would not have been equipped with a homing beacon.

“The packet mentions the screening process for being placed in one of those households,” Shepard recalled. “How to get through it.” She was beginning to have an idea of why she was here, and she wasn’t sure if she was intrigued or not. Fear didn’t factor into it. She knew she’d die in this war. In space or on an alien planet, didn’t much matter, so long as she got the job done.

Parasini nodded again. “It does. Typically, the quellen taken to the capitol are female, small, and young. Likely so as not to pose any physical danger to their ‘maecollen,’ or ‘hosts.’ Even a turian adolescent would be more than a match for most untrained female humans.”

“The important part of the message that came in the packet,” Nielson cut in, apparently beginning to get impatient. “Is that there is a cell of escaped humans and, apparently, rebel turians in the capitol city on Palaven.”
“Rebel turians?” The words felt odd in her mouth. One of the things that had made this war so difficult was the apparent complete and absolute unity of the turian people. Meet one, you’ve meet them all. At first it had been attributed to a superior military mindset, but tidbits of info gleaned from Citadel-operated comm buoys indicated that the entire race was alike in their dedication to racial unity and conformity. A ‘turian rebel’ was a paradox.

“Apparently there are factions within Citadel space that want this war to end, badly.” Anderson put in.

“That should not be a surprise to anyone.” Shepard glanced, mildly surprised, at the only one present who hadn’t spoken until just then. Admiral Drescher had leaned back in the leather chair, fingers steepled beneath a pointed chin. “Wars do not just affect the parties directly involved. They affect all those around, as well. It should not surprise anyone present that the other races of the Citadel are displeased with our conflict continuing as long as it has.” The words were clipped, precise, and with only a hint of the speaker’s native language.

“Well said,” Nielson murmured, gulping from his glass of water, still scanning his datapad. Shepard had the sudden, distinct impression that the man never stopped reading, never stopped planning, never stopped thinking.

“This leaves us with a very delicate opportunity, Shepard.” Anderson brought the topic at hand back to the forefront, turning somewhat in his chair to face her. “This cell found a way to contact us, to give us all this information. If we can establish communication, it would give us an inside edge. We could potentially receive warnings of major attacks, predict their patrol routes, possibly even take out key players in their hierarchy.”

“And if it’s a lure of some kind?”

“It’d be a pretty damned elaborate lure, with very little for them to gain.” Nielson looked up from his datapad at last, spearing her with an ice-blue gaze from across the table. “The most they would get would be one operative, one who would be trained to resist interrogation and to plant false information in the event of capture.”

Shepard sucked a breath. One operative. Well, damn. She’d had an inkling building this is what they were getting at, but she hadn’t really thought about being the only one. It didn’t frighten her—before she’d been drafted into the N7 program she’d been an infiltration and demolitions specialist, a damn good one. She was used to working alone, preferred it most times. It hadn’t precluded her from developing excellent leadership skills, only let her also understand how to utilize her people as individuals, not just in conjunction with other squadmates. It was an oversight on the part of many officers she’d known, an oversight she’d been careful not to make herself.
Shepard returned to perusing the info on her screen, shaking her head. “With all due respect, sirs, ma’am, in my opinion this calls for a different specialization that what I can lay claim to.”

“You are a top-ranked infiltration specialist, are you not?” Drescher asked, clipped tones making the question seem harsher than intended. Probably.

Shepard shook her head, raising the datapad for emphasis. “Not this kind.”

“You’re right, it is different than what you’re used to,” Parasini surprised her by agreeing. “You’re the unseen, the shadow- you get in, without anyone knowing you exist. You take what you need, leave behind those lovely little things that evaporate everything around it once you’re gone, all without ruffling a hair. You’re an artist, Shepard.” She tapped a nail on her own pad. “This requires a different kind of invisibility. You’ll need to be someone else, to undo everything you’ve ever taught yourself to be. You’ll need to be just noticeable enough to get in, then be forgotten. You need to be invisible to everyone except the people we want to see you- hiding in plain sight.” She grinned abruptly. “This kind of hiding? This is my art.”

Well, thought Shepard. That explains why she’s here.

The women held gazes for a moment, then Shepard gave a terse nod. “What’s the timeframe?”

“Two weeks,” was the reply. Shepard suppressed a wince, replacing the automatic response of ‘ouch’ with ‘no problem.’ Outwardly, the only sign she’d even given was a curt nod. She glanced to Parasini again.

“I assume you’re going to be my art teacher?”

Parasini’s grin widened. “In a manner of speaking.”

“You’ll be stationed here for the two weeks of prep,” Nielson informed her. “Parasini will be your advisor. As far as the local teams are aware, you’re consulting with a weapons contractor regarding what you saw firsthand of the turian ship’s schematics. In two weeks you’ll be picked up with further instructions.”

Shepard already had a guess as to what those instructions would entail, but she kept her mouth shut. All she had to worry about for now, was...
Learning how to completely eradicate who I am, she thought with a quelled sigh. One hint of military behavior, one whiff of anything other than a run-of-the-mil terrified human civilian, and any turian she encountered would put a hole between her eyes, no question.

“Understood, sir,” was all she said as Nielson stood. The others present followed suit.

“Good hunting, Shepard.” Then the General was gone, the three Admirals and Udina following. Anderson gave her a nod and a brief smile before he shut the door behind him.

Shepard and Parasini regarded one another.

“Any questions?”

“As of right now? Just one.” Shepard paused, wondering if she really wanted to ask this, or keep up her ‘good marine’ mentality. Thinking that she was going to have to learn, and learn quick, how to break out of that, she went ahead. “Why me?”

One of Parasini’s arched eyebrows rose. “Why not you? Decorated graduate of the Alliance’s N7 program, noted officer before that. Good military family history, not so much as a disorderly conduct charge on your record.” Her lips quirked. “Prior to last week, anyways.”

“That’s exactly why I’m confused,” Shepard confessed. “I’m a Marine to the bone, and you said it yourself- you need someone the turians will mistake for a harmless civilian. Why not CIA, or AIS?” The CIA on Earth had morphed into an organization spanning many country borders, but was essentially the same. The AIS -Alliance Investigative Service- served roughly the same purpose among the colonies and Alliance outposts.

Parasini tilted her head slightly. “You’re worried being so firmly rooted in your military ways will jeopardize your mission?”

Shepard nodded. She didn’t like admitting it, but it was a concern. It was no small task to dig the warrior out of someone who had been born and raised in the military. It was in the way she stood, the way she walked, talked, the way she looked people in the eye. It was in her very blood and breath. And if the turians were as deeply entrenched in their own militaristic ways as they seemed to be, there was no way they would miss seeing it in her.
The other woman simply smiled.

“Commander Shepard, if you were too set in the mind of a marine for this job, you wouldn’t have thought to go against all known doctrine to board an enemy ship and hold it hostage against it's own damn captain.” She paused, then added. “And you wouldn’t have asked me ‘why.’”

Two good points, Shepard conceded with a wry grin.

“All right. Two weeks. I assume learning to walk, talk, and scream like a civilian is just the beginning?”

“Oh, it’s a good chunk of it. You’re already far more versed in communications tech, espionage, explosives, self defense, and evasion than any of our other candidates. Aside from stuffing you in civvies and growing your hair out, we’re going to shove as much turian language as we can down your throat, as well as having you memorize every single word of the datapacket. In addition to memorizing all the things we want you to be able to relay to the rebel cell.”

“And if I’m captured?” There were standard procedures for such a thing, of course. But this was anything but a standard mission. As if reading her mind, Parasini’s grin turned sardonic.

“I’d recommend chewing off your tongue.”

“Aren’t you a ray of sunshine.”

Sardonic turned to satisfied. “See? You’re putting the marine aside already. C’mon. Clothes make the woman, and I’ve got a whole wardrobe for you to start getting used to, then we need to get your subdermal implant replaced.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow as she followed her trainer out of the room. “Replaced?”

“Palaven’s radiation is lethal to humans past a few hours of exposure. We think the turians use the planet’s natural radiation as a form of imprisonment for the human quellen - they don’t dare step foot outside. We’re going to hide an anti-radiation chip in a normal hormone implant. Just in case.”
Shepard followed Parasini down the halls to a lower section of the complex, where things were in mildly better repair, if more worn from use. She was shown to a set of rooms comparable to a middle-class housing unit on any number of colonies— it was easily three times the largest space Shepard had ever been able to call her own. It was also fully furnished, with any number of ordinary knick-knacks and decorative items strewn about. Training told her it was all useless and extraneous. The woman in her rather liked the symmetry whoever had decorated had kept in mind. She picked up a vase, a poorly painted imitation of something oriental, and raised an eyebrow at the other woman.

“Get used to being comfortable,” Parasini told her. “These things are yours. You have possessions, now. Part of making this ruse believable is having it actually be real— you can’t be a woman who’s lost everything if you never had anything to begin with.”

“I have things,” Shepard countered, defensively. Parasini snorted, eyes going to a footlocker by the couch. Shepard spied it, and winced. It was hers—everything she owned, aside from the hardsuit she wore now, was within it. She didn’t bother questioning how it had gotten there. “Fine, I see your point.” She frowned at the vase. “This really is ugly, though.”

“Pretend it was a gift from a boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?”

Parasini was already pulling out another OSD. “Your cover story. Read it. Get changed. Get familiar with your apartment. I’ll be back in two hours, then we’ll go get your implant replaced.” She went to the door, and over her shoulder she called, “See you later, Kastanie.”

The name was almost like a physical blow. She hadn’t heard it used separated from her last name, and a comma, since her family had been incinerated on a frigate damaged in a Batarian raider skirmish when she’d been fifteen. There was no real angst associated with the name, despite that— it was that she just simply didn’t like the name.

Still, she understood the psychology Parasini was applying. ‘Shepard’ was a ranking N7 officer of the Alliance Naval Marines. ‘Kastanie’ was an ordinary girl, orphaned along with several thousands of other boys and girls in this war.

Ordinary or not, some habits died hard, and Shepard found herself obeying Parasini’s instructions to the letter. She crossed the living room to where a lumagel screen was adhered to the wall, inserting the OSD card into it rather than her omnitool so she could read the slowly scrolling text while removing her armor. The last time she’d needed to look at her armor to remove it had been
her second week of basic training.

Out of habit as much as common sense, Shepard didn’t just read the dossier on her cover story; she memorized it. And there was a lot to memorize. She had to wonder at how much of this was necessary…she had a hard time imagining that the turians allowed their slaves -or ‘quellen’ apparently- to retain much of their identity. Were they really going to ask her what her grades were like in high school? Would they care that she was supposedly captain of the debate team?

Other things, like her name, her family affiliations, her college work and current job placement seemed potentially important. It was all easy enough to remember, since most of it was along the same lines as the truth. It was a standard way of thinking, really. Hide a nugget of truth buried in falsehoods that were only slightly false. Keep lies as close to reality as possible, and it was easier to remember the lie under stress. As it was, Shepard didn’t think she’d have an issue remembering that she was one Kristin Lambert, in her early thirties (which was considered younger than it had once been, given that medical advancements had almost doubled the average human lifespan.), with a husband lost in the line of duty, two children taken by the colonial pox, a father settled into a retirement home on Earth. One weak familial tie to keep her from seeming too good to be true.

She was also a corporate consultant for industrial grade chemical and bio-hazard containment, with degrees in advanced chemistry and physics. That part made her grin. Her alter ego could make bombs as well as she could, apparently. It would also paint her as insanely intelligent, without being a threat. You could give a prisoner all the knowledge of explosive yield and fertilizer you wanted- didn’t do them much good while locked in a shipping crate.

She finished removing her armor, transferred the OSD back to her omnitool, and continued reading as she stowed the armor on the shelves in the closet, which was thankfully right next to the bed for easy access. Play-acting as a normal person or not, some things were too deeply ingrained. With one eye on the dossier, she traded her underarmor suit for simple brown shirt and tan coveralls, shoving her feet into a pair of leather boots. A mirror caught her eye, and she gave herself a wryly amused grin. Normal woman? Yes. Successful corporate consultant? No way. She ran a hand through her shorn, ear-length dark locks. Parasini had mentioned growing it out. With only two weeks to go, she assumed the woman had stimulants of some kind in mind.

There was something ironic about the fact that Shepard had debunked accusations of stim abuse for years, and now she’d finally be taking some for her hair.

Again and again, Shepard read the file, until every detail was as ingrained in her mind as memories of her own life. By the time Parasini had returned, Shepard had brewed and consumed a few cups of coffee, examined the apartment’s contents and found they weren’t as bad as they could be- even spotted a few things she thought she might actually want to keep once this was all over. The clothes were not among these things. The sturdy, worn-in boots, however, were.
Parasini quizzed her as they made their way to the sparse medbay, a small room barely equipped for day to day occurrences, let alone if any major surgeries arose. The equipment for her implant was ancient, and lacked the anesthetic applicator the newer models boasted. There was, however, a brand new little scanner that, after the medigel had done its job sealing the incision, smoothed out the pucker of what would have been a minor scar.

“We’d rather they have as little reason as possible to examine the implant,” Parasini explained. “A new scar could potentially raise questions.” Shepard nodded in agreement.

As expected, Shepard had also been given stimulants to grow her hair, as well as a protein and keratin supplement to accommodate her body’s impending need for it. In addition, the doc handed her a pill bottle of something Shepard didn’t care to pronounce. When she raised an eyebrow at the doc and was told simply, “For weight gain,” she gifted Parasini with a demanding glower. Which was, of course, met with a wolfish grin.

“Starting today, you’ll take those with every meal, and decrease your work out regime. We want you to still be in shape enough to handle any situation that comes your way, but corporate execs aren’t just scars, muscle, and sinew like you are.” Parasini was already striding out of the room, nose buried in her omnitool as she spoke. Shepard scowled at the unintended insult, and the order to decrease her fitness routine. She went over what she could cut out and still maintain her body’s current limits, and winced. It would be a fine line to straddle, to keep both Parasini and herself happy. It didn’t help that she secretly disagreed- she knew there were plenty of powerhouse women in corporations that were skinnier than she was. Thinking back to Parasini’s earlier encouragement to drop the obedient warrior routine, she went ahead and said as much.

“The goal is to make you as unthreatening as possible. We don’t know how much turians know of our physiology, if they know how to differentiate between a woman who keeps herself fit in company gyms, and a woman whose honed her body into a weapon. In case they can tell the difference, we need to muddle that line. Now,” the woman stopped abruptly, forcing Shepard to come up short behind her or else tackle her. “Your file says you’re fluent in English and Spanish as well as Common. How long did it take you to learn them?”

“Learned the root languages growing up. Common I knew somewhat going into Basic, learned the rest of it on the way up through Basic and AIT.”

“Hm. Well, it’s not like we have a full language to work with, just some basic terms and grammar, not really even enough to communicate effectively.” Parasini turned again, this time to a door, and led the way into a small room that boasted two desks, a table with chairs, a viewing screen that spanned most of the far wall, and a holographic projector. Despite herself, Shepard was curious about the projector. What did Parasini want to show her that couldn’t be just as adequately depicted
Parasini pointed to one of the desks and said, “Yours. Sit, and we’ll begin.”

Apparently, Shepard wasn’t supposed to abandon her ‘yes sir’ attitude entirely. Somewhat amused, she sat and listened while the other woman outlined what they’d be doing eighteen hours a day for the next two weeks.

The viewing screen was for reviewing what media they had of turians, both military and otherwise. They included vids and photos taken from captured or destroyed turian vessels, everything from surprisingly normal family vids to what looked like wedding photos. At least, Shepard wasn’t sure what else the image of two turians standing before a third, all of them in various extraneous garb that looked decidedly ceremonial, could be.

The console at her own desk held a database of all known turian words and their meanings, along with the rudimentary sentence structure and syntax included in the rebel cell datapacket.

The holographic projector? Body language. Most of it had been extrapolated by experts from the same video footage Shepard would be reviewing. The holo would help get a better sense of the postures, mannerisms, and facial expressions. The latter was somewhat of a joke- facial cartilage plating didn’t give a lot to work with.

The rest of what needed to be worked on would be things that couldn’t be learned in a classroom, Parasini told her, and she explained no further. Shepard subdued her curiosity, and set herself to the first task Parasini put before her; memorizing as many turian words and their meanings humanly possible in the next four hours.

The rest of the day was divided into reviewing more footage, studying more examples of turian body language, memorizing key points from the data packet. And throughout it all, Parasini would give the oddest commands. “Slouch- you’re sitting like a metal pole.” Or, “you’re allowed to yawn.” Even, “This is a turian male in full battle-challenge posture. It is scary as hell. Look a little frightened.”

Shepard asked questions throughout the day, including why her cover was of a high-brow businesswoman instead of a colonial farmer. "I'd be much more convincing as a hick," she'd told Parasini.
"True," the agent had replied. "But you'll recall the datapacket mentions most of the quellen placed with high-ranking families are themselves from affluent backgrounds." At this, Parasini had smiled sardonically and added, "Guess we humans don't have a monopoly on vanity and egos afterall."

It was, in many ways, one of the most difficult days she’d had since...well, as long as she could remember. Her entire life had been built around a militaristic structure, but this room, this woman, these lessons, followed no regimen or pattern she could discern. It was frustrating and unnerving in a way that the threat of death had ceased to be after her forth or fifth near-death experience.

And yet, for all that, the fact that it was different, that it was a challenge, had her grinning with grim, determined satisfaction at the end of the day. She bid Parasini a good night hand-in-hand with calling her something that would have made her mother’s ears ring, was rewarded with a remark in kind, and the two women parted ways in the hall outside the ‘classroom’ with the understanding that the next day, things would go exactly the same, and they’d be exchanging the same insults in the same fashion at the same time. It made both of them smile.

Predictably, Shepard had trouble sleeping. While she was mentally exhausted, her body was aching for some sort of physical activity. Running for miles on end, lifting weights for hours upon hours, straining her endurance to the limit? Sure, no problem. Sitting at a desk for over twelve hours? That was a different ballgame.

When sleep did at last find her, her usual unsavory dreams were strewn with images from the holoprojector of turians in anger-stance, battle-stance, protection-stance, accompanied by the rumbling vibrations that was turian laughter. The next day, she woke up in a cold sweat, wondering why the laughter had bothered her more than the nightmares.

Habit had her up at the same time as always, according to the twenty-four hour rotation synced to Earth’s North American Eastern seaboard. Thankfully, this outpost was set to the same time table, so she wouldn’t have to lose sleep or find time to waste. She went for a jog around the complex, nodding to those she saw who didn’t have their noses buried in the glow of datapads or omnitools. She’d lived around enough techs to not be offended when they nearly walked into her, despite the pounding of her feet providing plenty of warning for her approach. She did, however, take note of how many people seemed surprised to see her. An outpost this small, most people would know each other by sight, if not have everyone memorized by name. She’d assumed the staff here had been made aware of her presence and supposed purpose- apparently not.

She sprinted the whole way back to her rooms, diving into the shower for a quick wash while a pot of coffee brewed. She didn’t mind admitting to herself that the coffee was one of the things she was enjoying about this place- it was good stuff. Strong and dark, with a pinch of sugar. The sugar was even real- no manufactured sweeteners. Breakfast was an energy bar she found in the pre-stocked cupboards and the pills the doc had given her the day before, then she dressed in the same dreary coveralls from the previous day and was out the door, pistol and back up nestled at her back and
ankle, respectively. Given that she’d recently navigated her way around an enemy alien vessel without prior knowledge, finding her way back to the classroom was hardly an issue.

Figuring out what Parasini wanted her to do with the child’s toy on her desk, however, was an issue.

“Multitasking,” came the voice from behind her. The footsteps had registered long before Parasini had spoken, so Shepard wasn’t startled when the woman spoke almost directly in her ear. She turned and raised an eyebrow at the consultant.

“Care to clarify?” She asked in a low, dry voice. She motioned to the toy, a box with holes cut into the sides in basic shapes- circles, squares, diamonds, octagons. Beside it sat a pile of blocks in coordinating shapes.

“Your language lesson from the day before will be playing in your audio headset. While it is playing, fit the blocks in the holes.”

“....and the point of this is?”

“When on Palaven you’re not going to be able to sit and stare at the turians and concentrate on what they’re saying. You’ll have to listen while working, translating what you can and inferring the rest based on context and body language.”

It made sense, Shepard thought. Very practical. The toy would not take up much of her concentration, of course, but it would get her used to using part of her brain as a running translator, constantly on, rather than using it intermittently. She began to understand why, out of all the professionals the Alliance could have called on, they’d drafted this woman. No textbook classroom schedules from her.

If Parasini expected disbelief or scoffing, she didn’t get either. Shepard sat at her desk and approached the task with the same manner and mindset that she had tackled everything in life; unquestioning determination. She dedicated exactly as much effort as was required to accomplish her goal, and no more. Nothing wasted, nothing extra. It was how, she believed, she’d managed to do all she had and not burn out. It was all well and good to throw yourself into a task with everything you had, but if that something was no more complicated than walking...

And so it was, six hours later, Shepard was steadily tapping out the translations of the words being
repeated in her ear with one hand, and inserting blocks into holes with her other. Run out of blocks, empty the box, start over. Miss a translation, fix the correction in her mind, move on. Mistakes were infrequent, and never the same one twice. If Parasini was impressed, she gave no more sign of it than she had the day before.

The other twelve hours of her day consisted of more of the same from the day before; a new set of known turian terms to memorize, more practice with grammar and syntax, more studying of turian postures and body language. The latter was proving easier to grasp than the language. Without the highly mobile facial muscles of humans, turian body language was much more pronounced.

That night when she dreamed, she was running from humans with torches and pitchforks. When she caught her reflection in the dark window of a very out of place hovercar, avian eyes beneath a long fringe and a toothy grin greeted her. When she woke up, she had to resist the urge to touch her hair and teeth to make sure they were all unchanged.

Shepard's days continued in much the same manner. Language, body and verbal. History, as much as they knew. Corporate hierarchys, even. Parasini seemed to delight in throwing tasks at Shepard she knew the Commander would likely think frivolous, at least initially. She seemed to draw satisfaction from watching her pupil balk, then think about it and eventually nod in agreement with Parasini's unusual thinking.

On day ten, though, Shepard drew the line at cosmetics.

"If by chance I end up some turian bitch's...handmaiden, I seriously doubt their girly....stuff is the same as ours." Shepard had said while eyeing the array of powders, cremes, brushes and pencils on her desk with avid distaste.

"Are you willing to bet your life on that, Kristin?" The use of her pseudonym had stopped making Shepard twitch the day after Parasini started using it.

The answer, of course, was no. And that was how Shepard, badass extraordinaire, ended up spending the next three hours fumbling with unfamiliar sundries and applicators. In the end, she managed to not stab herself in the eye and look like something not quite a whore, or even a clown. More like an old lady who'd simply begun to go blind. Or at least colorblind.

"Hand the woman a gun, and she'll take out half a platoon," Parasini had muttered in amusement. "But God forbid the turians come at her with an eyelash curler..."

Shepard's response had been a powder-loaded puff...thing launched at the back of the other
woman's head. It exploded in a pleasingly messy cloud of pink residue, coating Parasini’s formerly pristine black suit.

Shepard wasn’t all that surprised when a minimum standard of cosmetic application was added to her morning regime, per Parasini’s instructions. Vengeful harpy.

Shepard’s face wasn’t the only thing taking on changes. The adjustments to her physical routine were showing already, aided by the diet and supplements. Sharp angles softened, and she traded muscle mass for a thin layer of body fat. She even got a chest. She was, however, careful to maintain her core strength and agility.

Her hair was longer, too, enough for a stubby braid. It was a daily struggle to not give into temptation and take a razor to her scalp. Things weren’t improved at all when Parasini had her take gene mod treatments to alter the melanin in her hair follicles. Shepard was now a platinum blonde.

The grubby, but comfortable overalls and boots from the first day had disappeared long ago. Now, she had her choice of a suit, jeans and blouse, or a dress. Or naked. Shepard had considered the latter numerous times. At least Parasini hadn’t tried to restrict her footwear to heels. Instead, Shepard now had a lovely selection of flats, sandals, and stylish, shiny boots. Grouped together with the apartment, the cosmetics, the weight gain, the hair growth... the clothing was just another layer of what Shepard recognized as an extremely unorthodox method of immersion training. Immersion training that was, admittedly, incomplete. Without an actual turian civilization readily handy for Shepard to jump into, the continuing stream of vids, audio files, and images would have to suffice.

Parasini, Shepard was learning, never settled for ‘sufficing.’ And so it came as no real surprise when on day thirteen of Shepard’s personal little hell, she found herself on the shadowed side of an old-school one-way mirror. On the other side...

“Holy fucking shit,” the marine swore, eyes blinking and going wide. It wasn’t often Shepard was caught off guard- but this...she wasn’t offguard. She was turned around with her ass in the air while asleep. “Please, someone, for the love of God, tell me what the hell he’s doing here?” She rounded on Anderson, who had arrived that morning for an unexpectedly pleasant breakfast, a day earlier than Shepard had expected him. Now she knew why the man was early- he’d brought her a present, in the shape of a visibly furious turian with familiar blue markings.

“Last leg of your training.” Parasini came up beside her, looking absolutely divine in a mauve suit, tailored to perfection. Shepard wondered if it had been the woman’s goal to get her to look that pristine in business attire. Probably, she conceded, and as she glanced at her own shadowy reflection in the one-way mirror, admitted to herself Parasini hadn’t exactly failed. Shoulder-length hair was swept into a neat tail, not a strand out of place. Minimal cosmetics emphasised her
features in a way meant to be intimidating. A simple suit of black and white brought her natural air of no-nonsense into sharp relief. A nice pair of wedges would have completed the look, Parasini had said that morning. Shepard had snorted and marched away in the simplest black boots her wardrobe was permitted to contain.

“We’ve yet to get much out of him. Refuses to speak anything but turian, and our VI translators aren’t getting much out of what he is saying.” Anderson was regarding the captive through the glass. The one-way aspect didn’t seem to fool the turian; he was glowering directly at them. He was heavily chained to a chair bolted to the cement floor, a table not far away from him also bolted in place. A second chair, not bolted, was on the other side.

“He’ll recognize me,” Shepard warned.

“Doubtful, since he’s only seen you once, through a visor, and most turians have no easier time telling us apart than we do them.” Anderson looked at her now, and blinked. He’d done that every time he’d looked at her today. Shepard guessed Parasini’s two weeks of training had done a more thorough job than even he would have projected. “And hell, Shepard, if I saw you on the street even I might not recognize you.”

“I’m telling you, sir,” Shepard shook her head slightly before staring at the turian. “He will recognize me.”

“Might be beneficial that way,” Parasini said thoughtfully. “It would be something he’d not expect.” She tapped a finger against her chin then continued, “Either way, this is essential. We needed a real life turian for you to test your training on. Language, body language, inference...all of it. We’ll be recording everything.” She waved Shepard to the door, and with a suppressed sigh, Shepard shook her head again and marched on through.

The turian’s dark blue avian eyes snapped to her the moment she was in sight. She didn’t meet his gaze as she strode to the other side of the table from him, remembering the cultural difference- for a human, direct eye contact meant a challenge, or honesty. For a turian it was common courtesy. Looking away said you considered the person unimportant, boring. She looked at the table, the chairs, the datapad in her hands, the ‘mirror,’ the cameras high the corners- anything but him. Then, last of all, she slowly dragged her gaze to lazily meet his. Any doubt she’d had about recognizing this particular turian evaporated. For a moment they were both back aboard the Lincoln-

In clear, unaccented Common he said, “Commander Shepard.”
She grinned at him, inexplicably pleased that he did recognize her. Not wanting to disappoint, she answered, as clear as she could manage in the particular turian dialect she’d been studying, “Captain Vakarian. We have some questions for you.”
Chapter 3

The tall ship moved how slowly on
With me and hundreds more,
That thought not then of wanderings,
But of unwhispered, longed-for things,
Familiar things of home.

-‘Homecoming’ by John Freeman

Chapter Three

Garrus

Within thirty-two hours -a standard cycle on the Citadel- of their initial conversation, Barla Von sent Garrus a triple-encrypted data packet. The contents proceeded to be nothing short of worrisome. The information was simple- Nomos Vakarian had disappeared following his rendezvous with the turian military freighter Novarium, after a failed mission to track and capture a suspicious human vessel. A recon scout had found nothing but debris when sent to investigate, both ships gone save for the broken-off pieces left to drift.

Then, two days after that, a message from the group of humans tentatively recognized as serving in an ambassadorial capacity. They’d wanted to trade Captain Nomos Vakarian for a few key human prisoners...as well as some seemingly insignificant ones. Von had gained a copy of the ransom list, as well as brief dossiers on each one. Garrus himself had found the list odd. Some were obvious-high ranking military personnel taken prisoner rather than executed, or captured quellen that the humans claimed were family of political persons. But then some... A farmer. A college computer tech. A housewife. And no explanation given as to why these persons were considered valuable enough to trade the single high-profile prisoner the Alliance had managed to capture alive in years.
The Heirarchy's response had been that it would take awhile to get the persons on the list together, and then of course they would need to arrange for a neutral exchange location, security measures on both sides would need to be put forth and examined by the opposite parties... None of the stall tactics were overt, only noticeable to Garrus by virtue of the fact that he hadn't been raised as the son of two political figures without picking up certain nuances.

News of the infamous captain’s capture reached Garrus’ supervisor at C-Sec headquarters the same day Garrus himself received the confusing list from Barla Von. As soon as Garrus returned in the early afternoon from particularly frustrating confrontation with an almost aggressively evangelistic hanar, Executor Pallin summoned the younger Vakarian to his office, and didn’t waste time with niceties.

“Will you be able to do your job?” The older turian asked without preamble. He had no way of knowing that Garrus’ relationship with his father was less than loving.

“It won’t be a problem.” No ‘sir,’ to end the statement. Much as Pallin tried to pretend otherwise, C-Sec wasn’t the military. One of the reasons Garrus had been willing to join- military enough to satisfy his father, but not so much that Garrus would end up blowing his own brains out with frustration. At least, that had been the idea. Lately, frustration and aggravation had been his companion day and night. He recalled the hanar’s insistence that Garrus ‘see the light of the Enkindlers’ before it was ‘too late,’ and had to exert some effort to keep his brow-ridge from twitching.

Pallin had given a curt nod, “See that it stays that way.” Hearing it as a dismissal, Garrus turned to leave and was stopped when Pallin spoke again. “For what it’s worth, Vakarian, your father is a good turian. Doesn’t deserve to be in the hands of those pyjak-fuckers. Hope things turn out all right.” That, apparently, was the real dismissal- Pallin had already returned to skimming a datapad on his desk. Without responding, Garrus left the office.

For some reason, Garrus couldn’t help but think of Pallin’s comment about pyjaks, and the two young females he’d helped earlier that week. Something about it made his crop clench, and he ended up skipping lunch to finish up a few reports that were late on their deadlines.

To round out an already disgruntling day, Garrus returned home to find two messages flagged as urgently important. An argument with himself about leaving them ended with him opening the things with as much trepidation as exercised by a bomb tech. The first was from the Senatorial Secretary, notifying him that given his father’s predicament, Garrus’ presence would be required at the next Senate Hearing. There was a date, and even an itinerary of travel arrangements. Since Garrus was expected to fulfill his father’s place, he apparently was also privy to the same treatment. Families with Seats on the Imperial Senate were well-treated indeed, and Vakarian was a name that had rung out in the Senate Arena for hundreds of years.
The second letter was slightly more pleasant. Solanna, his elder sister and his only immediate family member he still contemplated with something approaching affection, was contacting him to let him know that his mother was getting worse, and she recommended coming home soon to see her before the aging matriarch didn’t recognize him anymore. He wondered if Solanna knew about their father, and if she’d told their mother. He hoped she hadn’t... Varais Vakarian wouldn’t have been able to handle the information last time he’d seen her, and if she’d gotten worse...

With a rumbling in his chest that equated a sigh in most other species, Garrus returned to the Secretary’s itinerary, and filled in his acknowledgement and acceptance, and forwarded a copy to the department at C-Sec that handled leave. He had quite a bit saved up anyway... and if it was short notice, he’d love to see them argue with the Imperial Senate about adequate warning.

A week after receiving the news of his father's capture Garrus was boarding a first-class transport to Palaven. Actually, it was more like a private transport. There were three suites aboard, but Garrus was the only passenger. The young asari who showed him to his berth made a point of mentioning this, so he would be sure to not hesitate to ask anything of her. *Anything.*

Between the obvious come-on, the comfortable accommodations, and looking forward to going home despite the issues awaiting, the trip was unexpectedly pleasant. His enjoyment was tempered only by a self-imposed assignment; reviewing the political climate of Palaven. He thought it a prudent use of his time, since he was about to throw himself in the middle of a maelstrom. Didn't mean he even remotely enjoyed it, of course. More than once he thought of taking the asari up on her not-so-subtle offer.... It had been awhile, and he wasn't looking forward to Solanna's guaranteed attempts to meddle with his marital status.

Restraint won out, and he ended up disembarking from the vessel without having so much as glanced at the gaps in the asari’s uniform that bared her waist to anyone who cared to look. This restraint was aided by a thought that had crossed Garrus’ mind about halfway through the voyage—was his father treated to the same... *perks* when he was shuttled to and from Palaven for political summits? He had an image in his mind of his father being an upright, perfect turian, loyal and honorable. But his mother hadn’t been herself in a very, very long time and Nomos was still considered a vital example of turian strength and-

The thought had ended right about there. No matter how many years Garrus gained, thinking of his parents in *that way* would never cease to be taboo. He wondered if it was just a turian thing. Certainly asari didn’t seem to be as prudish about sexual matters, and the salarians didn’t really have a sex drive at all. Batarians had all sorts of rules and restrictions on what constituted ‘appropriate’ sexual relations, and frankly Garrus had no idea how the volus reproduced, nor did he want to. Quarian fornication was another matter *entirely*, from what little he knew, one that involved numerous logistical headaches...and antibacterial baths.
Suffice to say, any inclination Garrus had possessed at the beginning of the trip for ‘relief’ was sufficiently quenched by the time his analytical mind had finished tallying what little he knew of the reproduction habits of the other Citadel species. Sometimes, having a brain that went past the basic instincts of eat, fight, sex, sleep, repeat was a bitch. Certainly took the fun out of a number of scenarios.

Thankfully, the hustle and bustle of Palaven’s main orbital station distracted him adequately. Limited space on the ground meant the station bore the brunt of the necessary security checkpoints, and that meant the station was crowded. He’d tipped his asari attendant, and only had moments to wonder if he’d tipped too much or too little before he was swallowed by the cacophony that was an overburdened transport station. Over the course of several hours, he was shuffled through two decontainment chambers, then through customs, then through another terminal that eventually found him wedged between a turian and a volus on another transport bound for the Palaven capitol.

Despite windows being an admittedly dangerous structural weakness on spacefaring vessels, the shuttle nonetheless boasted a few small portholes filled with a transparent compound nearly a foot thick. One was even near enough to Garrus for him to get a good view of the tropical planet below. A delicate balance of higher-than-average radiation and resilient plantlife had developed over the eons to create one of the most widely recognized galactic marvels, an example of ‘the exception that proved the rule.’ That rule being, of course, that living things tended to not get along with radiation.

Garrus wasn’t a botanist or geophysicist. He just enjoyed the sight of the lush greenery that enveloped his planet. Only one ocean, the rest of the planet’s water held in a dense canopy of clouds that was pushed around the globe by intense winds. Thunderstorms were a weekly, if not daily occurrence. A few patches of high ground served as the closest thing to deserts Palaven had ever known, high enough to be out of the reach of the swampland, not quite high enough to get regularly doused in high-altitude fog, but at just the right height to be scour ed by the planet’s infamous windstorms.

And at every level, even with the dense population and modern cultivation, predators. Most were restricted to regions designated as reservations, but even the ‘pests’ of the cities could be an issue if ignored. Palaven was a beautiful planet, but a dangerous one.

The view of green and white clarified as the shuttle drew near the groundport, and vistas of dense jungles and violent cloud formations gave way to glistening, towering buildings, interspersed with aged white domes. The lines between the ancient and the new parts of Palaven’s capitol were muddled, metallic skyscrapers shadowing classic villas. It served as a stark reminder of where they had come from, and where they were now, for anyone who cared to look.

And Garrus certainly looked. It had been a long time since he’d been home, not since the family
celebration of his graduation from the turian military training academy. He had forgotten what it was like to look at buildings bound by the laws of existing physics, rather than structures that seemed to have no beginning and no end, as on the Citadel. In one of the frequent times in his life where he’d entertained the notion of deviating from his father’s plan for him, Garrus had thought he might enjoy being an architect. He certainly thought he could do a better job designing new buildings that complimented the old.

He tried putting old almost-regrets aside in favor of enjoying the view, but when they swung low over the Senate Arena building, Garrus’ assiduous mind insisted on going over what he’d reviewed on the transport. The political structure was the same as it had been since the Unification Wars had ended over fifteen hundred years previous. Each colony had it’s own elected Conclave, the number of members dictated by the population of the colony. Once every standard Palaven year, at least one of those Conclave members were sent to the Senatorial Hearing. While only one had an actual vote, it wasn’t uncommon for up to half of a colony’s Conclave to attend a Hearing. Since they were usually held on Palaven, naturally all of Palaven’s own Conclave attended.

There were a few remnants from the days of a solely Hierarchical government, one of them being that most Conclave seats were kept in the family. But those families earned those seats. If a seat-holding family became unworthy, or dishonored the trust of their people, they lost the seat, pure and simple. Only one family in history had lost a seat and then regained it- Garrus’ own, in fact.

It was one of the reasons, Garrus had decided long ago, that Nomos Vakarian was the way he was. Garrus’ and Solanna's great-great grandmother had so greatly shamed the Vakarian name that they had been excused from the Senatorial Arena, theoretically forever. Two generations later, Garrus’ grandfather won back their family's seat -and their place in the modern turian 'nobility.' Knowing all that made Nomos' aggressive adherence to turian dogma understandable, if not particularly endearing. The memories of politicians were long, and there were still many who believed that redeemed or no, the Vakarian family had no place in the Arena.

In a rare indulgence in cowardice, Garrus did not immediately head for his family's estate at the edge of the city, instead opting to have his things sent ahead of him while he spent a few hours investigating his childhood haunts. Solanna would be irate, no doubt, but it wouldn't be the first time his elder sister had been annoyed with him. Beside, he told himself he’d get her something nice while he was in the city. Citadel Security Investigator's pay certainly wasn't shabby, but since he was here on family matters he had no qualms about accessing family funds, so 'nice' could be very nice indeed.

Garrus decided to kill two rodents with one arrow, and took an aircar to a slightly seedier section of the city. Per Garrus' instructions, the driver let him out a few blocks from his destination. He couldn't help but grin as he walked the familiar streets, just as dilapidated as he remembered. Despite that, he was treated to courteous greetings by everyone he passed. Only once did he glimpse a shady exchange at a shadowed corner, and he had to restrain his cop impulse. Not his turf. He'd report what he saw later to ease his conscience, even if he knew that his testimony would be barely a drop in the ocean.
Less than twenty minutes after he'd begun his trek Garrus came upon his destination; an old building of bleached stone juxtaposed with the modern, circular maglock doors set at the top of a short flight of wide, clean-swept steps. The doors did as much to attract the attention of thieves as they did to dissuade them. The mechanisms were not old fashioned tumblers, or even DNA encoded, things that could be bypassed. Rather, magnets strong enough to crush a full adult elcor kept the doors sealed. It would be easier - though only marginally- to go through the three-foot thick stone walls. With defenses like that in a part of the city that was built mostly upon prefab structures, Oraka's Imporium of Rarities screamed of being stuffed with valuables.

Garrus entered, and his mandibles fluttered in a hint of a grin. He'd always thought that if any hooligans broke in, he'd want to be there to see the looks on their faces when they first beheld not jewelry or tech, but furniture. Statues, decorations, sculptures. The wide showroom floor was well lit, the pieces arranged neatly. Many didn't even have tags, and Garrus knew that the sale of any one item would keep the proptrietor taken care of for at least a month.

"Garrus!" The voice that called his name sounded pleased, even through the low hum that made the voices of the elderly sometimes difficult to understand. Garrus turned to greet the old turian, offering his forearm to clasp. Old he may be, but feeble or weak would never be words used to describe General Septimus Oraka. He gripped Garrus' forearm with enough strength to tell Garrus that no matter that the turian was a decade older since last he'd seen him, Septimus could likely still toss him out on his ass.

"Thought you said you'd never set foot back on this miserable rock, boy."

Garrus suppressed a wince, a flicker of his eyelids. Trust the retired General to remember the words of a brash youth.

"Yes, well, the universe has a way of making you...rethink things. Such as, what constitutes 'miserable.'" His tone was dry, and Septimus snorted in mild amusement. He turned, hooking a claw in Garrus direction as he turned and headed into the back of the shop, where Garrus was shown to an spacious office.

"Sit," came the command, and Garrus sat as quickly as if he were still in military training. Septimus had that effect. He also had the ability to make it known what he wanted without saying a thing. Now, he turned and sat across from Garrus on the other side of a painfully neat desk. The terminal was open to a finance spreadsheet, and Garrus spied a healthy number near the bottom. Septimus closed it, and leaned forward as he gave Garrus a direct, expectant stare. Garrus needed no more prompting than that. With Septimus maintaining polite, attentive eye contact, Garrus filled in his old mentor on his doings since last they'd spoken, which hadn't been much more than a cursory condolence call when the general's wife had passed. The murder of Sha'ira, an asari and former consort of considerable note, had left it's mark on the noble turian. As Garrus recounted his gradual climb through the ranks of C-Sec, his frustration with the political restraints, the laws that
did more to hinder than help, he saw a portion of the turian's old self emerge.

"All laws are there to help, boy," Septimus had replied. "It's the corrupt people twisting them to uses they weren't intended for that hinders. There will always be those that insist the letter of the law supersedes the spirit of the law. That's when a dying old lady can be sued for all she owns for tripping someone with her cane."

It was not long before information and updates gave way to stories and jokes. Despite their ages, they were alike in other ways. Garrus thought that if he managed to reign in his radical tendencies, he might end up like Septimus. The prospect was not an undesirable one.

Eventually, Garrus noted the time and made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a groan. Septimus guessed the reason easily enough. "Solanna?"

"Will tear my mandibles off herself when I get to the villa." He stood when Septimus did.

"Then you'll be needing something to appease her. Come, boy." Garrus followed the silvered male out of the office and into the shop's storage room. "I put this aside when I heard you were coming home."

Garrus didn't bother asking how the general knew he was coming when he'd hardly told anyone beyond Solanna. "Not sure if I'm glad or dismayed my sister and I are this predictable."

"Be glad," was the only response, and no further explanation came with it. Garrus only shook his head; Septimus had stopped in front of two large pillars draped in tarps. When the tarps were pulled aside, Garrus sucked in a breath.

"Shouldn't these be in a museum somewhere?"

"It's actually one piece," Septimus corrected. "Or at least it's meant to be. Put together, it's too tall to fit in here." He rolled his shoulders forward in a turian shrug. "As for being in a museum, it was. Museum ran out of room, had to make space for newer pieces. They're popular with the high families lately, putting big Prothean artifacts like this in their gardens or somewhere else ostentatious." He and Garrus exchanged glances, and Garrus snorted.

"You're right, she'll love it."
They made arrangements to have it delivered to the Vakarian estate the next day, after Garrus had transferred a healthy sum from his family's accounts. He picked up a set of antique sorv-fringe decorations for females as well. The Protheon statue was all well and good, but it would be better to not show up empty handed. A few trinkets for his nephews joined the sorv before Garrus and Septimus bid their farewells.

Outside was dark, the stars blotted out by a building well of stormclouds. The only light came from the handful of streetlights that weren't smashed. In short order Garrus spotted at least three adolescents who were eyeing him. They could have been merely bored. Even if they weren't, Garrus wasn't in armor, and carried only his sidearm and a pair of kappa knives. He could handle himself just fine, if it came to that, but he'd really rather not show up at the front door wearing bloodstains. In the end, Garrus opted to call another cab. By the time it had arrived, though, the adolescents—along with everyone else—had been chased inside by a thunderous clap, accompanied by a brilliant spread of lightning that filled the sky.

The cab deposited him in front of a pair of extravagant gates in half the time he expected. No one wanted to be caught outside during a Palaven thunderstorm.

Packages held before him like a shield, Garrus approached the gate and tapped a code into a pad, then made his way through the gates and up the long, manicured path lined with artful stones and stubby trees. He pretended not to see the pair of shadows that watched his approach. He knew there were more than the two. Assuming his mother and Solanna hadn't undone his father’s instructions for security, there were at least a dozen guards patrolling the grounds. Twelve sentries was considered light security by the standards of many Senate families. One he knew of kept an entire barracks on his lands. Most families employed half what the Vakarians did...then again, most other families didn't have extremists convinced his family deserved to die for daring to reclaim a seat in the Arena.

Lit by lamps and set up on a hill, the silhouette of the villa rose above him. It was mostly one floor, with the two rear corners boasting 'towers' that had a second level each and a small loft. He'd spent considerable hours as a child hiding in those small, dusty rooms. Sometimes Solanna had been with him. Sometimes they'd been stifling their laughter, other times they'd been quaking in fear of reprisal from some prank gone awry. Looking at those towers, Garrus finally felt the cloak of his C-Sec self, the turian who mostly did what he pleased for no one but himself, fall away. He suppressed a rumbling sigh—it would have happened sooner or later, now that he was home. He may have found a way to escape the worst of it, but duty and accountability were still traits he held in high importance.

He let loose a tired noise that had been rising behind his teeth as he neared the side entrance near the kitchens and saw that the wall there was flat. Solanna had, apparently talked Meda into letting her replace the very, very old stone oven. The wall that the antique oven had once extended from was now sans an oven, and re-plastered. When Garrus stepped inside, he saw the new baking unit,
sleek and metallic. Meda probably hated it.... He wondered how Solanna had talked the stubborn old turian matriarch into the upgrade. For a moment, he wondered if the family cook may have passed- but no, Solanna would have told him. She might not be the same troublemaker he'd worshipped and emulated as a child, but she was still possessed of one of the most generous spirits Garrus had ever encountered. She would not have neglected to tell him if Meda had passed to the spirits.

With that in mind, Garrus his way through the quiet halls, heading for the central courtyard. The lights were dim, since most of the staff as well as his mother and nephews would all be asleep. He noted the things that had changed, and the things that hadn't as a matter of habit as well as genuine curiosity. Signs that Solanna had taken over active management of the household were obvious in the decor, in the practical way things were arranged. Overall, he liked it. He'd have to tell her so. The lack of clutter he remembered from his childhood was welcome, as well- or so his analytical, tactical mind told him.

Garrus found his elder sister exactly where he knew he would; sitting beneath one of the trees ringing the open, grassy expanse that filled the villa's central courtyard. The bench she sat upon had once been in one of the Imperial gardens. The flowers that grew at her feet were imported, and would die without the thick walls and the invisible overhead barrier-curtain keeping the radiation at bay. The barrier-curtain had been astronomically expensive, and his mother had absolutely refused to budge on the matter.

"My children will see the sky the moment their eyes open," she had told their father, according to Meda. "When we have plenty in the way of money and technology, there is no reason to hide our children from the world for so long." She had been speaking, of course, of the practice of keeping newborn turian children sheltered until their bodies and eyes adjusted to being outside the protection of the womb. Two weeks before they could open their eyes, sometimes up to a year before their carapace hardened enough to protect them from the planet's natural radiation levels. That year could be shortened with medical intervention, but many opted to wait. Varais Vakarian has refused to choose between either option- thus, the barrier-curtain.

Watching his sister, Garrus was struck with how lucky they were. Wealth, intelligence, good families, careers. Even if Garrus more often than not wished his father into dark space, that didn't change the fact that on most points, Nomos Vakarian was a good father, and Varais was a mother to match. One of these days, he'd have to tell them both as much.

"Hey, Lanna." Garrus stepped off the tiled floor and onto the grass. "I'm sorry I'm late. I took a tour of the city... It’s been awhile, just wanted to mire in nostalgia for a bit." No response. "Stopped by Septimus' place, got you and the boys some things..." He trailed off. His cop-sense was telling him something was wrong. Normal senses were telling him the same thing. Solanna's vitallia, the sense of her presence, was unsteady. He stepped forward, put a hand on Solanna's shoulder. "Lanna?"
At the sound of his apprehensive voice, Solanna began to shake slightly. Under his palm and through the fine fabric of her clothing, he felt her begin to hum gently with unmistakable grief. Instantly he was in front of her, crouching down with his knees turned out. She was shaking her head, delicate mandibles fluttering in distress.

"What-

"She's passed, Garrus. Early this morning. I... I'm so sorry. I forgot you were even coming, I... Oh, mother would be furious with me..." Her words dissolved into unintelligible trills and gasps, and when she fell forward off the bench and into his arms, it was all he could do to fight off the shock and catch her without toppling over.

His mind raced to catch up with the last few moments. He’d been spun in a complete one’e eighty, and the shock of it had his mandibles flared wide, jaw dropped, eyes fully dilated as he gasped and tried to absorb his sister’s words. His mother was dead. The woman he'd just been thinking of, of how he needed to tell her that he appreciated her....she was gone, and he’d been out wasting time and avoiding his family.

Garrus threw his head back and roared.

Shepard

The fact that Captain Vakarian refused to speak with anyone other than Shepard had quickly become a logistical issue as well as an annoyance to Shepard. Her two weeks of prep became three before orders came down to figure something out; Shepard got the sense that there was some window of opportunity that they were close to missing. Whether that window concerned her or the captain, she had no idea.

She also had no idea why the turian captain would only eat or speak in her presence, especially since he was never the one to begin the few conversations that took place. For the most part he sat, staring at her. Or else meditated, as far as she could tell. Once they got him to eat, that chore took bare minutes, since the meals were never large. Either by miracle or design, the Alliance had come by a cache of turian military supplies, that had included boxes of rations. The brown, slightly sticky bars wrapped in something similar to cellophane would meet the nutritional requirements of turians and humans, theoretically indefinitely, but they didn’t look particularly appetising.
Shepard had taken to simply showing up at the captive’s cell each morning, rather than waiting for the scientists to -again- call for her. They were insistent on getting the captain to eat and keep fit, since they weren’t going to get any more out of his mind than they already had -which had been scant to begin with- they were determined to glean every scrap of information they could from studying his physiology. He wasn’t the first live turian captive, of course, nor would he be the last, but every round of tests showed something new, the scientists claimed- even if that something new was more proof that this or that was consistent to all turians, not just the ones they’d gotten their hands on.

Captain Vakarian bore it all with a quiet sort of aloofness that to Shepard almost said, ‘Go ahead, run your little tests. If our positions were reversed, I would not be as nice.’ It made Shepard wonder if the turians had done the same- were doing the same. How many captured humans, quelen, were not in fields or mines or houses, but in labs? The thought made her stomach clench, and every time she thought about it she forced herself to watch the scientists jab another needle into another long, alien limb. And if the lab techs and doctors and scientists swarming their captive were clinical and cold, then at least they weren’t unnecessarily demeaning or cruel. Shepard had made the mistake, once, of mentioning this within earshot of one of the techs assigned to the team. He’d been wearing a white coat with a black and orange logo on his sleeve, one Shepard wasn’t familiar with. He’d blinked at her and said, “Of course not, we got those tests out of the way years ago.”

Despite all Shepard had seen and done, his voice still made her shiver days later when she recalled the exchange.

Then Anderson had returned from a briefing with orders from on high that they were done wasting time. The teams of scientists had reported that they’d likely gotten all they could out of Vakarian, so it didn’t much matter if Shepard was around to get him to talk or cooperate. Another two days, and the two adversaries would go their separate ways.

On the morning that Shepard was scheduled to depart for an undisclosed location, she realized not knowing what was going to happen to the old captain bothered her more than it should have. The fact that it even occurred to her upon waking to wonder where he was being taken, was more than she would have contemplated even a few months ago. In her frustration she ran harder and faster than she usually did, and felt the strain in muscles she’d let get lax over the past month. She turned the water in the shower up too hot, and scrubbed too hard... She tore two pairs of pantyhose before deciding to go without, whatever Parasini’s instructions had said.

Even though they hadn't called her, Shepard knew the team of doctors and scientists would still be in the room beside the holding cells, the one they'd converted to a temporary lab. She debated on informing them of her intentions, but decided there was little point. This time, she was here for her own questions. Briefly she'd wondered why her most pressing inquiry hadn't already been asked- it stood out to her like a beacon. She'd held her tongue, since she'd reasoned that they -the team- knew what they were doing. They could have asked when she hadn't been present. She told herself there were tactical reasons she should have the answer she wanted, but really she knew that perhaps Parasini's training had taken too well- she simply couldn't restrain her curiosity, that trait that had
gotten her into so much trouble, that she'd worked so hard to keep contained. Now she was brimming with the need to know.

The guard posted outside the cell saluted despite the lack of a uniform. She knew that special orders or no, many on-base personnel had issues grasping the idea of an officer on duty, but out of uniform, and on base. Thankfully, Goldman wasn't one of them. He gave her a small nod, failing at his attempt to restrain a grin. She shook her head at him, and dismissed him. To his credit, he hesitated only slightly before stating his objection.

"Noted," she told him, trying not to be overly short with her tone. She'd shared a few drinks with him and a pair of his friends from engineering, and he was a good guy. "He's chained with titanium, and I'm armed." She lifted her blazer out of the way to show the subsized pistol. He knew her well enough to know that there was more than the one sidearm.

With a sigh he keyed open the door. "I'll be down the hall."

Inside, the captain looked up from where his chin had been tucked down into his cowl, his back against the wall. The gaze he pinned her with reminded her very suddenly and strongly of her father, when he'd look at her and know she'd done something, or was planning something, but had no proof. Shepard sucked in a breath and swept her mind clear of such memories.

A few taps at her omnitool, and the cameras high in all four corners of the room gave off a soft hiss as they powered down. The turian's head tilted slightly- curiosity. But his mandibles were shut tightly against his jaw; apprehension.

From the back pocket of her slacks she pulled out another one of those nasty umino bars, and tossed it more or less into his lap.

"Feeding time?" he inquired in turian, in a tone she'd learned was sardonic, or close to it. At some point he'd decided that helping her learn turian was a bad idea, and stuck like a barnacle to what little Common he knew. Which, compared to a week ago, was greatly improved. So it puzzled her as to why he'd switch back now.

Slowly she replied, "No. You are fed little. This is..." she paused. "Payment."

"Dare I ask what for?" Thankfully, her understanding of turian was better than her grasp of speaking it. With the limited mobility his manacled hands afforded him, he tore open the bar and
bit off half of it.

"Answers," she replied.

"Your sartoviem have asked many questions through you already." He devoured the other half of the bar. She word she didn't understand, sartuvium, she guessed was 'scientist' or 'doctor.' Perhaps 'torturer' given his perspective.

She was shaking her head. "This question, it's answer is for me, not sartuvium."

He regarded her for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision. He absently stuck the empty wrapper into a pocket of his loose slacks, and stood. Turians were tall, taller than most humans, and Shepard was of average height for a woman. Nomos, she already knew, was tall even for a turian. If he hadn’t been clear across the room, she would have had to look very definitely up.

He moved, fast, coming up just short of pulling the cables connected to his ankle manacles taut. Shepard didn’t flinch. He was close enough now that she did need to look up, although he was still outside arm’s reach—barely.

“Ask,” he said, voice low. She thought she could just barely hear the lowest vibrations, almost a hum, coming from high in his chest.

Shepard squared her stance, unconsciously falling into something akin to a parade rest, chin held high and hands clasped behind her as she formed her question in her mind first in Common, then in turian. Only then did she speak.

“First time we witness the other, I was encased. When we witness each other second time, I not encased...you know me. How?” It was one of the longest phrases she’d uttered in turian, and she knew even as she said it she butchered it, but still hoped the essence of her inquiry was understood.

He took a step back, and caught himself before he took another. Coupled with the odd back-and-to-the-side tilt of his head, he was surprised, caught off guard. Whatever question he’d been expecting, that hadn’t been it.

“Your...” He paused. “Bodies, all bodies, human and turian and asari and all others, have vitallia,” he said, speaking slow. Shepard didn’t know if it was in consideration of her lack of
turian vocabulary, or if he was thinking about his words even as he spoke them. “Vitallia in humans is usually weak, too weak for us to sense. Yours is...strong.”

“What ‘vitallia?’” She pressed, surprised she’d actually gotten an answer out of him. “How you ‘sense?'” He stared at her, hardly moving. She realized she was hardly breathing, herself. She also realized she’d walked forward, within arms reach, now, and looking up at him. He stared down, and she saw his fists clench and unclench, claws flexing. She was abruptly aware that she was, potentially, in grave danger.

That potentiality became a sudden reality, as the captain lunged forward, seized her by the throat, and threw her across the room, the half of the room easily accessible despite his restraints.

Shepard landed in a heap on the cot, whipping out her sidearm in time to get off a single shot, scoring a line of blue across the side if the advancing turian’s cowl. Before she could even register the near-hit, he was on her, manacled hands around her throat lifting her up and slamming her against the wall. Legs came up to shove him away with powerful thigh muscles- but her feet didn’t make it high enough, and his narrow, smooth waist offered no purchase for her stylishly useless boots. His face was close, close enough to smell the slightly sweet umino bar he’d just eaten.

Shepard reached up with agile fingers to grab a few spines of his fringe, and at the same time she gave a mighty yank and exposed his throat, her other hand darted in to jab into the relatively soft hide beneath his jaw. She heard him grunt, but didn't let go. She kept her fingers planted firmly in his windpipe.

Hr glared down at her through dark, narrow openings, looking like something straight out of a horror vid. Then he spoke, in Common, "Never let an enemy near your throat."

He dropped her, and retreated a few steps just as Goldman came barging in, rifle up and painting a red dot on the captain. She was abruptly glad she’d only locked the door behind her, and not also encrypted it.

"Are you alright, sir?"

Shepard stood, keeping a watchful eye on the turian as she made her way to the safe side of the room, cursing herself in every dialect in every language she knew.

"Fine, Lieutenant." She rubbed at her throat, feeling where his claws had nicked her. "I think I'm
done here." She turned to leave.

"Shepard," Vakarian's voice made her pause, turning her head slightly while her back was still to him. Seeing that she'd stopped, he said, in turian, "When next we meet, I will end your life."

Shepard didn't do him the service of turning around to respond, instead giving a very human response of, "You can try."

Four hours later found the turian captain and the human commander on separate transports, leaving the ghosts of Shanxi behind.
Chapter 4

“Digging through the trenches still,

but our work is not done yet.

Forcing ourselves through all who oppose,

We are not afraid to get our hands dirty.

Not afraid because we were always filthy.

Knee deep in what we love,

But our work is not done yet,

We’ve got a job to do.”

- “Invade” by Within the Ruins

Chapter Four

In accordance with customs that dated from even before the Unification Wars, Varais Vakarian was buried at dawn on the estate her husband’s family had held for generations, within a week of her death. It was a long, solemn event filled with meaningful prose and genuine words of comfort for the family left behind.

Septimus thought it had been a load of absolute drivel. Only his gruff affection for the boy he’d once caught trying to sneak into his shop, now grown into a hell of an adult, had bound him to attend the affair. He’d left as soon as socially acceptable, and he’d been gratified to see that Garrus hadn’t resented him for it in the least. Rather, Septimus thought the heir of the Vakarian clan would have preferred to escape, himself. At least he’d be distracted for a while, the old general had thought as he’d left. Normally the girl, Solanna, handled social affairs. But all through the ceremony, the normally beautifully pristine widow had looked...dull. Lost. Utterly unable to do more than handle simple condolences. Which had left the majority of the guest-juggling to Garrus, who’d risen to the occasion admirably enough.
Septimus shook his head as he approached the back entrance to his shop. The Vakarian boy really should have come home sooner, he thought. This still would have happened, his mother still would have died, but at least Garrus wouldn't have had the look of guilt as well as grief and loss in his eyes. Septimus knew that look, and knew how long it took to fade.

Inside the shop, everything appeared the same as it had every morning since he’d purchased the place. To the right was the door to his office, and to the left was the storage rooms. Straight ahead, the hall let out into the store’s open floor. The silhouettes of the various items, furniture and sculptures stood out faintly against the glow of the windows, shuttered snug but still illuminated by the strong sunlight outside. The exact outlines of those silhouettes changed as pieces were sold or moved, which wasn't often. Septimus’s memory was good- the silhouettes were different, and he had not sold any pieces off the floor in the last week. One of the new silhouettes looked remarkably bipedal.

Pretending he hadn’t noticed anything amiss, Septimus went into his office, humming to himself as the old did, making inane noises as he apparently settled in before opening his store. One of those noises was a drawer being unlocked at the press of a talon, and pulled open to expose the loaded Haliat-made pistol. Not quite in the same league as the Armax weaponry he toted as a general, but it would do.

Septimus was good- he’d been better, in his youth, but even at his age he held his own against the occasional break-ins and hassling by the local gangs. So it was not at all pleasant to turn around, weapon in hand, and discover a taller, younger, heavily scarred turian male had snuck up behind him and was standing casually in the doorway of his office. Septimus swore, raised the pistol-

In the same instant, the other turian had raised a weapon, this one so heavily modified and laden with enhancements that Septimus had no idea as to the original model. Both turians held their positions, firearms raised while they inspected one another. Septimus saw expensive armor that had been repaired many, many times, worn by a pillar of confidence with enough scars to back it up. He knew what the younger man saw; a wizened old turian with his glory days long behind him. He hoped the intruder saw no deeper.

“You’d probably break a few of my teeth, General, but I’d win in the end,” the stranger said after a long moment. He cocked his head. “Personally, I’d prefer not to confirm it.” He lowered his weapon, the inside of his wrists turned out in a gesture of good-intent. Slowly, Septimus followed suit. Seeing this, the other turian gave a grisly grin and extended his free hand while holstering his weapon.

“Desolas Arterius,” the stranger introduced himself. Septimus didn’t bother doing the same.

“You break into my place of business, fail to announce yourself, and pull a weapon on me. You’ve
got a hell of a way of meeting new people.” Septimus had lowered his pistol, but didn’t restore the safety or extend his own hand. “Care to tell me what the hell you’re doing here?” At length, the newcomer lowered his own arm.

“Looking for something.” Arterius answered, raising his arm and activating his omnitool, the orange glow giving way to a holographic projection of the Prothean monolith he’d sold Garrus the week before. “It was recently in a museum on Illium. Just after it’s sale to you, we received evidence that warrants further study on the artifact.”

This was not the first time Septimus had dealt with such a scenario. There were lawyers and insurance policies he kept to deal with just such a issue, and there were procedures in place that both the museum and any retrieval service they employed would know. Arriving unannounced, armored and armed, was not part of that procedure.

Septimus decided to play along.

“Why didn’t you say so?” He retrieved a holster from his drawer and clipped it to his belt. He still didn’t restore the safety as he holstered his pistol, motioning with his free hand to the door behind Arterius, across the hall. “It’s still in storage. I trust you have the necessary forms with you? The museum will have to refund me quite a sum. Shipping was not cheap.”

It was when he stepped into the hall and saw a second turian stranger that Septimus at last, with a blow to his pride, realized he was out of his league. With surprise and a few pulled muscles, he thought he stood a chance of outdoing Desolas- but not this newcomer, too. Looking at the second arrival, Septimus saw clear familial resemblance, aided by the twin set of colonial markings. Older brother, was Septimus' guess. Older, harder, and deadlier.

"He's lying," the older brother said simply. "The Monolith isn't here."

"But it was here..." Desolas responded with a scowl. "It's still close, still in the city. I can feel it."

At once, two pairs of predatory eyes turned on him. The second arrival said, "You're going to want to tell us who you sold that artifact to, old one.” Then he pulled out something- credentials- and showed it to him. Any thought Septimus had been having on lying died then and there. A Spectre.

Septimus' blood ran cold as he thought, Garrus, my boy, what did I unwittingly get you into?
It wasn't uncommon for military personnel to use commercial passenger lines in lieu of wasting government resources on a single person. It was a win-win; military saved money, and the individual in question got to travel in a measure of comfort.

Shepard certainly didn't mind comfort- and first class on a business flight could be very comfortable indeed. For instance, steak. Steak was something that made many sins forgivable. Including a pair of handlers that suddenly decided to clam up soon as their pet project was being shoved onto a flight bound for Tera Nova.

It was the first time in a long time that Shepard had not been privy to all the information available pertaining specifically to her and her mission. The last time that had come close was the Lincoln ... Shepard scowled. She recalled how well that had ended, and her appetite suddenly abated. She pushed the remnants of the rare steak, with mashed potatoes, steamed broccoli, and sauteed mushrooms, away from her on the narrow table. She leaned back in the leather seat, resisting the urge to lean forward and set set her elbows on spread knees. Instead she made herself cross her legs and let her left hand rest in her lap while the right cupped her chin, elbow on the armrest as she stared out the minuscule porthole.

Why, exactly, would Anderson and Parasini choose now to withhold information, even a detail so small as a name? Granted, she knew very well that a name in the right hands could be a major thing, but why would they trust her with this mission, with all the names she knew already, then bite their tongues this once?

A potential answer had occurred to her already; there was no name. It was possible that Anderson, honorable man that he was, had refused to feed her this one lie, refused to give her a false name. That led to another question- why put his foot down on this one thing? Honor or no, the man lied when the job called for it. She knew that. He knew she knew that. All of which led Shepard to another plausible answer; Anderson had wanted her to know that there was no name. He wanted her questioning, thinking, puzzling. Following the next logical step, Shepard thought there was only one reason for that; there was something he wanted her to know, to be warned of, that he couldn't tell her. Something Parasini couldn't tell her either.

Shepard had a very good idea what that something was. A transport loaded with persons of political and financial influence? If their route was leaked to the right - or wrong- ears, they would make a very tempting target. The military escort was enough to make it look not quite too good to be true. She'd counted the ships outside; a single frigate and a pair of long- range Interceptor fighters that could dock with the frigate as needed.
Having watched them as much as she could from her narrow vantage point, Shepard would gladly bet her suitcases of new, pricey clothes that the Interceptors were unmanned. She'd never seen pilots fly so...stagnant. Usually they were a pleasure to watch, sleek lines of deadly precision, dancing to a tune only a few really felt and heard. These two were like machines on a pre-set route.

"Gorgeous, aren't they?" The unexpected voice came from a man who had slid into the seat beside her. Shepard blinked at him before offering a much-practiced smile, then looking back at the pair of Interceptors going past the window.

"Their new drive cores are a work of art, that's for sure." For a moment, she forgot everything. "Better measure of thrust pound for pound than the old Mark I Vipers, but I dislike the design- the Vipers were the last fighter class to pay homage to our roots in sci-fi back home."

There was a pause.

"I was talking about the stars, actually." His voice was wry, and when Shepard looked at him she saw the look of a man who'd had an encounter all planned out only to have a wrench thrown in the moment those plans were implemented, and wasn't sure if he actually preferred the new outcome or not.

"Ah," she responded. So this was what awkward felt like. Shepard knew exactly how to handle unwanted, predictable approaches. She was, however, unsure of how Kristin, her alter ego, would handle such a scenario.

*The best lies are mired in truth,* she thought to herself. Alright then.

"They're pretty enough," she said, fixing that polite grin she so hated firmly on painted lips. "I suppose the novelty has just worn off. You know, since I've spent my life out here, more or less."

"Spacer family?" He went with it, settling further into the chair beside her with no evidence of being irked that his pass at her had been distorted.

"Ah, no." She ignored the twinge in the general vicinity of her heart. Kristin, she decided, was a cold hearted business bitch with no room for sentiments regarding a lost family life.
Lies mired in truth, indeed.

The man's name turned out to be Ian Pigeol. He was a financial consultant for one of the major companies represented on their flight. He was handsome, intelligent, intuitive, and a very good conversationalist.

Shepard wanted to shove him out an airlock.

When he asked where she would be staying in Terra Nova’s port city, she eyed the nearest hatch and wondered how good the encryption on the controls would be. The invitation to drinks had her planning a more immediate demise—hand-knife blow to the throat, crush the trachea? Knee to the crotch, burst the right teste against pelvic bone? Or perhaps-

Her trail of violent thoughts, hidden behind a politely interested smile, was all abruptly dropped when the lights dimmed sharply and the captain's voice cut the air. Ian sat up straight, while she went perfectly still, muscles tensing and adrenaline beginning to rush as the projected words turned over in her brain and became a comprehensive concept.

"Ladies and gentlemen we'd like to ask you to please take your seats and strap yourselves it nice and snug. You might feel some jolting and bouncing as we need to do some maneuvering. Nothing our artificial gravity well shouldn't be able to handle, but we'd like you to be safe." His voice shook, and out of the corner of her eye, Shepard saw the pair of Interceptors zip by, streams of segmented light shooting from their forward guns. The lack of sound in space kept most of the transport’s opulent occupants unaware of the firefight going on literally right above their heads.

The turians had taken the bait.

Shepard felt a moment of sheer, unashamed fear. She looked the emotion over, acknowledged it for what it was, then tucked it firmly in the pack of her mind, out of the way of what she needed to do. In a way it was good that it was there—let her know she wasn’t completely insane. Really, she’d begun to wonder these past few days. Accepting this mission. Walking within arm’s reach of an enemy turian with every reason to want her dead. Making small-talk with Mr. Ian Number Cruncher.

Wearing pantyhose.

The transport ship rocked, and cries went out. The lights, already dimmed, flickered.
“That’s some turbulence,” Ian muttered, strapping himself in before reaching to help her with her own. She and her alter ego were in agreement for once, and shoved his hands away with a glower. What she wouldn’t give for a rifle. A pistol. Hell, her knives... But no, even the minimal arms she’d carried on base had been stripped from her prior to boarding this transport. And Parasini, the observant bitch, hadn’t missed so much as a needle. Shepard had a moment to think, perhaps she should have gotten a manicure after all. Acrylic nails could score even a turian hide with enough force, she was sure.

She recognized a scrambling mind, even when it was her own. With a will she calmed her racing thoughts, forcing herself back into a mode of habit. Observe. Wait. Prepare. Think. Only the last part of her usual mantra was missing; Act. This time, she’d have to do the opposite.

Hell, but she thought it’d be easier. She’d been a moron for taking this mission There was no way she was going to be able to sit still and shriek like the other business women -and men- were doing all around her. Swearing, she reached down for her briefcase. If she hurried, she could probably snap off one of the handles, use it as a fist weapon. There was a set of keys in the outer pocket that would work, too, inserting a key between her fingers like ragged metal claws. She glanced around the cabin, looking for who might be the flight Marshall. On every flight, every transport, there was an armed Marshall, his job heralding from the days of atmospheric flight and terrorist tendencies. No one stuck out, and no one wore a sign saying, ‘I am conveniently armed.’ Then again, that was the point.

Another jolt, as Shepard’s hands closed around the keys. A dull thud echoed around the cabin, audible above the screeches of her human companions. It centered at the same airlock Shepard had so recently contemplated as a demise for Mr. Pigeol. A second thud, then a third. One more, and they’d have blown the hatch’s four anchor points. The first rocking of the ship must have been the turian ship making a forced dock. A glance out her window showed her what she feared- a derelict Alliance frigate, and debris of what could be an Interceptor. She had a moment to hope they really had been unmanned, then sparks began to spew from the hatch as, on the other side, tools went to work to break past the last defenses. They weren’t even bothering with an attempt at hacking the external access panel Shepard knew was standard. She wasn’t sure if she felt disgruntled at their lack of finesse, or approving of their direct method.

Face determined, Shepard unlatched her seat harness, ignoring Ian’s alarmed squawks as she dropped to the carpet in a crouch. She moved to the isle, keeping low, her right hand with the key-claws held ready as she moved swiftly to the head of the cabin, dodging the flailing limbs of the panicked as they tried to release their own harnesses and get away from the ominous door. Ignoring them all, Shepard came up to the cockpit hatch and set to work at it’s small security panel. Standard binary coding, not even fully encrypted; the key was buried in the very first level of data, and the algorithm was one even basic extranets sites could beat. With the key and algorithm provided, the security program let the cockpit hatch cycle open. She slipped inside, slapping the controls on the other side in the same moment the main cabin hatch was torn away. She glimpsed a pair of turian militants before her hatch cycled closed again. One of them spotted her.
She had seconds, and they were ticking fast. Turning to the white-faced captain, his co-pilot and pair of attendants, she knew she looked anything but a woman of the higher echelons of business and politics.

She had a faint, wryly amused sense of thanks for the fact that she’d opted for pants that morning.

“Who was the Marshall?” She asked quickly. The captain blinked. “No- no Marshall, military escort provided exception-”

Shepard swore. She’d had a faint hope that the Marshall would be in the cabin. It would have been nice to have someone to collaborate with, on what little there was to collaborate on... Shepard wasn’t a fool. There was no way they were escaping this, not with the frigate disabled and likely both Interceptors out of the fight, the turians already aboard and nothing more lethal in human hands than a set of God-damned keys.

She knew her job was to lay low, let them take her, play the part. But she thought of Jenkins, and her parents, and all the friends and enemies alike that had fought and died beside her against these bastards, and the thought of going down without a fight made her physically ill. On top of that, intuition was working overtime. From day one, something about the plan to paint her the perfect high-ranked quellen and hope they snapped her up -noticeable, but not too noticeable- had rankled. She’d ignored it- her job had always been to get the information, not to decipher and compile it. She’d decided weeks ago to trust the ones who’s lives had been spent figuring out the best courses of action, the ones most likely to succeed. And yet...

In the moment the turians forced open the cockpit hatch, she had a flash of memory; the promise to deliver her death hand-in-hand with the compliment of staring her in the eye, and Shepard knew she was doing exactly the right thing by leaping at the first turian to step through the opening.

She had enough presence of mind to make the lunge deliberately inexpert. Her arm was snagged, twisted, and she howled as her own momentum was turned against her, and she ended up on her tippy-toes with her back to the bastard who had her arm torqued behind and up. If she tried to wrest out of his hold, she’d pop her shoulder out of joint. She’d done it before, enough times at the pain was bearable now, and she could usually replace the joint without assistance. The turian, of course, didn’t know that, and she decided to keep it that way.

The keys that never got the chance to be used were wrested from her grasp, and she wasn’t faking the gasps of pain that came from between clenched teeth as she was duck-walked out of the cockpit and into the cabin. She was shoved roughly into an empty chair, and she whirled to see that other turians were herding the captain and crew out in similar fashions. With the turian who’d grabbed
her distracted by a call from a compatriot, Shepard took the opportunity to survey the cabin.

It was crowded, was the first thing to register. The cabin hadn’t been fully loaded beforehand, but turians were big. Tall, if not broad, and some of them were both. A pair of the tall aliens were going from human to human, linking their hands behind their backs as they hauled them out of their seats, harnesses slashed if they weren’t already released. A third turian followed with what Shepard recognized from her briefings as a Halat Thunder V assault rifle. In case any of the humans felt like being feisty, she assumed.

Two more turians at the force-blown hatch. Another three near the cockpit, one attempting to question the captain in broken Common. She heard the turian curse in his own tongue to his companion -his second, if Shepard was reading the marks on his uniform correctly- and Shepard was distantly pleased to realize she understood most of what he was saying.

Shepard focused on looking beaten. It was an effort- it had been a long, long time since she’d been bested at just about anything. She thought the same would be true for Kristin Lambert. So, she was beaten, but not happy about it. She let some of her inner adrenaline-fueled fury leak out in her eyes, in the way she stared at the back of the turian who’d twisted her arm, in how she hissed under her breath at the ones now cuffing an elderly businessman. A small voice, the analytical voice that noticed everything and more often than not kept her alive, also forced her to notice something else; no one was being hurt that didn’t invite it. Ian Pigeol was struck down with the butt of a rifle when he made a grab for a knife strapped to a turian’s boot, but that was it. They left the man reeling, his hands secured behind him, and moved on. A woman who went purely hysterical with terror was firmly restrained, gripped hard enough to leave bruises but no more than that. Once she was restrained so as to not hurt herself or others, she was left alone to sob quietly.

Shepard fixed her gaze on the woman. Unbidden, unexpected memories reared ugly heads in her mind’s eye. The fact that they were memories of childhood nightmares, not actual recollections, didn’t matter. In place of turians she saw batarians. Instead of the woman, she saw her mother. The captain became her father, and the two male attendants, looking small as they huddled in a corner, were suddenly a quarter their actual age and clutching stuffed toys. She sucked in a sharp breath and banished the vision to the darkest corner of her mind, and locked it down with all her might.

The last time such a flash of memory had plagued her had been aboard the Lincoln. If then hadn’t been the time for nostalgic recollections, then this certainly wasn’t it, either!

The turian who’d hauled her out of the cockpit heard her hiss of breath, and turned to look at her.

“You’re not going to cry too, are you?” He asked, in a tone that clearly said he didn’t expect her to understand him. She kept her face carefully void of comprehension, just in case he was one of the few who could read human expressions, as she glowered up at him. He huffed a turian equivalent
of an amused snort. “Guess not. That’s a glare if I ever saw one, and I usually can’t tell your kind apart from a dozen. Except when you start crying. I hate it when you pyjaks cry.”

A dozen retorts to the insult crowded her tongue, but she bit them back. She’d never not done a mission to the best of her ability; she’d already muddled things by failing to restrain her urge to fight. She’d be damned if she didn’t at least play out the rest of it like a washed-out actress on her last gig; with everything she fucking had.

The turian snorted again, shaking his head at her uncomprehending glare, and she spied a long, angry scar down the side of his neck. It disappeared beneath yellow colony markings when it reached his face. He hollered at the turian who seemed to be in charge- the stars on his shoulder certainly said he was. “Lieutenant, sir!”

“What?” Stars turned to Scar, who jerked his head at her.

“I’d like to apaito this one, sir.”

Stars, face half-hidden behind a white mask, glanced at her. “That one? You sure?”

Scars grinned, a grisly sight to anyone who hadn’t been staring at images of every conceivable turian expression for the better part of a month on a daily basis. “She’s got pyrkagia. They’ll take her. Kol, my brother will take her off my nychieo failing anything else, so I’ve got nothing to lose.”

“And everything to gain,” Stars said in a tone that said he’d heard this before. “Your brother must have had to anaptysso a second sapiti for all the quellen you’ve failed to pon trefo.”

The conversation went on from there, with more and more words Shepard didn’t know, too many for her to keep track of. But she got the gist. She fought the flood of unreasonable relief that threatened to mix with the adrenaline and lay her out flat; she was being taken as a quellen. As it was, she already felt dizzy. Nearly a month out of combat, and the first combat high she’d had in all that time, coupled with this surreal euphoria of an even more surreal form of triumph was more intoxicating than any drug Shepard could imagine.

She managed to maintain the blank, unknowing glower and direct it at Scar and Stars as they bantered back and forth, oblivious to the sniffs and sobs that were all settling into a hopeless sort of melancholy. All, save one. Still in his original seat, a cut on his temple bleeding sluggishly, Ian glowered at their captors with triple the venom Shepard was putting out. The intensity of it startled her, clashing with her recollection of the mild man she’d been tolerating the whole flight. A turian noticed it the same time she did, and gave a humming bark of a laugh.
“Hey, Lieutenant,” the third turian called. This one had a pair of red strips across his nose. “If Ouli gets the female, then I’d like to apaito this male. He’s got a bit of pyrkagia of his own.”

There were those two words again; apaito, and pyrkagia.

Apaito. If she had to guess... Claim? Take? Own?

Pyrkagia. Taken in context that was...what, spunk? Spitfire?

Parasini’s simultaneous blocks-in-a-box and language lessons paid off immediately; while Shepard catalogued these new words, she heard and understood Lieutenant Stars give Strips permission to ‘apaito’ Ian.

When she and the others were finally shuffled off the transport ship, Shepard went over the information she had as fast as she could, filing it all away for recall later. It was then that one thing came to mind; if only she and Ian had been specifically selected as quellen...what was going to happen with everyone else?

Shepard steeled herself. She’d known going into this that their information was spotty at best. She tried not to be relieved that even if the worst case scenario should take place -the other passengers being executed- that she would not be among them. She didn’t bother trying to tell herself she was only glad for the sake of her mission- she was human, and not ashamed to admit it. Dwelling on it wouldn’t help her stay alive, or change the fact that her precious Alliance had knowingly risked these people for the chance to put her in a position to potentially save countless others. Shepard’s resolve hardened.

She had a job to do.

To say that Garrus ever expected to host the infamous Spectre Saren Arterius was akin to saying he expected his mother to rise from her grave. Neither was likely, and both occurrences would be cause for checking to make sure he was awake. Garrus was long past the age of idolizing certain celebrities in part to antagonize a militaristic parent, but he’d be lying if he’d said there wasn’t a
small part of him that perked at the realization that the most famous Turian Spectre of all time was standing in his family villa’s atrium. It was a perk that was most welcome; Solanna had told him just that morning that he was, apparently, not acting like himself.

Really, he’d had no response to that. Of course he wasn’t acting himself. And neither was his sister, for that matter, for all she was trying. She’d get up in the morning and start out like her old self, then at some point in the day she’d see, smell, or hear something and inexplicably break down in grief-stricken hums and trills. When that happened, he would take from her whatever it was she’d been doing, and she’d nod and disappear back into her rooms.

Not even the arrival of the expensive artifact he’d purchased as peace offering from Septimus cheered her, although his eldest nephew Norius proved to be absolutely entranced by the thing, and it wasn’t even assembled yet. It still lay in its packaging in the courtyard, near the center.

In the end, all of that meant Garrus was still shouldering all the household responsibilities his mother, then his sister, had always tended to. Meda, spirits bless her, had been a tremendous help. Without her, he’d never have been able to balance -however precariously- the post-death affairs, the household, his grieving sister, and his nephews as well as the daily meetings, reports, and conference calls required of him while standing in for his father.

Oh, and Spectres. He couldn’t forget about them.

He wondered, would the Honorable Secretary accept Visit By Childhood Idol as an excuse for missing this afternoon’s conference vidcall?

No, probably not. The damn shriveled old fruit had barely begrudged him the morning for his mother’s funeral.

“Spectre,” Garrus greeted as he strode into the atrium. He spotted the individual with the Spectre, and gave him a sharp nod as he shook Arterius’s hand. “How may I assist you?”

Surprisingly, it was the unnamed companion that spoke. “We’ve been informed that you’ve come into possession of a...Prothean artifact, Investigator.”

Interesting. He was addressing Garrus by his C-Sec occupation, rather than by the title owed to him while he spoke with his father’s voice. Not that he really minded- titles and names were no more than what a person made them.
Garrus nodded, keeping the confusion off his face. Who was this speaker? Why was the legendarily ruthless Saren Arterius letting him do the talking? “I purchased it for my sister. A gift.” He paused. “May I ask what this visit is regarding, sirs? While it is in honor to have you in my home, I do have certain matters to attend to, as I’m sure you do as well.”

Spectre and stranger exchanged glances. Garrus waited. He wasn’t a diplomat by nature, but then again he wasn’t dealing with diplomats.

“New tests have shown the artifact may be dangerous,” Saren spoke at last, gravelly voice direct. “We are here to confiscate it.”

Garrus fought the urge to bristle. ‘Confiscate’ implied criminal doings, to Garrus’s police-trained mind. He reminded himself that the majority of the time, the Spectre did deal with criminals.

“If it’s dangerous, you’re welcome to it.”

“We weren’t asking,” Saren replied flatly. Garrus raised an ridged plate arching over his left eye. It was a gesture he’d picked up from the various asari he’d worked with. He’d heard through various sources that asari and human expressions were interestingly familiar. He wondered what the Spectre would make of the gesture- someone as widely traveled as he was would undoubtedly grasp the implied sentiment.

He did, and a his left mandible lowered a fraction of a measurement in a turian sneer.

Abruptly, the wispy remnants of a childhood memory evaporated. Garrus had spent the past few days dealing with lawyers, simpering sympathy-wishers, politicians, his ghost of a sister, a pair of confused nephews, overworked staff, a father still absent -though rumors from his contacts hinted at an exchange having been made- and his own considerable frustrations. In short, he was done.

“If you’ll leave your contact information, and any documentation you may have, I’ll be sure to have my lawyer look into the matter.” He glanced at his omnitool, pretending to look at the time. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting in five. I trust you can see yourselves out?” He tilted his head back slightly, a customary gesture of goodwill by exposing the throat. He didn’t wait to see if the two visitors returned the gesture or not, turning on a talon’ed foot and heading down the hall towards his father’s -now his for the time being- office. He paused once out of sight, waiting for the sound of retreating footsteps and a closing door.
Exhaling, and slightly appalled at his own gall, Garrus headed into the room that served as his staging area for the chaos of his life. The only clean area was the section directly in front of the cameras that fed his image to the others’ linked to his daily videcalls. The rest of the expansive office was trashed. The large, heavy wooden desk loaded with datapads and tablets, empty energy bar wrappers, cold cups of energy drinks, plate of half-eaten meals. When the pair of household maids had tried to clean the room when taking his dishes, he’d simply told them to stop coming for said dishes. Every time they’d tried to clean, it had taken him hours to locate the things they’d moved.

Garrus crossed the room and went to the window. In old times, the space would have been covered in a screen for the summer, and shutters for the winter and storms. Now, plasteel panes just as transparent as glass kept the place equally cool and warm as needed. The window was fashionably framed in decorative wire mesh, and the bushes just outside had been trimmed and groomed into a neatness nature never intended.

For the thousandth time, Garrus wondered how he’d ended up where he was. The past few days of arguing, contract-writing, and political rhetoric had possessed an unexpected outcome; a distraction from his mother’s death. He’d thrown himself into the work like would never have done if he hadn’t had a reason to avoid the outside world. As a result, he’d had the dubious pleasure of being taken seriously, far more so than he -and clearly anyone else- had anticipated. In less than a week his reputation as the rebellious eldest son of rigid Nomos Vakarian was well and truly damaged. Not that he’d had any pride in that reputation...it was what it was. He was more afraid that when -not if, when!- his father returned, the old family patriarch would expect Garrus to maintain this new momentum, which was absolutely the last thing he wanted. The sooner his father was home, dealing with crotchety old politicians and lobbyists and self-styled nobles, the sooner Garrus could get back to the Citadel and work that -in his mind- mattered far more than any legal document detailing the requirements for hunting permits on new colony worlds.

He scraped his talons over his head and fringe, exhaling explosively.

Sometimes life bites, he thought to himself. Hard.

The sound of quick, sharp footsteps out in the hall was his only warning before the old-fashioned hinged doors were shoved open and Solanna blew in. For a moment, it was a relief to see the fury on her face. It was like the ghost he’d been living with had finally been banished, and his fiery, intractable sister was back. Then he registered the intensity of the fury, and something in the back of his mind told him to run and hide. He didn’t, although he had every expectation of regretting that decision.

“You sent them away?” She hissed at him, tongue visible lashing behind her teeth.
Garrus held his hands up, wrists towards her, in an unconscious gesture of placation.

“The Spectres were making unreasonable demands. And, frankly, I wasn’t in the mood to deal with it. I figured Diakos—” He named the family lawyer. “—could see to it well enough. And they were rude.”

Solanna stared.

“Spectres?” She said, and she sounded absolutely dangerous. “There were Spectres in my house?”

“Well, one was a Spectre, but I don’t know who the other one was, Arterius never gave his name—”

“Spectre Saren Arterius was in my home?!” Oh, yes. Very dangerous. She’d backed him into the window.

“Er...who else did you mean, being sent away?” He tried to deflect. It didn’t work. It never did. Solanna was worse than a heat-seeking missile like that. He thought, belatedly, that she might have meant the troublesome maids.

“Details,” she snapped. “Every word, every gesture. And when you’re done telling me, you will contact them, apologize, and invite them back. You’ll clear your schedule for a nice dinner sometime this week, and we’ll give the Spectres their due respect and whatever the hell else they want.”

A dull ache was beginning to latch onto the base of his neck. Garrus rubbed at it, and sighed. It really wasn’t worth arguing. He told her the details she so adamantly insisted on, and she huffed at him when he was done.

“Could have gone worse,” she muttered. “At least you spoke nicely enough, even if you practically kicked them out.”

Garrus bit back a comment about speaking nicely. She was pacing now, obviously making plans for a dinner worthy of the Emperors of old. Now that her ire was turned away from him, he was again rather pleased to see her seeming so close to her old self. He’d begun to wonder how much longer the grey moods would grip her, how long her *vitalia* would be so faint and weak. It was humming now, even across the room, almost as strong as it had been before...
He sighed. Well, even if he’d reminded himself of the very thing he’d been trying to not think about it, he’d be damned if he did or said anything to remind Solanna.

“Meda is visiting her sister today,” Garrus told her. The old housekeeper, cook, and nanny usually did the shopping. “Why don’t you go get all those fancy ingredients yourself? You could use a day in town. Go get your fringe buffed, a nice talon-polish or whatever else you females do to primp for dinner parties.”

Solanna blinked at him. “Party? Now there’s an idea. I’d thought just us and the Spectre, but a dinner party... It’s been awhile since we’ve hosted.”

Garrus wanted to kick himself harder than was really possible for a person to kick themselves. He hadn’t meant to give her the idea...he’d assumed she’d already gone there. He suppressed a sound of abject misery. What was done was done. He rubbed at his neck again.

“I’ll take your word on that,” he told her. “Are you going to go or not? You should take Cabrias with you.”

Solanna nodded. “I...I think I’ll do that. Where are the boys?”

Garrus winced. Solanna’s flare of spirit was fading again. “Norius is at the lootis, remember? The boy’s nearly fourteen.”

“Ah...yes.” Shame made the tips of her fringe flush lavender. In her grief, Solanna had disconnected completely from her life, forgetting schedules that had previously been as forgettable as breathing to the female who was normally a walking calendar. He saw her wince. “He’ll be leaving for the Academy in a year...how time flies.” She sighed, talons tugging at the draped length of fabric hung around pronounced hips. Two pieces reached up to wrap around her middle, crossing over her chest and tying at her back. It was a fashionable garment for women, and he thought the fabric looked expensive. Clothing of any kind was both a luxury and a nod to the modest sensibilities of the other Citadel species. Turians neither needed the protection of clothing nor the guarding of modesty, since modesty didn’t really exist for a species with very few external gender indicators aside from size.

“How about,” Garrus ventured. “When you get that fancy stuff for the dinner party...you get something for us, too? Just us and the boys. We haven’t really had time, just the four of us, since...since I arrived.”
Solanna perked. “That’d be nice, I think. Yes, very nice.” Her right mandible fluttered at him in a slight grin. “You’ve gotten better at this, brother.”

“Better at what?” His ignorance was only partly feigned.

“Family,” she responded simply. She stepped close and briefly pressed her brow to his in a chaste gesture of affection. “I’ll be back before dark. There’s a nasty storm forecast for tonight.”

“It’s Palaven,” he retorted. “It’s always nasty.” She laughed at him and his dour tone as she left.

In the hours that followed Shepard’s capture, she learned three things; one, she was never wearing a business suit again short of the threat of death. Second, she really, really disliked Ian Pigeol. And three, the turians who had captured their vessel and its passengers were mercenaries, not part of the Heirarchy militia. Mercenaries who dealt with batarians. Slaving batarians, specifically, who were salivating over the crop of soft, weak, biddable human captives. Shepard watched, gaze fixed on the scene, as her ‘colleagues’ were shuffled out of the cage built into the cargo deck of the turian freighter, examined, then herded to a chain of their predecessors. Only a few, the older ones, were sent back. Shepard had no illusions as to what would happen to them.

Shepard, Ian, and two others were in a separate cage, this one with cots, dubious sanitary facilities, and a bright blue barrier curtain of some kind. In most things the Alliance had managed to catch up with the rest of the galaxy - barrier curtains were still beyond them.

She’d heard the word ‘quellen’ tossed around in their presence enough that even if she weren’t able to understand most of their speech, she’d know the word now applied to them. She pretended she didn’t understand, at least intellectually. In every other aspect, she showed she knew exactly what her situation was, and that she had no intention of being stupid. Which was the absolute truth. If she was gauging the mannerisms of her captors accurately, their regard for their bipedal bounty was mixed; disdain, apathetic, and from a few, a measure of respect reserved for those they thought deserved it, mostly the ones also being separated as quellen.

At some point, they were finished sorting the rest of humans, and the batarian bartering with
Lieutenant Stars gestured to the four would-be-quellen. Stars shook his head. Not dissuaded, the batarian strode over to to the cage, keeping a careful distance from the bars and crackling blue barrier curtain. He was looking directly at Shepard.

Batarians, the Alliance knew more about. Very deliberately, Shepard tilted her head to the right, a supreme insult, as she met his stare- at least, the stare of his main set of eyes. The batarian’s lip curled in a very human sneer. Lieutenant Stars outright 

The batarian began talking, very fast, very harsh. Stars stopped laughing. He tapped one talon against the barrel of the rifle he held casually in his arms. He looked at Shepard, though not so much looking at her, as contemplating the issue of her existence.

“Ouli!” He barked suddenly. Across the room, keeping a wary eye on the batarians guarding their string of selected slaves, one of a trio of turians snapped his head up.

“Sir?”

“Get over here.” When Scars had obeyed, running over to them in a long, almost beautiful lope, Stars gestured to her with the butt of his rifle. “Our guest here wants her.”

Scars shrugged. “Can’t have her. Already have a buyer lined up.”

For all Shepard knew, that was completely false. First of all, to the best of their knowledge quellen were not purchased. And second, it was standard bartering procedure; see how much the interested party was really interested. Shepard took in the exchange that followed with grit teeth- she didn’t need to feign incomprehension this time. Even if she hadn’t understood the turians, it would have been obvious they were discussing her fate.

The batarian said something else, and she understood it only due to the faint voice chirping from the turians’ VI translators, converting the gutteral batarian speech into the more sibilant turian. He was offering to double whatever Scars had been offered for her. Shepard frowned. Now there was some poor negotiating if she ever heard it. He didn’t even bother to try and glean more information, or wheedle down the price while still seeming to give a better deal. Odd. Batarians were normally shrewd merchants. This was just...lazy.

“Why do you want her anyway, four-eye?” Scars was feigning disinterest...at least, she thought he was feigning. Her less than a month of immersion training in a far-away class room had been rendered comparatively laughable in the few short hours she’d been in the company of her captors.
The batarian kept his expression carefully blanked out as he responded. This time, Shepard couldn’t catch the translation. He seemed to think she’d do particularly well in a specific market...well enough he was willing to flat out pay. Scars, for all he’d flat out turned him down in the beginning, responded visibly to the numbers named. Shepard knew enough of Citadel currencies to know that it was a large number indeed.

In the back of Shepard’s ever analytical mind, she realized she was at a crossroads, and for once she wasn’t at the helm. Today would see her going forward on her mission, or irrevocably lost to the mire of batarian slave lines. The lump of ice in her belly grew and sharpened, edges gouging at her innards as she fought to swallow the bile that bit at the back her throat. She knew the risks going in. She wasn’t one for prayer, but... Well, if she’d told anyone the thought of ending up in batarian slave markets hadn’t terrified her since her childhood, she’d be lying in the most profound way. And as this day had so harshly reminded her, despite all her training, medals, accomplishments and notoriety for doing the impossible, in the end...she was still human. And very much afraid.

At length, the batarian and Scars went back and forth. When all was settled, the batarian walked away. Shepard stayed in the cell, and fought off waves of nauseating relief. She had no idea if her fate was any better than what would have happened if she’d gone with the batarian, but at least this way she had the possibility of doing something to help the Alliance.

Shepard made herself watch as the string of former business tycoons -or at least the representatives of tycoons- were shuffled towards the hatch accessing the batarian ship. As they moved, one of the men seemed to suddenly realize what was happening- more specifically, that it was really happening, that it wasn’t a nightmare or dream. He started screaming unintelligibly, flailing against the chains that bound him to his neighbors, pulling them off balance as he yanked against his restraints.

“We’re not what you think!” He cried suddenly, as a batarian came forward brandishing a sparking rod. “I’m not a business guy!” He shrieked as the rod was jammed into a kidney. “I’m a murderer! I was on death row! We all were!” Another jab, this one under an armpit, and the man howled.

Still, he went on, “There’s been a mistake...you won’t...you won’t get any ransom for us... They promised us our freedom...”

Idiot. Did he really think ransom was what they were after?

Shepard watched, contemplating, as the batarians instructed the man’s neighbors to pick him up, dragging him through the hatch while hampered by their own restraints. She watched the batarians nod in farewell to their turian counterparts, their business concluded, and watched the human expressions of dejection and misery as the hatch cycled shut.

So, not innocent corporate lackeys. No financial advisors. No political representatives. No business mongols. Shepard fought the urge to glance back at Ian. It dawned on her to wonder if he’d known she wasn’t a former inmate, or if he’d been playing along. Or maybe not all of them had known that the others on the ship were also criminals? Either way, Shepard felt an unashamed weight lift from her shoulders. No innocents. If she’d been the one to choose criminals for this, she would have chosen the rapists, the child molesters, the serial killers. People utterly unworthy of even a chance at redemption. Hers was a harsh outlook, she knew. She didn’t much care. She’d been criticized for it before. The result was the same; a sudden lack of guilt for being spared a slave’s demise.

“Anyone have any idea what the pyjak was barking about?” Stars inquired. Shrugs and other various motions of noncomment rippled through those present. Stars himself made a dismissive gesture when no answer was forthcoming, and the crew dispersed to attend to other duties.

Silence from the humans reigned for a long while, once the deck was emptied of all but a single guard in the corner, watching something on his omnitool and gawuffing with laughter every now and again. Eventually, behind her, Shepard heard the other female in the cell begin to sniffle. She clenched a fist. Through sniffles, the woman spoke.

“I drowned my daughter,” she said, words muffled. Shepard turned, saw that she had buried her hands in her face. “I was nineteen. I wanted to party...drink...date. Couldn’t do that and be a mother at the same time. So I put duct tape over her mouth and nose, and I drowned her in the pool.” She removed her face from her hands, staring blankly out into the dimly lit cargo deck. “I deserve this.”

There was a long pause following the unexpected confession. Shepard took the confirmation of her guess about the nature of at least one criminal’s transgression with no more than a nod.

The other male, across from Ian, heaved a deep sigh. He dragged his hand through dark, wiry curls. “Aw, fuck,” he grumbled. Then shrugged and said, “Fucked a girl. Bitch was drunk. Didn’t fight or nuthin’. Died, dunno how. Jury was stacked. None of ‘em ever tried sex while bein’ tied up, I guess.”

Both the man and the woman glanced at Shepard and Ian, expectant. Ian’s jaw clenched visibly. Shepard sighed, and searched for a story.

“Blew up a hospital,” She said simply, with a careless shrug.
Best told lies are shrouded in truth, after all. They didn’t need to know that it had been a batarian hospital, used to implant slaves with control chips. It had been one of her first solo missions.

Now all three looked to Ian, who pointedly looked away, lips pressed into a thin line, eyes hard. When after a long moment he remained silent, the other three looked away. Shepheard remained standing at the cell’s edge, turning her attention to the single turian guard watching something on his omnitool. If she strained, she could just barely make out the dialogue. With Parasini’s voice in her ear telling her to not waste any opportunity, Shepheard set herself to translating the speech from those small, distant speakers.

At this point, focusing on something was better than doing nothing. Shepheard was very bad at doing nothing. She hoped the guard had lots to watch; Shepheard had no idea how long they were going to be stuck where they were, and Shepheard was equally bad at being bored. Things tended to...erupt, explode, implode, burn, die, rupture, or any combination thereof when she was bored with nothing to do. So it was a relief to, several hours later, realize that the shift in the vibrations of the deck plates, the shuddering of the engines, and the suddenly alert posture of the guard, could only mean one thing; they were entering atmosphere.

Solanna would absolutely never admit it to her younger brother, but Garrus had been right. Even just the act of dressing for an outing had helped her feel more like her old self. She’d bathed, given herself a nice sandcloth buffing, rubbed scented oils into patches of rough hide that desperately needed it, trimmed her talons, even brought herself to outline her colonial markings with a stick of faintly metallic pigment in a shade of lavender that complimented the deep blue. She’d changed her red garments for one of her favorite fousta, a length of indigo cloth that draped becomingly over both hips, the end ties looping behind her and crossing around in the front, held in place by a brooch studded with gems. A set of matching sorv and gone onto the ends of her fringe spines, and a thick collar of delicate links and blue stones was clasped around the outside of her cowl, hanging low over her chest.

She’d taken her time getting dressed. All in all, it was a very traditional ensemble, although perfectly acceptable and fashionable in Palaven’s capitol. Elsewhere in Heirarchy space, she would get looks. Here? Likely not so much as a glance. Leastwise, not for her clothing. Solanna peered at herself in a mirror for a moment, then scolded herself. Widow or no, she had no time for anything but her boys, the household, and-

Abruptly, her thoughts stopped. There was one aspect of her life that had consumed much of her time that was no longer an issue.
Feeling her improved mood slip away, Solanna resolutely clipped her omnitool in place over her left forearm, and went to fetch her younger son. Cabrias was still at the age where spending time with his mother was perfectly acceptable. Norius, at fourteen and nearly ready to begin his steps into adulthood, had reached and passed that point several years previous. Solanna loved her children dearly, and dreaded the day that they, too, would leave her. It was a secret fear, one she hoarded and guarded, to be left alone. Partially because she knew it was an eventuality, not a possibility. Her husband, her brother, her mother, her father... Garrus’ return was temporary, she knew. And even if this war ever ended, she knew her father would be as distant as he had been in her childhood. More so, now that he believed she no longer needed his guidance.

Solanna suppressed a sigh as she entered her son’s room, collected the excited boy, and went outside to meet the aircar. After giving directions to the driver, Solanna set about getting her youngest to talk to her, no easy feat for any parent in any scenario. The initial excitement of going out had worn off, and Cabrias had retreated into his usual reserved tendencies. He’d been a shy child before the chaos of his grandmother’s death and funeral, and now seemed even more so. Solanna wanted to kick herself for a selfish, horrible being; how could she had thought he was handling this as well as she had thought? How had she not seen it? What a mess.

Eventually, Solanna got her son talking about his favorite topic; his brother. Norius was, in Cabrias’ mind, a god in training, second only to his uncle Garrus. If his grandfather was a demon to keep him in line, then Garrus was a benevolent guardian spirit, and his brother was going to be just as spectacular. He was going to be a Spectre, maybe, or perhaps a dreadnought commander...

“And what about you, hm?” Solanna nudged her son as the aircar pulled up at the main entrance to one of the busiest centers for shopping, trade, dealings, and exchanges on the planet, let alone the city. Some of the things she had in mind would not be carried at ordinary stores. “What do you want to be?”

Cabrias fell silent, small talons clenching as he looked away, and mumbled something.

“What was that? Don’t mumble, Cab.” Solanna pulled her son along behind her as they exited the aircar, paid the driver, and made their way into the throng of people flooding the Exchange District. Overhead, the roar of frigates and freighters entering the atmosphere was nearly deafening until they were underneath the massive canopy designed to keep out the weather and sound alike. At the far end of the District, where the canopy retracted to allow ships to dock, the noise would rise again, but she doubted she’d have to go that far to find what she needed. Her omnitool beeped at her, letting her know that she was near the first of her pre-programmed destinations.

“I said, I don’t want to be anything.” He sounded both petulant and nervous about the statement. Odd, Solanna thought... He usually was rather forthright with his thoughts. ‘Tactless’ her mother
had said often, laughing. Solanna suppressed both a wince and the memory, and looked down at her youngest.

“Nothing at all? I thought maybe you’d like to be a musician. You love that na’ande grandmother got you last year.” And indeed he did...more than that, the young boy was actually quite good on the four-stringed wooden asari instrument. Most turians didn’t have the patience needed to learn to play the thing without their talons snapping the cords, but the very first day her son had encountered this very problem he’d simply frowned at the thing, then returned a few moments later with his talons wrapped in remnant leather strips left by an upholstery-repair man the week before. That same week she’d found gloves for her son that were thick enough to protect the strings, but thin enough to allow textile sensory to not be completely deadened.

But Gab only shrugged. “Grandfather says I can’t.”

Solanna stopped dead. She loved her father. Dearly. But he hadn’t been there, so many years ago, to see her brother’s devastation at being told the very same thing, in regards to his dreams of being a Spectre. He also hadn’t seen the disappointment on her own face, when she’d been a similar age, she’d been told the life of a dancer was frivolous, impractical, and unacceptable. Thankfully, her passion for dance had faded on its own, and became a moot point. But still...

“You listen to me, my son,” she told him, and the boy looked up at her with wide eyes. “If you enjoy it, and it harms no one, then let no one stop you from doing what you love most. Especially if you’re good at it. And you, my Gabrias, are very good with the na’ande. Now, that isn’t do say I don’t think you should also look at other options, but for now...” She sighed. He was still staring. For spirit’s sake, the boy was six. She shook her head at herself. “There is a music shop here. Several, in fact. Would you like to look for a new case? The old one is still broken, isn’t it?”

Tentatively, Gab nodded, looking hopeful.

“Then we’ll stop at one before we go home, and you can play something for us tonight at dinner, how does that sound?” At the absolute delight on her son’s face, Solanna felt the worst of her black mood finally lift, and she silently thanked Garrus. She’d have to be sure to take Norius on a similar outing at the first opportunity.

The day progressed pleasantly, with Solanna finding many of the things on her list at the very first shops she tried. Rewarding Gab for his patience and perfect public manners, she chose a child-friendly restaurant for them to have lunch at, despite the clamor of childish shrieks, shouts, and wails emanating from the eatery’s play area. Gabrias, despite his shyness, managed to assign himself to a loose coalition of other children playing against a second group in an impromptu game of ‘turians vs humans.’ The ‘humans’ jumped around and made noises meant to sound like pyjaks, or the Palaven equivalent, the tree-dwelling maimou, one of the few furred creatures the planet
had to offer. The ‘turians’ strode around, hollering war-cries stolen from the latest historical-fiction holovid. Despite herself, she laughed along with the other parents at the various antics and creativity of their offspring.

Later than she would have liked to leave, but sooner than Gabrias preferred, she pulled her son away from his games, watching the tips of his fringe flush violet at the compliments called his way as they departed. She teased him gently when she realized the one calling was a female of his own age.

“She had a very nice cowl, don’t you think? Nice and smooth, very pretty,” she nudged him, and he scowled, the violet deepening to purple.

“Mother!” He whined, and she laughed and pulled him along through the crowds.

A few hours later, though, the laughter had faded somewhat into frustration. The last thing she needed- in fact, the main thing she needed, eluded her. Cheli steaks were hard to come by, since they had only recently been taken off the endangered species list for Palaven natives and it was one of the few species to firmly refuse to be raised domestically or seeded on colony worlds. Price wasn’t really an issue for Solanna Vakarian, but finding the damn stuff, well...

At long last, a break; one of the shopkeepers told her that a shipment was due in that very day, any hour now in fact, and if she hurried she could meet the shipment on the dock itself. The shopkeeper knew the captain, and knew he would gladly sell straight to Solanna. Being the straightforward person she was, Solanna preferred this than waiting to see which of the stores she’d already tried were expecting a portion of that shipment, and which of them would have a selection not already on reserve. Better to go straight to the source.

Gabrias followed behind her, cordially silent despite how tired she knew he had to be by now, especially after expending so much energy in the turians vs. humans game of earlier. And they hadn’t even visited the music shop yet. If he kept up the good behaviour, she told herself, she’d amend the trip to music store to include a stop at a toy store, too. She also slowed her pace, despite her impatience, for the sake of her son’s shorter legs. As it was, they had to slow to nearly a crawl when she reached the fringes of the dock. Apparently, there a rumor of a shipment of freshly captured and claimed quellen arriving, as well. Solanna’s mandibles retracted slightly in distaste.

As a historical and traditional practice among turians, Solanna had no problem with the taking of quellen. But she had been raised by a C-Sec officer turned Palaven Security Administrator turned Heirarchy Military Captain, and she knew very good and well that the majority of quellen brought into Hierarchy space were brought in for the purpose of free labor. Theoretically, the laws governing the handling of quellen dictated that they would be fed, clothed, housed, and receive medical treatment so long as they cooperated. A handful also went to traditional households who
wanted to make political statements, or to show off.

Still more of them, she knew, went to...other places. Hunting grounds, carnal houses, unregistered sweatshops. All illegal, all denied as even existing by the Hierarchy. She recalled quite clearly the night her father had returned home from a raid on a warehouse, a raid that had found an illegal prostitution ring that catered to the more...exotic tastes of depraved individuals with more money than sense. The next day, her father had acquiesced to requests to re-enlist and serve his people. She wondered how many people knew that her father had done so not out of dislike for humanity, but because he desperately wanted this war to end for the sole goal of exposing such depravity and prosecuting those individuals he’d caught and been forced to release that night, all because other than as *quellen*, humans had no rights in Hierarchy space.

She wondered if Garrus knew.

Solanna dismissed such musings from her thoughts for the time being. It didn’t concern her, and the crowds were beginning to thin that direction...

Another hour found her walking away from a docking station crowded with sealed crates of *cheli*, a receipt in hand and assurances that her purchase would be delivered that very afternoon. It would be a late dinner, but she fully expected Garrus and the others to sacrifice an hour or two of hunger after all the trouble she’d gone to today! Besides, if she headed home now and got everything else going, then once the delivery arrived it wouldn’t be that long...like most turians with sensible taste, they preferred their various meats little more than warmed. Perhaps a little cooked for Gabrias, as he was still young enough that portions of his digestive system were still building up tolerances to various bacteria and-

A shout went up, somewhere nearby. The crowds that had begun to thin, as most of the shipments for the day had come and gone, and Solanna could see straight to another docking station, where a group of rather disreputable individuals in mismatched armor, lazily all painted the same color to imitate some sort of cohesion, were arguing loudly. The two attracting all the attention were clearly brothers, even without their matching yellow colonial markings. One had a nasty scar reaching down beneath the cowl of his hardsuit, the other looking like he’d come straight from a salon. His garishly colored suit was straight off a Citadel fashion catwalk.

Despite herself, Solanna caught a snippit of the argument, and her interest was caught.

“...you promised fifteen hundred!” The one with the scar shouted.

“And I told you it was an *estimate*!” The other hissed back, looking around nervously. “And keep
“I don’t care!” Scar waved his arm, carelessly flagging several passerby with a much-used assault rifle in the process. Solanna frowned, wondering where D-Sec was. Dock Security was usually better at screening than this, to let an obvious mercenary-affiliated individual brandish his weapons so recklessly. Mercenary groups were not illegal, but they had a definite negative connotation on the civilized worlds.

The argument continued, as at last Solanna spotted a pair of hardsuited turians striding in their direction, eyes trained on the arguing pair. When Solanna looked back, prepared to leave things be, she saw something else that made her pause. At her side, Gabrias looked on in the mild interest of a child who knew better than to get involved with angry adults, but was still curious. He clung to his mother’s side absent, eyes following the argument, and now the newcomers that were being herded down the ramp in restraints.

Solanna’s mandibles retracted sharply along her jaw, baring needle-like teeth and hissing slightly in disgust. The humans were shackled, like they were slaves. True quellen who understood—or had it explained them, as humans would need it to be—their circumstance required no shackles. Common sense and honor would guide them to cooperate until their freedom was negotiated or the disputes between their people ended, where upon they would be released with a sum theoretically equaling what they would have been paid had they been employees rather than quellen. The fact that they were chained like farm animals ignited a furnace deep inside Solanna’s belly that she hadn’t felt in a very long time. It reminded her of the fire that had driven her to do reckless things as a child, things that she’d had to put an end to when she’d chosen to grow up and take up her responsibilities and eldest child of the Vakarian clan.

It was a good burn, one that had been banked for a long time.

Solanna strode to intercept the D-Sec officers, releasing her hold on Gabrias but making sure he followed along closely. By the time she reached them, they were near enough to the arguing pair that had they paused their heated argument, they would have heard her address the officers.

“I overheard these men discussing prices,” she told them. “I believe they require...re-education regarding the laws of quellen handling.” She gestured in the direction of the humans, now standing abreast with the quarreling brothers.

One of the officers looked tired, the other incensed, though if it was at her presumptuousness or at the breach of a very old, very sacrosanct law of warfare, she couldn’t tell. The brothers had finally noticed them and fallen silent, turning to face the officers and Solanna. To the left and slightly back, the four humans looked both interested in confused. Of course, they had no VI translators. They had no idea that this was not how it was supposed to be, that this was deplorable, honor-less,
immoral... The third turian, the one to have brought them down the loading ramp, was watching
the proceedings with rapt attention. There were stars painted on the cowl of his hardsuit in
imitation of Hierarchy military rankings. He seemed to figure out for himself what was about to
happen, and quickly stepped forward to mitigate, as the turian in garish colors tried to excuse
himself, the scarred one kept him from leaving, the officers tried to extract information-

Gabrias had wandered away from her.

Too quick for even turian reflexes to react, the human at the end of the chain lunged forward, his
restraints falling free -how had he managed to unlock them?- as he seized her son in an iron grip,
and lifted him bodily off the ground, backing away from everyone. She didn’t hear the human’s
shouts, didn’t see his wild eyes, didn’t see the smaller human beside him react almost as quickly,
didn’t register the two officers drawing their weapons, or the fashionable turian take the
opportunity to run away...

All she heard was her son’s terrified shrieks, calling to her. “Mama!”

She’d thought he’d try to run. Really, when Shepard noticed Ian working at his restraints with
surprisingly adept fingers, she’d thought the idiot would be no more stupid than to try to run. She’d
thought he’d give up even that idea when they all walked down the boarding ramp and saw not a
jungle, or an outpost, or a station, no- a city. A turian city. Some asari here and there, salarians,
even one of the giant sloth-like elcor. But mostly turians. As far as she could see, turians. They
couldn’t run more than perhaps twenty feet before running into one.

But Ian kept at the restraints, using a pin he’d gotten from somewhere to work at the tiny control
panel. It was of batarian make, so Shepard was familiar with it’s construction and programming,
but she had no idea how Ian also seemed familiar with the thing’s specifications.

She’d never expected him to grab the kid.

She swore, even as she knew she was too late to intercept his lunge, too late to knock him aside. Ian
backpedaled, the child -Shepard had no idea if the kid was male or female- struggling and
shrieking to the turian that had to be its mother.

“Ian!” She shouted at him, trying to get his attention. She’d let herself stumble and fall when her
grab for him had failed, hand landing on the pin he’d dropped. With all attention on him, she set to work at her own restraints. Thankfully, training had included dealing with these things in the dark; she didn’t need to look at her hands while she worked.

Ian looked at her, lips curled in a snarl. “Shut up!” He looked at the two turians in uniform, a pair of pistols now trained on him. “Don’t even think about it! You’ll have to shoot the kid, too!” His voice was hoarse with fervor. “If you want the lizard to live, you’ll get me a ship, supplies, and let me leave here!”

Shepard noted faintly he hadn’t included his three would-be fellow quellen in his request, and any sympathy she may have had left for his desperation evaporated.

“Ian, listen to me!” She put the force of command into her tone, and Ian’s head snapped back to look at her. “They don’t understand you! Even if they did, do you really think they have human food laying around? What are you going to do about the kid, huh? Keep him with you on the ship til you’re back in Alliance space? Then what?”

“Does it matter? Anywhere is better than here! And of course they have human food, they must have been planning on feeding us something!” None of them had eaten since they’d been captured. More than once, Shepard had sharply regretted not finishing that God-damned steak.

“Ian,” she repeated. “You’re not a moron. Don’t do this. Put the kid down. They wouldn’t have gone to all the trouble to bring us here alive if they didn’t want us alive.”

The turian officers said something else, something that faintly registered in the back of her mind as a call for back up, and someone with a human VI translator. The kid was calling to its mother, and its voice was uneven, like it had the hiccups. Shepard spied how Ian had one hand clamped around the kid’s mouth, keeping his jaw and mandibles firmly shut, and the other arm wrapped around his middle, underneath the pronounced ribcage. He was using the inverted shelf it made as a ledge to lift the kid. The child was wearing loose, short slacks to accommodate wide hips and budding spurs on the back of his calves. He also wore an open leather vest of some kind, so that Shepard could clearly see the dark grey hide pressed against Ian’s tan forearm. Something about it made her frown, part of her overclocked brain sifting through what she knew of turian anatomy.

Ian’s face was beginning to splotch. “Alive? You call being some turian lizard’s lackey living?”

“As long as we’re alive, there’s a chance at being rescued.” Just keep him talking.
The turian mother was talking to the kid, rapidly, clearly trying not to panic. The small turian was flat out wheezing now. Something was wrong. She watched the expanse of hide struggle to press against Ian’s iron-firm arm. Spied Ian’s fingers, red bleeding between them as the kid struggled to get his mouth open, cutting into Ian’s soft human flesh with sharp teeth and rough-skinned mandibles.

“Ian!” She shouted. “You have to let his mouth go!” She was guessing on the gender, here. But saying ‘it’ wouldn’t help her try to persuade Ian to see the kid as just that...a terrified child, innocent of the doings of his elders. Whatever quarrel humans and turians had, it had nothing to do with the children.

“You just said, I’m not a moron,” Ian snorted. “Now what do you take me for? Even their whelps have those damn teeth-”

“Shut it and listen!” She barked. “A dead hostage isn’t any good to you, and you’re killing him! He’s suffocating! Turians can’t sweat, they have to be able to pull in more air through their mouths- like a computer, they need more airflow to cool off, as much as they need it to breathe! They can’t pull in enough air through their noses alone!” Besides which, Ian’s big hand partially covered the child’s flat, broad nose as well.

Shepard kept working at her restraints, discreetly. The turian female was still talking to her child. Behind Ian, she saw more turians in security uniforms run up, slowing as they neared. One of them was working at his omnitool.

Something came over Ian’s face, then, that made something inside her go cold. It was a look void of reason or intelligence. It passed quickly, his anger-splotched face re-asserting control over the moment, but the memory of that brief glimpse into the man beneath would haunt Shepard for the rest of her life. It was the look of a... thing that enjoyed hurting children.

Suddenly, Shepard was very glad he’d never voiced what his crime had been.

“You’re right, I’m not a moron, but you are. You think I buy that? How would you know about turians breathing, huh?” His face, if possible, contorted into an even uglier expression. “What do you think they want us for, hm? Some sick games? Slave labor?” He sneered at you. “Or maybe some of them have human fetishes, hm? Is that why you’re on their side? You want to see what it’s like to have a nice fat turian co-”

The restraints clicked open, and Shepard felt time slow. Adrenaline pumped, supercharging the synapses in her brain, fooling the muscles into thinking they were stronger, faster. She moved, and
was halfway to Ian before the shouts even began. By the time she registered the words, translated them, and understood that they were telling her to stop or they’d shoot, her fist had connected with Ian’s nose, over the kid’s head. Ian’s neck and snapped back, bouncing his brain against the inside of his skull. With his throat exposed, her other hand came in, jabbing at his throat and compressing his windpipe. As he choked, her other hand curved back down, driving in and up into a kidney in a precision strike that made his arms go limp as pain and lack of oxygen scrambled his control of his body. The kid dropped, gasping, and Shepard crouched down, arms going around his small body of hard angles and soft hide, whirling low on her heels to shield him as the turians opened fire.

A half a moment later, silence gripped the dock. The only sound to break it was the wet gurgle of Ian’s last breaths, his chest and neck punctured with a dozen well-aimed shots.

The world was still going in slow-motion as the security personnel rushed forward, and she was yanked away from the kid, who was promptly deposited in his mother’s eager arms. Shepard’s own arms were wrested behind her back, more restraints clicked into place as she was forced to her knees, head shoved down with the business end of a pistol pressed at the back of her neck. She was very aware that if she so much as breathed wrong-

Then time resumed its normal pace, and she registered the chaos around her. She smelled copper, sweet and metallic at once, and the stink of offal- Ian. She smelled her own sweat, the remnants of the perfume she’d used yesterday morning. Heard rapid words, turian language flying around her too fast for her to grasp and translate. Only a few words here and there- ‘hostile,’ ‘illegal,’ ‘insane,’ ‘dangerous.’

It was the last one that had her concerned. There had been one thing that had been made very, very clear by whoever had authored the data packet that had made this whole mission possible; never, under any circumstances, would a human that demonstrated themselves to be potentially dangerous, be permitted to work anywhere but the fields or mines, never in a home. It was one of the reasons they’d chosen a female operative. Even among sexually-equalized turians, females were considered a lesser threat due to the simple fact of size and strength. With humans, the gap between genders in those attributes was even larger, and turians knew that.

Shepard heard the safety on the pistol to her neck being clicked off.

Sometimes, some humans were deemed too dangerous to be allowed even in the mines.

Shepard shut her eyes tight, and for the first time in two decades, she prayed.
Chapter Five

“All warfare is based on deception.”

- Sun Tzu

Chapter Five

“Stop!” Shrieked a shrill, panicked voice. “Mother, make them stop!”

“Quiet, Gab-”

“Ma’am, you should go with the officers to the station, your son’s seen enough today-”

“What will be done with the human?”

“Mother-”

“She’ll be dealt with, ma’am, don’t worry-”

“You will not tell me what to worry about and what not to, Officer. I asked you what will happen to this female.”

Amid the chaos, the blood rushing in her ears, options and courses of action and escape routes flooding her brain, Shepard decided she liked this speaker. Even if Shepard never got the chance to say so, she silently thanked the woman for not being a push-over.
“It’ll be up to the Magistrate, Kyria.”

“No,” the female voice replied. Kyria? Was that a name or a title? Since they didn’t seem to know one another, Shepard guessed it was the latter. “I think it’ll will be up to me. She saved my son’s life, with absolutely no reason to do so, and every reason to keep her head down. You,” she called someone Shepard couldn’t see, due her chin being firmly planted against her clavicle.

“Er, yes Kyria?” Shepard recognized Scars’ voice.

“You have apaito on this human quellen?”

“Yes, Kyria.”

“Then you will mitafero the apaito to me.” She said. Even Shepard wouldn’t have wanted to argue with that tone of voice. Some things carried across species, without translation.

“Er...yes, Kyria. Uh, when? Where?”

“At the station. Now.” As she gave the command, Shepard was hauled to her feet, arms still in a tight grip. Sometime during the chaos, a black aircar and a white transport vehicle of some kind had pulled up.

“I’m afraid that will not be permitted, Kyria.” A new voice preceded the arrival of a second female, flanked by a pair of turians in what could only be their equivalent of professional attire. They came from the direction of the new vehicles. The voice, stance, and clothing of the new female spoke of a position that was universal; government employee. Shepard’s wariness, if that were possible, went up a notch. This, if anytime, was when things could go very wrong.

The speaker, a tall female with absolute authority in her manner, strode over to Shepard in the long, graceful stride of her species. She looked down at the comparatively diminutive human, and Shepard had no problem translating the disdain in her alien features. Shepard kept her own face open, eyes wide, letting the deluge of adrenaline in her body begin to induce a slight tremor to her limbs. She’d have a hard time fighting to keep herself steady, anyway- might as well save the energy and use the shaking to further her case.
“Explain,” the ‘kyria’ growled. She was full of anger and fight, and here was something she could focus it on. The newcomer looked at the mother and snorted.

“There are procedures not even your family can bypass,” she told Shepard’s defender. “These humans all need to be quarantined, processed, interrogated before they are sent anywhere.” She turned to the cuffed turians who had raided Shepard’s original transport. “Trafficking in illegal quellen is a steep accusation,” she told them. “Get a good law-defender.” She then turned to a small army of turians in what looked like white lab suits, all bearing what looked like...

The other human female, the one who’d murdered her daughter for impeding her party life, began to shriek at the sight of body bags. The government turian winced, as did many others.

“Someone shut it up!” She snarled. She turned on the mother, still holding the child Shepard had rescued. “If you want to claim her, you may do so at the central processing center tomorrow morning.” Then she turned and strode to the aircar she’d first emerged from. By the time she was speeding away, the ‘kyria’ was visibly shaking with rage, and the three surviving humans were being forcefully shoved into white, body-sized bags with small CO2 scrubbers attached. Seeing that, Shepard realized what they were for; containing anything nasty they may have brought with them. Turians couldn’t catch human diseases, but asari could, and even at a glance around her surroundings, Shepard saw plenty of asari. Still, Shepard’s cover wouldn’t necessarily know that, so she put up a good struggle for show.

Once zipped inside, she fought the rising instincts that absolutely loathed being blinded. She could still hear, and somewhat translate, the instructions for where she -and the others- were to be taken. Most of it was beyond her, but she remembered all she could, anyway.

Once she was loaded into some sort of vehicle, she memorized the number of turns and their direction, the time between each turn, the approximate speed of the vehicle, thinking that it might come in handy later if she needed to find her way back to this particular port. As it was, the journey itself was short enough, and it wasn’t long before she and the other two bagged humans were lifted over uncomfortable shoulders and dropped onto what Shepard imagined were gurneys of some kind. She wondered if there was some sort of deliberate psychology going here? Body bags, gurneys...what next, dissection?

Shepard remembered her interactions with the scientists back at Shanxi, and shied away from that thought. Just because she knew it was necessary on both sides to understand how to beat an alien enemy, did not mean she relished dwelling on the imagery. Shepard’s imagination and experience supplied for too much detail, sometimes.

Through the white bag, Shepard spied strong lights on a ceiling as she was pushed along on her own rolling apparatus. She could still hear the other woman sniffling, and thought she was
somewhat ahead of Shepard. She heard jokes and laughter of the turians, careless and unconcerned, as they passed some of their coworkers. She didn’t get the jokes, unsurprisingly.

Eventually the morbid journey ended, and the gurney stopped. She held very still as she was lifted up, careful not to give them a reason to drop her. She was set down, surprisingly gentle, and the very top of the body bag was unlatched. In the manner of a woman terrified of enclosed spaces -as she decided Kristin would be, after this- Shepard clawed at the opening. By the time she burst free, gasping despite there having been plenty of air inside the bag, the two turians who had moved her had retreated to the other side of a thick plexiglass wall, a transparent door shut and sealed. Shepard looked around, and let herself gawk.

The cell was ten-by-ten, small and white. Odd looking contraptions were set against the back wall. It took her a moment to realize it was a toilet, of sorts, and what looked like a round hammock, of some sort of plastic, suspended in the corner. A whirring noise interrupted her examination of her surroundings, and a chute separated from the wall to her left, too small for anyone but a child to fit through. Above it, a screen set flush with the wall flickered to life, and there was an animated image of an androgynous human removing their clothing and dropping it into the chute.

Shepard looked to the two turians still on the other side of the clear wall, and despite herself said, “You’ve got to be kidding.” They only kept looking at her, uncomprehending. Behind them, Shepard spied a mirror image of her room, the other woman apparently going through the same instructions.

Shepard sighed. She had left her sense of modesty behind in her early teens. Living in close quarters on a military-contracted vessel, then life in the military itself, had seen to that. Even if she had been self conscious, she knew that what constituted turian porn didn’t include stripping, since their species didn’t really consider clothing required.

Shepard sighed, rubbed her forehead, and climbed out of the white body bag. Resolutely not looking at her audience, she methodically and efficiently stripped to her skin, and shoved it all down the chute. A tapping sound on the glass wall made her look over, and the turian doing the tapping motioned to the body bag, as well. Not seeing the point in refusing, Shepard grabbed it and shoved it, too, down the narrow opening. She snatched her fingers back a half second before the chute snapped shut. Another half second after that, and nozzles had descended from the ceiling, and Shepard was drenched in a sudden deluge of frigid liquid that smelled strongly of something that had to be a disinfectant. Despite herself, the great Commander Shepard shrieked in surprise. A glance told her the nozzles covered the whole room. Teeth chattering within seconds, she hugged her arms to her torso, concentrating on flexing and relaxing various muscle groups to keep the blood warm and flowing to her core and internal organs. She didn’t think the turians were trying to freeze her to death, but training would not be denied. She kept moving, kept the blood flowing, as the nozzles shut off and a second shower came, this one smelling utterly alien. The third was plain water, rinsing away the scouring fumes. It was also, for a wonder, hot. Actually, it was probably lukewarm, but even tepid water on frozen flesh would feel like boiling temperatures.
When she pushed wet hair out of her eyes, she saw that her audience was gone.

Another chute opened, this one proving to contain a false bottom supporting a pair of scratchy towels of some unfamiliar fiber. No four-hundred thread count Egyptian cotton available, apparently. Despite the abrasions that turned her body a bright shade of neon pink, being dry was infinitely better. She used the damp towel to wrap her hair, and tossed the other to the odd-shaped hammock she assumed would serve as a bed, for later use.

Shepard stood in the middle of what was undoubtedly one of the nicest cells she’d ever been confined to, hands on naked hips, and indulged in a breathy sigh as she realized for the second time in as many days, she was in another cage, with nothing to do but commit the day’s events and conversations to memory, reiterate her mission objectives, reheat her cover, and then -her favorite- just wait. She couldn’t even resort to her go-to time passing activity while incarcerated; gym-less work out routines. Kinda defeated the purpose of convincing the enemy she was harmless, if they saw her pushing her body to its limits with obvious experience. Then again, the stunt with the turian kid might have already blown that. But Shepard hadn’t gotten as far as she had in her career by taking chances. So, sitting on her hands it was.

Balls.

Garrus really, really wanted to shoot something. Preferably something wearing Advocate Baltan Caprinicus’ clan paint and garish robes. If he was forced to sit through another vid-conference discussing another motion, bill, law, or petition he didn’t agree with, didn’t care about, or wanted to laugh at, he was convinced he’d abandon his family name and take off for the Citadel and the life he knew and preferred.

‘You owe me, father,’ he thought vehemently. Faintly, he hoped that Solanna was having a good, relaxing time, at least.

For what had to be the hundredth time that day, the highly traditional Advocate of the Tridend colony world was insisting it be required that every family with someone currently serving in the war take a quellen. Apparently, it was their duty, and would provide much needed financial relief to the over-crowded, over worked processing centers currently holding the humans that, by law, could not be killed or released, but were too old, young, or volatile to serve in sensitive households, the agricultural colonies, the mining colonies, the resort colonies, the outposts...
“Advocate, I agree something needs to be done about the overcrowding,” Garrus agreed -again. “But I doubt forcing millions of families to take in a human, especially if those families have lost someone in this war, will prove very...healthy, for the humans in question.”

“You think our people lack the honor to do their duty?” Caprinicus bristled, his crest flaring with indignation.

Garrus restrained a sigh. “On a whole? No. But there will be enough that will see only the face of their husbands’, wives’, childrens’ murderer, and will react. If they don’t outright kill their humans, they’ll make their lives miserable. Add to that, how many families can afford special shipments of asari food? Or even cheap umino rations? And when the war does end, how do we expect these families to pay their quellen, hm? We don’t use livestock and beads anymore, last I checked.”

Counterarguments were made, touting the honor and dedication to service displayed by all good and loyal Heirarchy people. Exceptions could be made for families genuinely without the financial means to care for their quellen. The government employees currently working the centers could be freed up to check on the quellen on occasion, once the emptied centers no longer required more than a handful of workers, to make sure no families with grudges abused their charges. And the government would pay the quellen their back pay upon release, out of the money saved by shutting down so many overcrowded centers. They had an answer to everything, even if every single one of them knew none of it would happen like they said.

Garrus wanted to argue further. This was, in his mind, a phenomenally bad idea. The only up side to it would be, once a good eighty percent of the population had a human quellen shoved down their gullets, the clamor for the war to end and send the unwanted aliens home would be deafening. If that was the goal of this delegation, he could almost have appreciated their single-mindedness. But it wasn’t. This was just another motion to further the propaganda of the Heirarchy’s most conservative party, the very party his father had been a member of. And since Garrus was filling his shoes, technically he was also. The kick was, Garrus usually agreed with their goals and statements. Just not this one. The one he was stuck dealing with.

And, of course, it was decided -without Garrus’ input, since he’d remained silent for the remainder of the discussions- that since they were putting this motion forward, they should set an example. All but two of the delegation members already had quellen in their household; Garrus, and another by the name of Celisia Nimonise. Gracefully, the female Advocate agreed to acquire a few quellen. Across the holographic screen, the other Advocates turned to Garrus, who bit back another aggravated sigh. Not that he was against having a human in his house, but he knew his father would frown on it, and the last thing Garrus needed was to look forward to another reason for his father to be displeased. But there was way out of this without undoing all his work of getting his temporary colleagues to see him as someone worth listening to, even if they never actually seemed to take his advice into consideration.
“My sister is out today,” he said amicably enough. “I’ll contact her and have her stop by our local center this very evening and bring one home.”

‘Bring one home,’ he echoed in his own mind. Like picking out a pet. He swallowed a sound of distaste, keeping his tone and expression cordial until farewells were given and the connections severed, all but one.

“May I be of some assistance, Advocate Nimonise?”

“You’re not very good at hiding your true thoughts, Advocate Vakarian.” She was grinning at him, almost teasing. Garrus scowled, though in a good-natured way. He’d known Celisia briefly during his obligatory tour in the military, when they’d been stationed together aboard a recon frigate. He’d been a gunnery officer, and she a scout. He’d continued onto C-Sec, and she’d returned home to take over her father’s place on the family Arena Seat. They’d exchanged a few messages now and again, always intending to meet up for drinks, but never getting around to it. Bearing that in mind, he was pretty sure what she was about to bring up.

“So, how about that round of Rocam Seven you keep promising me?” She fixed him with a charming look, the one that said she knew she was going to get what she wanted. Garrus couldn’t help but return the grin.

“Sure, so long as we’re playing for pretend money. Don’t think my father would like to return from being a prisoner of war to find his accounts cleaned out.”

She laughed lightly. “Seriously, Garrus. We’ve been meaning to meet up for years. Now we’re on the same planet for the first time in...how long has it been? Six years?”

“About,” he agreed. “All vright, how about some time next week? Solanna’s planning a dinner party sometime soon. If I don’t see you at that, then we’ll go for drinks.”

“Why not both?” She leaned towards the camera, still grinning. He chuckled.

“You still don’t know when to just take what’s handed to you.”
“You don’t get anywhere if you do.”

“Fair enough,” he responded, pleased to find their conversations still flowed in much the same manner as they always had. He suggested a date and time, she agreed, and they bid each other farewell and disconnected just as Solanna came hurtling into the room.

“Lanna?” He asked, worried. She was vibrating with rage, and despite not a thread being out of place she had the look of disheveled urgency.

“Hermatis Processing Center,” she snapped. “We’re going, now. I’ll explain on the way.”

Garrus raised an eyebrow, but for once Solanna didn’t make a face at him for using the asari gesture, just whirled around and headed out of the room as quick as she’d barged in. Given no choice but to follow, he fought the sensation that tonight was going to be one of those nights that saw the kind of change that most people ran from screaming.

Despite her trepidation about being bored, Shepard didn’t have to wait long before a turian in a long grey lab coat came to stand on the outside of her cell, holding a datapad and followed by an asari. They’d brought folding stools, while Shepard was forced to stand or else sit on the floor if she wanted to be close enough to hear them through the glass. She’d wrapped the spare towel around herself, though the cloth barely covered her hips, and stood.

“Hello,” the asari said, a pleasant smile on her face. “I’m going to be translating for you today, since Dr. Vesarius claims he’d rather not torture you with his own butchering of your language.”

Shepard nodded. An unexpected and golden opportunity. Any chance to learn new turian words was to be hoarded, and this way she’d have an idea just how close her own translations had been.

“May I ask your name?” her voice was pleasant, and she was perfectly sweet and polite. Shepard looked at her for a long moment, wondering for the hundredth time why her people, the undeniable ruling species of the galaxy, was permitting this war to continue. And, for the hundredth time, no answer was forthcoming. Shepard put aside the questions and thoughts of a marine, and swapped them for the fear and demands of a spoiled corporate exec.
“Yours first,” she bit out. The asari only smiled.

“Certainly. As I mentioned, this is Dr. Vesarius,” the turian nodded, green eyes fixed on her, as his name was said. “And I am Dr. Liara T’soni. Please, I know you must be scared, but I can promise you that you won’t be hurt.”

“What do you want?”

“Can you be more specific?” Liara pressed, tilting her head slightly. She looked young, though Shepard knew that was not much of an indication for asari.

“With me. What do you want with me?” Translator or no, if the asari was going to be so accommodating, might as well learn as much as she could. Aware that they might be fooling her, and the turian might speak common just fine, Shepard was careful to not ask any questions that would flag her as suspicious.

“Just to know who you are, and make sure you’re treated fairly while placed as a quellen.”

“What’s a quellen? I...I’ve heard that word a lot. What happened at the dock? Why was there shooting?” Not too many at once...too many questions, and none would be answered.

“A ‘quellen’ is a sort of bond servant in the turian culture,” Liara explained. “In times of war, when innocents are captured, instead of killing them the turians would make them servants until the war was over. Most times, they would then pay the quellen as if they had been willing, paid servants the whole time. Many marriages and contracts developed between quellen and their hosts, as well.” She smiled sweetly. “Many officials in the turian government insisted this tradition be upheld while in conflict with your people, otherwise they’d be no better than the batarians, or the krogan.”

Shepard made herself latch onto the thing Kristin would. “So when this is over...I can go home?”

“Absolutely.”

Interesting, that the data packet had been so accurate. Of course, it had mentioned numerous corporations and mercenary bands who went out of their way to capture civilians specifically...free labor force. Short sighted, she supposed, since when the war ended -and all wars ended- they’d supposedly have to give all those people back-pay. But Kristin wouldn’t know about all that.
“Can I ask your name, now?”

“Kristin Lambert,” she replied. She fixed Liara with a calculating eye. Was she lying? Feeding her what she wanted, what she expected to hear? It was possible.

The questions continued, Liara translating, Dr. Vesarius providing the questions to be asked, and many of the responses. Shepard noticed Liara was paraphrasing much of it to be kinder, gentler, but she left nothing out, even the unpleasant details.

“You understand, the tracking of quellen is very important. Quellen may only be captured, not born. If you are caught engaging in sexual activity, you will be sterilized.” She said it gently, but Shepard couldn’t stop the look of disbelief. It made sense from a purely logistical standpoint, but the raw reaction she had from it was firmly horrific, and she let it show. Liara gave her an apologetic look as the Doctor said something else, something about the radiation and a warning. Liara translating, cautioning about Palaven’s naturally higher radiation, due to a thinner magnetosphere than most habitable planets.

“You’d last a week at most, in nonstop exposure,” she told the human. “Most buildings are built to block enough of it out to not harm humans. On the off-chance you are taken in by a family or corporation without such protection, you’ll be administered daily anti-radiation medication.”

The questions, answers, explanations went on and on. Shepard was shocked by the amount of information she was given freely. They either had been thoroughly taken by her ‘vulnerability,’ despite her display at the docks, or else they genuinely didn’t think she stood a snowballs chance in hell of ever escaping. She thought of how much of her mission directive contained instructions and guides for contacting the Alliance, but none for extraction, she was tempted to agree. It was something she’d resigned herself to when first taking the assignment; she’d be on this planet until she died, or until the war ended. Knowing her luck, the two would probably coincide.

Shepard put such thoughts aside as the questions continued, and they dredged up every detail of her life- of Kristin’s life. Oddly, the turian seemed fixated on her health. On any medical procedures she may have had. Heart conditions, time spent on planets with extra radiation, biotics.

Humanity was familiar with the supposed ‘magic powers’ of the asari and a very, very rare handful of turians. None had emerged in the human race...none that had survived past infancy, at least.

She never missed a beat, despite the piercing stare with which the doctor fixed her in place.
Silently, she thanked Parasini. What she could understand of the words that passed between the doctors in turian told her that they were completely unsuspecting of her.

Eventually, it seemed like the Doctor and Liara were finishing up, standing and taking their folding stools down, when a familiar female turian came marching down the hall. Shepard held her face in a state of neutral non-recognition, though she had every recollection of her last encounter with this particular female; it was the official from the docks.

“You shouldn’t have wasted your time,” she told the doctor and the asari. “This one’s going to Epyrus, the mining outpost. She killed one of her own this afternoon when being brought in.”

Shepard bit her tongue, barely in time. She had understood just barely enough of the female’s words to know she was giving a rather inaccurate reports of events.

“Hello Varas,” the doctor greeted the female, frowning at he looked at his pad, then at her. “Shame. Advocate Nimonise comm’d me less than an hour ago. This one would have been perfect.”

“Pick another,” Varas snapped. “Spirits know we’ve got plenty.”

“They’re not animals, Varas,” Liara cut in, frowning firmly. “They’re people, caught in unfortunate circumstances. Your callousness is unwarranted and unprofessional.”

“Sing it to someone else, asari.” Varas snorted, and kept walking, barking orders to the pair of turians who followed her, taking notes.

The asari girl muttered something in her own language, and the doctor’s VI translator on his omnitool chirped a translation that made him chuckle. “Careful,” he told her. “Don’t let her hear you. Someday, it’ll be a advantage to you, that no one knows you’ve got such a backbone.”

Liara beamed at him. “The only reason they don’t know, is because they mistake kindness for weakness, and such ignorance is their weakness.” She spoke in turian, that time.

“Spoken like a true daughter of Benezia,” the doctor told her, patting her shoulder. Liara blushed as he turned and walked away.
“What just happened?” Shepard demanded, remembering she wasn’t supposed to have understood any of that. Liara looked at her, expression apologetic again.

“I’m sorry,” she told her. “I’m afraid there will be a change of plans. Nothing bad, I assure you.”

Odd. Shepard wasn’t an expert on asari body language, but from everything she -and the Alliance- knew, they were similar enough to human mannerisms. And Liara was an open book. And she had just lied.

Liara opened her mouth to say something else, when she was cut off by a sudden commotion from down the hall. A door was opened, and footsteps could be heard. A turian female voice, speaking loudly and forcefully.

“Oh dear,” the asari murmured, still on common, oddly enough. “I...I’d better go see what’s wrong.” She gave Shepard a polite smile, and moved off out of sight down the hall.

Shepard sighed, putting a hand to her temple, keeping the other hand on the towel to keep it in place as she moved back to the damn hammock.

More waiting, but this time she had new and interesting information to dissect and disseminate...a lot of it.

In the end, Garrus had put aside the rolling ball of emotions his sister’s tale had evoked to deal with for another time. Worry, relief, exasperation, anger, determination- they all went in a box that he shoved to the back of his mind. It was something he’d gotten good at over the years, putting unimportant things aside and focusing.

Right now, he was focusing on not putting the guard in his way through a wall.

Solanna’s family name, temper, money, and threats had gotten them past the usual pile of paperwork and wasted time most people had to go through before they were permitted to select a
quellen to bring into their household. A guide had brought them to the holding cells underground, but now a guard was barring their way, saying that interrogations were being performed at the moment, and no one unauthorized was allowed in.

Thankfully, the stubborn individual who was precariously close to finding his head on one side of a wall, and his body on the other, was saved by the emergence of what obviously a doctor. His badge read ‘Vesarius.’

“I’m sorry,” he told them when Solanna had finished telling him who they were there to claim. “But that particular female has been declared unstable. She killed one of her own kind, did you know? With no reason.”

“No...no reason...” Solanna’s mandibles were flared wide, and she was gasping with rage. Alarmed, Garrus moved between her and the startled doctor.

“You’ve been misinformed,” Garrus told him, keeping his voice calm but intense, making sure the doctor was listening to him. In a voice filled with steady confidence, he told the male what had transpired, according to the explanation Solanna had given him on the way.

“You may contact D-Sec Officers Parrin and Deloscus for confirmation,” Solanna said once she managed to regain her temper. “And then you tell me if saving my son is ‘for no reason.’”

“I...apologize,” Vesarius said after a moment. “It seems I was...misinformed. Please, go on through. I’ll make some calls, draw up the immediate documents. The superfluous legalities I’ll have sent to your home terminals, if you like, for you to fill out later.”

“That would be appreciated,” Garrus nodded.

“She’s in cell number four,” the doctor told him before instructing the guard to let them through. “Kyria Vakarian, if you will come with me? I’ll need you to sign those documents right away.”

“Fine. Yes, I’ll come with you.” She made a visible effort to calm and collect herself before moving down the hall after the doctor, her movements jerky with anger and fear of what might have happened. Now that this crisis was taken care of, he knew she’d be eager to return home to where she’d put Gabias in bed.
Garrus nodded to the guard as he opened the door, and he moved past it and into the long hall beyond, lined with a total of eight small cells. He walked down the row of small white rooms, stopping in front of the forth one. She lay curled up in the turian-style hammock suspended in the square made by the corner of the cell and two brackets extending from them to meet at a right angle. She was covered with only a thin length of cheap toweling, the fibrous strands growing from her head still damp from the decontamination shower.

She stared directly at him. He watched her form stiffen, then spring into a multitude of simultaneous actions that resulted in her ending up at the other side of the cell, facing him, looking utterly shocked.

At least, he thought it was shocked. He was better than most turians at reading human expressions, due mostly to his time on the Citadel and dealing with the victims of the Traders crime ring. He was pretty sure this was ‘shocked.’ And not surprised, frightened, or startled shock, but flat out seeing-something-that-wasn’t-supposed-to-exist shock. Interesting.

Also interesting, was the fact that he could sense her from clear across the room. At first entry, he’d thought it was the other turian at the far end of the room, guarding another door. As far as he knew, humans had no detectable vitalia. And yet, this one did. Even through the plexiglass wall, he could feel the faint thrum.

He imagined there were any number of doctors -military and civilian- that would love to take a look at her, see if their previous assumptions of humans having no detectable vitalia was wrong after all, or if she was a fluke. For a moment, patriotism warred with personal honor. The imperialist in him knew he should bring this curiosity to the attention of the proper persons, if Dr. Vesarius hadn’t already, knowing it could possibly give them that final leg-up over the surprisingly determined human aggravation.

On the other hand... She had saved Gabias. According to Solanna, Gab had been close to asphyxiation, and from there only a few moments away from the beginnings of brain damage.

With that in mind, the choice was clear.

Mindful of her frightened -that word seemed wrong, somehow- state, Garrus approached the glass, hands clasped loosely behind him. She kept her gaze trained on him, her expression shifting now, subtle muscles underneath the soft flesh on her face altering their orientation to form new shadows and contours. It was utterly fascinating to watch, especially when her face settled into something he was pretty sure meant confusion. Also...
Recognition? That one was too subtle for him to be sure of.

Once again thankful for his human-language-speaking asari cohort on the Citadel, Garrus spoke. It was time to see if he was bringing home a potential threat to his family or not.

“What you name?”

The question shocked Shepard almost as much as seeing Nomos Vakarian’s clone appear on the other side of the glass had been. She hesitated. Was he related? Or was this just a passing resemblance? Even among humans, there were people who looked related who were not, and that was an observation made by a species of themselves...Shepard still had issues telling turians apart from one another.

For a moment, she’d thought he was Nomos. Wondered how he’d known where she’d ended up, how he’d returned to his homeworld so fast. By her reckoning, he wasn’t even due to be handed over the turians just yet. Then she noted the small deviations -the shade of blue of those raptor eyes, the slight height difference, the pattern of scales up along his neck. All those things told her no, this was not Nomos Vakarian. She really thought she’d gotten better at looking past the colony markings.

The turian in question cleared his throat, and repeated, “What you name?” A pause, “Please?” She realized he was speaking gently, deliberately trying to keep his mandibles shut while he spoke. Trying not to spook her. She made herself relax, one toe and finger at a time. She didn’t have to falsify the wariness suffusing her movements and expression. Every instinct she had told her she’d been found out, and that this was a trick to figure out how much she knew. For once, logic and instinct were not in cohesion, and it made Shepard very edgy.

Well, if she’d been found out...there wasn’t much she could do about it. There would be no extraction. No rescue. No painless death. Might as well drag this out, make the bastards work for it.

And if she wasn’t found it, no point in blowing it.

“K-Kristin,” she managed to get out, managing to put fear in her voice. Fear she felt just fine, but would never had made it into her tone and inflections if she didn’t let it. A brave man was not
lacking in fear, just knew how to control it. True fearlessness was for the stupid.

The turian gestured to himself. “Garrus.”

“Why am I here? What’s going on?” She didn’t know how much common he knew, but she both needed to find out, and play the role of ignorant but stubborn Kristin. “The asari said everything was going to be allright, but I know she was lying! Tell me what’s going to happen to me!”

Garrus tilted his head in a manner so reminiscent of a bird, or a raptor, Shepard blinked. Did they have hollow bones, too? Feathers, perhaps? Have a fascination with shiny things? And wouldn’t that end up being a hoot, if the weakness of the mighty turian military was a bunch of dangling mirrors?

The turian seemed to be trying to translate her rapid questions, but eventually he answered, slowly and brokenly, “You safe. No hurt.”

She forced herself to relax, somewhat. Kristin, she thought, might take some comfort in that promise. Shepard, however, called bullshit. At least for now.

“Where am I?” She pressed. Would he give her that much?

“Home,” was all he said. She gave him an exasperated, desperate look.

“That’s not an answer!” At his obvious lack of comprehension, she pointed at him and said, “Your home.” Pointed to herself. “Not my home!” If her concentrated turian-expression-reading-bootcamp time was telling her anything, it was telling her that he was grinning slightly.

“Yes,” he replied, pointing at her. “Your home today.”

Kristin was a wealthy, pampered, spoiled business bitch. She stamped her foot, turned away from him, pacing angrily, still keeping a death grip on the towel. Inwardly, Shepard’s mind was working overtime. He spoke a smattering of common, then, basic words. Actually about equal to her turian, it sounded like, which meant he probably understood more than he spoke. She heard a sigh behind her, and turned, a genuinely wary look on her face.
“I really have no idea how to explain this in what little of your speech I know,” he said in tired-sounding turian. “I’ve had a hell of a week. Taking over my father’s political responsibilities while he’s off playing with your people, my mother dying, my nephew nearly being choked to death, and now you.” He looked up at her, clearly not expecting her to understand. She made sure he saw nothing he didn’t expect; a frustrated scowl of incomprehension. “But here’s what you need to know; you are now quellen, honor bound to serve the family of the one who captured you in battle until our peoples’ quarrels are over. You were not taken honorably; by most traditions, that means you get set free. But these are modern times, and no one will approve the release of a human who has seen the homeworld. So, you’re stuck here. And since you saved my nephew, I owe you. My sister owes you. My family owes you. Technically, you cannot be in debt to a quellen. We cannot free you, or send you home, or pay you. But we can make sure you come to no harm until this war ends.”

Shepard had understood barely every other word of his speech, but context and what she already knew let her fill in the blanks. Sister, nephew. Owed her. It clicked, then- this was he brother of the mother whose son she’d saved that morning. And now he felt honor-bound too make sure she at least didn’t die in a mine somewhere out in the universe, felt he owed her an explanation.

Turians with honor. Honor recognizable by human standards.

Well...damn.

She’d known it had to exist, had heard plenty of stories of humans and turians trapped together, working together so that they all survived, holding their promises until all were safe and only then resuming the fighting. She’d heard it, just hadn’t really believed it.

Remembering her persona at the last moment, Shepard spread her hands wide and blurted, “I don’t understand you, you great big lizard!”

Surprisingly, the turian chuckled, a surprisingly pleasant sound that vibrated the air in thick, rolling tones. “Lizard, hm?” He grinned, still speaking the turian common language. “Been called worse.”

Shepard felt as if she were standing on a tilting-table, one of those torturous devices from bootcamp used to teach balance while on the go. One step too far, too hard, or too late in any direction, and she’d fall. There were too many pieces in play at that exact moment. She had the sense she’d just past some sort of test, and wondered if passing it had been good or bad for her mission. For her continued breathing through her nose rather than a hole in her chest. It all rested on what this turian in front of her decided to do. If he was a good judge of character, he’d know she’d genuinely never do anything to harm a child or his family. If he was too good a judge, he’d see that in the same moment in which she saved his nephew, she’d shoot him in the heart if it saw her mission completed.
And so they stood, captive and captor, staring and evaluating. Shepard recalled that for turians, when staring, meeting the eye was a sign of respect and common courtesy; it said, you have my attention, and I think you are worth listening to. To stare, but off center of the eyes, satisfied the bare requirements to be considered ‘polite,’ but indicated lack of interest. Looking elsewhere during a conversation, or any sort of interaction, was utterly rude. Not entirely different from human body language, but much more important in a species that lacked overtly obvious facial expressions. Shepard wondered how he would take it, that she was meeting his gaze with an intensity on par with his own. Deer-in-the-headlights syndrome? Would he find it odd that a human upheld turian expectations? Would he think it unknowing, or wonder if she knew to do it?

Abruptly, it occurred to her that Kristin Lambert might meet the stares of her peers without qualms, but an enemy, a walking example of everything human instincts screamed to run away from?

Not likely.

Shepard averted her eyes, gaze flicking uncertainly back up to his a few times, willing him to read it as uncertainty, not deliberate rudeness.

The door opened, breaking the tension that had risen almost slow enough as to be imperceptible until it was unexpectedly shattered. The asari from earlier came into view, bearing an armful of cloth and a brilliantly relieved smile. She nodded to Garrus, and they spoke quietly, with Shepard only catching a few words. Eventually the newcomer nodded, and keyed open her cell. Still smiling, Liara stepped through, and handed Shepard the cloth; clothing. A dress-robe sort of thing, and a pair of asari shoes made of something durable that stretched to accommodate just about any foot size.

Grateful despite herself, she gave the asari a genuine grin before turning and slipping the robe on over her towel, turning her clothed back to Garrus and Liara before dropping the towel and securing the fastenings of the robe in place. It actually fit rather well, as did the shoes. As she dressed, she heard another set of turian footsteps come down the hall, and tensed, but kept her fingers busy. At least they weren’t sneaking...

Clothed, she turned around to find the new turian, one wearing a guard’s uniform of some kind, reaching into a compartment on his belt to retrieve a set of restraints. Garrus stopped him as he came forward, taking the restraints and coming towards her himself.

A feeling reminiscent of a stint in her AIT years, the first and only time she’d been arrested, pulled at a thread of memory. She ignored it, and turned around, clasping her hands behind her. A talon’ed hand on her shoulder made her jump, and again her training and restraint were tested as she just
barely managed to keep instinct from taking over in a series of defensive moves that would likely end up with her severely injured, given that she was unarmed and outnumbered. The hand was gentle, despite the talons, and only turned her around. Facing Garrus, she saw give her what she thought was meant to be a reassuring smile as his other hand tugged gently on her bare arm, until she released her grip on her wrists and let him pull her hands in front of her.

It dawned on her, very abruptly, that this was the first time she’d let an enemy touch her. Every other time during this mission, she’d been touched through gloves, and for the purposes of restraining, fighting, or injuring. Not sure what the make of the revelation, or why it had even occurred to her to notice this fact, Shepard dismissed it entirely. She watched as he put the restraints on, with her arms in front, an infinitely more comfortable and maneuverable position. A small measure of consideration, perhaps even trust.

Idiot. If their positions were reversed, she’d have him trussed up like a crocodile on a spit. Then again, if positions were reversed, there was no way she’d taken one of the enemy into her house, either. Lucky for her mission, their positions were right where they were.

“See?” Liara told her as she passed. “I told you everything would be okay. The Vakarians are a great family, very well known, very respected. I’ll come and check on you soon, yes?”

Barely, just barely, Shepard managed to swallow a sharp inhalation of breath that would have tipped them all off that something was wrong. She managed to smile and nod at Liara, but her mind was reeling.

Vakarian. Really? Did God hate her?

As she followed her new host out of the hall of cells and up an elevator, through some offices, outside and into a sleek aircar, Shepard’s entire grasp of her mission underwent a rapid re-evaluation. Nomos Vakarian had been scheduled to be turned over to Hierarchy officials a week from the day of her own ‘capture.’ That had been two days ago. Assuming Nomos came straight home—and who wouldn’t, after being a POW?—Shepard now had five days until her cover was blown.

‘Oh shit,’ didn’t even begin to cover it.
“But you, take courage!

Do not let your hands be weak,

for your work shall be rewarded.”

- 2 Corinthians 15:7

Chapter Six

Garrus

The atmosphere in the aircar on the ride back to the villa was...odd. Not tense. Not awkward. Tired, certainly, but with an alertness that made the three occupants unusually wary. Solanna was still clearly trying to calm down after the day’s events without her body crashing, an impossibility in Garrus’ experience. The little quellen in the back seat was silent, watching the city pass the windows with avid attention. Garrus thought she might be trying to memorize everything she saw. Not unlikely, since she had to know she wouldn’t be leaving the house often, if at all.

Garrus himself was so far beyond strained, he’d passed into amused. It might have been worse if he hadn’t already been planning on taking in a quellen. Granted, that plan had come into existence mere minutes before Solanna had abducted him from his own office, but still.

At that moment, Garrus was indulging in something dangerously close to wistfulness, as he briefly let himself wish devoutly he was still on the Citadel, where the worst thing he usually had to deal with was aggravating evangelistic hanar. Then with a will, he turned his thought tiredly to the issue at hand. The human would need a room, food, and tasks. He didn’t want to foist it all off on Meda, at least not tonight. In the morning he’d inform the old housekeeper she has a new set of hands to help, but for tonight he'd deal with it.
"The old servants' hall," Solanna said suddenly, cutting the silence like a knife. Garrus looked at her with mild surprise. He'd thought her mind had been elsewhere. He should have known that she, like him, knew to deal with immediate issues quickly. "It'll be better than putting her in one of the outer buildings."

Garrus nodded. "I was thinking the same."

Now Solanna looked at him with surprise, then away. "You've changed," she said bluntly.

"People are known to do that, now and again," he replied with aplomb. Solanna smacked him on the shoulder with the back of her hand.

"I'm serious. You used to never think beyond your next antic."

"I'm serious too, Lanna. People change when they leave home. Did you think I didn't know I wouldn't need to do some growing up when I left Palaven?" He was curious now. Not hurt, just curious as to why his sister was surprised to find him capable.

At last she answered, "I had hoped you wouldn't need to change. At least, not so much."

Ah, so she'd noticed. He really shouldn't have been surprised. Born barely a year apart, the siblings had always been alike when it came to being observant and intuitive. Solanna wasn't the first to mention the edge he had gained in the last few years, as he'd begun to see through the layers of polish on the universe, to the grime beneath. For the most part he managed to do what he could, and shake his head at the rest. It wasn't always enough, but it was better than doing nothing. Barely.

"I can pull apart one of the disaster kits for some umino bars," Solanna went on, effectively changing the topic. Even though he'd thought of this an hour ago, while walking out of the Center, Garrus let his sister continue, to give herself something to focus on while the last of the day's tension drained out of her. Plus, she was better than he was at accounting for unforeseen details. By the time they pulled into the long, winding driveway, Solanna had the new quellen's -Krista?- life plotted out like a well-charted recon run. Despite the stress that still clung to him, he had to laugh. Some things would never change.

The garage they pulled into was underground, a small distance from the villa itself. Thankfully, Palaven's radiation levels were low enough that a short trek outdoors wouldn't hurt the human.
Briefly, Garrus wondered if this was what it felt like to be a parent, or older sibling. Certainly reminded him of when Gabias and Norius had been younger. As he watched the human emerge from the back of the vehicle, he also wondered why he cared. Answering his own question, Garrus recalled the two human girls on the Citadel, survivors of a botched Trader sting op. He remembered hoping they were placed with a family, and not on a mining or agricultural colony, and admitted his concern for this one human might be as much due to his guilt at not being able to save more victims that day, as it was gratitude for his nephew's safety.

Once inside, Solanna began to steer the human through the kitchen -they'd come in through the side entrance- and stopped out in the hall when Garrus put a hand on he shoulder.

"Get some sleep," he told her, keeping his voice low. The kitchen was the first room of the wing, with the old servants rooms beyond it, as well as a number of rooms used for storage. Old Meda was the only one who still slept in the main house, all the others having long ago been given their own specially built, one and two room apartments, set somewhat away from the central buildings of the estate.

"Nonsense," she argued, and made to move forward.

"Solanna." He kept his voice gentle, and let his use of her full name, rather than his nickname, 'Lanna,' carry the implication. She fixed him with a scowl, but relented.

"Sleep well," she said, then disappeared down the opposite end of the hall.

Sighing, Garrus looked back at the human just in time to catch her averting her gaze from...well, everything. In a split moment, while she'd thought no eyes would be on her - Solanna walking away, and him watching her go- the human had glanced at very specific points in their surroundings; the vents in the ceiling, the window that looked out over the kitchen garden, the hanging pots visible through the open kitchen door, the closed doors down the hall. Even the decorative sconces on the walls. Garrus blinked. If he didn't know better, he would think she was just curious about being in an alien home...except she hadn't looked at the paintings, the statues in the niches, the distinctly turian style tilework.

She caught him staring at her, and for the briefest of fleeting moments, when she first met his gaze, he thought he almost caught something...something like a mirror-

Then it was gone, and he was looking at just another frightened human. Garrus shook himself, putting the observation aside for later contemplation. For now, he planted a firm hand on the quellen's shoulder and guided her down the dimly lit hall to a room at the middle, one he knew had
no windows. He didn't think she was stupid enough to try and escape on a planet that would slow-cook her in about a month, but still. Besides that, the placement of the room and lack of windows also offered just that much more protection from the radiation.

The door, like all the others, remained in the classic style of two parts that slid aside into slots into slots in the wall. A few generations ago, all the locks has been upgraded to biometric scanners. In the rest of the villa, they were designed to blend stylishly with the wood. Here in the old servants wing, however, it was just a boxy interface adhered to the old locks.

Garrus let the reader scan his finger, just below the talon. It slid open, and he took his hand off the human's shoulders, and motioned her inside. When she peeked into the room cautiously, he did the same, and winced. Dust covered everything, and much of the furniture had been removed. But there was a suitable turian-style bed still in the corner, and a small door led into a private bathroom that should still function.

"I'll have Meda give you some cleaning supplies in the morning. That'll be your first job, taking care of your own room." He looked down at her, as she glanced up at him with...an odd expression. Once again reminded of how little he knew of human faces, he said, "Don't give me that look. Just because I brought you here doesn't mean you get to sit on your ass. You'll work, and sing while you do it."

Something in his tone must have carried across the language barrier, because her lips twitched briefly in what he recognized as amusement. The amusement shifted to...hesitation? The expressions were so similar to asari in many cases. Once he'd realized that, he'd made a significant improvement in his understanding of human faces, but this particular female changed faces so abruptly, he felt like he was back at the beginning.

"What is it?" he prompted, hoping that again his tone would convey his meaning. It must have, because she asked a question he mostly understood, save for what seemed to be the key word.

"'Kid?'" He echoed inquisitively.

"Small child, boy." She pronounced the words carefully, and this time he understood.

“Gabias is fine. Frightened, but fine.” At her blank stare, he realized he’d spoken in his own tongue. “Ah, boy safe,” he tried, and was saw her nod with satisfaction.
"Sleep well," he told her, and stepped back. He waited until she’d done the same, moving back into the room, before he let the doors slide shut. Without thinking twice about it, he locked the doors, and went to find his own room.

Desolas

The sight of a turian wiping blood off his hands was undoubtedly one of the more frightening things the universe had devised, and Desolas held this opinion while being a member of said species. To a human, it had to be that much more terrifying. During the earlier years of the war, Desolas had made it a sort of hobby, studying what humans were afraid of, both consciously and on the instinctual level. He had found, to his useful interest, that turians encompassed both rather well. The teeth, the eyes, the body structure that shouted ‘predator.’ There were exceptions, of course, those that overlooked all aspects of common sense for the simple fact that they were aliens. He knew his brother had a handful of human contacts who held the idea that this was all one giant misunderstanding, and that eventually peace would be reached and the turians would be the answer to their every prayer, as benevolent and understanding as they’d been ruthless and unstoppable. His brother rather firmly loathed humanity, but he was more than practical enough to overlook his distaste in favor of utilizing contacts that few other turians had.

Desolas himself neither disliked nor liked humans. They were just another species, and eventually the war would end, as all wars did, and the humans would likely either become a client race of the turians, or else the universe would forever be ensuring that every event, battle, encounter, and treaty that ever took place put the turian and human counterparts on opposite ends of the tables. They were holding their own well enough, certainly worth of respect, but it was entirely clear in his mind that they were in no way equals. Not a threat to the turian race’s standing in the galaxy, and therefore rarely warranted more than his most cursory of attentions.

Excepting, of course, situations like this.

“Well?” He asked his brother as the taller turian came into the room, wiping his talons clean of that odd shade of red humans leaked.

“Same as before,” Saren replied flatly. “Claims the artifact was taken straight from the ship to Septimus’ store, and we know where it went after that.”
“Hm,” was Desolas’ only reply for a long moment. Then, “I’d rather not stir up any suspicions, brother. But if this is the right now, we need to get it someplace...safe.”

“Any suggestions?” Saren’s voice was icy, edged with sarcasm. “I don’t see us walking onto the Vakarian estate and just taking it.”

“We can.” Desolas’ replied simply. “Spectres.”

“Spectre,” his brother corrected with the singular, harshly. Desolas did not take offense. It was true, his brother was the Spectre, he was not. Too many wavering psych evals. While Saren was a ruthless bastard who went to any length to see a job done, no matter the body count, it was clear Saren did not relish the killing. He simply didn’t care.

Desolas, on the other hand... ‘Enjoy’ was the wrong word, but ‘fascinated’ was close. So many ways for a turian to die, that number multiplied exponentially when the methods of death for asari, human, batarian, and all the others were added in to the equation.

Saren went on. “Vakarian’s not the type to just let us walk out with it, even if we’d be perfectly within the law to do so. That one doesn’t let anything go easily.” He was nearly hissing now, tongue lashing against the backsides of his teeth. Desolas tilted his head inquisitively.

“Personal experience?”

“Plenty. Bastard’s investigated me a few times, with Pallin’s blessing.” Saren had tossed aside the reddened cloth, and removed a pair of packaged meals from a chilled closet set into the wall. He tossed one to his brother, who caught it but didn’t open it.

“Odd, thought he was the one the Council had been seriously looking at assigning to Nilus for probationary training, a few years ago?”

“He was.” Saren had torn open his own meal, and was using mandibles and teeth to tear chunks off a large portion of purple-brown meat, gulping the pieces mostly whole. “Political strings were pulled, and he was reassigned to C-Sec. I doubt it was his idea, and he’s been venting his petty jealousy ever since.”

“Hm, yes, because you’ve never done anything worthy of investigation,” Desolas drawled at his
brother, who ignored the taunt. He put his own meal -unopened, untouched- down on the table beside him, picking up a datapad he’d been perusing before Saren had entered. The image of the artifact, whole and beautiful, flickered to life at the movement. He’d only been in its presence briefly, a few days, but the more he thought about it, the more he researched it, the longer he tracked it...

“You better do something about the body before it begins to smell.” Saren stood abruptly, tossing the empty package in a waste bin and heading for the door. “It sounds like what we’ve found is just what it seems; an old prothean beacon from an old museum.”

“But I felt it,” Desolas murmured, ignoring the comment about the body. "Protheon artifacts don't... sing."

Before either could do or say anything further, Saren’s omnitool chirped it’s notification of having received a message. The identity of the sender intrigued Saren enough that he opened it then and there, and exhaled in sharp disbelief. Or amusement. Siblings or not, sometimes even Desolas wasn’t sure of Saren's moods or reactions. He waited for his brother to volunteer the information. Pressing him would only make him dangle the knowledge, as he’d done all their lives. Certainly he was more subtle about it now, but the inclination was still very much there.

“Apparently,” Saren said, voice filled with dry amusement. “We are invited to dinner. As an apology.”

Desolas gawuffed. “The sister?” Spectre or not, he still had access to many of Saren’s contacts and resources. And, of course, he was not without his own veins of information. It was relatively well known that the unorthodox and somewhat rebellious Garrus Vakarian had a sister that was invertedly politically competent and socially adept.

Saren didn’t respond, only tapped in a brief reply into his omnitool’s interface, and sent it. “We’ll go and take a look at the thing,” he said, curtly, and made to leave.

“Might as well stay for dinner,” Desolas responded to the door as it cycled shut, but he himself was already looking back down at the datapad in hand.

He had to find that damn Monolith. And once that was done, find the damn bastard who had managed to hide it from him so sucessfully for so long.
Jack.

Shepard

After a night of discreetly searching for bugs and cameras, her movements disguised as a blind-in-the-dark woman fumbling for light switches, Shepard had permitted herself a few hours of sleep before dawn. The hanging hammock-nest proved surprisingly comfortable, despite being laden with dust. She’d lain awake, despite her physical and mental exhaustion, until she was convinced there was nothing more she could do until morning. She’d located the remnants of a broken lamp, the pole that had made it’s stand heavy and rounded at one end, and set it near her in case her new ‘hosts’ abruptly realized the idiocy of taking in one of the enemy, tradition and gratitude be damned.

She actually was glad the kid was all right, though.

In the end, she slept, but lightly, and woke to the sound of the Japanese-style doors sliding open without so much as a warning knock. Shepard was awake and on her feet by the time the old female was stepping across the threshold, her hand behind her on the pipe resting on the hammock. She was careful to keep her posture wary, but non-threatening. The female wore the same blue markings as the two Vakarians she’d dealt with yesterday. Family, or just from the same colony?

The female began chattering at her, speaking too quickly at first for Shepard to grasp more than a few words, but ‘come with’ and ‘morning food’ were among them. Shepard wondered if they’d remembered turian food was useless to her. She was one of the ones lucky enough to have zero reaction to dextro-amino acids, but foods based on the wrong side of the molecule still would pass straight through her system mostly untouched, providing as much nutrition as air.

Not given much of a choice, Shepard tentatively followed the female out of the room and into the hall, and down to the room they’d come in through the night before, obviously a kitchen of some sort. There were two section to the wide, open space- the right, the actual kitchen, and to the left was some sort of informal dining area. It never ceased to make her grin inwardly, how many little things were the same between two radically different species. The chairs and table could have fit right in on any art-deco furniture show room floor.

There was a place set. Just one, with new-looking cutlery. Shepard knew turians didn’t use much in the way of eating utensils- they didn’t need to, with their talons and considering that most of their
cuisine was composed of largely uncut meats and vegetables, and very few liquids aside from water. But there it was, the set of knife, fork, and spoon, and a plate loaded with...

Bacon?

Shepard realized that the old turian was talking to her. Training and habit retained most of what she’d said, even if Shepard hadn’t been paying attention, and she recalled the woman's words and translated enough of it to understand that she had gotten up very early, gone to the 'market,' and tracked down a shop that specialized in human cuisine. Some turian ‘host’ families spoiled their quellen, apparently, as a show of wealth. Quellen weren’t much of a step up from old-school slavery, so squandering funds on imported, borderline illegal goods couldn’t, in her mind, be validated by much of anything other than vanity.

And of all the things to survive being transported off of earth, through several Relays, probably a firefight, then eventual transportation to an alien world, and still be edible...it would be bacon. Salty, fatty bacon.

The pile of crispy ribbons was still steaming.

Shepard looked to the turian woman, pointed to the bacon, then to herself, and raised an eyebrow. She doubted she understood the significance of the raised line of hair, but she did understand the hand gesture, and gave the turian equivalent of ‘shooing’ her towards the seat, saying, “Yes, yes, of course for you, go eat!”

Shepard didn’t move right away, simply paused and looked the alien in the eye. Something about her reminded Shepard strongly of...well, ‘home’ was as close as she could really come, though she couldn’t pinpoint what exactly about her made her think of the Midway or her parents or brothers, exactly... But there it was. The last place and set of people that Shepard had ever called home, and here was this member of the enemy species, offering her a plate of bacon, reminding her of it.

Shepard put a hand to her chest and said, “Kristin.”

The turian’s mandibles flared wide in a careless beaming grin, and mirrored the gesture, saying, “Meda.” Then she shooed Kristin towards the cooling bacon.

The bacon was exactly what she expected; clearly on the verge of going bad, thoroughly saturated with sodium, dripping with enough grease to make her arteries cry out in protest, and absolutely the
best thing she’d ever eaten. It was true, that hunger was the best sauce, and since she hadn’t eaten since the half-finished steak on the Alliance transport, she had plenty of sauce. She spared enough thought to hope Meda wouldn’t take offense to her not using the cutlery she’d so thoughtfully sought out, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to deal with the impractical image of trying to eat bacon with a knife and fork.

While the bacon steadily disappeared down her throat, Shepard rehashed what her exhausted brain had managed to dredge up the night before; time wise, she was screwed. By the terran calendar, she had five days until negotiations were scheduled to begin for the exchange of a number of turian and human prisoners, the highest profile on the human side being Nomos Vakarian, the one turian who could absolutely identify her. Difference in planetary rotation gave her an extra day, give or take a few hours. Counted in to that, the fact that negotiations between allies never went according to schedule, let alone enemies, Shepard thought she could count on an extra two days, Palaven calendar. Counting in travel time gave her nine days- ten, tops.

That brought her to her next hurdle; prioritizing goals. First, make contact with the rebels. If nothing else, they needed to know that the Alliance knew they were there, and were willing to help. If she accomplished nothing else, then at least the bare basics of her mission objective would have been achieved. This would be easy enough, provided she could find a relatively secure terminal and at least a minute while she hacked it, used it to send out a message encrypted and disguised as burst static on the frequency she’d memorized, then erase her tracks.

Secondary objective; gather whatever intel she could, through whatever family she was placed with, and funnel it to the rebels for the next time information managed to be exchanged between them and the Alliance. She’d lucked out where this was concerned- the Vakarian family was high ranking, the equivalent, perhaps, of modern English nobility on earth. Some ancestral ties to purely inherited power, but most of it now actually earned and worked for in some fashion.

Tertiary objective; if possible, do what she could to disrupt the turian war efforts.

Thankfully, cancer had already been cured, else she was sure that would have been on the list, too.

Shepard had been given more impossible missions before. Hell, she’d assigned half of them to herself without anyone knowing about it until things were left behind her as smoldering ruins and she had the answers to the universe in hand. Shepard did not gloat; she told facts. She knew exactly how good she was, and no more and no less. And fact was, she was good enough to get this done...with enough time. It was why they’d chosen her, and why shed gone along without argument.

One thing at a time, she reminded herself. Rome wasn’t built in a day.
No, but it wasn’t built in ten, either, she thought with a suppressed wince. This was going to require a set of miracles and lucky occurrences even she would raise an eyebrow at.

At the same time that she swallowed the last bit of salty goodness, an adolescent turian male entered the kitchen, spotted her, and stopped dead in his tracks. Despite the social stigma that said eye contact was polite in most cases, it was also an evolutionary development; don’t take your eyes off what the mind registers as a potential threat. And from the young male’s posture, quick glances to Meda, and the knife by Shepard's right hand, and back to Shepard herself, she could guess he definitely saw her as a threat. Something in those things strongly and abruptly reminded her of the tall male, Garrus. A son? Or another nephew?

"What's it doing here?" the adolescent demanded of Meda, sounding rude even by human standards. Meda ignored him. Shepard kept her face neutral even as the boy kept shooting her dirty looks. Based on the information Parasini had provided, she guessed him to be around fifteen, give or take. If she were standing, he’d have to look her in the eye rather then staring down at her as he was now. With that in mind, Shepard rose to her feet, but slowly so as not to startle the tense youth.

"Meda!" the boy snapped. "Why is that human here?"

"What was that, Norius? Did you hear a noise? I heard a noise. Sounded like a boy filling the air with impolite gas." For a turian, it was a sharp rebuke. To human ears, it was just funny, and Shepard found herself fighting a grin. As for the boy, Norius, his head recoiled and his mandibles snapped shut. He looked between her and Meda, fringe flushing with either embarrassment or anger.

Meda’s tone gentled. “She saved your brother, Norius. Your mother and uncle took her as quellen.”

Norius’ gaze, so very like his uncle’s, snapped to her in clear disbelief. “What happened?” He demanded of her. Shepard just blinked at him, a look of non-understanding in place. He scowled, or as close to scowling as turians could get. “Why didn’t anyone tell me? Is he ok?”

“I just did,” Meda replied glibly, returning to her preparations. She’d pulled out a number of gnarly root-looking things, and was peeling them quickly. “And Gabias is fine. In fact, I believe your mother is the one who-”

“Pyjak-lady!” A high, buzzing voice brought Shepard’s attention to the door, where the kid from
the day before -Gabias?- suddenly appeared. Shepard had a moment to be surprised and brace herself before the small form of angles and bones launched itself across the room and into her lap.

“Uh...” What to say? She’d never been good with kids. The last children she’d been near willingly had been the daughters of a friend from AIT, before Shepard had even been selected for the N7 program. Both her friend, the friend’s husband, and the girls had disappeared years ago. Before that, there had been her brothers, when she herself had been not much more than a child at fifteen, and life on a ship had limited irresponsibility and encouraged maturity early on. In short, Shepard didn’t do kids.

This kid, apparently, didn’t know that.

Gabias’ mandibles were clacking against his teeth, he was talking so fast. Meda was tittering with laughter, while Norius looked...confused. Shepard struggled to keep up with the flow of clicks and syllables and hisses, fighting a grin despite herself. Here was something familiar, at least. The unmitigated energy of a child, and blind affection distributed without care or worry about whether or not their skin might have scales in some places. Without conscious thought, Shepard settled Gabias more comfortably on the perch he’d made of her knees, so his left calf spur wasn’t digging into her thigh. Although blunt at such a young age, the bony protrusions could still bruise.

Shepard gave up trying to translate Gabias’ train of small-child-chatter, once she caught enough words here and there to hazard an educated guess as to the topic; his rescue the day before. Apparently, once the fear and confusion had vanished in a way only children could manage, he’d been able to remember enough of it to know that she had saved him. From what, exactly, she could tell he didn’t quite know, and even if Shepard knew how to explain it, she wouldn’t have. There were some things even she held sacred; innocence was one of them.

Over Gabias’ head, Norius continued to stare at her. Occasionally his gaze would flick to his brother, and what she saw there intrigued her- concern, pure and simple. Concern over what had happened the day before, or concern regarding Gabias’ proximity to a ‘dangerous human enemy?’ If her guess about Norius’ age was correct, then he was due to begin his military training soon. He would have been flooded with prep material, everything from work-out schedules to history lessons to brief updates on the current climate of the war. For a moment, she felt sympathy for a youth. Not sure whether or not to regard her as hostile, when he was set to go off and try to kill as many of her species as possible, in less than a year. ‘Conflicted’ probably didn’t even begin to cover it.

Just as Norius seemed to make up his mind about something, and spread his mandibles to speak, the female turian from the day before -the mother- walked in. Instantly, Shepard was forgotten, as Gabias turned his attention to his mother, who came and scooped him out of Shepard’s lap with barely a nod to the human.
“Meda?” the mother spoke to the older turian female. “Has she been fed?”

‘Fed.’ Like a pet. Shepard suppressed a sigh, and with the ease of practice ensured her incomprehensive expression was in place.

“Yes, Solanna, yes,” Meda replied. “Between the umino bars and what I found this morning, she won’t starve before the shipment arrives.”

“Good, thank you, Meda.” The mother -Solanna, apparently- settled her son into a chair at the other end of the table, and herself beside him. Norius came to sit, and immediately bombarded his mother with questions, which Solanna set to answering patiently. At one point she paused, single talon held up imperiously in an amusingly human gesture of ‘hold on,’ and turned to look at Meda, who was pulling freshly heated canisters off of some appliance that hummed. “Meda? Garrus won’t be able to join us, he has an early morning vidconference... but I know he didn’t sleep well, or eat, last night... Would you mind fixing something to take to him?”

“Of course not,” Meda replied. Shepard’s guess at this point was that she was some sort of housekeeper, or nanny- or both. She watched Meda pull out another plate that more resembled a large salad bowl than a true plate, since it was noticeably concave. Onto it she speared thick lengths of the roots she’d peeled and roasted while Shepard had been occupied with Gabias. Along with the roots went the contents of one of the heated canisters- whole fish, the size of Shepard’s hand. The smell wafted across the room, and Shepard’s stomach absolutely could not decide if it liked she was smelling or not. The indecision was worse, she decided, than outright nausea.

Shepard watched Meda look to the line of plates, one of them set on a tray with a very oddly shaped cup and pitcher, and frowned briefly before her gaze flicked to Shepard, still sitting beside the greased plate. At the turian’s beckoning, Shepard gathered up plate and unused utensils, which Meda took and deposited in a cleaning unit.

“Take this,” Meda instructed, handing Shepard the tray. “Now come,” and she took Shepard by the arm and brought her just outside the kitchen door. “Now, you’re going to take this down the hall, take a left, then a right, go across the courtyard -don’t worry, it’s shielded- and knock on the first double set of doors you see, three times. Now, Garrus is a bit of a frightening fellow to look at, I know, but he’s really a very sweet boy, and you just give him this tray and-”

“She doesn’t understand you, Meda.” Norius cut in from behind them. His tone was neither derisive nor helpful, simply factual. Shepard wondered if that was how he’d decided to treat her and anything to do with her. If so, she approved.
“Oh, yes, I had forgotten.” The housekeeper-cook-nanny managed to look sheepish—mandibles, teeth, and all.

“I’ll show her!” Gabias piped up, wiggling down from his chair and scurrying across the room to tug at a fold of the robe she was still wearing from yesterday. “Come on, pyjak-lady.”

The word he actually called her was ‘kirpy,’ which referred to the matriarchs of pyjack family groups, similar to gorilla silverbacks. Basically, a more polite way of saying, ‘female monkey.’ Which, if it had come from anyone else, would have been an insult. Surprised at herself, she realized she felt the same sort of amusement she might feel at hearing a young child utter an expletive without knowing its meaning. It was amusing in a way it really shouldn’t be, but was.

Without waiting for further permission, Gabias pulled her down the hall. Shepard managed to look bewildered, although she was sure the expression would have been lost on them. So far the only turians who she had caught actually looking at her face as a whole, and not just her eyes, had been the doctor from the center and Garrus. The same Garrus she was now bringing breakfast to.

The way Gabias led her was the same as the directions Meda had been trying to give her. Shepard memorized all of it, how long each hallway was, how many doors and windows, how large, where they were, using the information in combination with what she already knew to build a blueprint in her mind. It wasn’t as good as smuggled schematics she could memorize at her leisure, but it would do.

Gabias led her through a set of glass-paned sliding doors that let out onto a tiled patio, one that she saw reached all the way around a large square courtyard that she guessed was near the middle and towards the back of the villa. It was occupied by a large, slopping, grassy mound ringed with trees, benches, flowerbeds...all of it looking like a slice of a tropical paradise. At the top of the shallow hill, was something that made Shepard blink rapidly. She couldn’t be sure, without getting closer, but...it looked like a dismantled Protheon artifact of some kind. One piece was already in place, and a second piece lay on its side nearby. There were tools set out, as if whoever had been erecting it had only just stepped away. Unwittingly, Shepard took a step forward.

“This way!” Gabias insisted, his grip on her robe firm, and he tugged her the other direction. She followed, keeping her eye on the artifact as long as she dared. Why did she have the most unnerving conviction that the sudden buzzing in her ears was related to the old Protheon relic?
“You all can’t really be this moronic,” Garrus hissed, barely restraining the growl that threatened to escape. He’d spent the past three hours listening to the three Advocates on his screen discussing the finer details of the motions and laws they wanted to put forward, collectively to give them more weight, at the Imperial Senate at the end of the week. Garrus had planned on being more prepared than he was- then again, he hadn’t planned on his mother dying the day of his arrival, or his nephew being taken hostage, or having to deal with morons. Thankfully, the morons in question hadn’t heard his outburst- he’d very carefully switched off his audio feed before letting loose the string of curses and insults.

Every morning, the first thing Garrus always did was check the news feeds. He liked to be informed, and that hadn’t changed with his temporary relocation. The top story had been regarding the rising infamy of a radical group of traditionalist patriots, most of which had been more or less contained on a few fringe colonies. Recently, though, they had made their presence known on some of the core worlds of the turian empire, including Palaven. Late the night before, while Garrus had been rescuing his nephew’s rescuer, a group of these extremists had broken into a central government building and stolen documents, locations, names, blueprints- all things pertaining to the war and very, very classified. They’d claimed they’d found things that the Heirarch and his Senate would not want the Citadel Council to know of. They’d demanded an immediate cease and desist of all war efforts, and for all quellen and prisoners of war to be immediately released.

Naturally, Garrus had expected this issue to supersede the items that had been on today’s agenda for the vidconference, and it had- for all of an hour. Then it had been agreed that there was nothing they could do, that it was being handled by those best trained to do so, and they should move on with their own matters- like reallocating funds for a chapterhouse to be built in one of the major cities on Palaven previously gripped by opposing factions in the Arena.

A dissident faction of turian nationals threatened the stability of the Heirarchy, and his colleagues wanted to discuss construction?

He could feel the spines of his crest flush with frustration, one of them even twitched. His mandibles clacked against his jaw with irritation. Just when he was considering restoring his audio feed and letting the Advocates hear exactly what he thought of their inactivity, a knock at the door to his -his father’s, rather- study brought him back to reality. He took a measured breath, waited until his annoyance was clear from his face and voice, and keyed up the controls to renew the audio link. He excused himself from the conference, and left the small room adjacent to the actual study, which was cluttered and showed signs of heavy use in previous days. Garrus was normally a very organized individual, but the past week had been unusual.

He opened the door fully expecting the tray, carried by either Meda with her well-meant scolding,
or Solanna with her not-so-well-meaning scolding. What he did not expect was a pair of steady eyes that drew his gaze downward, holding them when he’d meant to blink, not looking away until a third person, looking back and forth between the two adults, spoke up.

“Uncle Garrus!” Gabias broke the inexplicable tension with his enthusiastic voice. “We brought you breakfast!”

“I can see that.” Garrus reached out and took the tray from the human, faintly registering the smells of a simple, standard turian morning meal. With amusement, he noted the faint crinkling of the skin encasing the human’s nose. If he remembered right, that crinkle without the accompanying wrinkles around the eyes, and spreading of the lips, meant the human had smelled something distasteful. Unable to help himself he picked up one of the fish, and dropped it whole down into his mouth, and swallowed without chewing. The oils the fish were kept in absorbed the flavor, and stayed on his tongue and coated his throat for him to enjoy. What he enjoyed more, though, was the look on the human’s face.

The nose wrinkled further, and her head bobbed back on her neck slightly, recoiling. Which, if he recalled Anaya’s -the asari from whom he’d learned so much about humans- explanation, was a further indication of disgust, and couldn’t help but grin. Watching her, he couldn’t help but think on how similar human faces were to asari. He’d been told their skin was similar, as well, though in texture only. Asari skin was thicker, harder to lacerate, but human skin was much more adaptable, healed much faster, and scarred less. Although, this human, he saw, had a faint white mark crossing one of the arching lines of hair above her left eye, as if a knife had caught her there. He wondered how someone so sheltered and soft, as she seemed to be, would come to nearly have her eye slashed. The records of her interrogation had been sent over, and he’d perused them briefly the night before. A corporate finance mogul, a widow, and mother of two deceased children. His tired mind had felt only fleeting sympathy for a woman whose life had been needlessly cruel, wondering how the children had passed. But now, how she’d received that scar in a life of sitting in cushy offices, was the question on his mind.

For that matter, he thought absently. How does an accountant know how to handle hostage situations and disarm a hostile without harming the hostage?

Garrus, for all he was currently being shoved into a politician-shaped box, was an investigator at heart. He found problems, solved them. Digging out answers to questions no one was even asking was something he’d done since he was a child, and he’d gotten very, very good at it. Something about this quellen was off, and now that he’d noticed it, it wouldn’t leave him alone until he’d figured out what it was. And now that he was thinking along that vein, was she looking him square in the eye out of courtesy, or as a challenge? How would she know that it would be courtesy?

Abruptly, he remembered the night before, when coming inside and she’d glanced around at anything but what he thought an alien would find fascinating about an inhuman home. For a
wonder, he realized she’d looked at the same things he would have; exit points, potential weapons. In a glance, she’d evaluated that portion of his home as a potential battlefield. And he hadn’t recognized it then, either too tired or too trusting.

“Uncle Garrus!” Gabias had been tugging at his pant leg for a moment or two. “Can I come eat with you? Please?” Garrus broke his deadlocked stare with the human -Kristin, he thought he recalled- and glanced down at his nephew.

“Not today,” he said, not unkindly. “I still have the rest of this meeting to finish up, then I need to organize this study before your mom comes in with a decontamination team.”

Gabias peeked past Garrus and into the room. Obviously not having understood the conversation, Kristin did the same, her manner comically mimicking.

“It is messy,” Gabias informed him sagely. Garrus hummed a laugh, though he was still watching the human. She was looking around the room with unmasked curiosity. Garrus turned his profile to the doorway, partially to allow her a better look, partially to watch what she was watching, trying to see if she only looked at the doors, windows, consoles, the antique weapons adhered to plaques at the wall. But no, she looked at everything, theoretically with genuine curiosity...and although she did look at the weapons, the long spears topped with wickedly curved blades, it was with what he thought was appreciation, not...whatever he’d been expecting. Although, to be honest, he wasn’t entirely sure what he’d been expecting. All he knew at this point was that she was just...odd. He’d need to watch her to find out more.

“Gabias,” he turned his attention back to his nephew, who’d been watching him watch Kristin with an remarkable amount of interest for a six year old. “Would you please go tell Meda I’ll be stealing her new assistant for a few hours to help with my study?”

“Sure!” And as simple as that, Gabias was off running. Although, Garrus guessed the boy probably hadn’t had his own breakfast yet, and was just as eager to gulp down some of Meda’s perfectly fire-roasted atapa as he was to help.

Balancing the tray on one hand, Garrus held out his arm to indicate she was free to enter. She did so with far less hesitation than he would have expected, something he found himself approving of, even if it left him with one less clue than he would have liked.

Thinking to himself that he really needed to get that damned Alliance VI translator, he tried to give sketchy instructions in words she’d understand. “I ask assistance...er, caning?” He set the tray down on a corner of the overloaded desk, and began making neat stacks of the datapads, plates, and
other miscellaneous items, trying to demonstrate what he was saying. She was grinning. In fact, he was pretty sure the sound coming from her was a snicker.

“Cleaning?” She asked, correcting him.

He nodded, “Yes, cleaning.”

She looked around, hands going on her hips, and for a moment he caught a glimpse of what he thought she might have looked like in a place and circumstance where her freedom and life and species wasn’t an issue. She had been given a problem, and now she was dissecting how to go about handling it. Bewildered, Garrus realized he recognized this because it was exactly what he did. There was nothing in particular about her manner or expression that was his own, but still... There it was. He watched her, as she circled the room, the nodded to herself, and...shooed him?

“I’ll get it organized,” she said, and he barely understood her. “Go, I know you were busy.”

How, exactly, had she known he was busy? Or was he misinterpreting her words?

He really needed that damn translator.

He nodded, picked up his tray, and went back to the small adjoining conference room. His father had converted it from a second study to a conference room for the simple reason of, he wasn’t home long enough to go traveling all over the planet. Many Advocates couldn’t be where they needed to be, so in-home vidconferences were common.

Sitting down, Garrus re-opened his audio feed, but cancelled his video output. They would have seen his tray before his image would have gone dark. It was common courtesy, when someone chose to eat during a conference, which wasn’t often, but it did happen. No one present was unfamiliar with the reality of their situation, and the fact that they ate their meals whenever possible. Frustrated Garrus might be with his colleague’s priorities, but he wouldn’t deny they worked hard, and long.

Garrus spared a moment, however, to check and make sure the surveillance cambots in his study were active and recording. He’d look at them later to make sure his new quellen didn’t look at anything she shouldn’t. Not that she’d understand anything she found, but still... Until he knew more, he was going to treat his odd new houseguest very carefully indeed.
Of course there were cameras. Of course. It had been going too easy for there to not be cameras, now. Shepard didn’t let any of the four cameras she’d spotted before even entering the room catch her looking at them, or even looking for them. On the walk over, she’d spotted an entire security network’s worth of cameras, inactive sensors, alarms, and access panels. Without a security terminal with which to hack their network, she had no idea if it was active or not. If it was, that would mean this family was either paranoid, had enemies, or was much more prominent and powerful than she’d been originally led to believe. Any one of them was possible, so she had no choice but to assume that the tiny optical machines were turned on and recording everything she did. So, she did no more or less than she was supposed to do; she cleaned.

It was almost surreal, actually. Here she was in the heart of enemy territory, on a high-risk mission that could end with her dead, tortured, a legend- possibly all three. And she was playing french maid. Minus the costume, of course, but still...

The office was a mess, really. Datapads were everywhere- even scrolls, of all things, where humans would have had piles of earmarked paper. There were no pens or pencils, which were still common in Alliance space, since turians used ink-filled nubs that slipped onto a talon, and they used the tip of that talon to write with. Sensible, since humans had needed to discover the blackened ends of sharp sticks before they’d thought of scribbling on cave walls. Turians had just used their own natural talons to score marks into stone, clay, wood, and leather. The ink had been the next natural step, and was still used today.

There were also the plate-bowl dishes, trays, a knife or two that she briefly considered trying to use sleight of hand to stash on her person, dismissing the idea when she realized that there really was nowhere she could stash them- the robe fit well enough, but had no pockets and was loose down past the hips, with no sleeves. There were also more of the odd cups, which had funnel contraptions functioning as lids. She’d seen them before- turians had a hard time creating suction with the configuration of their mouths, so the funnel allowed them to pour their drinks more or less directly down their throats, where they had just as many taste buds as on the tongue.

It was mildly aggravating, not being able to look at anything longer than it would take for her to discern what it was, and where it went. Even with her mild grasp of the turian language -and her written was better than her spoken- she had hardly an inkling of where things belonged, so at least that gave her a little extra time to look around and act confused. In the end, she piled the dishes on a tray by the door, trash in a bin by the desk, and stacked the datapads on the desk by date, which was thankfully in galactic format, so she wouldn’t have to come with a reason for how she could read the turian calendar. The scrolls she carefully re-rolled and stuck into slots in special
bookshelves set along the back wall.

And during it all, she was picking up snippets of info, memorizing it, cataloguing it away for later analysis. Names of places, names of people, references to events and laws and meetings. It was while glancing through these documents that Shepard finally had confirmation that she was, indeed, under the roof of not just any Vakarian family, but Nomos Vakarian’s brood. There had been the slightest chance, of course, that this had been a family that had just happened to have the same surname. But that would have involved luck, which Shepard usually liked to save for escaping untimely explosions and bullets too close to vital organs. Although, if Nomos Vakarian came home to find the Alliance marine he’d sworn to kill bouncing his grandson on her knee, both of those scenarios might occur, and all the luck in the world wouldn’t help her.

Garrus was not, apparently, the kind of person to leave his passwords written down near at hand, however. It was not something she’d expected, but she’d been surprised before by the lack of common sense on the part of her targets. And Garrus Vakarian was most definitely now her target—if she was going to glean any information from her current residence, it would be through him.

A shout through the door he’d gone through made her look up sharply, senses all on alert. Muffled by the door, she couldn’t make out the words, but the volume and tone told her enough. Garrus apparently, had a temper. And a short leash on it. Not finding any reason why it would look suspicious for her to be curious, Shepard went silently to the door and quickly, quietly pressed her ear against it. And here was the base of her profession; eavesdropping, in its most primitive and natural form, developed and perfected first by curious children, and utilized by grown adults who should know better.

Even being closer to the door, Shepard could only make out every other word. The shouts had dimmed to low, harsh words. The flange in his voice was reverberating at an increased pace, making it harder to understand him. The gist of it managed to root itself in her brain, despite that—there had been a terrorist attack of some kind, something the Hierarchy didn’t want the Council knowing, and whoever Garrus was talking to now apparently wasn’t treating it like much of a big deal.

Finally, someone responded, and she understood this person somewhat better.

“I will explain this simply, Advocate Vakarian. If those documents somehow ended up at the Council’s feet, it would only aid us. The Council would finally intervene, and it wouldn’t matter that the Arena is split down the middle on this war; they would make us end it.”

“They would make us stop, yes, but the humans are not under Council law! Do you think they will just sit back and ignore us once we let up? Have you ever looked at a single mission report, Advocate Pallun? They will come after us with everything they have, and they will not stop until
they believe justice has been met.” Garrus had regained control of his temper, and his words were clipped and full of confidence. Silently, Shepard agreed with him. It wasn’t a plausible possibility that the Alliance would just let bygones be bygones and cease their efforts the same day the turians did. At best they might keep at it until they began, suspiciously, to believe the turians had given up. But that would require the turians to even resist acts of self-defense, to pull out of every contested territory and colony. Even then, greed was an unfortunate part of human nature. There was no telling whether or not the Alliance would be satisfied with what they had, or if they’d take advantage of the Citadel’s leash on their attack dogs, and press for more. Shepard’s eyes grew hard as she thought of what would happen then—against just the turians, humanity had stunned the galaxy with their will to survive, to thrive. Against the entire Citadel Armada?

Humanity would be obliterated.

Now this was some info Anderson and the brass would salivate to get their hands on. She knew what her orders would be—try to obtain copies of those documents. Another monumental obstacle to overcome with limited time, resources, and no allies. Just another day in Commander Shepard’s humdrum life.

Eventually the conversation whittled down, having gone nowhere with nothing resolved, and the topic returned to something about amending laws of marriage between different colony members. Nothing of worth to Shepard, so she returned to her tidying. When she couldn’t do anymore without cleaning supplies, she contemplated knocking on the door to show him...and in the end decided there was only so much ‘meek little human quellen’ she could stomach, added to the fact she couldn’t risk him telling her to go elsewhere; she needed access to this study. That she’d been invited in with what amounted to a hand delivered, perfumed invitation was the sort of luck that happened to people in her profession once in a blue moon. With that in mind, she moved fast when she traced her earlier route with Gabias back to the kitchen.

An idea had been forming in her mind since she’d spotted the cameras in the study. She needed to get into that terminal on his desk. She’d spotted other terminals, but most had been personal models, or else looked like they lacked uplink modules.

Galactic communications relied on a system of comm bouys and allotted ‘data space.’ Companies purchased batches of allocated data, and resold portions of it to consumers and companies. Government, military, medical, and emergency transmissions retained priority, and everything after that came in order of what you paid. The more you paid, the more data you could send, faster. The best uplinks sent large data bursts every few minutes, near the top of the queue. Lower-end connections could send smaller packets, letters and photos and messages, once a day. Most household terminals could transmit on-planet just fine, using variations of wireless technology, but required a specific destination and had varied range. Most people who could afford service to the entire planet would also have an interplanetary service. As a result, the terminal in Garrus’ office was the only one she could be sure had the range she needed. The frequency she had memorized was just that—it gave her no idea where on the planet her contacts were hiding.
So, Shepard needed those cameras down and out for at least a minute. Time would be short, and she’d briefly considered just recoding herself a back-door protocol for later, easier access. But accessing a terminal twice doubled her chances of being caught. She’d have to do it in one go.

The kitchen was empty, the countertops spotless, the appliances silent. A quick glance reaffirmed what she’d seen the night before; no cameras. She’d bet there were motion detectors, cameras on the exterior of the kitchen door, but none in the actual kitchen. A security oversight, or frugality? Either way, it served her purpose as she closed the kitchen door, sliding the panels shut.

Most of the appliances were alien, of course, but the basics of their functions were obvious, and that meant Shepard knew roughly what their inner components would require. Anderson was fond of saying that the laws of anatomy between their species might be different, but physics wasn’t. Granted, he’d told her that in regards to how to snap a turian elbow joint, but the principle still applied. The exact configuration of how a turian heated their equivalent of their morning coffee might be different, but the need for heat remained. And there were only so many ways to generate heat without the risk of melting, exploding, irradiating, and otherwise rendering consumables inedible.

Rustling in the drawers -another thing, so simple, so very the same as would be found in a human kitchen- produced utensils with wooden handles, wood being non-conductive. She used what looked like a small barbeque fork to pry the back panel off of one of the appliances, and quick, practiced fingers found what she was looking for by method of elimination. She didn’t recognize the small grey box with wires and a tiny lumagel interface that she extracted from the small machine’s inner workings, but she knew that it would produce what she needed; short, intense burst of electromagnetic energy. Another component inside the appliance, one that she didn’t need, would focus that energy into a highly conductive plate that would transfer the heat directly to whatever needed heating. In essence, it was the heart of a basic universal kitchen necessity; a microwave.

And, with some tweaking, it would knock out the cameras in that office.

Shepard was careful to put the panel back on the appliance, and return it to precisely where it had been before her meddling. Another appliance produced what would serve as a power supply, and from another she retrieved what she could jerryrig into an amplifier. Working quick with improvised tools, Shepard assembled her short-range EM pulse generator, and used a knife to cut a length from her robe’s sash to hold it all together, also disguising exactly what it was.

Luck guided her to what was obviously a closet of cleaning supplies, from which she retrieved a bucket, cloths, and several canisters of cleaning solutions. Her macgyvered EM generator went into the bucket, a rag on top of it.
She again retraced her steps back to the office, this time giving the odd Protheon statue a glance as she passed. Back inside the study, she could still hear muffled conversations in the next room. She confirmed the door was shut, and that nothing had been moved in her absence, which had been five minutes, tops. Slow, but she’d reprimand herself later.

Shepard set the bucket of supplies down on the desk, and set to actually cleaning for awhile, careful to make her motions look cautious of disturbing the wrong things, occasionally picking up a strange item and examining it. Part of her was genuinely curious, but for the moment she was too focused on the job at hand to give the random objects more than a clinical examination. Only the long glaives on the wall, the spears topped with curved knives, remained untouched. For one, she could tell they were securely bolted in place. For another, she had an inkling that it would not be a good idea to show her ‘hosts’ she knew how to handle a sharp implement.

At some point, she heard Garrus raising his voice again, though not nearly as passionately as his earlier outburst had been. This time, his voice was raised to speak over the din from whoever he was talking to, who was shouting. Deciding this was the best chance she was going to get, Shepard went to where she’d set her bucket on the desk, right next to the terminal. She’d noticed one thing about the camera placements; none of them were set to be able to catch the doings of whoever sat at this desk. That meant that while they could see where she was, they couldn’t see what she was doing with her hands.

Out came the EM generator, and a twitch of a pair of wires sent a current rushing through the contraption. She gave it a count of fifteen, then turned it off, since she couldn’t leave it on without disrupting her own workings. It would take even a top of the line camera system at least another ninety seconds to recalibrate and restart. Considering this was turian technology and not Alliance, and they’d had an extra few hundred years head start on making tech tamper-proof, Shepard gave herself sixty.

One minute to hack, send a transmission, and wipe her digital fingerprints. No problem.

The interface was standard, thankfully. Many of the Alliance’s initial reverse-engineering attempts of turian tech had begun with simple trial and error, trying different combinations of buttons and commands. Eventually, it had led to the beginnings of their limited understanding of turian language and psychology. Much like how early computers functioned along the same basic thought process as the human brain, so did turian computers. Shepard had been involved in a number of missions to retrieve turian tech, partially due to her own competence with anything technical. It wouldn’t have done the research team much good if the grunt sent to snatch the goods bashed things up while pulling it out of the wall.

Shepard’s fingers flew over the command keys, having trained her fingers to be efficient with
interfaces not meant for a human’s multi-digit appendages. Bypassing the security protocols took two seconds longer than she’d allotted, but she made up for it when she reached the terminal’s equivalent of a BIOS quicker than planned and used it to essentially write her own basic, barely functional transmit program. Using the onboard programs to send messages was a rookie’s mistake—every decent program now kept records of what was sent to who and when, in ways nearly impossible to completely eradicate.

Her own quickie program up and running, she keyed in the memorized frequency, the message to the rebel cell coded into it’s sub-waves.

Fifteen seconds. It would take her eight to back out of the system. Seven seconds to make a decision, and to execute it; try to send out a second signal, and hope it reached the Alliance, warning them what would happen to her and her mission of they handed over Nomos? What about the human prisoners of war so close to being returned to their families, and wouldn’t, if the exchange was cancelled? Was more time for her mission worth it?

Realism protected her from guilt as she acknowledged that yes, the potential for her to help end this war that much faster was worth it.

Five seconds saw a second frequency and a short, five word encrypted message attached to the first, both of them compressed and piggybacked onto the terminal’s next automatic data burst.

Seven seconds.

Shepard erased her one-time-use program, filled the space where it had been with junk data to eliminate a suspicious ‘empty’ spot in the terminal’s hard-drive space, and backed out of the terminal’s innards entirely, closing everything behind her like a surgeon suturing layers of muscle and skin after he’d finished reorganizing someone’s organs.

A half second later, Shepard was across the room with a canister and rag, wiping down shelves. Up in the corners, Shepard heard the faintest beeps as one by one, the cameras came back online. Now all there was left to do was wait for them to contact her, pass on whatever information she’d gleaned, do whatever she could in the meantime to disrupt the mighty turian military, assume she was going to be instructed to gain copies of those oh so potentially dangerous documents...

All before Nomos Vakarian came home and kept his promise.
Jack

The individual known only to his cohorts as ‘Jack’ was a secretive man, his agenda known to none but himself, his thought processes and conclusions shared only with those who were worth convincing.

Right now, Kelly Chambers was not worth convincing. The pretty young woman was intelligent, far more so than she let on, and was currently perfectly situated to deliver a response to a most timely message. Jack reread the decoded transmission his people had received earlier that evening, hidden within a comm buoy’s junk-data dump, just as the data packet Jack’s people had concealed within Lillith Montague’s sub-dermal hormone implant months ago had instructed.

Jack took a moment to appreciate the artistry of the disguised transmission. Whoever the Alliance had sent in was a true artist with numbers, he’d give the guy that much. The timing, however, was a bit off. Jack had hoped for action from the Alliance much sooner, and when it had not come, he’d been forced to step things up. His plans would not wait for the galaxy to get its act together. The Monolith was safe, for now, but he knew it was a matter of time before the Arterius brothers tracked down all the false beacon deliveries and found the one they were looking for, the one that had never been at a museum but that he had shipped under that disguise.

“If I knew why, though, I know I could-”

“Could what, Miss Chambers? Be a security risk?” Jack closed his terminal’s screen, and lifted one of his few personal indulgences to his lips; cigarettes weren’t cigars, but it was close as he could get this deep into turian space. Palaven had its share of human luxuries, forbidden fruit as it were, but cigars were not among them. He enjoyed a pull, then exhaled as he spoke. “You’re brilliant, Kelly, but weak. You’d crack at the first sight of a knife. No, you’ll deliver the message, no more and no less. Am I understood?” Hiding her sulk poorly, the woman nodded. “Then I will talk to you again when you’ve done your job.”

Thus dismissed, Kelly left the room, twitching luxurious lengths of crimson silk, another human luxury, around shapely hips. She was one of the few quellen to not only have found herself in a high-ranking turian home, but discover that not all turians found the human physique too alien to be attractive. Kelly, of course, didn’t know that Jack knew she was sleeping with her maecollon, her host.
“She’s going to be trouble, eventually.” This female voice had none of Kelly’s sulk, and was faintly accented with something that hinted of an upbringing most girls only fantasized about—wealth, sophistication, education.

“I worry about eventualities when they’re actualities,” Jack responded, taking another drag. The blue smoke turned an odd shade when it met the dim light of his re-activated orange lumagel screen. He turned and glanced at the tower of perfection making her way across the room, from where she’d been lounging against the wall during his exchange with Kelly. No draped silks or pouts for her—oh, no. Miranda Lawson was five feet eight inches of honed muscle and snake-like speed. One of the handful of living human biotics, Miranda had been kept a secret the entirety of her life, and for good reason. Cloning was still illegal in Alliance space, tampering with cloning procedures even more so. Jack had moments when he applauded Mr. Lawson’s initiative, to create the perfect female. From a pro-human standpoint, it was a marvelous achievement.

The fact that this ‘perfect woman,’ however, was based off of Mr. Lawson’s own genes contorted the whole thing into something somewhat less marvelous, and more sinister.

Still, regardless of origins, Jack wasn’t one to turn aside a useful tool when it presented itself, and Miranda was beyond useful. Deadly intelligent, wickedly conniving, brutally efficient. She was his right hand, and his anchor— and that last one was likely more important than either of them knew. Perhaps if he’d escaped the proximity of the Monolith sooner than he had...

But he hadn’t, and now he had this one weakness, this one need for a leash to reality, to his humanity. Miranda was that leash, and God help him if she ever found out. She was loyal, but only because even she didn’t have the whole story. Even she didn’t know that the reason he did what he did, to fight what they needed to fight, was because a part of that very thing they were trying to prepare the universe for was inside him. Always whispering, always clawing at his mind, testing his control. They waited, those voices, those beings, on the fringes of his awareness for a moment of weakness. If he fell to their ever-seeking feelers, with what he knew...

He wouldn’t fall. He would do what he had to do, whatever the cost.

Miranda’s eyes were on him, searching, and he realized the silence had stretched on long enough. He took one last pull of the cigarette, and extinguished it.

“Arrange for another one of ours to be on the next funerary pod. Now that we know the Alliance found our first message-in-a-bottle, they’ll be looking for more. I’ll have the data I want encoded in her implant ready by the morning. Make sure the arrangements are in place by then.”
Miranda blinked, thinking. “Michel Bellavioux will do. She recently contracted a bacteria from an asari consort visiting her *maecollon*. I can arrange for it to be fatal.”

Jack waved a hand. “I trust you, Miranda. Do what you need to do.” She raised an eyebrow at him—they both knew he trusted no one.

When she was gone, and Jack was left alone with his thoughts and the inhuman, inorganic voices in his head, he let himself hope that whoever had sent him that coded message was up to the task of helping him save the galaxy.
Chapter 7

“If we don’t end war, War will end us.”

- H.G. Wells

Spoiler Warning:

If you have not read Mass Effect: Evolution, and intend to, then there is a portion of this chapter that alludes to plot points from that compilation. I am vague about it, as much as I can be, but consider yourself forewarned. It is the part that begins with, ‘Desolas was growing desperate.’

Chapter Seven

Admiral David Anderson had argued with himself before, on a number of morality issues. A few of them had even been personal. The name Kahlee Sanders came to mind, but was dismissed as quickly as it had come. Instead, Anderson lifted a framed photo from his desk, one of the few pictures taken of him standing with N7 graduates that he had kept. Although, ‘graduates’ was really the wrong word. The people chosen for Alliance special ops were already remarkable individuals. The academy didn't so much turn out accomplished students as it polished an already sharp knife, and he knew that Kastanie Shepard was one very, very sharp knife. The kind that left wounds so clean and quick you didn't always notice right away that you were dead.

Which was why, he told himself, he knew she'd be fine with or without his help. Whereas the human prisoners being held, at that moment, on a turian cruiser on the other side of this planet's smallest moon, would not be fine if he did what he was considering. What she was asking.

A few keystrokes at his terminal brought up a live security feed from the brig of the Desert Storm, the Alliance's own prisoner-carrying cruiser. The turian who sat calmly at one end of the room
held the key to Anderson's problem. Releasing him on schedule would, according to the transmission confirmed as Shepard's, guarantee her death within the month, possibly the week. Not releasing him, however, virtually assured the death of those aboard the turian cruiser, the Nixarium.

Anderson was deadlocked with himself. Was Shepard’s life worth more to him than those strangers on the Nixarium? Dead straight, it was. He had led the rescue team aboard the derelict freighter that Shepard and her family had called ‘home,’ along with several dozen other volunteer civilian workers. Captain Shepard had signed up his vessel, and family, to ferry supplies to non-combat military outposts, freeing up the military personnel to man the strained shipping lines to outposts that were in combat zones.

Shepard’s ship hadn’t been the first to be hit by ballsy batarian raiders, and it wasn’t the last. But it was the one Anderson remembered the best. More specifically, it was the survivors he remembered best. Because there’d been only one. A girl, mid-teens, backed into a corner with a rifle in hand and a circle of dead batarians at her feet, and a look of wild determination in her eyes that, to Anderson’s observation, had never truly left.

He imagined that look returning full-force, when Nomos Vakarian discovered that by the hand of devious Murphy, that mock-god of worst-case-scenarios, she’d landed in his family’s home. He could see it, in his minds eye, her backing into a corner, brandishing whatever weapon she could find-

He cut himself off. It had been a very long time since Admiral Anderson had allowed his mind to run into the fantastical...even if that fantasy was more probable than not. What he needed now was facts, not predictions extrapolated from theories and personal fear. With that thought in mind, Anderson killed the vid feed and comm’d the assistant he’d been assigned.

“Sir?” The aide was young and male, eager to make his mark, and very competent.

“I want status reports on the negotiations updated as they come in, instead of every hour,” Anderson told him. “And get Udina in here. Tell him it’s about...the weapons debrief on Shanxi.”

“Sir.” The aide acknowledged with the single syllable and a salute, and then was gone. Hopefully, what Anderson had in mind wouldn’t blow up in his face and end up with everyone involved dead, rather than one or the other.

With one finger, Anderson tapped the edge of the picture frame he still held, next to the face of the person on the far right of the group in the photo. “Hold on, Shep,” Anderson murmured, finger
tapping near a younger Kastanie Shepard’s proud, grinning face. “I’ll do what I can. The rest is up to you.”

Two days had passed since Shepard had sent her message, and no response from either the Alliance or the rebel faction had been forthcoming, not that she'd really expected one. Finding a window of opportunity to send her own transmission so soon had been a stroke of sheer luck. Another such opportunity, to either receive or send, she was sure would not present itself anytime soon.

Meda kept her mercilessly busy, as well as relatively out of sight of the handful of staff. Only two others aside from Meda lived on the Vakarian estate, the rest arriving early in the morning for housework or late at night for a guard duty that made Shepard wonder about Turian paranoia. Or the possibility of enemies. Neither were good for her purposes.

On the third night, Shepard waited in the dark of her small room, listening to the house until the silence was near absolute. Only her own heartbeat, shallow breaths, and the hum of dormant electrical systems and air filtration vents permeated the darkness. Then, regretting the absence of viable exit points in her room, Shepard slipped into the hall with a dark sheet cleverly wrapped around her form for ease of movement, and to blur her silhouette.

She briefly wished she'd been able to keep her little makeshift EM pulse generator, but putting the components back before they were missed had been an essential accomplishment in and if itself. She had to rely on her memorization of the villa floorplan, and trust she'd spotted all the cameras. The latter worried her; her route was precariously detailed. One camera missed, and she was sure her ‘hosts’ would have some questions for her.

Cat-footed and quick, Shepard danced from blind spot to blind spot, until she reached the room furthest down the hall. Inside that room, a large window was ajar, the sensor at its latch jammed with what could have been a random bit of fluff. Shepard had put it there the day before when ‘cleaning’ the room, and had waited for some household system to alert someone about the compromised access point. Obviously, nothing had happened. Either no one had bothered to attend to it, security in the room was turned off, or there was someone outside the window waiting to see who came through it.

Adrenaline slipped through her veins, intoxicating as it was energizing. Who needed drugs or liquor when she had nature’s own custom-tailored addictive substance supplied directly from her own body on a daily basis?
Riding silent on that singing high, Shepard slipped out the window, watchful of any sort of laid traps. Nothing. Senses buzzing and alert, she made her way from the main building to the scattering of outlying apartments, skirting gravel pathways in favor of soft grasses, both for the sake of stealth and her bare feet. All the technology in the universe, and sometimes the simplest things were what could keep someone in check- what captive was likely to try a casual escape barefoot?

The grounds were expansive. She found a tall wall, keeping shrubs and trees between her and the silent cameras that topped its length at periodical intervals. She followed along it, keeping meticulous track of her position and orientation as she mapped out her prison. Twice she had to duck out of sight from a tired-looking night sentry, and as he had passed her she had, again, wondered if his being here was due to prudence, paranoia, or warranted caution. Her observations thus far had confirmed the almost feudal system of nobility, warlords, and merchants in place in the Hierarchy, with only the religious aspects suspiciously missing. The only thing even close had been the brief discussion between Meda and a young female household assistant, who had been discussing an event she’d attended at an asari temple. The discussion had sounded more curious than pious.

All in all, the information Shepard had gathered was less than she would have liked, restricted to household nuances and culinary tricks. Nothing useful. True, technically her main mission objective had been achieved, but she was under no illusions that more was not expected of her- hell, she expected more of herself. The Alliance had been itching to get an agent on Palaven since the inception of the war, and now here she was, taking a midnight stroll on a garden.

She clamped down on her impatience, surprised to see it rise with such ferocity. She thought she’d wrangled it down long ago, but it seemed even she was susceptible to a relapse when it came to baser, more aggressive tendencies. She would finish this recon excursion, finalize her minds-eye blueprint of the grounds, and she’d use that knowledge next time she had access to an extranet terminal to figure out exactly where on Palaven she was. Sure, she knew the name of the city, knew that it was important, but she had no idea where she was in relation to the rest of the world. Her original turian captors hadn’t been kind enough to provide windows, or a guided tour.

Global positioning systems were a universal things, in one form or another, and it would be a simple matter to input the details of the Vakarian grounds and let Palaven’s own GPS systems find it for her. From there, it would be simple enough to plan her future targets.

An hour before dawn, Shepard decided she’d pressed her luck far enough. Even with her subdermal implant, she didn’t want to risk daytime radiation if she could help it. She had a clear image in her mind of just how expansive the grounds were, including the locations of the staffing apartments, the single storage building, what had looked like stables and a field of some sort, as well as a number of gardens and strange gazebos. Satisfied for now, she made her way back to the main villa, slipped back in the way she’d come, danced her routine around the cameras, ducked back into her room, and was in ‘bed’ with her impromptu stealth suit-sheet folded and put away inside a quarter hour.
Long years of catching what little sleep she could, when she could, saw her asleep despite the adrenaline in her system inside another ten.

Desolas was growing desperate.

It had started out simply enough, roughly thirty galactic cycles ago. Saren and his brother had been sent to recover something from Shanxi, something that they both suspected was the reason the small planet had been off-limits to the rest of the galactic community since before the turians had made their first venture into the stars and subsequently abandoned their Spirit Temples.

There had been a group of humans, remnants left behind when the pyjaks had been forced to retreat. They’d been after the same artifact, and they’d both found it. Both parties had come into contact with it. Both had been changed.

Up until that fateful event, Desolas had been a glorified General of the turian militia. A hero, brave and handsome and considered a veritible modern legend. Saren had been the quiet one, the one content to do his work in his brother’s shadow. He’d been a young Spectre, with only a decade of service in the Special Tasks and Reconnaissance force. A long time to some, but among a group of elites comprised mostly of a species that lived close to a thousand years, a mere ten was nothing.

After that day, though...

When he’d failed to reclaim the artifact, Desolas had resigned from the military. Despite claiming he could still ‘feel’ where it was, they never quite caught up to it. Desolas, over the years, slowly returned to something resembling his old self, confessing the song of the monolith had faded over the years. The brothers grew apart, with Desolas serving as a military consultant on occassion, the rest of his time divided up among activities Saren, at best, considered questionable. He was a Spectre. It was his job to prevent injustices, to see to the stability of Citadel Space. He knew his brother knew where the line was...but he also knew that his brother had no qualms about crossing it if he thought it necessary. It was something the siblings had in common, that sense of getting things done, no matter the cost.
Then, recently, the monolith had resurfaced. It was studied, tested, declared inert. It was set up in a museum on Illium, and forgotten about.

Except that it wasn’t inert, according to Saren’s brother. What signal it could be sending that the asari could not pick up on, the Spectre didn’t know. What he did know, was that this thing was important, and finding out the famed General Arterius was now unstable was even moreso. So Saren went with his brother to Illium, only to land and be told by Desolas that the monolith was no longer on the planet. Standing in the middle of a spaceport, without so much as having flagged an aircar to head to the museum, Desolas had sensed it was gone.

Saren’s Spectre status gained cooperation from the museum officials, and they had told the Arterius brothers that strings had been pulled, and the Monolith, along with a half-dozen nonfunctional Protheon beacons, had been sold and shipped offworld, and would the Spectre like copies of the shipping manifests?

The shipping manifest files had been corrupted, no evidence of which destination received the Monolith. Five planets, five dead ends, all in a single-file line out from Illium, so Desolas’ odd sense of where the thing was, was no help, since it only gave a direction and not distance. Planet number six was Palaven, and Desolas had sworn it was there...except that they’d been unable to take a look at the damn thing without potentially raising red flags. If the Council took note, they’d certainly wonder why one of their decorated Spectres had been running around the galaxy chasing statues. Questions along that line would lead to places neither brother wanted brought out in the open.

So... Desolas was growing desperate.

“It’s...distressed,” Desolas hissed. Saren watched his brother pace their small accommodations. He knew Desolas was accustomed to finer things, but Spectres were utilitarian by necessity. At the moment, though, Desolas didn’t seem to care that the walls were stained, the furniture old and barely holding together. That in itself was odd- he’d never known his brother to settle for anything less than perfection. Saren watched in silence, thinking that the turian before him more closely resembled the individual he’d had to deal with directly following the events on Shanxi, than his honorable, brilliant General of a brother.

Perhaps the monolith was on Palaven. Close proximity might explain Desolas’ behaviour.

Tapping a talon on the table, Saren asked, “It has feelings now?”

“Not...feelings,” Desolas ground out, a low rumble emanating from his chest. “Desires. Goals. I...I
think it knows I’m planetside.”

Tap, tap, tap. Desolas ignored the noise. Once, he’d have snarled at his brother to cease the tapping, and when Saren ignored him he’d have either left or forced a physical confrontation.

Now, he did nothing.

Saren stopped his errant digit, and stood. Desolas paused his pacing to look at his brother askance, eyes full of veiled suspicious.

“Come,” was all he said, heading for the door. “This room is stifling, and I have a few contacts I need to...renew my acquaintance with while I’m here.”

“You...want me to come with you?” The suspicion was unveiled, now.

At the door, Saren checked his weapons. “No, but if I leave you here, you’ll do something stupid.” Satisfied with his armaments, he re-holstered them, turned, and left, not bothering to see if Desolas followed. The old Desolas would have laughed at him, and simply gone about his own business.

This new Desolas followed, and it was Saren’s turn to begin to worry.

Shepard had been woken up plenty of unpleasant ways. The most recent being, of course, the attack on the Lincoln. Being woken up at all, when sleep was already so scarce and -when she did manage to get some- tense due to her circumstances, was unpleasant to begin with. But it was especially distasteful to open her eyes and discover a scowling, growling turian advancing towards her across the room with clear intentions on violence.

In the same amount of time it had taken her subconscious to register the noise of an intruder and rouse her, she had also sprung from the bed, danced halfway across the room to be a more strategic position, and was brandishing the heavy broken lamppost. The turian stopped dead, blinking at her in plain surprise at her speed. It lasted only a moment, then with a roar he launched himself at her. The single motion was enough to tell Shepard that he lacked any formal combat training beyond the basics the turians taught at their Military Academies, although that -coupled with natural turian
Shepard pivoted at the last possible moment, letting the turian skid into the wall before turning on feet specially designed for speed and maneuverability, and darting towards her again. This time she brought up the heavy metal post, swinging it up from below to connect with the underside of his jaw, a weak point in the turian skull structure. He rocked back, the momentum of his charge cut short, the unused kinetic energy dissipating into his flailing limbs.

Shepard hesitated. She could finish him, as he tried to shake off her stunning blow. But she had no idea who he was, or why he’d attacked her. She knew what the datapacket had said about the laws governing what happened to quellen who killed their maecollon, but it had said nothing about human quellen who killed random turians, self defense or no.

Cursing, Shepard tossed her post into a corner of the room, and ran through the still-open doors just as her attacker regained his equilibrium and gave chase. She didn’t bother to keep quiet as she thundered down the halls; she was certain her cover identity would be very loud indeed while being chased by an apparently blood-thirsty predator species. So, with that thought in mind, Shepard hollered loud and shrill as she dashed down one hall, flew past the kitchen, around a corner into another passage, and burst out into the green courtyard. Experienced ears kept track of how far behind her the turian was, based on the staccato of his feet hitting the tiles. She gauged him as too far to reach out and grab her, not too far to lose her- and not too far for anyone who saw them to guess how fast she could really run.

She darted up the low hill bearing the half disassembled Protheon artifact, and saw another courtyard door open. Garrus Vakarian stepped into the courtyard, clearly having been just woken by her ruckus since he was utterly naked, which only marginally distracted her from the fact that he looked...odd, and not just because he was sans clothing. Not that turian anatomy made nudity that much of a big deal, but she had enough spare brain power to register an impressive physique for any species before the rest of her instincts and training shoved aside all superfluous thoughts. In half a second, she made sure Garrus saw her, slowed her run almost imperceptibly, and allowed the turian chasing her to tackle her from behind. She fell, hard, chin bouncing off the grass-like growth, fighting to turn over on her back to fend off her assailant- also fighting to keep training from taking over and using her stronger thigh muscles to lift him off her, flip him, roll away, bounce to her feet and then either run or take him out while he was down-

Something glinted in the sunlight that shone through the overhead barrier curtain, and Shepard let her tight hold on her training loose. She jerked her head to the side as the knife came down where her throat would have been. Her hands latched onto his wrist, and at the same time she torqued it back and to the side, she lifted her hips and tossed him off. She rolled with him, keeping a grip on his wrist that would have done nothing to a human’s, but was painful for a turian. Her free hand snagged the knife from his limp fingers, her right knee slamming down on the elbow of his free arm. Behind her, his legs flailed, but turian hip joints didn’t have the range of a human’s, and his kicks didn’t reach her. She moved the knife to his throat, mind cleared of everything but eliminating this immediate threat-
From behind, strong arms hooked through hers and lifted her off her former assailant. She felt talons at the back of her neck as whoever was lifting her pulled her firmly into a full nelson, arms under hers, hands at the back of her neck, locking her in place with her back to a turian chest, the lower rim of his cowl digging into her upper back.

Her attacker, the one still on the ground, was grabbing for the knife she’d dropped -foolish! Rookie mistake!- and was getting back to his feet-

“Stay where you are, Markin.” Shepard’s restrainer barked, voice vibrating against her back. Shepard recognize Garrus’ voice, and let herself relax marginally. Her arms screamed, but she ignored it. He was exerting enough pressure on her limbs to ensure discomfort, but no actual damage. Apparently she wasn’t the only one in the house with knowledge of alien anatomy.

“But, Kyr Garrus, she’s human-”

“Yes, thank you, Markin,” Garrus replied dryly. “I had guessed that.” His hold on her arms and the pressure on the back of her head eased marginally, as she made no move to try to get free. She held her breath as she listened to the developing conversation. She’d worry about Garrus seeing her defensive and offensive abilities later. As it was, she could only barely see her assailant through her lashes, as Garrus’ hands on the back of her head were forcing her chin into her chest. She thought about the last time her head had been in this position, and thought that at least this time there were no guns pointed at her.

“Then what is she doing-”

“She’s quellen, Markin. You know what that means.”

“I...I...”

“It means you won’t touch her, harass her, speak to her, or engage her in any way unless you have instructions from myself, my sister, or Meda. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Kyr.” The response was tight, and angry. She could see his talons tense and flex.
“Then you can go explain to Meda now why you were poking around the old servants’ rooms when you were supposed to be out in the gardens.”

“Sir.” The address was reluctant, and the footsteps that followed were the stomps of someone who clearly thought they’d been wronged.

“You can let me go now,” she said in Common when Markin was gone. Garrus only snorted, not understanding but guessing at her words, and re-arranged her limbs so that he held her hands behind her, requiring only a shove to get her walking towards the open door he’d come through. She spared a glance over her shoulder, habit making her want to re-asses her surroundings. Markin had truly gone, and Garrus looked...

Thoughtful? Contemplative? Something along those lines, she was sure. This was only her forth day within these walls, but between Meda and the two Vakarian boys, she’d absorbed more exposure to turian nuances than hundreds of hours of Parasini’s training could have instilled.

With Garrus herding her, she passed through the door and into the room beyond, a sitting room of a sorts, with comfortable chairs, bookshelves, a rounded fireplace and an extranet terminal, as well as a large viewing screen. Garrus shut the door behind them, locked it, then pushed her into one of the chairs.

“Stay,” he said in Common, apparently one of the few words he knew, and retreated beyond another door, through which Shepard spied a turian-style hammock bed with tousled bedding. He returned a moment later, clad in short, loose draw-string pants slit up the back to accommodate his spurs, omnitool clipped around his right forearm. He was tapping away at it, when Shepard realized why he’d looked odd earlier; he wasn’t wearing that eyepiece. Every other time she’d seen him, he’d been wearing that blue-glowing bit of tech, and now without it, it was just...off. Moreso than it should have been. Like it was one of those items that was just a part of him, much as a favored weapon, or a wedding ring might be for someone else.

Observations like this were one of the things that made Shepard good at what she did. The fact that she had begun to make such connections regarding her host was both disconcerting and encouraging; the first, because it usually took much longer for her to get this sort of feel about a target, and the second because it would make her job that much easier.

As he approached, she watched him frown at his omnitool interface, the silvered plates of metallic cartilage on his face shifting subtly. The blue tattoos that were his colony markings were somewhat faded, due for another application of the mildly acidic ink the turians used to paint their marks. The color stayed on the cartilage plates through a combination of etching, due to the mild acid, and staining, much like blackberry juice or wine, but would fade with time and washings. Painless, since cartilage had no nerve endings, but the process still tended to make most humans
uncomfortable just on principle.

At last he found the program he was looking for, and looked at her and said, “Finally got ahold of one of these. Does it work? Can you understand me?” He spoke quietly, and the voice that emerged from his omnitool was his, but the syllables were re-arranged from turian, to Common. A VI translator. As long as he had it turned on, she wouldn’t have to pretend ignorance.

“Yes,” she said with genuine relief. “I can understand you.” She heard her voice being regurgitated by the omnitool, in turian words. The translation was not direct, but close enough.

“Good,” he responded, and came to stand across from her. She took note of the position, clearly radiating authority, and wondered if it was conscious or not. “Care to tell me what happened out there?”

She gave a terse nod, and explained. She watched him absorb her explanation. He seemed casual, unconcerned- almost amused, she thought. Then he asked, “So, how did you learn what you did out there?”

“Learn what?” She doubted she could feign ignorance for long, and she was right. He shook his head at her, and surprised her by sitting, looking as if the action were subconscious. Interesting.

“You know what I mean.” His tone was warning, and the look he fixed her with did something the stares of few had ever managed; made her breath catch. There was an intensity, a fire, to this turian that she’d seen rarely, in humans or any other species. It was only partly tempered, only mostly under control. There were tendrils of that fire that were still free, still unchained.

And that observation, on top of noting that his eyepiece was something he should not be without, solidified the worry that had begun to gnaw at her. There was something about this family... She should not be noticing things this personal, this soon. Perhaps in humans...but in turians?

The answer to this inner dialogue was an uncomfortable one. The logical solution was that, turians and humans were not nearly as different as everyone thought. She’d already known they were more alike than the press and the media led the average public to believe. You couldn’t fight an opponent day in and day out for as long as she had and not know how similar enemies could be.

And still....
He was still watching her. Patient, but with a bubbling *impatience* just beneath the surface. Again, interesting. Contrasting.

“I...learned some self defense as a girl,” she managed, deliberately putting uncertainty into her voice. “My father insisted. Said you never knew when a pretty girl might be caught in a bad situation.”

“Smart man,” Garrus replied simply, surprising her. “How did you know to hold his wrist like that?”

“I...I didn’t. I just grabbed it.” It was a gamble- she didn’t know how good a look he’d gotten at the scuffle. To her memory, the angles had been right for it to be believable. She watched his eyes carefully, looking for signs of disbelief.

He snorted, and surprised her yet again by saying, “It’s good you dodged that knife. I could have fired him, but not much would have happened to him beyond that. It’s not that people don’t think killing quellen is wrong, it’s just that our laws haven’t caught up with the times yet. There’s no human embassy to push your case, and no precedents set for how to handle human murder cases.”

“I appreciate you...intervening,” she ventured. “I can’t imagine things would have gone well for me if I had managed to kill him.”

His gaze sharpened on her. “Was that your goal? To kill him?”

She returned the stare. “If necessary.”

He tilted his head slightly. “If I hadn’t stepped in? Would that have constituted ‘necessary’?”

“You were there,” she shot back. “What do you think?”

He snorted again. “I think I would have done the same.” He paused, then added, “And you’re right. Things would not have gone well for you if you had managed to slit his throat. Not that I haven’t considered it myself, now and again...” He shook his head. “He’s old blood. His ancestors were quellen to my ancestors, and at least one member of his family has continued to serve the Vakarians since. He takes this new trend of taking human quellen as a personal affront to the sanctity of the tradition.”
“There’s nothing sacred about making slaves of your enemies,” she retorted, sharper than she meant. The energy behind his gaze returned as his omnitool chirped out the translation of her words.

“Turians don’t have a word for that, you know,” he said after a moment. “The VI program had to use the batarian translation.”

“What word? ‘Slave?’” That was interesting, if what he said was true. Sure enough, now that she listened, she could distinguish the single word from the string of vowels and constants the omnitool echoed as batarian, not turian. It was one of the few batarian words she knew.

“Quellen are slaves,” she said simply, and watched him bristle, straightening his posture as the fringes atop his head flared ever so slightly. Personally, she didn’t entirely agree with her own assessment, but her alter ego would, she thought, believe it wholeheartedly.

“They are not,” he bit back, clearly offended. “When this war is over-” she snorted in disbelief. “-the quellen will be released. Theoretically, with payment.”

“First, this war won’t end in our lifetimes and you know it. Our species are too alike, too stubborn.” She was now treading close to the line that separated ‘Kristin’ from ‘Shepard,’ but she didn’t let it stop her. “Second, we both know that no government could afford what they would have to pay out. They’ll probably insert a clause in their laws sometime soon that gives them an out for precisely that inevitable scenario.”

The look on his face as she spoke was...intriguing. Half interested, half...surprised, but pleased.

She realized she’d leaned forward in her chair, knees apart, one elbow planted on the coordinating knee, other hand gesturing. The posture she always assumed when discussing various things with colleagues or squadmates. Garrus was neither of these things. She made herself sit back in her seat, watching him assimilate her rebuttal.

He was forming a denial -she knew he was, somehow- when the terminal on the desk chirped. He made a frustrated noise, and she couldn’t help but give a quirk of her lips in lieu of a grin. She knew the feeling- get on a roll, and someone, somewhere, would know it and interrupt. He stood and stalked to the desk, hit a key, and barked a demand for an identity.
“Is this how you greet old friends first thing in the morning?” The voice translated by Garrus’ omnitool, still with the VI translator running, was definitely female, and even more definitely teasing. Despite herself, Shepard raised an eyebrow at Garrus’ back, slightly curved as it blended up with the high rim of his cowl.

“Advocate Nimonise,” he responded, although the title had a similarly teasing note to it. Shepard’s interest was perked, and she went perfectly still and silent, with the goal of Garrus forgetting she was there.

“Really, Garrus? It’s Celisia.”

“It’s never been ‘Celisia,’” Garrus responded. “It’s been Scout Nimonise, Nim, Kyria Celisia...”

She was laughing. “Fine, then it’s Celisia now.”

“If you say so, Nim.” Still the light tone, but there was something else there, too. A line being set. Shepard found herself approving. Alien or no, Shepard knew the sound of a woman working from friendly casualness to friendly flirtation. Garrus was putting on the brakes without necessarily kicking her out, and he did it while sounding like he’d done it before. With her, or with others?

“You still owe me that drink.” Now the female’s voice, ‘Celisia’s’ was firm, too.

“So I do,” he responded. He paused, thought. “How about this afternoon?”

“Little early for drinking, hm?”

“Sorry, not doing much drinking lately. Figured we could do lunch instead.”

“Allright, I think I can make an exception...this once.” Still the teasing, and she heard Garrus rumble with a turian chuckle, as if this were an old game between them. He named a time and place that meant nothing to Shepard, then the call was disconnected right as there came a knock on the third set of doors in the room, a set that didn’t lead to the courtyard or the bedroom.

Garrus motioned for Shepard to stay where she was, and went to the door himself to find Meda
standing there with a very large tray and severe frown. Garrus sighed and said, “Let the scoldings commence, Meda. Here, let me take the tray. I don’t want shouting and holding it to tire you before you get it all out.”

Ignoring his jibe, Meda did indeed proceed to scold, not giving up the tray as she shouldered past him to set it down on the low table in the middle of the room.

“In all my years managing this household, I’ve never had a more insane morning. A missing quellen, Markin looking like someone threatened to cut his spurs off, telling me that Kristin attacked him and you took her side, meanwhile breakfast was burnt and I had to start all over. And now you’re standing there, letting it get cold, and my schedule for the day is completely ruined from the start. And Solanna’s party barely a week away! It’s been so long since we’ve entertained, do you have any idea how many things I’ve let fall to the wayside that now need tending? I’ll not thank you for putting this idea into her head, and you can be certain that you’ll be there, helping me manage the chaos, no escaping this time-”

Shepard’s attention was divided between Meda’s rapid speech being emitted from Garrus’ VI, Garrus’ own amused, long-suffering expression, and the scent emanating from the tray. She couldn’t be smelling what she thought she was smelling.

An oddly relaxed mood had taken Shepard. A combination of the after effects of an adrenal high, the surprisingly intriguing conversation, the amusing Meda, and now the scent wafting from that damn tray. Not drawing attention to herself, she leaned forward and lifted the small pot’s lid, sniffing. Strong, aromatic coffee steam rose to meet her nostrils, and she could hold back the delighted half-moan-half-sigh that escaped her. There was even a human-style coffee cup.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Garrus look away from the ranting Meda, having heard her ill-contained sound of enjoyment. She saw his mandibles twitch and flare in an unmistakable expression of turian amusement.

“The shipment of human supplies arrived early this morning,” Meda said, obviously somewhat peeved at having her scolding interrupted. “Spirits help me decipher what half of it is, but some of it was straightforward enough, like that drink. Can’t decide if it smells wonderful or ghastly, myself.”

“Smells interesting to me,” Garrus supplied.

Meda gave the turian equivalent of a ‘hmph,’ and said, “Well don’t you go sampling it. No telling what it’ll do to you. Caught Norius earlier trying to sneak a taste.”
“Already know I’m not allergic levo, Meda, but thanks for worrying.” He gave her an affectionate pat on the shoulder, to which Meda waved her talons at him before turning to leave.

Over her shoulder she called at Shepard. “I expect you in my kitchen within the hour!”

Shepard chuckled, and out of the corner of her eye saw Garrus look at her in surprise. She wondered if he’d ever heard a human sound of amusement.

“I like her,” Shepard volunteered. “Reminds of me someone I used to know.”

“Who?”

“My...” she paused, spinning the falsehood in her mind before speaking it. “My mother-in-law.”

Garrus sat down across from her, pulling the plates that were obviously for him closer. The other two, Shepard belatedly noticed, held something she hadn’t had in a very long time; microwave waffles. No syrup or butter, just waffles, the formerly freeze-dried kind that might have come out of an MRE. And more bacon. No sugar or cream for the coffee—thankfully, she usually like it black anyway. She couldn’t help but laugh softly to herself.

Heart of enemy territory, indeed. With a side of bacon and free coffee refills.

Without sticky syrup or butter or even jam, Shepard ate the waffles with her fingers. She’d never been one to do things the difficult way when there was a simpler solution, manners be damned. At the edge of her vision she watched Garrus watch her take the first sip of the scalding coffee, wrapping her hands around the cup reverently. She’d honestly never expected to taste the hot, rich-bitter drink ever again. She hadn’t gone into this mission thinking it was a suicide mission, but she also knew her statistics, and she was more often than not a realist. Even if by some miracle Nomos’ return was delayed, or she managed to stay out of his sight, eventually someone, somewhere, would figure it out...or someone like Markin would get to her.

“May I?” He surprised her—yet again—by holding out one taloned hand, looking at her cup. She raised an inquisitive eyebrow, but said nothing as she handed over her prize. She’d heard him say he wasn’t allergic to levo, and wondered how he knew. He raised the cup to his mouth, long, narrow tongue darting out to taste the dark brew. He recoiled almost instantly, facial plating contorting comically. She laughed despite herself, and held out her hand to take the cup back.
“Most humans take it with cream, or sugar, or both, to mitigate the bitterness,” she told him as he moved to take a drink of his own beverage to eradicate the taste.

“Good to know you’re not all insane,” he said with a shudder, tipping his odd spouted cup into his mouth. The drink was almost the same color as hers, but the scent was...not quite sweet, not quite sour.

A request rose on Shepard’s tongue, and she bit it back for a moment while she evaluated where she was. How she’d gone from fending off a mortal attack, to swapping drinks with her mortal enemy, she’d never be able to fully explain. But here they were. And Shepard had never turned down an opportunity when it presented itself, as this one somehow had. Her main mission objective had been completed, theoretically with none the wiser. Sending the message again would double the chance of discovery. She’d have to trust that the instructions had been good, and leave it at that. Now, anything else she did was up to her and her secondary objectives; intel gathering, primarily. What better way to do that, then to talk up the house head of a prominent turian family? Certainly safer than being caught outdoors scouting out the terrain. Up until now she hadn’t even entertained the idea that conversation with anyone other than Meda would be probable.

With that in mind, she held out her hand for Garrus’ drink and said, “How about my turn?”

He looked at her, and there was a flicker of that intense fire she’d seen earlier. It was something she’d never seen before in any other turian, and wondered what it was. Openness? Curiosity? Turians were big on turning out cookie-cutter citizens. Maybe here was a turian who’d refused to fit the cookie mold?

He handed over the cup after removing the spouted attachment. She sniffed, thinking it reminded her mildly of sweet’n’sour sauce. She sipped, and had to fight the conflicting reactions of delight and nausea. The taste was vile, sweet’n’sour sauce in pickle juice. But there was something else...it made her tongue, then her throat, then her belly tingle and burn like whiskey, artificial warmth spreading from the inside out.

She shuddered, and handed the cup back. “Interesting,” was all she said, and Garrus gave a brief laugh.

They returned to their own dishes, and didn’t trade anything else.

Since both of them proved to be efficient eaters, everything was consumed in minutes. Dishes were
piled back onto the tray, which Shepard picked up as a matter of being habitually tidy as well as remembering her cover.

At the door she paused. "Thank you, again, for...stepping in." Enemy or not, there was something unfailingly honorable about Garrus that she could respect. The fact that he considered the protection of those under his roof as a given, rather than something magnanimous, was part of it.

The tall turian turned from where he’d paused at the door to the bedroom, and nodded. "If he gives you trouble again, come to me."

Forgetting herself for a moment she gave him a half-grin and said, "I think it would be better if I handled it myself, but thanks."

He tilted his head at her. "Interesting response to something that wasn't a suggestion." He sounded amused, but forceful.

The half-grin became a full grin as she juggled the tray to palm open the doors. "I'll keep that in mind." Then she was outside the room, shutting the door behind her before he could respond. She hurried down the hall- Meda would be waiting.

For a wonder, the day ahead was free from meetings of any kind. Garrus had been hoping to sleep in somewhat, but Markin and his over-zealousness had prevented that. At least he had another interesting encounter with Kristin to add to the growing puzzle that was his new human-shaped quellen, that was something.

Having time to kill before he met Celisia for an early lunch, Garrus found himself rewatching the vid footage from the docks, the day of Kristin Lambert's arrival on Palaven. He wondered if she knew the footage existed. She never looked for cameras, but that could have been because she'd already assumed they were there.

For the tenth time in a row, Garrus paused the vid at a specific frame; Kristin, moving fast enough that the low-grade camera image was slightly blurred, lashing out at the human holding Gabias. Her limbs were poised in perfect alignment with her target, and her face was set in a look of solemn concentration- no fear, no worry, no concern, just razor-sharp focus. Nothing like the expressions she'd worn while living at the villa. Every time he'd seen her, she'd seemed confused, ignorant, or
else simply resigned.

He'd chalked it up to his own lack of understanding of human emotions. Then, this morning, he'd seen that first expression again when she'd flipped and pinned a larger, stronger opponent. Deadly focus. Elimination of all extraneous distractions.

And then, breakfast. Curiosity, tempered with wariness. Garrus wondered if it was just the aid of the VI translator suddenly helping him put names to her expressions, or if it was something else. He was good- he'd never thought he was that good, not with humans.

Instincts honed over the years of military and C-Sec work told him he was dealing with two different people. The problem was, he didn't know either if them well enough to know which one was real. For a short time he worried that he'd brought a dangerous enemy under the same roof as his family, then recalled her defense of Gabias, and how she'd run from Markin when she apparently could have killed him at any time, turning to deadly force only when left with no other option.

So, certainly dangerous if for no other reason than her unpredictability, but not dangerous to Solanna and the boys. Good enough for now.

With concerns regarding his new family quellen put aside for the time being, Garrus turned his attention to a less interesting, but more pressing, issue; politics.

At the last meeting, it had been decided that several warehouses full of goods confiscated from human shipping routes were to be sold off, the proceeds used to pad a fund set up to pay quellen for when the war ended. If the war ended, some said. At the rate they were going, many considered it an eventuality that humans and turians would simply be blood-enemies for countless generations. Personally, having lived off of Palaven for some time, Garrus thought the latter to be rather unlikely, but then again he also couldn’t quite say why the Council hadn’t yet stepped in, when they clearly should have...so who knew?

He read and responded to a handful of messages he’d been putting off, including a request from his sister to visit a clothing store sometime before next week’s dinner party, then dressed and headed out to meet Celisia.

The restaurant he’d named was an old favorite of both of theirs, one of the many little nuances they’d discovered while developing a friendship so many years ago aboard the Ceratus. Granted, the friendship had begun to emerge after a year of bitter rivalry finally settled with a particularly brutal round in the crew sparring ring, but still.
She was already there when he arrived, at a table near the back. At a smaller table off to the side sat a male human with skin the color of that odd drink Kristin had so enjoyed that very morning. Beneath the plain, functional unisex robe all quellen wore, Garrus spied an impressively developed musculature. Around his neck hung something interesting— an antique-looking medallion etched and enameled with Celisia’s Parthia colony white markings, simplified and condensed to fit on a flat surface rather than a face. Not many turian families hosting quellen opted to take them out into public, for a number of reasons, first of which of course being the radiation. In response to that thought, Garrus’ gaze flicked to the man’s wrist, where he spied a wrist-brace strapped snug against the quellen’s dark skin. It was similar to a medical device used to administer regulated drugs. This one would be fitted with ampules of anti-radiation medication, reverse engineered from medical supplies pilfered from one of the Alliance’s own frigates. The only other race with regular need of anti-radiation meds were the asari, whose physiology was just different enough to require medications that didn’t quite work on humans. Drell possessed an epidermis and scales resilient enough to permit visits lasting months before needing any sort of medical treatment, and quarians and volus both wore enviro-suits anyway. Elcor were, seemingly, impervious to everything but haste.

“I see your spending habits haven’t changed,” Garrus observed as he sat across from the undeniably exotic specimen of the turian species. Unlike most females who opted to have their fringes removed periodically, Celisia allowed hers to grow long and slender, like his sister. It was a radical fashion choice gaining popularity after centuries of societies considering the look too ‘masculine’ for well-bred females.

She gave a low laugh at his comment, which had been made with gestures to indicate the quellen’s medical-brace, as well as the ornate set of sorv decorating her fringe.

“Since our dear Advocate colleagues were so insistent on those of us without quellen obtaining them soon as possible, I thought I might as well go the extra distance and show him off,” she said as she sipped at her drink, a thick and fruity thing she’d never would have indulged in when he’d known her as a Recon Scout in the military. “And he is impressive, isn’t he?”

“Wouldn’t really know,” he replied, flagging down a waiter. “Most of them still look alike to me.” Briefly, he recalled his conversation with Kristin that morning. He thought he might be able to pick her out of a crowd, and not because of her oddly strong vitalia.

“Hm,” his old friend hummed. “How is yours settling in?”

“Fine,” he replied. “You heard of how Solanna found her?”

“Most everyone on the Board has heard,” she replied with a grin. “They’re trying to think of how
‘The Board’ being the defacto term regarding the ranking individuals of the political party Garrus had found himself unwittingly a member of while taking care of his father’s obligations.

“Of course they are,” he grumbled, and she laughed. The waiter finally came over, took Garrus’ order, and left. When he was out of earshot, he glanced to the dark-skinned human pointedly ignoring everyone, while still seeming to see everything. Garrus jerked his head at him, directing a questioning look at Celisia. “How did you come by him?”

“Funny story,” she replied, reclining in her chair. She proceeded to detail it until his drink came, and he found himself shaking his head, whether in disbelief or amusement, even he wasn’t sure.

“You really think its wise, taking in a confirmed member of a group known to target turian ships?”

“Probably not,” she confessed. “But it’s certainly exciting.”

He snorted. “Some things don’t change,” he said, raising his cup to take a drink. Quick as a reptile, Celisia reached across the table to grip his arm.

“No,” she replied, tone oddly intense. “Some things don’t.” Her opposable talon was tracing a hard line down the inside of his forearm. Discreetly, he removed her hand, not entirely sure why. She took it in stride, reclining back in her seat as if nothing had happened.

The conversation returned to inane things, recollections of times fondly remembered, and some not so fondly remembers- friends lost in the line of duty, battles that hadn’t gone as planned. Inside jokes, political jokes, speaking for a time as two ordinary people without responsibilities to the greater good. Despite the unexpected come-ons, it was pleasant, and when she eventually suggested going to take a look at the warehouses the Board wanted liquidated, he readily agreed. As pleasant as inactivity was, neither was comfortable doing absolutely noting but sitting for extended periods of time. If they could be productive while enjoying each others company, it was a win-win all around.

“No,” she called to her quellen. “We’re leaving.” She spoke clearly, and he guessed she was teaching the human male some basic turian instructions. Prudent, even though he was sure she could have come by a VI translator- a copy of his, even, if she asked. He thought about asking Meda to do the same for Kristín.
Garrus remembered how surprisingly engaging their conversation that morning had been, and thought that if he had the time, he’d handle the lessons himself.

They took their own vehicles to the warehouse, located on the far side of the city, actually not far from Garrus’ friend Septimus’ shop. Their credentials got them passed the warehouse guard, and found to their surprise that a few representatives from a liquidation company were already perusing the warehouse’s contents, sorting valuable from not. Celisia went directly to the neat rows of boxes in the ‘valuable’ section, Jacob following behind as she began picking through boxes. When his limited turian and her limited Common became a hindrance, Garrus discovered she actually did have a VI translator, and she used it now to satisfy her curiosity as to the purpose of various items.

“This, what is this? There’s so much of it!” Celisia had opened a sealed box to reveal a mound of sleek, glistening white fabric in a variety of densities and weaves. She pulled it out, clearly puzzled by it, and Garrus himself found himself intrigued as well. Turians were familiar with traditional clothing, most of it comprising of robes, with the colors and patterns indicating their purpose. Pants and skirts and shirts had come along around the same time as the beginnings of their assimilation into Citadel society, but the robes had remained mostly invariable as far as shape.

This garment, though, was...

“That looks ridiculous, whatever it is,” Garrus came over to join Celisia in pondering the item. The bottom half, when Celisia held it up by the shoulders, was conical, tapering up into a waist narrow enough to fit a turian, but then going back out again. Garrus thought it was shaped faintly like Kristin, in that there were twin mounds of allocated of fabric on the chest.

Jacob snorted. “It’s a dress. For women.”

“It looks...extravagent.” Celisia looked intrigued.

There were tags dangling from a sleeve. Jacob reached out and grasped them, turning them to read lettering indecipherable to Garrus. He saw the man’s face contort into what he thought was a wince. “It is,” he confirmed. “Most women I know would cut off an arm and a leg for a dress like this.” He frowned at the pillar of white froth. “Hell if I know why, though.”

“Humans are so odd,” Celisia sighed, tossing the dress back on top of the box, then proceeding down the row. She had stuffed a box into Jacob’s arms at some point, and was helping herself to a number of oddities. “I’ll donate a lump sum to whatever bank account the Board sets up for the
“Liquidation,” she told Garrus. “You should do the same. Maybe something for your quellen? Some of this is for Jacob.”

This, apparently, was news to the human, gauging by his suddenly raised eyebrows. Garrus peered inside the box the male was holding, wondering what among the random things Celisia thought her quellen would like. She certainly hadn’t asked him, that Garrus had noticed. He wondered if her callous treatment of her quellen was deliberate. Then, watching the glower Jacob directed at his companion’s back, Garrus couldn’t help but grin. Of course she knew. She was pushing the male.

There were few things turians liked better than a challenge, and Celisia was no exception. If she was going to invest time and money into a quellen, she damn well was going to make sure it was going to be an interesting experience. It was probably why she’d picked this potentially dangerous individual, although how dangerous he could be if he passed through the local quarantine center, Garrus wasn’t sure. Either way, it was apparent that Celisia was going to push and bait her human until the man did something. If he didn’t know Celisia was intelligent and perfectly capable of watching her own neck, he’d have worried. Instead, he bent his attentions to taking her advice, waiting for something to catch his eye. Most of it was obviously decorative, with a few things that looked like they might be medical, and plenty of things Garrus had absolutely no idea about.

In the end, he didn’t really see anything, and left Celisia to her impromptu shopping to speak with the liquidation representatives, immersing himself in talks of money, logistics, legalities and schedules. Boring, responsible, and absolutely something his father would have been doing. That last thought rankled, and the representative he was speaking with noticed, finishing up what he was saying with a promise to have a packet detailing the proceedings, fees, etc, delivered to him and the other Board members.

“And, if I may suggest... There’s a few items I notice you didn’t look at.” And he gestured to the far end of the warehouse, where a handful of large silhouettes under tarps were sitting. Curious, Garrus followed him and watched as he pulled a tarp off one.

Ground vehicles, judging by the four wheels. This one lacked a top, the seats exposed to the air, so he guessed they hadn’t gone particularly fast. He walked around the thing, admiring the glistening paint despite himself. The seats looked like were upholstered with some sort of leather, and the controls looked extraordinarily basic.

“Antique, obviously,” the rep was saying. “Obviously valuable...the ship they were being transported on identified itself as a carrier vessel licensed to transport things of high value, when it was confiscated going through a Heirarchy safe zone.” The rep scratched at a fringe spine. “Not sure why they value outdated transportation vehicles, but...well, they are oddly aesthetic.”

“They are that,” Garrus agreed, looking at the other two that the rep had unveiled. The one directly
in front of him was the exact shade of turian blood. The one beside it was black, smaller, and rounder. The one farthest from him was bright red, with two thick white stripes going the length of the body, a narrower stripe going down the side. It had a square, almost blocky look to its design, and something about it seemed...stubborn, was the word that came to mind, for some reason. The back of the cab reached back to meet the very end of the vehicle in a sleek, aerodynamic line, with the front had an odd protrusion up from the surface, like a vent. Everything about it was polished and well cared for. Whoever had owned it, had loved it and admired it as a piece of machinery worthy of such admiration. Garrus, a techie at heart, could appreciate that.

He was hooked.

“Allright,” he gave in. “Have it shipped here,” he tapped at his omnitool, sending his address to the rep. “Along with what you appraise it at, and I’ll send the amount once the Board has an account set up.”

“Here,” Celisia said, coming up behind him with a box. “Take these, too. Thought you might find them interesting.” And she plopped the box down on the top of the red vehicle, hard enough to make Garrus wince despite himself. She gave him a knowing look, and laughed. “Boys and your machines...guess it doesn’t matter if its a human, turian, or volus lump of gears and fuel, you’d love it all the same.”

Garrus returned the look. “Bite me, Nim.”

“Anytime,” she responded glibly. “Dinner first, though? We’ve been here awhile, and now I’m starved.”

“Why not?” He found himself agreeing.

And all through dinner, and after, he couldn’t help but think she was right...turian, human, didn’t seem to much matter to him, as much as it should...and not just when it came to machines. He just didn’t care about the differences, as he should as a proper turian citizen.

He was considering stopping by Septimus’ store to say hello, when a message from Solanna had him suddenly changing his route and zipping recklessly through traffic.

“Message received from Admiral Teronus Almonus...it’s about Father. It’s not good. Come home.”
He should have known better than to think he could have one day disaster-free.
Chapter 8

“I can be on guard against my enemies,
but God deliver me from my friends!”

-Charolotte Bronte

Chapter Eight

“He has what?”

“Karvallian Pox,” Solanna sighed over the datapad she was signing before handing it back to the delivery service employee, who thanked her and left the box on a side table, beside another box, the one of human-centric items Nim had picked out. “So he’s being detained on Taetrus until it clears up.”

“Taetrus...” Garrus mussed, leaning against a pillar of the entryway as Solanna prodded at the box. Then it clicked- he remembered an incident a short time ago, terrorists had ‘landed’ a starship in the middle of the planet’s capitol, Vallum. The resulting fallout had taken years to clean up, and refugee conditions had seen outbreaks of many illnesses and diseases long since thought extinct, Karvallian being one of them. Coughing, alternating fevers and chills, painful sores developing on the softer parts of the turian epidermis, such as the neck, knees, elbows...and other areas. Highly contagious and potentially fatal if the individual already had something else nasty. Since Karvallian had been relatively unheard of outside of incidents like Vallum, it was probably one of the only places other than a core world with the resources to treat it. It could be hard to land on Palaven if you had so much as a snuffle, thanks to rigid quarantine regulations, so Garrus wasn't surprised at the choice to quarantine his father on Taetrus.

Garrus raked his talons over his fringe, sighing. He was torn between relief and annoyance. When he’d received Solanna’s message en route home, he’d feared the worst. His sister had always possessed an odd sense of the concept of ‘emergency.’
“Did they give a time estimate?”

“No, but I did some research...for someone’s father’s age, but of his good health, it shouldn’t be more than a few standard weeks.” She peered at the contents of Garrus’ box, apparently mildly puzzled by the contents, then turned to him. “I thought you’d want to know as soon as possible.”

She was right about that, but he’d wished she’d phrased her message differently. Knowing better than to pick this particular fight, he bit his tongue, choosing instead to simply nod and push away from the pillar, asking, “Where are the boys? I’ve been promising Norius a sparring session for weeks.”

"And here I was hoping to hear more about your date with Celisia.” She gifted him with a teasing grin, the kind only sisters can get away with. Garrus’ response was a snort and a rude flick of his hand.

“They’re outside, helping with the weeding,” she told him as he turned to go, Solanna's laughing directions following him.

The gardens around the villa had been his mother’s pride and joy, and most of the staff had continued to maintain them without any comment from Solanna or himself. He stepped outside, fully expecting the scene of trimmed shrubs, vines, ferns and floral arrangements that was half art, half organized chaos. Upon arrival, however, Garrus stopped in his tracks and observed an interesting sight; Norius and Gabias, hiding behind a shrub, peeking over the top and whispering. Curious, Garrus edged closer, much quieter than people would have expected of such a large individual, and listened.

"Just watch, any second now...” Norius was promising his younger brother. Gabias was fidgeting impatiently.

"She can't get it, it's too high..." Gabias, grumbling.

"Sssh, yes she can, Saris says humans can jump twice as high as they are tall."

Garrus’ amusement was suddenly swapped with trepidation. He strode forward, letting the boys hear his approach and only feeling the slightest sense of suppressed glee at the way they leaped out of their hides in fright.
"Now why, exactly, would our human guest need to demonstrate her skills at jumping?" Garrus answered his own question when he peered around the corner, and saw Kristin staring up into the branches of a tall, thick miphacera tree with high branches, where her bucket of gardening supplies hung from a swaying branch. It was one of a trio of trees, all roughly the same height and distance apart. A hundred or so paces beyond the trees was a more dense cluster of varying sizes, thick enough to nearly be called a miniature forest, complete with the ferns and vines that would have accompanied such trees in the wild jungle.

He spied an anti-rad med-dispenser clamped around her left wrist, and guessed Meda or Solanna had ordered one. Both had taken his mother's beliefs to heart, that no creature should be separated from the sky. Or, apparently, from working beneath it. Kristin’s knees, hands, arms and face were smeared with dirt, and there was a shovel by her feet. Likely the boys had snatched the bucket when she’d gone to get the shovel.

Garrus sighed, and was about to order the boys to fetch a ladder to retrieve the pilfered tools, when the human moved. Quick and sure, she ran at the trunk of one of the trees, feet moving up its smooth bark before a great push sent her flying away from the tree-

And landing feet-first on the trunk of its neighboring twin. Half a step, and another lunge back to the first. Back and forth she leaped between the trunks, powerful pushes with straining thigh muscles keeping her momentum in constant movement, until one last leap took her high enough to grip the lowest branches, and swing herself up onto its thick support, crouching low for balance as she landed. From there she moved from branch to branch with a smooth, effortless grace until she had the bucket in hand, which she kept in one arm while she used the other to help guide a serious of controlled falls, dropping from one tree limb to another until she landed lightly on solid ground. She rose out of her impact-absorbing crouch, not even breathing hard, then looked directly at the boys with an eyebrow raised and clear challenge in her posture. And was that a hint of a grin..?

So, she'd known about her mischievous audience. Although, judging from how her stance shifted when she raised her eyes to meet his gaze, she'd thought her viewers numbered two, not three. She turned sharply, heading back towards the half-weeded flowerbed as if nothing had happened, shoulders tense and her stride stiffening as she went.

"Go inside, boys," Garrus told his nephews. Sensibly they did not argue, but scampered away as soon as they realized that they had -for a time- escaped retribution. Sometimes Norius forgot he was old enough to be preparing to head off for his first year at the Academy, and normally Garrus tried to appreciate those sometimes. Now was not one of those times, not when his curiosity had been stoked, a banked fire prodded with a rude fire poker.

Garrus moved to follow the human, and when he was near enough for her to hear, he checked to make sure his omnitool’s VI translator was running, and spoke.
"And here I've been telling everyone that humans aren't pyjaks." He said the words as a statement, the question indicated by its very absence. Kristin kept walking away from him, towards a flowerbed with a pile of spiny weeds tossed to one side on a square of canvas. She didn't look back, only knelt with her own sort of controlled grace and resumed digging through the hidden thorns.

He wasn't done.

"Care to tell how you can jump like that? I've seen humans trying to escape certain death, and I've never seen one move like you just did." Granted, most of those humans had been injured, malnourished, and exhausted from their captivity with the Traders, but still. The puzzle that was Kristin kept compounding itself into more and more complicated pieces. Abruptly he realized the pattern his thoughts were taking, and for a moment he was back on the Citadel, questioning another lead he'd seen display some nuance to grab his attention.

Kristin seemed to sense it too. She'd sat back on her haunches, something that his own anatomy told him should be very uncomfortable, and was staring up at him. She looked...wary. Tensed. A lead, alright, and one he had no idea about whether or not they were innocent or packing a missing murder weapon.

"Seen a lot of desperate humans, have you?" she asked, and he blinked at her. Not the response he'd been expecting, but he should have given their conversation that morning.

Spirits, had it only been earlier today? It felt like months, somehow.

Her gaze had intensified. He didn't need a handbook on human faces to tell that much. He took a step back, not wanting to crowd, and gave a jerk of his head towards the free standing building that hosted what served as a gym. "Come with me," he said, wondering if she'd need more than that. She looked at him considerably, then rocked back on her heels and stretched to her feet, all in one seamless motion that he couldn't help but appreciate.

She followed him, not losing that wary look entirely despite wrangling her expression into something he thought was supposed to be subdued. It looked...odd. He pulled the door open to the small building, and motioned her inside. She went, managing to keep him in her peripheral vision as she did so, he noticed. Huh. Following her inside, he flicked on a light, then turned to ask her just precisely why his eyes told him one thing about her, while his senses screamed another. The sight of her made the words die in his mouth. She was a livewire, and everything about her told him that if he said the wrong thing, made the wrong move, she’d strike.
He couldn’t say what, exactly, told him this, except to say that all of her told him this. Posture, eyes, tilt of her head, set of her chin and mouth. He found himself studying her face, the way it was fixed and positioned. He thought it might be a good idea to remember it.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer,” she said, and her voice broke a brittle silence he hadn’t even noticed building. He shook his head slightly, her words catching in his mind. He gave her a quizzical look, and she surprised him by relaxing a hair.

“A...saying,” she said. “An old one, overused, but it’s still around for a reason.”

“What’s a ‘picture?’” He asked.

“Two-dimensional image, before holos and three-dimensional screens were common.”

“Ah, a painting.”

“Not quite.” She leaned against the wall, arms crossed and one leg bent at the knee slightly. Somewhat relaxed, but not off balance.

Garrus tilted his head at her. “Something in between, then?”

Briefly, she explained the old fashioned technique of using special chemicals to treat other chemicals applied to special paper -another thing that needed explaining; turians had used parchment up until the development of computers, their claws too sharp to handle anything as brittle and delicate as what she described. Which of course in turn led to Garrus explaining that turians really had never had anything quite like it, lacking perhaps certain components of the celluloid process. Rather, the first real photographs had been very, very early, rudimentary digital experiments. And that in turn led, naturally, to discussions of tech, comparing timelines of development. In this, they found startlingly kindred spirits in one another as the tech of pictures and holos led into video, then information storage, then information transference...

“It’s actually somewhat funny, trying to explain to someone born and raised on Earth that the extranet -what little we get of it- isn’t the internet. It’s not instant or round-the-clock.”

“What’s so hard to understand?” At some point during their discussions, Garrus had moved to a set of weights on a rack, selecting a pair to take with him to a bench, and had been repeating sets of
movements that looked decidedly uncomfortable to the human, he could tell by her oddly
fascinated winces as she watched him. “Depending on how much you pay or your rank in the
government, you get an allotted percentage per databurst, incoming and outgoing. Not
complicated.”

“Try telling that to a fresh-faced officer straight out of his mama’s kitchen,” she responded with a
grin, and with a snort of agreement he hefted his weights once more. He’d always felt odd,
exercising with an audience. He nodded to the rack, an invitation, one he didn’t expect her to take.

“Officer of what?” He asked absently as she moved to the weights, testing them before settling on a
pair nearly as heavy as his, he noted with mild interest. She paused at his question.

“I think your VI program glitched,” she said at last. “The word I used means ‘new employee,’ and
the word you just asked me about refers to a law enforcement individual.”

“Had to happen sooner or later,” he responded. “Surprised it’s been this accurate so far.”
“I’m surprised, myself,” she agreed, moving to another bench and beginning what looked like a
human equivalent to his own exercise. He found himself watching, interested in how visible the
movements of each individual muscle in her arm was, compared to a turian’s musculature beneath
their thicker epidermis. She spotted him looking, then raised an eyebrow. He grinned widely.

“I know, I know...picture, lasts longer.” He went back to his own repetitions, and she laughed,
surprising him into looking at her again, still grinning.

They continued on in much the same way for a time, in unexpectedly companionable silence. This
was not what he’d had in mind, initially, but there were more than the spot-light-and-questioner
method of getting answers. And this was decidedly more enjoyable.

After a shorter time than he normally invested in his exercise routine, he stood and shelved his
weights -a different set than what he’d started with, for a different purpose- and stretched. Kristin
had surprised him by keeping pace, and not looking particularly tired either. Her skin had shifted
hues, he’d noticed with interest, a darker shade of her normal tone.

One of those arches of short hair over her eyes rose in a manner he never failed to find utterly
amusing, and she asked, “Done already? I anticipated more endurance out of you.” It had the air of
a challenge, one that made him chuckle.
“Promised my nephew some sparring lessons. Don’t want to overdo it.”

She grinned at him, and he was reminded very much of a small, furry predatory species that liked to hunt by perching in trees and descending on its prey in a flurry of fang and claw.

“You’re planning on being tuckered out by that scrawny kid?” Oh, yes, definite challenge now.

He turned, crossing his arms as she rose and moved to shelve her own weights, despite her taunts.

“You have met my nephew, yes? The bigger one, not the one you rescued. Taller than you, rather resembles me?”

“If you say so, you all still look alike to me,” she responded flippantly, planting hands on hips as she turned from the rack. “And yes, we’ve met. By accident, as it were. Before today I thought he’d die pretending I didn’t exist.”

Ah, yes, the stunt with the tree. So she believed it Norius’ idea. It fit with what he’d overheard. He’d assumed the prank had been intended for fun, or perhaps to amuse his younger brother. Now, he wondered, and tucked that wondering in the back of his mind for later overview. For now, though...

“I think the gardens look neat enough for today,” he said. “I think you ought to come spot me while I teach my nephew. You know, since I’ll probably give out halfway through. Would hate to have injuring his uncle on his conscience.”

She snorted, but was grinning as she followed him out of the building and across the yard. He was already planning a way to fake a VI malfunction to allow him to plot with Norius. He wanted to see if he could actually convince Kristin-

It was the heat he registered first. Immediately after as to make no difference from simultaneous, came the sky-cracking boom that both deafened him and threw him back onto the grass. It took him a moment to unscramble his senses, for the training to assert itself. When it did, it did so with a vengeance. Information from multiple sources flooded his charged brain, his visor chirping at him noisily. Chemicals released from various glands, already amped from the recent work out, supercharged his reflexes. He was on his feet and sprinting, halfway to the burning villa house before he realized there was someone was keeping pace with him.
"Go back!" He shouted at her, and was rewarded with a cold glance right before a secondary explosion blew the kitchen outward in a cloud of fire and dust and warped cooking utensils. Both he and Kristin shied away from the blast, bring arms up to shield faces. He was between her and the smoking remnants of the wall, the only reason a length of jagged metal -the former handle if a pot, he thought- protruding from his thigh wasn't instead spearing her through her lower abdomen.

A grunt was all the noise he made, continuing to move -limp- towards the burning building with his thoughts dominated by his sister, his nephews, Meda-

His left knee trembled, then buckled, dark blood gushing down his leg. Kristin half managed to catch him when he fell, and he spat our swears the VI translator ignored. Pain that had been blocked by the fight-or-flight instinct now rushed to the foreword of his awareness, and he bellowed, reaching for the length of shrapnel. Kristin grabbed his wrist, snapping something at him he didn't understand, faintly realizing his translator was broken, possibly his whole omnitool. She shoved his hand away, tearing off her shirt to pad around the potentially deadly pot-handle, shouting at him. The words were a mystery, but her meaning was clear when she stood. He was to stay put, while she did what she could for anyone inside.

"Idiot, you don't know what you're doing, you don't know the first thing about explosives or fires-" Wailing sirens in the distance penetrated the roar of the blaze. She looked in their direction, then back to the house. Somehow, he could see on her face the same calculations running through his own mind. They were too far, the fire too well-supplied with fuel. Not enough time. She spared him a grin before taking off again at a run. She paused only to snatch up a canvas sheet that had been holding a pile of leaves and weeds, dunk it in a decorational fountain, and swing the heavy wet covering over herself. Then she dived inside through the smoking hole in the kitchen wall, and was devoured by tongues of flame.
Chapter Nine

Solanna Vakarian watched with a sort of numb detachment as the cleaning crew cleared away the rubble remnants of the kitchen wall. The garden that had been just outside it would have to be cleared and replanted, and half the kitchen’s contents replaced, the table included.

That damn table. It had been a feature of the Vakarian kitchen since before she could remember. She was pretty sure it had been there when her ancestors had first built the place, directly following the end of the Unification Wars. Fitting, that it would see its end due to another war, she supposed.

Investigators had found the source of the explosions. The package she had received just that morning, signed and dismissed while discussing her father with Garrus. And a second package, delivered to the kitchen’s back door, received by Meda. Both females had assumed the contents were for the extravagant dinner party planned for later that week. Both females were wrong.

All of them had been spirited to the nearest hospital while emergency responders had worked to save as much as possible. Solanna had stayed with her family in the hospital overnight, ensuring all were well as could be, before returning this very morning to see the extent of the damage. She had not slept. She thought she might never sleep again.

“Kyria Vakarian?” The polite salutation that meant both ‘lady’ and ‘ma’am’ somehow sounded like an afterthought, despite being spoken first. Solanna turned, somehow not surprised to see the unmistakable form of Spectre Saren Arterius, flanked by someone that could only be his brother. The resemblance was impossible to explain, otherwise, since she -and most everyone else- knew Saren had no children.

“Spectre Arterius,” Solanna greeted as amicably as she thought she was capable of, given the circumstances. “They told me you were on your way. To take over the investigation? Isn’t that

“Trust in me, just in me
Shut your eyes and trust in me
You can sleep safe and sound
Knowing I am around.”

-Trust in Me
unusual? Not that I’m not grateful for your attention, but I hardly think this ranks with galactic security.”

“On the contrary,” the Spectre countered, moving closer. His hands were clasped behind him, his bearing something between a swagger and a military march. “Your father and brother are known advocates for ending this skirmish with the humans, a skirmish that does have proven consequences elsewhere. I believe this attack to be related to that.”

Solanna, as muddled as she was by shock and stress, was not a fool. This was a thin connection at best, one that perhaps would have warranted a more junior Spectre at most, not one of the galaxy’s best and most famous.

“I see,” was all she said. “Then I’ll...leave you to your duties.” She made to walk away.

“I understand your human quellen was injured in the blast?” His inquiry made her pause and look back. She wondered how he managed to use polite words, and yet convey a demand?

“Y-yes. She pulled my housekeeper and my elder son from the blaze.”

“Your other son?”

“Was with me. We were in the courtyard, and escaped through a back door.”

“And your housekeeper, and elder son? They were in the kitchen?”

“In the hall, just outside the kitchen. A section of wall had collapsed, trapping them. The quellen was able to find another way around to them.”

“Intriguingly capable, your quellen.” Saren was examining a large chunk of stone being lifted clear of the rubble by a small crane. His voice was quiet.

“And loyal,” spoke his companion. Desolas, she thought his name was. Desolas Arterius. She knew most other citizens would have recognized him before the Spectre, being that he was the one with claims to a prestigious, famous military career. But he had fallen from the public eye several years previous, and Solanna had grown up with a brother with dreams of becoming a Spectre, not a General. Looking at him now, Solanna thought that the private life he’d been leading had not been treating him well. His fringe was in need of buffing, his teeth yellowed and uncleaned. His eyes had a way of darting around him, as if expecting the very trees to participate in something unsavory. There was a light in those eyes that had nothing to do with intelligence or duty.

“Yes,” Solanna agreed warily. “We are lucky to have her.” Then she did walk away, with no inquiries to call her back. She found a side entrance that was undamaged, and proceeded to find her rooms, untouched save for the acrid smell of smoke, and her personal terminal. She wanted to place a vidcall to her brother, but the sense of subtlety had gripped her, and she did not feel safe speaking her thoughts out loud. In her own home, no less. The message she typed out was simple.

’Spectre Saren is back. He has taken over the investigation. Asked questions about Kristin.’

She paused before adding, ‘Desolas Arterius was with him. Did not look well. Something is off, brother. Be careful.’
‘...be careful.’

Garrus dismissed his omnitool’s holographic interface and the message from his sister, grimacing as the action pulled at his IV needles, precariously inserted between two scaled plates on the back of his hand. The message worried him, but there was nothing he could do from here. The solutions being fed into his bloodstream dulled the pain in his thigh, and made sure his body had a bit extra of a few key things his body would need to repair the damage. Not for the first time, he wondered if he’d been a fool to turn down his father’s offer of paying for a few gene mods when he’d first gone to the Academy at fifteen. At the time Garrus had thought that had felt too much like...cheating. Now that he was older, and had proven himself to everyone who mattered, he thought maybe he could invest in a few mods.

Thinking of the Academy made him glance to one of the other beds in the room, where a smaller body was breathing the deep breath of dreamless, drug-assisted sleep. Gabias had been inconsolable when he, along with Garrus, Norius, Meda, and the quellen had been brought to the hospital, a child’s panic that had been only partially calmed by his mother.

Garrus’ wound in his leg had been worse than he’d originally thought, having knicked a rather important artery. If Kristin hadn’t stopped him from pulling out the pot-handle-of-death, he’d have bled out in a matter of moments. It was one near-fatal-mistake he’d rather forget... He usually wasn’t that foolish.

Meda had been treated for severe smoke inhalation and scorched lungs. Norius had not fared much better, though he’d been saved from any serious exterior burns by Meda shielding the boy. Solanna and Gabias had been untouched save for a few bruises from when the blast had knocked them both over. Kristin, however...

He didn’t know what had happened to her. She’d been spirited away upon their arrival, and no one would tell him anything. He’d only glimpsed her, as she’d been removed from a second ambulance, not the one he and the boys had been in, not enough to tell him how badly she’d been hurt.

As if his recollections had sparked action, a sudden scream split the air what had to be the entire wing of the hospital. Cursing, Garrus freed himself from his sheets and IV bindings, limping to the door. Gabias, mercifully, did not stir.

That was not a turian scream.

Out in the hall, nurses were running, and one or two tried to herd him back to his room. He brushed them aside with more strength than he thought he could spare. The screaming, tortured and ear-splitting, continued. He followed it to a large room segmented with a glass wall. On the other side, Kristin was being held down by a pair of large turian attendants, while a third and forth...

He surged forward, not feeling the stitches in his leg reopen and blood gush down his leg.

“What are they doing?” He demanded, his ears full of her hoarse screams and his eyes full of the chunks of blackened flesh they were scrubbing from her arm with wire bristles. Arms hauled him back inches from the door that would have let him through the glass partition.

“Garrus!” A voice he knew he should recognize was hollering in his ear, but his eyes were locked on the gruesome sight of Kristin’s right arm and shoulder.

“Get him out of here!” Someone else was shouting. They were louder than her screams, but he
didn’t hear them until he’d been hauled out into the hallway, the task not as hard as he should have made it for them, given his weakened state. A nurse was busily unwrapping the soaked bandages around his leg and applying compresses. He’d apparently also torn the artery open, at least partway. He didn’t think he’d completely undone the work of the surgeons, else he’d probably be on the floor near death, but the blood flowing down his leg to a puddle was still impressive.

“What...” he began hoarsely. “Are they doing?”

“Saving her life,” a human voice said, older and with an accent he did not recognize. He didn’t realize right away, but the human was speaking the turian common language. He looked up, his vision swimming, at a small human woman with short silver hair and tan flesh, crinkled around her eyes and mouth.

“I brought her, old friend.” Garrus at last heard the voice that had begun calling his name in the room, trying to pry him away.

“Lantar?” He asked, trying to get a grip on the world. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the unholy sounds Kristin was making.

Lantar Sidonis, son of one of the Advocates on a party competitive to Garrus’ own father, and one of his best friends all through turian boot camp and Academy, was a known party boy and incorrigible flirt with tastes rumored to be...exotic. Glimpsing the well-dressed human standing behind him, Garrus spared a half a thought to think that those rumors might be more than that, with the way she hovered behind Lantar, hands almost reaching out for him. As he watched, Lantar absently reached back and patted her shoulder. Garrus shook his head, trying to clear it.

“Saving... her life?” He chose to focus on the silver-haired human. She nodded.

“My name is Doctor Kerin Chakwas,” she told him, in tones that said that no matter the species, a doctor was a doctor. “The treatment for burns this severe in humans is very, very different from how turians handle burn victims, Mr. Vakarian. Dead flesh will fester and hamper the healing of nearby savable flesh. The burned parts must be removed before we can begin reconstruction. Unfortunately, medical advancements are not yet to the point where the patient can be unconscious for this. There are drugs available now to take the edge off, where once no drugs at all were permitted, but as you saw for yourself...it is still not a pleasant process.”

“She saved my nephews,” he found himself muttering, running his talons roughly over his fringe. “Twice. Once for each.” The nurse had finished re-bandaging his leg, and gave him an admonishing glower before carrying off the sodden dressings.

“I am aware,” the human replied patiently. “It is why your friend brought me. I am...” and here a touch of pride warred with telling the truth, he could see. “...a quellen of his household. He... procured me specifically in the event of something like this.”

“She saved my life, too,” the woman draped in expensive cloth said, stepping up from behind Lantar to stand beside him. “I was sick with something none of the turian doctors could treat.”

“Thankfully, Lantar also had the foresight to confiscate the contents of my medical bay, off the ship I was captured on.” Dr. Chakwas continued. “I’m good, but even I wouldn’t have been able to synthesize that medication.”

“Now now, no need to be modest, Kerin.” Lantar reached out and patted her shoulder, too, something that made the skin around the woman’s eyes tighten.
The screaming stopped.

“Is it over? Are they done?” He didn’t think he’d ever stop hearing that sound.

“More likely, she passed out,” Chakwas responded, not unkindly.

He moved towards the door again, brushing off Lantar’s hand as the smaller male tried to halt him. “I’ll behave this time,” he replied darkly. Lantar nodded, and removed his hand. Both followed him in.

“Stay out here, miera,” Lantar told his little human when she tried to follow. Hearing the endearment caught Garrus offguard. “You don’t need to see this.”

“I think you underestimate the things I’ve seen,” she replied, in a voice that for some reason had Garrus inclined to believe her. “But very well. I will wait.” And she did.

“You always did have unusual tastes,” Garrus murmured to his friend absently as they reentered the room. Lantar chuckled.

“Not so unusual, if you knew what she could do,” he replied with a measure of forced joviality.

“Don’t want to know,” Garrus answered, holding up a forestalling talon. Lantar raised an eyebrow.

“I confess, given your reaction to all of this,” he waved an arm to where Kristin was laying, limp and obviously unconscious, as the doctors continued to work on her arm. “I had thought you already knew.”

“It’s not like that,” he protested. What was it like, he wondered? The events of the day before -had it already been a day?- had spun his world off-kilter. The things that had been in one place, were now in another. He felt like an ordinary stone that had been pounded and fractured to reveal it wasn’t a stone at all, but something else. He just wasn’t sure what, yet. He couldn’t even bring himself to add his own reactions into the equation of the problem that was his odd quellen; at that moment, he only cared that someone under his protection was suffering horribly. The thought that it was his fault wasn’t even fully formed, yet- he’d get to guilt and blame later. For now, he just locked his gaze on that limp, pale-haired form and willed her to live.

She awoke in that particular, far too familiar haze that she recognized relatively quickly as drug-induced. Agonizingly slow, her thoughts managed to ek out the conclusion that for her to be this heavily drugged, she had to be absolutely royally f***ed up, a conclusion that seemed proven when she discovered, by method of elimination, that she could not move her right arm. A few moments later, she discovered the reason- a combination of her being too weak, and the aforementioned limb being too heavily swathed with bandages.

Faint memories filtered through the drugs, like dappled light through a leafy tree. The turian with blue eyes, blue markings. Garrus. Suspicion, fading to wary comaradie in a gym.

The explosion. Blue blood down a thick, alien thigh. Fire, heat- calls for help and rough coughing. Meda and Norius, huddled and trapped...limited time to find an alternate route. Finding that route,
pulling them free...the generator exploding, directly beside her. Pain, enveloping pain. Norius, 
taking her good arm over his shoulders, helping her to safety...

Then, blissfully, nothing. She remembered how bad the burns had been. Her expertise, among 
many others, was demolitions and explosives- you didn’t get good at those without incurring a few 
burns now and again, and without knowing exactly what your own handwork would do to any 
human -or alien- bodies caught in the fallout. Knowing all that, she was faintly surprised she still 
had an arm, even if she couldn’t imagine it’d be of much use after this.

Eventually, she noticed someone else in the room. She blinked the fuzz from her eyes, and slowly 
recognized a familiar sight- another human woman. She was dressed oddly, a modified version of a 
turian woman’s garment, narrow lengths of pleated fabric wrapped and draped attractively around 
torso and hips, managing to cover the essentials by seemingly happenstance. Lucky for the woman, 
her breasts needed no help with support. They had to be enhanced, Shepard thought faintly- no way 
a cup size like that would be that buoyant without help, and the narrow swaths of red -silk?- barely 
covering the nipples could hardly be called support.

“Commander Kastanie Shepard?” The woman leaned in close, once she saw that Shepard had seen 
her. Half a heartbeat, and Shepard’s breath caught in her throat. She hadn’t expected to hear her 
real name on Palaven, not without an accompanying firing squad.

“M-my name-” Shepard started to ‘correct’ her, with her alias, when a coughing fit seized her 
throat. A cup was presented to her lips when the fit had subsided enough for her to drink. Cool 
water on a singed throat was absolute nirvana.

“My name is Kristin Lambert,” she said, not recognizing her own voice. The woman smiled, a 
conspiratorial smile.

“Don’t worry,” she said, voice low. “My name is Kelly Chambers. I’m with the resistance you 
contacted. I’ve been trying to see you for days, but I couldn’t just bring it up out of the blue. My 
maecollon is very liberal with my freedoms, but he’s also very protective. Announcing a random 
desire to see a new quellen without reason would have been...suspicious. I suppose I should thank 
whoever sent the bombs to the Vakarian place for this opportunity.”

“I’ll be sure to send them a thank you note on your behalf,” Shepard croaked. Kelly grinned.

“Good to see you have a sense of humor. You Alliance types can be so... stuffy .” She pulled up a 
chair, taking Shepard’s free hand. She was too weak to pull it free and still have enough energy to 
speak, so she let the woman hold her hand as if they were best of friends, one comforting the other.

“I’m to tell you that now that we know the Alliance is watching those funerary pods more closely, 
there’ll be another one hidden in one soon. We’re hoping you have a way to contact the Alliance 
like you did us, let them know which one. We can move our plans along more smoothly if we have 
reason to believe the Alliance will get our messages regularly, instead of hoping they don’t miss 
the one pod they shouldn’t.” Her words had the sound of recitation, Shepard decided. So, Kelly 
was the courier pigeon. Par for the course.

“Not going to be doing much contacting of anyone,” Shepard pointed out. “Not for awhile.”

“You can give me the frequencies,” Kelly told her, looking for all the world like the most 
innocent, trustworthy of innocent blondes. Shepard chuckled, and paid for it with another coughing 
spasm. More water was provided, and Shepard nodded her thanks when the cup was taken away 
again.
“Sorry, but I keep the frequencies for now.”

“Was worth asking,” the blonde replied, surprisingly willing to let it go. “But for now, you need to get the time and coordinates of the next pod to the Alliance.” And she proceeded to whisper them to her. It was in a format Shepard was familiar with, and she managed to commit it to memory with only marginally more effort and an extra repetition from Kelly.

A noise from the hall made them both glance to the door.

“We’ll talk more later,” Kelly told her. “We’re best of friends now, right? You couldn’t have gotten through this pain without a friendly, familiar human face at your side, hm?”

Shepard caught her meaning. “Of course,” she agreed, keeping her face neutral. The pain in her arm and shoulder was starting to overcome the drugs the more awake she became. Kelly patted her hand, and stood as the door opened.

“You’ll be fine, you’ll see. Dr. Chakwas is a miracle worker.” She smiled, glowing, at the turian who entered. Tall, as they all were, though not quite as tall as Garrus or Nomos. Shepard couldn’t make out the color of his eyes at this distance, but his markings were a faint lavender in color and more intricate than the Vakarians’.

“Oh how convenient, you’re awake already,” the newcomer’s voice was a slightly higher pitch than Garrus’ as well, though still of course deeper than a human’s, partially due to the double vocal cords. The omnitool at his wrist spat out the translation.

“Not so convenient for me,” she replied, hearing her words repeated in syllables the lavender-marked turian could understand by the VI. She winced as she lifted her head, trying to see the extent of the damage. The bandages engulfed her shoulder nearly to her neck, reaching down to her wrist. Her hand was splotched with shining red welts, but nothing that would hinder its use, thank God. The side of her face also felt numbed, and rolling her head to the side she heard the rustle of more bandaging against fabric.

“Kelly, mi era, would you wait outside, please?” If she was reading him right, the turian’s expression towards Kelly was clearly affectionate. Interesting.

“Of course,” the buxom blonde agreed readily, letting her fingers trail over his pronounced hip as she passed him to the door. Shepard raised an eyebrow, and the newcomer gave her a wide turian grin, mandibles flared wide.

“Not all of us are xenophobes, miss Lambert,” he told her, coming to take the chair Kelly had vacated. “And please, believe me- she’s not the one being taken advantage of.”

“Never crossed my mind,” she lied, although after having spent a few moments with the woman...she wouldn’t exactly disbelieve it, either.

“Lantar Sidonis,” he introduced himself. “And you are one Kristin Lambert. Taken quellen by...unorthodox methods a bare week ago, now suffering for your loyalty to your host family. What a shame. You have been dealt a most unfair hand, Miss Lambert.”

“Call me Kristin,” she said, voice thick and throat aching. She motioned for the water, which he provided without thought. As much as she’d wanted a drink, she’d also wanted to see if he’d get it for her. The fact that he had told her a little about his character, aside from the fact that he managed to find a human female physique attractive enough to sleep with her. She couldn’t believe it was Kelly’s intriguing conversation. Then again, she was playing a role lesser to who she really
was, perhaps Kelly was doing the same. Could she have brought herself to sleep with whatever turian she’d ended up with, if that had been what was needed?

Somehow, her mind connected that thought to Garrus. She couldn’t see him demanding -or even expecting- that of anyone, especially someone he considered under his protection. The two concepts -Garrus and manipulated sex- seemed as foreign to one another as water and fire.

“If you don’t mind, Kristin,” Sidonis was saying as he took away the cup she’d drained. “I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Fine with me, but I don’t know what you could ask me that someone else wouldn’t know.” It was true enough. The only things she knew that others did not were things he had no reason to ask.

“Perhaps. You see, while the doctors were scrubbing your burned arm, when you weren’t screaming you were repeating something. The doctors didn’t understand you, of course, since it was in your own language. I think they assumed it was a prayer. It was before Garrus came in, before you passed out from the pain.” He took a drink from the pitcher of water, keeping his gaze locked with hers.

Green. His eyes were green. The palest, silvery aquamarine green.

“Now, it’s been awhile since my MP days, you understand, and Garrus was always the one with a knack for connecting the dots and finding the secrets, but I still know a few people, and money buys a lot of open doors, including a brand new VI translator, one that only our top military intelligence analysts are cleared to use.”

“Guess some things are common to both our species, after all,” she said, delaying until she could figure out what, exactly, he was getting at. Had she been so careful under Garrus’ roof, only to be found out by this stranger?

“Hm, indeed.” He brought up his omnitool interface, and began to play an audio recording, very quiet so as not to be heard outside the room. Shepard felt the blood drain from her face. Amid nerve-stripping screams -and how chilling that was, to hear her own howls- was a phrase gasped and choked out, but never wavering in its repetition.


Her name, rank, military affiliation, and service number. It was what they were trained to say when being tortured. It wasn’t a far stretch, to think that while delirious, drugged, confused and in the hands of enemy forces she’d assume the incredible pain they were inflicting was torturous rather than medical.

Was there any way she could salvage this? Instinct and the way Sidonis was staring at her, the recording continuing on, told her no. Seeing that she knew this, he shut off the recording.

“Now, normally I’d hand this over to people who are paid to handle this sort of thing, and that was my intention up until I contemplated my good friend Garrus’ reaction to seeing you in such...discomfort. And now I’m curious. Tell me, why exactly do you think your fate matters to him?”

“Aside from obligation, I wouldn’t think that it does,” she croaked, mind working as fast as she could spur it on beneath the weight of the drugs and pain. She almost wished for all pain, no
painkillers. She was used to working through pain. She hated muddling her way through pharmaceutical hazes.

“That’s where having known him as long as I have comes in handy,” he replied. “It does matter. He may not even have admitted it to himself, but it does. He’s...intrigued by you. Not entirely difficult, I’d say, more lucky than anything else- Garrus is known to fixate on things from time to time, and whatever perks his interest is not overly forthcoming in the whys of his curiosity. My theory is that you’re not as good a pretender as you think. Or, perhaps you didn’t anticipate our Garrus taking such an interest in you, hm? Yes, I think that’s more likely.”

It was then that Shepard decided on her course of action. She would neither confirm nor deny; she’d keep him talking.

“What makes you think he’s interested in me at all?” God, her voice was like sandpaper.

He patted her hand, rather like an elderly uncle might instead of a six foot evolved apex predator setting her up with a hell of piece of blackmail.

“I hope you’re not this unobservant when it comes to your own species,” he said, sounding amused. She wondered why he was so casual about all of this, then realized she already knew why. She knew people like him, people who regarded the happenings around them as moves on a board game, interesting only insofar as their complexity and only so long as they didn’t affect the individual doing the watching. As soon as any of this might fall back on him -and she was sure there were ways he could make sure that audio recording made it to the right ears without anyone knowing who it came from- he’d dance away, no one the wiser.

“I’m usually pretty quick on the uptake,” she admitted. “You’ll have to forgive me, I’m not exactly at my best right now.” With her free, uninjured arm she gestured to her bandaged-swathed limb and the IV bag hanging from a stand by the bed. She hoped it was good ol’ saline loaded with meds, and not something that might slowly chemically boil her insides.

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“Of course, of course,” he conceded, as amicably as if he were just checking on her and not letting her know he held the power of life and death over her, now. Abruptly, she wondered if he knew about Kelly. If he did, she was sure Kelly didn’t know about him knowing- otherwise she wouldn’t have changed the tone of their exchange right as he’d entered.

“Now, if you’re up for it, I believe you have another visitor,” he said, standing and looking towards the door, clearly having heard something -or sensed something- she had not. He patted her hand again as the door opened, and a much more familiar turian visage was poked inside. Mandibles marked with thick cobalt blue lines fluttered in an uncertain grin, and then the rest of Garrus followed him into the room, leaning heavily on a cane.

“Surprised they’re letting you walk, Garrus.” Sidonis moved out of the way so the limping turian could get to the chair. Garrus gave a scowl and sat.

“They didn’t. I managed to slip out when they weren’t watching.” He looked to Kristin, and for a moment there was that intensity again, making her catch her breath in surprise, the catch turning to a yet another hoarse fit of rough coughs. More water helped, but the pain in her throat was beginning to rival the dulled agony in her arm.

“Well, I think I’ve neglected my business enough for one week,” Sidonis said when she wasn’t spasming. “Take care of yourself, Garrus. Shall I swing by your place on my way, check on Solanna and the boys?”
“It’d be appreciated,” Garrus said with a nod, which was returned. Sidonis gave her a bland look before leaving, shutting the door behind him. Taking his VI translator with him, Shepard realized when Garrus spoke a moment later. Garrus seemed to realize it to, and scowled.

“My omnitool with the VI program was broken in the explosion,” he told her, trying to gesture to his wrist and making a ‘break’ motion, thinking he knew she wouldn’t understand. She only smiled and nodded. He sighed, running a trio of talons over his fringe. He looked at her, at her arm, her face. “This is twice now you’ve saved someone important to me. Who are you?”

She felt another cough rising, and clamped down on it. She shrugged slightly in response to his question, letting him take it as he would. The motion made her wince, and she saw Garrus reach for a device through which the many tubes inserted into her arms passed. He twitched a dial, and half a moment later the pain lessened, and she gave an unconscious sigh.

“You should have said something, if the pain was that bad. They don’t like using too much when you’re already unconscious, don’t want you getting immune to it too quick.”

His tone was clearly admonishing, so she didn’t feel she’d be giving anything away by murmuring, “Sorry.”

His left hand was resting beside hers on top of the sheets, and she saw his talons curl into a fist. There were abrasions on the back of his hand, scorch marks peeking out from beneath his sleeve. She reached out and tugged the sleeve back, seeing the extent of the damage. It wasn’t bad, mild enough even that she doubted he felt it through the thick skin. It looked like a piece of flying, burning debris had caught him in the second explosion, probably the same one that had sent the shrapnel into his leg. She assumed that same leg injury was the reason for his limp.

His fist had loosened under her examination. He was watching her. She forced herself to crack a grin. “Can’t be that bad,” she said, raising her hand to feel at the edge of the bandages. They were...extensive. She winced. “Ah, hell, I was never pretty to begin with anyway.” She dropped her hand back to the bed, the brief movement and previous conversations taking their toll. She yawned, and through her contorted vision she saw him...wince? Did he look...guilty? For what?

For not protecting her, she realized. Damn sweet fool... He really did take that ‘under his protection’ stuff to heart, didn’t he? Well, damn... Why did she have to go and land in the household of the only decent turian on the planet? Well, one of...Solanna and the kids and Meda weren’t bad.

Guilt gripped her, abrupt and swift and hard. Why, she amended her earlier thoughts, did she have to land in the household of the only turians she didn’t want to betray?

Exhaustion began to claw at her.

“Sleep,” Garrus told her, leaning back in his chair. “I think I might take a nap myself. Walking over here was exhausting. Still injured, you know.” He patted his own knee, the same leg bearing thick bandaging visible even beneath his slacks. She snorted. He didn’t look at all tired, and she wondered why he hadn’t been released from the hospital. Further ponderings would have to wait, however, as sleep finally claimed her.
“Well?” Jack Harper waited patiently for the woman on the vid screen in front of him to begin her report, which she did with alacrity once she realized the vid feed was live.

“She’s alive,” Chambers confirmed. “And still possessed of all her faculties, I believe. Sidonis let me stay with her until she woke up, and we talked for a while. The precedent of friendship is established enough, I think, that I’ll be able to request to visit her again. She’s aware of the next pod’s release date and coordinates. The Alliance should pick it up on schedule, assuming she’s able to send them a message before then.”

“Good work, Ms. Chambers.” He watched her grin. Praise had its uses, warranted or not. “Continue as usual, and wait for my next instruction.” He cut the feed before she could respond. The room went dim, lit only by the smoldering end of his cigarette, one of his last. More attention was being paid to the area around his hidden base, small and obscure as it was, than usual, and he would have to be ever more careful about the things he had smuggled in and out. He rose from his desk and went to the edge of the room, a room carved from solid bedrock to peer over a balustrade to the level below. Thick, lead-treated plexiglass walls surrounded a glowing, pulsing object that both called and repelled him. Its cage deadened its affects to all but those who’d already been exposed to it beforehand. Namely, himself and Desolas. It was the only reason it was as safe as it was. He had to hope he could keep it safe, just a little longer. Just a little longer...

Garrus hadn’t been sure what he’d been planning on saying when he’d finally found Kristin awake. After he’d re-opened his leg wound a third time, the doctors had practically tied him to the bed overnight until the meds and modern miracles had time to do their job. Now he only had a bit of a limp, but they’d refused to let him go until they were certain he wasn’t planning on doing anything like taking a knife to his leg. Or something. Garrus hadn’t really been listening.

He watched the pale human quellen sleep, finally thinking about all the things he’d avoided thinking about until he’d assured himself she was alive, and would stay alive. Things that had made little sense even before the explosion—and that was another issue he’d have to deal with later—and now made even less. The inspectors had told him the route she must have taken to get to Meda and Norius. It wasn’t unfeasible that Kristin had at some point found time to explore, but seemed...unlikely. Meda had kept the human constantly busy, and at night she was locked in her room. None of the tasks she’d ever been given had required her being shown the old, sealed-off hallway that in more archaic times had been how the servants had moved around the villa. No reason at all for her to know about it, let alone where it went. And yet she’d found it, successfully navigated it to find Meda and his nephew, and together they’d made it out of the burning deathtrap.

He tore his eyes away from the patch of angry red skin on the back of her free hand, a burn not quite bad enough to warrant bandages, just ointment and oxygen. He brought up his new omnitool, thankful his contacts and data at least had been backed up, if not all his programs. He pulled up one contact in particular, and tapped out a quick message.

“Barla Von-

One last inquiry, and you’re free of me. Kristin Lambert, human, captured quellen about a galactic
week ago. I’m attaching all the data passed on to me from the quarantine center. See what else you can find on her.”

He sent it, and watched Kristin -or whoever she was- breathe the deep breath of someone trusting to her safety while she slept. Garrus hoped Barla Von wouldn’t find anything to make him betray that trust.
Chapter 10

“I'm the first in the Irish Sea
Another message I can't read
I'm on your side
Nowhere to hide”

-In Limbo, Radiohead

Chapter 10

He came to visit every day. At first she chalked it up to his ‘head of the household’ sense of duty. Each time she tried to convince him she was fine, and that the doctors weren’t doing anything here that she or Meda couldn’t do on their own. Every day she spent in a hospital bed, sleeping only lightly in case some turian patient or doctor decided a human wasn’t worth the time and resources, was a day she wasn’t doing her job. But Garrus wouldn’t budge on the issue, and so she lay, day after day, bored out of her skull.

He brought news of the others, which she admitted to herself was appreciated. Meda was fine, furious that her kitchen had been invaded and destroyed. Norius still had a cough, a few spines on his fringe needing burn ointment every morning. Gabias was untouched, although had apparently been asking after her. For someone who ‘didn’t do kids,’ Shepard was oddly pleased by that particular tidbit. He was a good kid. She harbored an uncharacteristically sentimental hope that the war ended before Gabias reached the enlistment age.

Solanna, too, was fine, aside from sharing Meda’s fury at their desecrated home. Any time Shepard tried to ask about how it had happened and why, Garrus changed the subject, none too subtly either. She tried confronting him on it, and was rewarded with a simple, ‘Don’t worry about it,’ and because of her cover all she could do was grit her teeth and let it go.

He kept coming. Even after the fourth day, the longest she’d told herself to expect him, he kept coming. On the sixth day, he brought a brightly colored box.

“Don’t know what you’ve been told about human occasions, but gifts for the bedridden usually come the first day or two, not a week later,” she told him, trying to sound lighthearted. The doctors had eased up her pain meds that morning. Despite the pain, she didn’t say anything; the last thing she needed when she finally did get out of here was to deal with the DTs.
He paused in the doorway, looking uncertain for a moment. Something had shifted in their...relationship, such as it was, during her interim in the hospital. Much less ‘master and servant’ and more... Well, she wasn’t sure. But it was definitely less ‘master and servant,’ which both pleased and worried her. She needed him to regard her as just another dispensable human, needed to be invisible when she moved about her chores in his house. But this new...friendliness had saved her sanity these past six days, and she’d found him to be just as engaging a conversationalist as she’d first thought he might be. Although, she’d been surprised to discover that he was very unlike his father, differing far more than she’d expected given that her initial impression of the two alpha males -strong, opinionated, loyal- had been virtually identical.

But she could never, ever imagine Nomos Vakarian standing in the doorway to her hospital room holding a brightly colored box looking so hesitant.

“That was a joke,” she told him, and he seemed to relax somewhat, mandibles fluttering in a wry grin. He entered, kicking the door shut behind him. She pushed herself higher onto her pillows, setting aside the book he’d brought her a few days ago. It was a trashy harlequin romance, the kind she’d never even glanced at let alone picked up, but this was her second time reading through. She’d been that bored.

He set the box down on the edge of the bed, and Shepard raised an eyebrow. It was a big box, Garrus had to brace it with his knee to keep it from falling to the floor. It was that, or she’d have to give up half the bed.

“I thought we could play a game,” he told her, hooking a calf spur on the leg of a chair and pulling it close enough for him to sit. She adjusted the bed controls to lower the whole thing so she wasn’t looking down at him, putting the box between them.

“There are warehouses, on the other side of the city, full of...contraband, is what they call it. Things taken from the cargo holds of human ships taken during this war.” As he explained, he was pulling something out of the box. “They’ve begun liquidating those warehouses to fund various projects aimed at helping the quellen and getting this damn conflict over with.” He put the first object in her hands. “Friend of mine gave me this box. Told me her quellen told her that these were...feminine things. I have absolutely no idea what any of it is. The book came out of this box, actually. Was the only thing I could figure out.”

The first thing, sitting on her palms, was...

She snickered, and set the package of feminine condoms aside.

“You don’t want to know about that one,” she told him. She saw a light flicker in those slate-blue eyes, and she realized she’d chosen her words wrong. She knew if someone had used those words at her, it would have only inflamed her own curiosity. She sighed and picked up the box again, opened it, and fished inside. Sure enough, there was a stiff bit of folded paper, that when unfolded displayed ‘how to’ diagrams. She presented it for Garrus’ perusal, watching with facial muscles straining against a shit-eating grin as he blinked at the images, glancing between the instructions and his omnitool’s screen, translation program up and running.

After a moment he closed his eyes for longer than it took to blink, mandibles tight against his face, and she snickered. He carefully folded the paper and handed it back to her.

“Next,” he said, and she choked on a laugh.

The next item was easier.
“Cosmetics,” she told him. “Never was one for using them.” She moved to set the small black container of various shades of eyeshadow aside.

“I’ve wondered why some humans use it and others don’t,” he said conversationally.

“Personal preference, really,” she replied. “There’s whole arguments on it about self esteem, media pressure, blah blah. It comes down to a combination of all of that, true, but mostly it’s what the individual likes.”

He handed her another item, and she laughed outright at the bundle of pink satin and long ribbons.

“Ballet shoes,” she told him. At his expectant expression -she’d gotten good at reading him lately- she elaborated. “Ballet is a style of dance. Very old, considered very ‘refined.’ Very hard to do, especially at the higher levels, requiring special shoes.” She held up the ones she held for emphasis.

“Do you dance?” He asked.

“Badly,” she confirmed. She found herself peering at the shoes more closely. There were initials marked on the inside, in dark ink smudged by time and wear. The shoes were small, meant for a young woman most likely. Shepard wondered what had happened to the owner. Not only were they ballet shoes, but they were pointe shoes- flattened toes with a bit of metal for support. Expensive. Peering inside, she saw dark stains at the toes. Whoever had worn these shoes had just started their pointe training, if their toes were still bleeding that heavily. She pointed out the stains to Garrus, who recoiled slightly.

“Why would anyone do that to themselves?”

“I asked the same thing, once.”

“What answer did you get?”

Shepard hesitated. Was this something she should fabricate, or use the truth? She decided it couldn’t hurt anything. She was finding she wanted to lie to this man as little as possible.

“My mom told me to wait until I saw a true ballet performance, back on Earth, then I’d understand.”

“Was she right?”

“Never found out,” she answered, and her tone closed the topic. She shook her head and set the shoes aside.

The items continued, some of them random enough to make her laugh out loud, others even she had no idea.

“I’m not the girliest of girls,” she confessed. When Garrus needed a translation, she explained, “I’m not considered very feminine as far as human women go.”

Garrus gave the equivalent of a shrug, a motion she’d never really seen from any other turian. “I’ll take your word on that. You’re the first human female I’ve talked to for more than what was required to get basic information.”

“Basic information?”
“Names, age, that sort of info.”

“For...?”

He grinned slightly, and proceeded to fill her in on his work on the Citadel. She hadn’t realized until then that, apparently, his presence on Palaven was supposed to be temporary.

“When do you go back?” She asked, and found that she wanted the answer for more than just her own personal plans.

“Soon as my father is...released,” he said, obviously trying to be sensitive about the fact that his father had been held and probably tortured by her people. She felt a stab of guilt she hadn’t expected to, at the thought that she was the one who had captured his father in the first place.

She nodded. “Miss him?” She asked, remembering the more socially adept Kristin identity. Surprisingly, he snorted.

“I hope he’s all right, and I can’t wait to get back to C-Sec, but do I miss him? Hell no.”

She grinned despite herself.

“Don’t hold back, now,” she admonished. “Tell me how you really feel.”

He snorted. “He’s a controlling, overbearing, stiff-backed tyrant. Does everything by the book. If it’s not in the book, you’re not looking at the right book. If the book doesn’t cover a situation, you’re looking at the situation wrong.”

Shepard paired this information with the turian she remembered, and thought it fit.

“You mentioned a mother. What about your father?” He asked after a moment of rifling through the box and pulling out another item and handing it to her. She took it, and had to bite her tongue before she told him the truth. It was nearly automatic. It was also a wake up call- she’d gotten far too comfortable with Garrus. Sure he was friendly, seemed honest and he had a moral code she knew would benefit not a few humans she could think of, but he was, in the end, still the enemy.

“Rotting on Earth somewhere,” she told him. “Haven’t seen him in forever. He didn’t like that I decided to leave Earth.”

“I know that feeling,” the turian at her bedside commiserated. His eyes were on the box in her hands. She looked at it, and her eyes widened in surprise. The name of a rather infamous jeweler was emblazoned across the top in gold leaf. She pulled off the top, and reached inside and withdrew the hinged black velvet box. It was too large to be a ring box, but just the right size for what was actually in there; a pair of large sapphire, emerald, and diamond earrings in a classic design. She whistled.

“Nice, I take it?”

“Very,” she told him. She handed him the lid of the box. “Harry Winston’s been around for a long time. Anything you see with that name will be very nice, very pricey.” She shut the lid tossed it back into the box. What little movement Garrus’ facial structure allowed shifted to the equivalent of a raised eyebrow.

“Very nice, she says. Very expensive, she says. And she tosses it away.”

She grinned at him. “Also never been big on sparklies,” she confessed. “They’re pretty to look at,
but pretty useless. What’s next?”

They passed the afternoon like that, most items sparking a conversation that lasted minutes or hours. A few she set aside without comment, and when she did so, Garrus learned to not ask further.

The very last item out of the box, however, sent her into gales of laughter as Garrus pulled it out, needing to stand to do so. It was the primary reason for having needed such a large box, even after it had been flattened and pressed to the bottom by the weight of the other things.

“This,” Garrus said, casually. “Is either a joke I don’t get, or else... I don’t know what else.”

“It’s...” Shepard coughed, trying desperately not to laugh harder. “It’s a wedding dress.”

“A what?”

“Wedding? Dress? It’s what women traditionally wear when they get married.”

Garrus blinked at the thing. “Human women have something specific they have to wear to get married?”

“They don’t need it to get married,” she corrected. “It’s traditional.”

“How would you move in this thing?” He asked. He was holding it up by the shoulders, and he swished it around a bit. For a moment, he looked almost like he was holding it up to himself, and Shepard collapsed back against the pillows, tears streaking down her face.

“Good thing I already know you humans leak from the eyes for everything,” he said dryly when she’d managed to regain control of herself. A nurse had poked his head in briefly before Garrus assured him everything was fine.

“I haven’t laughed like that...” she paused to think. “Ever, I don’t think.” She grinned at him. “Please tell me you have the veil and tiara in there, too.”

He looked at her quizzically, and she chuckled. “Other parts of the traditional ensemble,” she explained as he stuffed the dress back in the box. As he did so, she spotted something, and reached out to snag the large tag dangling from the sleeve. She flipped it over and her breath caught. Garrus paused, looking at her and waiting.

‘Ashley Williams,’ the tag read, hand written beneath the price and size of the dress. Beneath the name was a comm code, and an address. And two dates. Pick up date, and event date. The wedding date. She put the tag and sleeve in the box with the rest of the dress, and didn’t say anything. She doubted it was the same person. There were probably hundreds of women in the galaxy with that name. Neither the surname or the first name were uncommon.

Garrus was watching her face, gaze fixed in an unreadable expression.

“Did you wear something like this?” He asked finally, obviously trying to turn her thoughts from whatever she’d seen on the tag.

“Hm?” She looked at him, mildly confused.

“Your wedding. Did you...?”

Kristin Lambert was a widow, right. Her wedding. Not Shepard’s. Shepard had never been
“No, no, we had a...a beach wedding. We just wore...comfortable stuff.” The few times she’d thought about weddings as a girl, it had always been on a beach.

“How...not girly of you,” he said, using the human term. She grinned and chuckled.

His omnitool chose that moment to beep an alert. He glanced at it, and blinked.

“Anything important?” She asked casually, peering in the box again.

“Just a message from a...coworker. I asked him to look into something for me. He got back to me sooner than I expected.” He flicked off the interface, and moved to sit again. “I’ll...look at it later.”

Turian or not, his tone and inflections spoke volumes about that message. She knew all too well what it meant to both anticipate and dread a message. As he hadn’t pressed on her reaction to the tag on the dress, she didn’t press his reaction to this message. Give and take. It was comfortable and natural, and it scared the shit out of her. If she were honest with herself, it wasn’t Kristin Lambert who had been sitting and chatting with a far-too easy going turian citizen, but Kastanie Shepard. And she had absolutely no idea what to make of this fact.

Garrus did her the favor of pulling up a holo game on his omnitool, one he’d shown her a few days ago, and began to set up a game. As he did so, Shepard was struck with the thought of what he might think if she suddenly...disappeared.

“Thanks,” she said abruptly, breaking the silence that had descended on them.

He looked at her in surprise. “What for?”

She grinned, slightly, just a quirk of the left corner of her lips. “Don’t play an idiot, Garrus Vakarian. Just take the thanks.”

He nodded, almost curtly. “You’re welcome.”

They played the game.

Modern medical advancements were, in Shepard’s opinion, probably the only thing the galaxy had to offer that might -and only just- be worth the hardship and struggle when all was said and done. Shepard didn’t count the elimination of scars, the perfection of contraceptives, simplification of cosmetic procedures. All of those were wonderful, but in the end were luxuries, conveniences.

What was worthwhile to Shepard, in a very personal way, was the fact she still had a usable, functional hand. At her insistence -translated by Garrus- she’d been shown pre-op vids of her hand and arm. A flormerly gnarled claw of blackened flesh was now being revealed as a fully fleshed appendage with all five digits. It was pink and puffy and oh so very tender, but as the last of the bandages were pulled away and she flexed and stretched each each joint and muscle in her hand,
her arm, she felt her wonder growing. There were still scars, patches of skin that were shiny and were noticeably less sensitive than the skin around it, but they wouldn’t impede her use of the limb at all.

She didn’t let herself ask for a mirror when they took the bandages off her face, but she did raise an eyebrow when she caught Garrus staring on their way out. He raised his talons in an apologetic gesture she’d learned to recognize, and she shook her head, trying not to wince at the stiffness still present in her neck.

She might not be going ‘home,’ but at least she was getting out of the hospital.

When she and Garrus arrived back at the Vakarian villa, she got to see just how bad the damage had been. Most of it was repaired already, the front of the property completely fixed. The kitchen had been restored to functionality, if not in an entirely aesthetic way. A heavy tarp over the hole in the wall kept the elements out, but not the radiation, so Shepard was given an anti-radiation dispenser to use whenever she was required to help in there. The casualness with which Garrus gave it to her surprised her. Her door was also no longer locked at night, and after stepping on a piece of debris Meda tracked down a pair of shoes for her, ones that even fit. Shepard pressed her luck that day and asked about clothes other than the shapeless, sleeveless robes quellen typically wore. The next day she found a box outside her door, full of jeans and shirts of various sizes, none too big or too small that she couldn’t use them.

More than once, Shepard thought that many a requisition officer she’d known could have taken advice from the turian female’s ability to procure seemingly anything in an astonishing amount of time. She had half a mind to jokingly as her if she might find Shepard a fueled up shuttle with local nav maps and turian IFF installed for a handy escape. She had no doubt the woman would have made it happen, too.

Other things changed, too. Markin, the turian staff employee who had tried to kill her the first day had all but disappeared as far she knew after Garrus had given his hide a verbal lashing. Now, however, she’d see him poking his head around corners multiple times during the day, watching her with an expression she wasn’t quite good enough yet to read accurately. She thought it might be guarded, or suspicious.

Norius’ attitude changed as well. She frequently found him nearby whenever her tasks took her out of sight of the house, or to a place no one was likely to come through. Where Markin’s attitude was worrisome, Norius was more...interesting. He watched her like one might watch someone previously thought to be an idiot, and instead turned out to be a savant.

If Solanna’s thoughts on her had altered, she hadn’t shown it beyond an initial, intense thanks for again saving her son. After that, nothing from the woman except increasingly frequent orders and instructions. The dinner party the woman had been planning since the day of Shepard’s arrival was nearing, and if anything the attack had made her more determined to make it spectacular. She reminded Shepard strongly of one of her earlier CO’s, back when she’d been stationed on a skeleton outpost. They’d received word that a higher ranking VIP was coming, and the CO in Shepard’s memory had tried to turn their basic mess hall into a ballroom fit for a state dinner. Surprisingly, the man had actually pulled off something quite nice. With that in mind, Shepard dutifully did everything Solanna asked, smiling to herself in memory.

As for everyone else, Meda expressed relief in both her being healed, and her return to lend a hand. Gabias made his hero worship of her abundantly clear in his insistence on following her and helping her with every little thing. The rest of the staff seemed to regard her with somewhat less hostility- meaning they ignored her now rather than actively sabotaging her chores, something that
had hardly phased her beforehand. Garrus...

Garrus disappeared. Apparently, according to young Gabias, he’d neglected many of his political duties while she’d been bedridden, and now was paying the price. He spent at least ten hours a day locked in his study. More than once Shepard was tasked with bringing him his meals, and more often than she liked the trays were left outside his door untouched.

He’d come out once, and only once, to take the tray and quickly shove something into her hands. An omnitool. An old one, with most of the useful functions disabled, locked against other programs being installed. It only had one. A VI translator. He’d hardly accepted her thanks before shutting the door, looking apologetic.

While the VI translator made daily life infinitely easier, she found she missed talking with the turian, and the intensity of that notion caught her offguard when it first occurred to her. She’d gone from having a steady companion, to...

Well, she did still have a steady companion, and he still had the blue markings and slate-blue eyes. He was just a hell of a lot shorter.

“And then, the Spectre, he came in and asked mama where they kept the family records, and she told him he’d have to ask Garrus or Grandfather, and the Spectre -his name is Saren, he’s famous!- he got this scary look on his face and said...”

He also talked a lot more. She listened with half an ear to Gabias’ retelling of the happenings in the Vakarian Villa while she’d been gone. He was a surprising little gold nugget of information. Apparently, the rule about no one paying attention to what servants overheard worked for children, too. And this particular child had the memory of an elephant. Or drell, if what she knew was correct.

No, Shepard didn’t do kids, it was true. But she thought she’d make an exception for this kid.

“Hand me that, would you?” She asked, when Gabias had paused for breath. He hopped down from where he’d been sitting on the table and handed her a large gnarled root that had been sitting on another counter. He handed it to her when she reached for it, with the hand that had been scarred. The worst of the scarring on her arm was covered by the anti-rad dispenser clamped there, but the marks on her hand were still visible, starkly pink against otherwise pale skin. Gabias caught the appendage in his hands, six fingers curling around hand. He frowned.

“Why is it different colors now?” He asked, a child’s innocent curiosity making the inquiry harmless.

“The pink skin is scar tissue,” she told him.

“Why’s it shiny?”

“Partially because they’re new. They’ll get less shiny over time.”

“Will it match everything else?”

“No, not entirely.”

“Why not?”

She suppressed a sigh and gently reclaimed her hand, setting to chopping the root into large chunks that turian teeth could sink into.
“You’ll have to ask a human doctor the details,” she told him. “But basically, when human skin is hurt bad enough, the body grows it back thicker and stronger to protect itself.”

Suddenly looking excited, Gabias plopped himself down on the new tile floor and hauled up the left leg of his short slacks, showing her a part of his thigh. “See that? That’s where a varren got me once. The scales grew back thicker, and they were dark at first, too!” She could see a slight discoloration, now that the boy pointed it out. She grinned at him.

“Guess we’re not so different after all,” she said, and the way he beamed at her, she couldn’t help but feel her own grin widen.

There was a polite sound from the doorway, the social equivalent to a throat clearing, and Shepard glanced over to see Meda standing there. “Shouldn’t you be outside? You’re supposed to start your sparring lessons with Norius’ tutor today.”

The boy sprang to his feet, and looked up at Shepard. “Come watch me later?” He asked, half pleading, half demanding. She glanced to Meda, raising an eyebrow in question. Meda sighed and nodded.

“Sure, if your mom doesn’t have anything for me to do.”

Gabias darted away.

Shepard noticed a box in Meda’s hands as she turned back to her chopping. “You know, if you blow up this kitchen again I think Solanna will just make you prepare everything over a campfire.”

Meda laughed. “I’ve made do with worse situations.”

Shepard supposed she had. It was easy to forget that in the turian Hierarchy, every citizen went through the military, including sweet old Meda. Had she been a cook? It might fit with what she did now, but somehow Shepard wouldn’t be surprised to find out the woman had been a General, or fighter pilot, or artillery officer, or any other number of volatile positions requiring the unflappable nerves of steel she seemed to have.

“What’s in the box?” She asked, knowing Meda would stand there silently until she gave in and asked.

“Something for you, apparently.” She set it on the -new- table, and came to take the chopping knife from Shepard. “Go open it, I’m rather curious myself.”

Wiping her root-juice wet hands on a towel, Shepard approached the box with understandable trepidation. It had occurred to her that the last bombs might have been meant for her, if anyone had figured out who she really was and didn’t want the embarrassment of a trial. No one had come forward claiming responsibility, though the rumor was that they had been sent by the group of radical anti-war activists. Why they’d target the Vakarians, who were currently members of the party trying to end the war, Shepard and no one else she’d talked to could guess.

She scanned the exterior of the box with a practiced eye, then took a discreet sniff. No powders, no odors. The twine keeping it shut came away easily, and the lid slid free without any of the pull she might have felt if it were rigged to go when opened. The others had been on timers.

Inside, on top of the thin folded cloth turians used in lieu of tissue paper, which was too delicate to be feasibly common with a clawed species, was a thick card.

‘Shepard,’ it read in the turian common language. ‘I had asked dear Solanna about your attire for
this coming evening event, and she confessed a lack of knowledge on where to procure anything appropriate. Thankfully, I’ve been doing this somewhat longer than she has, and I know a very good tailor in the city. My dear Kelly insists this should fit you, and will complement your coloring. I look forward to seeing you and continuing our discussion from the hospital, now that you are in better health. Yours, Lantar Sidonis.’

Laid in the folds of the cloth was a...well, she supposed it was supposed to be a dress. It was similar to what Kelly had worn at the hospital, though in different colors. She winced. Bright cobalt blue next to kiwi green, shot through with gold thread. There was, thankfully, more to this garment than had been to Kelly’s. Instead of the thin, crisscrossed straps that had only barely covered the other woman’s aerole’s, this one at least seemed like everything important would be covered while still looking like it was doing the covering accidentally. Nearly sheer panels of fabric would also conceal her waistline, doing so in a manner that struck her as...conservative, somehow. Did turians have a thing for waists? Huh. Weird people.

There was just the dress. No shoes, jewelry, or headpieces, thank God. Kelly seemed the type to accessorize out the ass. Shepard wondered if anyone would think it odd if she wore the sneakers Meda had found for her with the dress, and snickered. At least Palaven was warm, even at night.

She let Mede look at the thing, and the turian snorted.

“Someone’s trying to turn you into *falivae* bait,” she said. When Shepard asked for an explanation on the term the VI had missed, Meda only shook her head. “Nothing you need to worry about, girl. Garrus is a good lad, won’t let that happen.”

Her words made Shepard frown at the dress, wondering if she should just not wear it. Then she thought of what Sidonis knew, and thought better of it. An advantage to the skimpiness of the thing was that it wouldn’t impede her movement if she needed to do some serious moving, and there was no reason to antagonize the one turian on the planet that she knew could get her killed, simply for the sake of her pride.

She had assumed Garrus didn’t know about the dress, but when she went to her room that night - she’d deposited the box there earlier- she found a familiar black velvet box sitting atop the one with the ‘dress.’

The earrings.

Standing there, looking down at a box with a dress from a man who could have her killed at any moment, holding earrings from another man who in truth had no right to them to give them to anyone, realizing that with all the hustle and bustle she’d actually been looking forward to the damn dinner party, Shepard tore herself forcefully from the seductive clutches of this little world that had begun to spin her up in its web like a fly for a spider’s dinner. She shoved the earrings in the box, and kicked the whole thing under her hammock-nest-bed-thing. She sat on a chair in the corner, head in her hands, and waited, going over her mission objectives in her head, drilling them in until there was no room for thoughts of dinners she couldn’t eat, turians who thought she was someone else, little turian boys whose sparring practices had made her itch to get up and correct the tutor. She was Commander Fucking Shepard, not a tame little turian family quellen.

She thought of Jenkins, of the turian who’d killed him and how she’d splattered his grey-blue brains on a bulkhead. She remembered Nomos’ talons around her throat, promising to kill her next time he saw her. Anderson was in her head, telling her how big this was, how important. She saw the pod with the homing beacon, filled with dead humans, one of them a mule for vital information. Information she was supposed to make sure the Alliance received. She’d been waiting for another opportunity to send that information, playing it safe, being cautious. Why? Her initial mission was
taken care of, anything further was icing on the cake. She hadn’t expected to survive this excursion, and with Sidonis possessing the information he was, her clock was definitely ticking. So why was she pussy-footing around what she had to do?

No opportunity had presented itself. Fine. She’d make an opportunity. It was what she was good at.

At least the omnitool was good for something—time. She waited until she knew everyone would be in bed, then she donned the darkest pants and shirt she had, wrapping a torn piece of a dark bedsheets around her face and artificially light hair, and slipping out of her room. She dodged the cameras, easier now that she’d spent more time in the house. She didn’t go for the office—she knew that’d be locked. Instead she headed for the only other terminal she knew had the access she needed.

She followed the same route she’d once taken with an incensed Markin on her heels. Down the halls, out into the courtyard. She skirted the edge, keeping pillars and trees between her and the camera until she came to a set of double doors set with opaque glass squares. She’d brought enough meals to Garrus to know the code to the lock-

The doors were open, she saw when she got closer. Or rather, one was. Just cracked. She wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, but she was extra cautious as she eased it open enough for her to peer inside, then move herself through the widening opening once she saw no movement inside. She shut the door behind her, not all the way, sliding it back to where it had been when she’d found it, just in case one of the hired sentries decided to do a round through the villa itself as they sometimes did since the attack.

A sound made her freeze. A soft sound, but...

He’d been so still, and positioned just right, with his head slumped down onto the desk and a high-backed chair between him and her line of sight from the door. He was snoring.

Turians snored. Shepard would have to laugh at that later. For now, she needed to think of what to do with the fact that Garrus was asleep at the terminal she needed to use.

Explore all options first. Careful, quiet, she stepped away from the door and skirted the room, ducking into the room she’d once seen him fetch his omnitool out of, so long ago. And pants. He’d been unabashedly naked, she recalled, and had to suppress another grin. She’d guessed that it was his bedroom, and she’d been right. A turian bed was in the far corner, larger than hers by far of course. Oddly shaped pillows, used to stuff between their heads and the top of their back-cowl, though they usually slept on their stomachs or sides as far as she knew. A window looked out towards the grounds, including the cleared space Norius and Gabias had used earlier to do sparring drills with their tutor. A wardrobe was across from the window, and a desk beside it. The rest of the walls were taken up by bookshelves and antique weapons.

Despite herself, she took a moment to glance over the displays, wondering if it was all actually his, or just belonged to the family, decorations in a room that didn’t change no matter who occupied it.

Reluctantly, she turned from a shelf of antique-looking scrolls to the desk, relieved to find it also had a terminal that looked equipped with full access. She’d just have to listen for Garrus waking up and coming to bed.

She tweaked the program she’d written last time, taking advantage of the extra time to make it more secure. She added extra layers of encryption to the message, careful to make it look like corrupted junk data. Only someone looking for it would find it. She encoded Kelly’s information about the next funerary pod’s launch date and trajectory, as well as the information she’d gleaned
on the political movements of the turian Hierarchy. She didn’t mention the attacks of the documents stolen by the fanatics; neither would have any bearing on the Alliance’s actions, and neither were valuable as they were, not until she gathered more information.

Once or twice she’d frozen at a sound, hand poised over the short-cut key that had been among the first things she’d coded into the program, something that would wipe the entire terminal as clean as could be. Each time, she’d waited with baited breath until she was convinced she wasn’t about to be walked in on.

She finished the message, entered the frequency, and loaded it to the next data burst. That done, she backtracked her steps and, just like before, closed everything neatly behind her, returning everything to how it had been before her meddling.

She paused on her way out, looking to where Garrus was passed out at his desk. She couldn’t see what he’d been working on, but she did see a tray at his elbow, the meal untouched. For a moment, she was confused. Why was he working himself so, so hard, when he’d professed adamantly that he was not a politician, not a leader or speaker or even politically active? Was it for that father of his? The one he’d said was so demanding, had always driven him so hard? Did he fear Nomos’ disapproval upon his return? That image seemed at odds with the turian she’d come to know, someone driven in his own right, passionate, capable, intense... That person didn’t seem the type to be cowed into an overworked frenzy by their father.

Shepard recalled her own exchanges with the Vakarian patriarch, and revised her opinion. Nomos was a force of *nature*.

She left Garrus’ rooms, resisting the urge to wake him and send him to a proper bed like she had done for no few marines under her command over the years. Garrus wasn’t under her command, of course- if anyone commanded anyone, it was him over her- but that didn’t stop her from feeling a mild sort of responsibility for him. When Nomos returned, all hell was going to break loose. Even if she was gone by then -dead or otherwise- she had no doubt the older turian would eventually figure out she’d been there. The thought of being the source of more strife for Garrus when dealing with his father was...not a pleasant one. He’d done well by her, and she didn’t like the idea that she’d be rewarding him with more bullshit to handle.

Back in her rooms, her dark clothing put away -she’d taken to sleeping naked, a concession to the heat- she found that she’d succeeded in wresting Kastanie back into the forefront, over Kristin. But at a price. For a few days, after returning from the hospital, she’d found a warped sort of...peace. That was gone now. She was back on the job, and while she was relieved she’d managed it with relative ease, there was a part of her that...

She didn’t sleep much that night.

The dinner party turned out to be not so much about dinner as about showing off. Shepard counted around eighty guests, all draped and cloaked and robed and clad in enough brilliant hues to make tropical birds jealous. Shepard, in her gharish ‘dress,’ sneakers and definitely no earrings, was placed at the entrance to offer a tray of what looked like small roasted beetles with the legs and
antennae removed. Each guest took one and crunched down on it, most of them ignoring her entirely.

“It’s a tradition,” came a voice from beside her as the deluge of guests had begun to die down. She glanced to the side to see Norius standing next to her.

“The bug hor’dourves?” She asked, gesturing with the mostly empty tray. It was the forth she’d been handed throughout the evening.

“In ancient days, there was a Primarch who invited clan leaders to a summit to discuss peace. The reason for this was because there was a drought, and food was scarce. They couldn’t afford to keep fighting clan against clan and survive. All the Primarch had to offer his guests was water, and talik beetles.” Norius took one -so they were beetles, apparently- off the tray, and popped it in his mouth with a wet crunch.

“Lovely,” she told him, voice flat. He grinned at her, and for a moment he looked so much like his uncle she blinked.

“Anyway, the treaty made that day lasted until the Unification Wars. Most of the colonies can trace their ancestry back to one of those clans.” He tapped the side of his face, on a line of his own blue markings. “The Vakarian clan? Our ancestor was that Primarch.”

“Impressive,” she conceded. He seemed pleased with that response.

Solanna appeared at the door, summoning her son.

“Go help Meda in the kitchen, please, Kristin,” the family matriarch told her, briskly but not rudely. Shepard set down her tray and grabbed fistfuls of the filmy fabric of her dress, moving it out of her way with no little annoyance at having to do so.

“My dear Kristin!” Shepard turned at the sound of her pseudo-name, and the sight of the turian who’d called her set her adrenal system into overdrive with fight or flight instinct. She clamped down on the urge, releasing her skirt and waiting placidly as Sidonis and Kelly, kept close under one of his arms, made their way up the long drive.

“Sidonis,” she greeted, attempting to keep her voice cordial and free of Shepard. His mandibles flared wide in a generous grin as he held out his free hand.

“You’re dress? Really? You must have outgrown it.”

He laughed, to his credit. He neared, and put that extended arm around her shoulders, hauling her to his side, a mirror of Kelly in a shades of brighter blue and nearly black green. Shepard went stiff as a board, her mind blanking out all emotions and reactions. Just cool calculation. She was playing a part, she reminded herself. Shepard, were she here, would have promptly removed one of Lantar’s spurs and shoved it up his rectum. Cloaca. Whatever they had.

Kristin? Kristin gave a nervous smile, and let herself be dragged, pinned to his side as she was, inside and into the party.

She supposed she was about to find out if Garrus really would or wouldn’t let her be ‘failvae ’ bait. If he even spotted her in the mass of people. Most had moved across the courtyard, through the wide double doors at the far side and out into the gardens beyond. Temporary floors had been laid out, along with chairs and tables laden with food and decorations. Lights were hung from every
tree, though none were lit yet as night hadn’t fully descended.

Shepard was forced to smile and play nice as Lantar Sidonis dragged her and Kelly—though she didn’t seem to be complaining—around to various party guests. Most ignored her and Kelly, though a few gave Sidonis what Shepard could only describe as... knowing grins. One or two threw rather disgusted looks their direction, but her captor never stopped to greet those. Every time she tried to slip away, his arm was there again, around her waist or shoulders, pulling her back.

Once, he’d whispered to her, “I really don’t think you want to keep trying that. I’ve always had a notion to have two of you at my side at one of these things- I do so love being whispered about, and this is sure to start a few jaws snapping. And since I know you don’t want to ruin my fun, won’t you please be accommodating and stop trying to run off?”

Through gritted teeth she’d replied, “I have...duties to attend to.”

“Of course you do, but I’m sure they can wait.” With that, he’d dragged her to the next set of people, and Shepard had no choice but to go along. He’d been fingerling his omitool during the entire exchange, and the memory of hearing her own voice, contorted with pain and confusion, gasping out her real name was fresh in her mind still.

The only break she got was when he’d taken himself to the restroom, already swaying as he walked. Kelly had helped him move in a straight line to the door, then she and Shepard had waited outside.

“I don’t know why you’re so stiff,” Kelly began conversationally. There was no one else in the hall. “You might as well enjoy yourself while you’re stuck here, you know. They kill you if they catch you having sex with a human male, and I’m sorry, but a girl has needs. I’m open minded, but girls only do it for me for so long, you know?”

Yes, yes she did know. But that was none of Kelly’s business. She found herself hoping Sidonis would piss faster. Or for Kelly to need a bathroom break— the woman had ingested nearly as much liquor as Sidonis, beverages that apparently didn’t kill humans but would knock a human on her ass with only a shot or two. Or, Kelly was just a severe lightweight. Shepard, having been offered a few drinks, hadn’t been willing to test which one it was.

“And turians, they’re not half bad. Ok, actually? Lantar’s kind of ruined humans for me. They’re ribbed, did you know? And there’s this little bony protrusion at the base and- ok, well, I’ll just say I’ve never needed to, you know, help myself along? Yeah.” She actually giggled. “They like to bite, too. But the control! He’s never broken skin, with teeth or talons.”

Was she really hearing this?

“And between you and me, I’ve seen enough turians to know that Lantar is...shall we say, gifted? I mean, they’re all proportional, and seeing as they’re all at least six feet tall, that’s not a bad thing...”

Yes, yes she was hearing this. Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose.

“And oh my God the stamina!” She let out a theatrically gusty sigh, fanning herself as she slumped against the wall. “Best part? He’s totally okay with me just passing out when I’m done, he’ll do all the work and says he actually kind of likes it when... Well, actually, what he likes best—and it seems like all turian guys like this- is me going for his waist.”

Oh, so they did have a thing for waists. Suddenly self conscious, Shepard wrapped her arms around
her middle. Was she blushing? Holy fuck, she was.

“He likes me going at his neck, too, for some reason. All of it, not just the neck and shoulder part, like with humans? Yeah, and if you can get to the back of it, just below the fringe? Best reaction ever ... Oh, and the part he likes best? Blowjobs. Turian women can’t give em.”

“Imagine that,” Shepard muttered, thinking of Meda and Solanna’s toothy maws.

Kelly pushed away from the wall, coming over to peer into Shepard’s face, grinning wickedly.

“You know, I’ve gotten pretty good at telling turians apart. Your Garrus? He’s definitely considered ‘hot.’ Not ‘good looking,’ not ‘handsome,’ but ‘fucking hot as hell.’”

“Good for him,” she responded, glancing at the door. Had Sidonis passed out in there?

Kelly tilted her head. “Good God, you really are all about your...job, aren’t you? You’re not even curious?”

“Not a bit.”

“Seriously? You’ve never thought of that blue eyed, six-and-a-half-foot animal bending you over a-”

“Very. Definitely. Not. He’s a friend.” She said the second part without meaning to, and the gleam in Kelly’s eyes progressed from wicked to predatory.

“You should offer to fight him some time, then.”

Now that Kelly had suggested it, it was now, of course, the last thing she would ever do. Not that she’d ever had any intention of fighting Garrus in the first place. And since she had no intention of doing it, she felt safe in asking, “Why would I want to do a thing like that?”

“Oh, trust me. They’re...very impressive when they fight...friends.”

Like a boon from the heavens, the bathroom door opened and Sidonis stumbled out. Kelly giggled as he grabbed her arm and spun her, pressing her against the wall and nuzzling her neck from behind.

“I need a drink,” Shepard muttered, turning on her heel and marching away. For a wonder, Sidonis didn’t call her back, and she made her escape down the hall and toward the kitchens.

Meda was there orchestrating an army of of a staff, most of them hired on just for the night. Shepard started to apologize, but Meda waved it off.

“I heard that Sidonis boy had you in his clutches, you’re at no fault. Solanna’s spent the evening keeping Garrus away, since no one’s quite sure how he’d react.”

Shepard wasn’t sure how she thought about that. On one hand, she didn’t like the idea of Garrus seeing her roped into playing arm-candy, but on the other hand she would very much have liked to have been rescued before Kelly’s little how-to-sex-up-turians pep talk.

“Here,” Meda came back with a tray and a small shot glass of something purple. “You look like you need it, dear.” She handed her the glass first, which Shepard threw back without hesitation. She trusted the woman. Liquid fire burned down her throat, seeping calmness into her limbs. Shepard was no lightweight, and she coughed as she was scorched from the inside out, feeling the affects of the single shot almost immediately. She shook her head to clear it, handing Meda the
glass back and taking the tray. This one was full of more shot glasses of the same colored liquor she’d just downed.

“Try not to get caught again?”

“If I do, send Garrus after me,” she muttered. “Any scene he causes is guaranteed to be smaller than the one I do.” Meda cackled after her.

The evening progressed in a blur. She didn’t see Sidonis or Kelly again, but did hear whispers of some of the spare rooms being...occupied, and Shepard had no doubt those two were in one of those rooms. She made a mental note to ask Meda to spare her from laundry duty the next day.

Shepard’s only job that evening was the liquor. Every time she went back for another tray, it was loaded with a new kind of drink. She was tempted to sample, but after that first shot she restrained. She’d only been half joking about making a scene if she was accosted again, and she wanted her faculties fully operational if she had to explain herself later on.

Halfway through the evening, one of the temporary outdoor floors -dancefloors, she thought- was cleared. Instead of dancing, however, a pair of turians approached from opposite sides, calling good-natured jibes at each other as they removed shirts and shoes and gloves -which were apparently required evening attire for male turians- and proceeded to go at each other with almost feral ferocity. At least, it seemed feral until Shepard noticed that they didn’t seem to actually be trying to hurt one another. They were... well, she guessed they were dancing after all. In their own way.

Shepard hovered around the fighting floor, soaking up the chance to see turian fighting live. Even if they weren’t actually trying to kill one another, it was good information. She watched them with an almost clinical interest. A few fights got her interested as a spectator as well, but most participants made their moves obvious, letting their opponent counter in plenty of time. As she’d thought at first, definitely more of a dance.

Then Garrus stepped up to the floor. His opponent was Sidonis. And Garrus looked pissed. Sidonis seemed to have burned off most of his drunken stupor, and Shepard deliberately turned her mind away from how he might have done that when she spotted Kelly on the other side of the fighting floor, looking decidedly rumpled and flushed.

There was nothing of a dance about this fight, not in the way the others had been. Garrus was quick and decisive in his blows, using a lot of knee strikes and quick turns to dodge Sidonis’ looser, more circular movements. They kept moving, never stopping, never backing down. Garrus was a boiling volcano to Sidonis’ careless river, and the visual result was...

Impressive. She’d go with impressive.

As the fight progressed, Sidonis slowed, but Garrus maintained his speed. His strikes continued to be hard, strong, and quick, knees driving into Sidonis and disrupting his center of gravity, pushing off balance. Once he was stumbling, Garrus’ other leg would come up, driving his shins or knees or thighs into his side with bruising force to send his opponent stumbling. No wasted movement, no squandered strength, unwavering focus. Sidonis fought back, and made Garrus work for his points.

Abruptly, Shepard thought of Kelly’s earlier advice to offer to fight Garrus and something inside her coiled hot and tight. Oh, yeah, in another time, another life, she and Garrus going to the mat would one hell of a show.
The overall encounter ended up being rather short, once Garrus got the shorter turian to the ground, his knee pressed to his sternum, one hand keeping his face pinned to the floor, other hand poised to claw out his exposed throat. So he could grapple, too. Polite clapping, sounding mildly stunned to Shepard’s ears, echoed the end of the round. Garrus stood, offering Sidonis a hand up, which he took with a coughing laugh. Sidonis said something, quietly, to his taller friend. Garrus glanced up, over Sidonis’ shoulder, and locked eyes across the distance with Shepard.

That hot, tight coiling from earlier tightened further, and snapped, filling her insides with a foreboding warmth.

Oh, fuck.

She picked up a glass from her tray, and downed it in three gulps as she turned and headed back to the kitchen. She thought she heard Kelly laughing somewhere behind her.

The party progressed without Shepard seeing scale or talon of Garrus again, for which she was oddly grateful. That second drink had her thoughts tangled and her coordination fogged, and she needed every bit of her cognisance to pretend she was fully sober. She had no idea what had been in that drink, but it hadn’t been meant for humans. At least not humans her size. She was small, actually, a fact most people had neglected to notice throughout her military career in lieu of her...well, her attitude, she supposed. She hoped it was that, anyway, and not her N7 ranking. She preferred people to judge her by her abilities, not the numbers and letters stenciled onto her hardsuit. People did it anyway, of course, but still.

Roughly an hour or so after watching Garrus fight, something caught Shepard’s attention, and she found herself turning at the sound of her pseudo-name. A tall, almost lean turian stood a ways away, looking at her. At her response to the name, he nodded and approached. He had an odd, elongated mandible configuration she’d never seen before, and white lines for his markings. His eyes were an almost electric shade of blue, and somehow the gaze of those eyes alone was enough to rid of the worst of her buzz.

“Can I help you?” She asked politely, hearing her omnitool spit out the translation. The turian glanced at it, then at her, and she had never in her life seen an expression that so strongly informed her that she was an insect, hardly worthy of note, than she was seeing right now. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“Spectre Arterius,” came a voice from behind. Garrus stepped up behind her left shoulder, a solid, reliable presence she was instantly glad of. “I wasn’t aware you were attending.”

“I was delayed,” the ‘Spectre’ responded. Shepard felt a surge of alertness. Spectres, the shadowed right hand of the Council. The best of the best. The galaxy’s super police. And the best of them all was standing right in front of her. If their skills lived up to the legends that had made it to human colonies, then he’d be able to smell her duality.

Thankfully, those skills seemed somewhat inflated.

“Then I hope you have time to stay for the dinner,” Garrus responded, perfectly polite except that his hand had gone to her shoulder, firm and...protective? How sweet.

“I wouldn’t dream of missing it,” the Spectre responded. He was still looking at Shepard. “My brother regrets that he could not make it tonight, but I at least will enjoy the...festivities.”

“Glad to hear it.” At the undeniable ice in Garrus’ tone, the Spectre at last broke his gaze with Shepard, and raised his eyes to Garrus. He gave what she thought was a condescending smile.
“Good to see you, Officer Vakarian.”

Garrus’ hand tightened on her shoulder, almost imperceptibly. She had the urge to elbow him in the gut and tell him to get control of himself.

“And you, Spectre Arterius.” The white-marked turian stepped away, instantly with a pair of uptight looking turians falling into step beside him, starting up a conversation Shepard couldn’t make out.

“Go to the gym,” Garrus told her quietly from behind, for her ear alone. “The one we used together? I’ll come find you later.”

“Why?” She asked, turning and looking at him with a raised eyebrow. “You’re acting...odd, tonight.” He was stiff as a rail.

“It’s been...an interesting few days,” he murmured. “Just go. I need to talk to you, and I don’t want our conversation to be where anyone can hear.”

He had interesting timing. Whatever this conversation was, it had to be important.

She went, bypassing the temptation to grab another drink. Or hell, a pitcher. If she survived this mission, she was buying herself a fully stocked bar.

The gym was dark, obviously, but unlocked. She decided to keep the lights off- the last thing she needed or wanted was someone to come investigate a random light on where there shouldn’t be any. She found a padded bench, and sat, and waited.

Thankfully, Garrus didn’t make her wait long. He left the lights off, too, but the glow of his ever-present eyepiece was enough to let her see where he was, let her see the set of his face.

After a long moment, in which tension built exponentially, he spoke.

“Remember that message I got while you were in the hospital?”

“...Yes.” Now that was random.

“It was about you.”

Oh, fuck.

“Allright...”

He raised his omnitool, talking while he tapped at the controls. “I have a contact who owed me a favor. I called in that favor, asking about you.”

“Why...why not just ask me?” Had she played Sidonis’ eye candy for nothing tonight? Had Garrus already figured her out, while she’d been busy having her ears stuffed full of turian-sex advice and her refusing that advice on the basis of ‘we’re just friends?’ Had she even allowed herself to actually consider him a friend?

Yes, yes she had. Because he was. Or would have been, in another life, another set of circumstances in which they weren’t inherent enemies. In that alternate universe, they would have been the kind of friends only a rare few were lucky enough to know.

“Some things about you just haven’t added up.” He told her after a moment of not answering. Her omnitool at her wrist beeped as he lowered his.
“That’s the message I sent, and his response.”

Shepard stood. She adjusted her footing. There was no audience, but she had a feeling that the ‘show worth seeing,’ featuring a Vakarian and Shepard showdown, was eminent.

She raised her omnitool, brought up the single message, and read.

“Barla Von-

One last inquiry, and you’re free of me. Kristin Lambert, human, captured quellen about a galactic week ago. I’m attaching all the data passed on to me from the quarantine center. See what else you can find on her.”

And the response.

“Vakarian-

Remember, you said I’m free of you after this. You didn’t mention any clauses about the information being ‘satisfactory,’ so I’m holding you to it. There is no ‘Kristin Lambert.’ She doesn’t exist.”

“Oh, fuck,” she muttered. This seemed a night for ‘oh, fucks.’

“Yeah,” Garrus agreed. “I’d say that about sums it up.” He leaned against the door, the only exit save for the thick windows. “So. Care to explain?”
Chapter 11

“If I gave you the truth,
Would it keep you alive?
Though I’m no closer to wrong,
I’m no further from right.”

- ‘Truth’ by Seether

Chapter 11

Over the course of Shepard's career, she'd observed her cohorts make a number of mistakes. Some of those mistakes had been made during training, and had resulted in severe down-dressings and public humiliation. And some of those mistakes had been made...other than in training. Those were the mistakes Shepard remembered. It wasn't forgetting that the 'enemy' is actually your instructor that got you killed in the field. It was freezing at times like this, right now, with the fear that you'd been found out, that they knew everything and your lifespan could now be numbered in minutes unless you somehow convinced them you were valuable alive.

That was the mistake Shepard remembered, and refused to repeat. As of that moment, all Shepard knew was that Garrus knew her name was not Kristin Lambert. That was all. Blowing her cool and confessing everything would be like the pedestrian being stopped for jaywalking and, out of panic, confessing to murder.

So Shepard sat, a consciously non-threatening move, and asked placidly, "What do you want to know?"

He regarded her, and she remembered he was the Citadel equivalent of a cop. A detective, more accurately. She would bet all the hazard pay she had coming he knew this tactic; by letting him ask questions, she was the one gleaning information- what he knew, what he didn't know, what his concerns were. Would he play the game?
"Let's start with your name." He made his first move.

"Kasi Shepard," she answered truthfully. 'Kasi' was a nickname she had left behind on the wreckage of her father's ship, but it was true. Better, she'd bet the translator would pick it up as 'Cassie' or 'Casey' and she knew for a fact there were plenty of Cassie and Casey Shepard's out there. Kastanie Shepards? Not so much.

Then again, there should have been records of 'Kristin Lambert' too, files and references planted by Alliance Intelligence. So either someone had dropped the ball, or this 'Barla Von' was very, very good. Neither was a comforting thought.

He’d asked, she’d answered. It was turn.

"Why the false name?"

She hesitated, only partly feigned. A grain of truth in a bucket of lies, she thought before answering, making her move.

"Turians kill people involved with the Alliance military. I didn't feel like painting a target on my forehead if I didn’t have to." All true, every word.

Garrus was shaking his head slightly. He'd moved away from the door, using his height against her seated position to make her look up. Any closer and she'd have to either lean back or put a crink in her neck. His way of taking control of the game.

"Combatants only," he told her. "You were on a civilian vessel, that much I know to be accurate. You wouldn't have been harmed, not even by those mercenaries." She raised an eyebrow, recalling the batarian slavers, but said nothing for a moment, thinking through her response before voicing it.

"I didn't know that then," she replied. It was true, she hadn't. Then again, almost all Alliance personnel to come into contact with the turian military had been combatants.

He took that additional step, forcing her to alter her posture to maintain eye contact. Another standard tactic across both species, it seemed; make the opponent dance to your tune, even if only
with body language. She stayed as she was, peering up at him through her lashes instead of leaning back or tilting her neck.

"That first day at the port," he went on. "With the human that took Gabias, and then when Markin attacked you, you showed...skill. You've had training. More than what a father would insist on for a pretty daughter."

"My father did train me," she said. "I just may not have mentioned he was a master." Again, all true. So far she'd managed to avoid a single lie, had maneuvered out of danger without losing any pawns or claiming any of his. How long could she keep up this finite dance?

“A friend of mine warned me tonight you were not what you seemed. What did you do or say to Lantar Sidonis to make him think that?”

She’d been afraid of that question. Up until now she’d been able to allude to the idea that she’d had dealings with the Alliance, without confirming her actual enlistment. She was at a crossroads in her game; lie, and hope she had time to do what she could before this ‘Barla Von’ inevitably came back with the truth, or throw the dice and hoped they landed favorably with this turian.

She looked up at him, giving in and leaning back to do so. It had been a very, very long time since she’d been this exposed, longer since it hadn’t been her choice. Memories of a brief existence on the streets of a crowded city, nowhere and no one to go to after her family’s destruction at the hands of batarian raiders, came and went through her mind.

Shepard had always been the type to prefer knowing where the needle were hidden, even if that meant getting her own fingers pricked to find out, rather than waiting and hoping she wouldn’t be jabbed at the worst moment. If she lied and Garrus found out -and he would- she’d never know the moment her life was over. It would come quickly, either by him or by others come to discreetly dispose of her and the embarrassment she posed to the planet’s failed security. If she was upfront... Well, she thought she knew him well enough to know he’d at least give her the benefit of shooting her from the front, and not the back. Couldn’t ask for more. At least her main mission objective was secured, and then some, with that second transmission safely away.

Shepard stood, shedding the mantle of hesitant, worldly Kristin. Garrus took a step back, and his vertical scanning gaze told her he picked up the difference at once. He seemed...satisfied? Like an itch that had finally been scratched.

“I’m an officer in the Alliance Navy,” she told him, voice blunt. “I was off-duty when my transport was attacked, but I am military.”
“What rank?”

“Commander.”

“Where does that fall in your military’s hierarchy?”

“Just below a ship’s captain,” she said.

“As much as I appreciate this honesty, it doesn’t answer my question about Sidonis.”

“Actually, it does,” she replied. “When I was...hospitalized, I apparently was in enough pain during the initial treatment of my burns that I...forgot where I was. I thought I was under...duress. I began reciting my real name. Sidonis heard.” Her words were clipped, precise. She prayed that, if he didn’t about-face and march off to turn her in, he’d go ahead and do her the additional favor of not pressing further. Bad enough he had a confessed Alliance military officer in his household- it would be worse if he found out that, say, she was there to spy? Her saving grace was that he would assume she was isolated, unable to communicate, that he didn’t know of the existence of the freedom cell. That grace would be tested if he kept asking, because for some god-dамned reason she did not want to lie to this man. She wasn’t sure she could. And wasn’t that a pickle?

He looked at a spot beyond her, over her shoulder, clearly thinking. His right mandible twitched.

“You know,” he said after a long moment. “The way he tipped me off... I think he was hoping I’d suspect something...illicit, between you two.” Garrus gave a snort she thought might have almost been partly born from amusement. She felt her own lips twitch. Here she was, playing a verbal game of chess with more than her life at stake, and she felt abruptly... Relieved. Telling him the truth, even just these narrow slivers, was a weight off her shoulders she hadn't realized she'd been carrying.

In an unexpected move that had her tensing, he stepped close again, peering down down at her as she automatically craned her neck to maintain their eye contact. The glow of his eyepiece was mildly distracting, but behind it his eyes were intense enough to mitigate the distraction. He examined her, and for a brief moment Shepard felt more thoroughly naked than she had that day at the quarantine center. Odd. Usually she was the one giving that stare. What did he see, she wondered? An enemy? A friend? Or just an unreadable alien? To answer those questions she found herself examining him with equally scrutiny. What did she see when examining him?
A potential ally, and an equally potential adversary. A friend, or a foe. Incredibly alien and unfamiliar in some aspects, and a mirror of herself in others. Was that what he saw in her, too?

It was, she realized, with one extra addition; lack of certainty. He didn't know he could trust her.

Because he couldn't, she admitted to herself with a bitter twist somewhere near where her conscience resided. He shouldn’t. If the orders came down to provide coordinates for an orbital strike, she’d give them. If she found damning evidence that would help the human race, she’d take it, no matter who it hurt. This war had to end—it was bigger than her or him.

As they regarded one another, standing nearly chest-to-chest, she began to notice other things. She could smell him, for one. The scent of something faintly, sweetly metallic. The sweet part was, she knew, due to their opposing amino natures. The metallic part she was unsure of. She found herself glancing to where scales were exposed by his ‘formal’ attire, reflecting a slight sheen of blue from his eyepiece’s illumination. Parasini’s training had included a breakdown of turian physiology, more than what she’d already known, and she knew that evolution had given turians their harder exteriors as a natural defense against their homeworlds unfriendly radiation levels, exteriors comprised partly of metallic alloys. Enough for her olfactory senses to pick up, apparently. She would have thought it would have made him smell of human blood, but it didn’t. More like a hot, sandy beach, one with a high silica content, perhaps.

His mandibles were spread slightly, she noted. Not relaxed, but deliberately parted somewhat, and he was breathing deeply.

He was smelling her, she realized with a start.

Before she could remark on this, or even think of a remark, there was a noise from outside, followed by a voice that struck Shepard as mildly familiar.

“Garrus? Garrus, I know you’re in there, because I’ve searched absolutely everywhere else. If those lights are off because you’re ‘entertaining,’ I’m going to be absolutely furious you didn’t invite me. Unless you’re in there with Vipa, then I promise I will scale you-” The door opened, a talon flicking at a light switch with a quickness that spoke of familiarity with its location. Shepard had not moved, and neither had Garrus, save for twisting slightly to see who entered.

The turian female who stood in the doorway was, by turian standards, quite attractive. At least as far as Shepard could tell. Her fringe was kept long in a manner that, on a human, would have been
akin to a stunning woman going with a buzz cut. It was a statement, more than a concession to vanity. Her waist was long and narrowed sharply, and the spurred calves that showed through the narrow panels of her skirt were long and shapely.

“Nim,” Garrus addressed her, sounding surprised. “I was just-”

“Uh-huh, don’t want to hear it,” she said, waving a dismissive hand. “There’s really nothing you can say right now that will save you from merciless teasing, anyway. Sidonis will be thinking he finally got you curious, and the last thing we need is for him to think he’s actually right about something.”

Despite herself, Shepard snorted, inadvertently drawing attention back to herself. Thankfully, Garrus’ omnitool VI program was still running, so her understanding the woman’s tirade was covered. He turned to her now, expression shuttered.

“We’ll talk more,” he told her, quietly. “Later.”

Hearing a dismissal loud and clear, Shepard stepped clear of his circle of personal space, moving around him towards the door. The female, ‘Nim,’ moved out of her way, eyeing her with open curiosity. As Shepard shut the door behind her she heard, “You know, if what my quellen Jacob has been telling me is true, she is quite pretty by human standards. Not a bad waistline by turian standards, either.”

And in answer, a long-suffering sounding sigh and, “Nim!”

And an innocent, “What?”

Shepard shook her head, feeling suddenly lightheaded as the rush of adrenaline subsided. The liquor probably hadn’t helped either, although thankfully she hadn’t worried about it hindering her judgement or responses. She wouldn’t have made a very good operative if she’d been unable to imbibe at the various functions she’d infiltrated over the years, or resist various drugs and narcotics during interrogations. And at the moment, she certainly felt like she was coming down of a dose of something serious.

She ground her palms into her eyes, taking a deep breath before moving away from the gym towards the party area. Most of the guests were gone, she saw, a few still lingering in small groups around decorative braziers or fountains, talking and laughing quietly. Neither Sidonis nor Kelly, or
the Spectre from earlier, were visible. Thankful for what appeared to be an emotional respite, Shepard picked up a tray and began gathering discarded cups and plates and utensils. She was utterly ignored by every single one of the remaining turians, the sort of denial of her existence that was painfully deliberate, and she distractedly added this little fact to her reservoir of observations.

She went over her conversation with Garrus as she gathered up the refuse, and by the time the last tray of trash had been disposed of, she decided it was safe to sleep that night. Even if Garrus decided not to trust her, he wouldn’t do anything to her tonight. He was many things, she’d decided, but honorable was definitely among them. He wouldn’t kill an enemy in their sleep.

Inside, Meda was tipping the individuals from the staffing service, thanking them and dismissing them. She spotted Shepard, standing in the kitchen doorway, and waved her over as she reached into a pantry, pulling out a covered tray.

“You did admirably,” the aging turian told her, handing her the tray. “Eat, then go sleep.”

The scent of food for a human palate worked its way past the cloth to Shepard’s nose, and at once her stomach gave an ungodly growl. Meda started, then laughed uproariously. Shepard raised an eyebrow, which Meda had learned to interpret correctly, and explained, “Oh, my dear, you have no idea what that sounds like to turian ears. You better make sure you’re never hungry around Sidonis, or a few others I could name!” She chuckled, then shooed her ‘charge’ towards the table. Shepard, with a wry grin, went as bid.

Microwave waffles, bacon, and a small block of cheddar cheese. She shook her head over the random meal, but ate it all. She never thought she’d miss MREs. They’d improved greatly over the decades, her grandfather had once told her, no longer requiring the little pieces of gum that doubled as laxatives, but there was only so much science could do to make a meal intended to survive an apocalypse palatable.

Meda turned down the offer of help with cleaning, stating that most of it would be done in the morning by the few permanent staff lucky enough to have been off that night. Once she was satisfied the older woman would find her own rest soon enough, Shepard gave into the matron’s shoo’ing and left to find her room, even if she knew sleep would not come easily.

Garrus was, in a word, utterly confused. He was used to his brain and instincts telling him two
different things, and he was used to it being about fifty-fifty which one was right. What he wasn’t used to was them being in agreement against a third voice, one that he couldn’t name.

His mind, supplying facts and likely scenarios, told him he should -discreetly- contact a few key persons he knew through his father and quietly have the small human quellen removed. His instincts were telling him that this wasn’t necessarily a bad idea, since those same instincts were screaming at him that she hadn’t told him everything. Her responses had been too perfect, on the way that they weren’t. They weren’t what he’d wanted to hear, but neither were they the worst they could have been- they were that kind of perfect, the kind that could either be utter truth, or the kind created by someone...

Someone like him. Someone who knew where that ‘perfect’ ratio really was.

On the other hand, just because she hadn’t told him everything didn’t mean she needed to...disappear. That was the third voice, the one he refused to name because spirits take him, it was just too melodramatic. But it was the one that spoke the loudest, the one that told him to wait, to trust her just a little longer. She’d saved Gabias, and while that might have been a ploy to get into his household and good graces, saving Norius had no explanation other than one; it was who she was. And a person who could selflessly throw themselves into a burning building to save the family of their enemy was not a person he wanted to distrust. To do that meant that what little hope he had in the universe truly was pointless, and he wasn’t quite ready to admit that. Not yet.

And so Garrus sat outside the family villa, beneath the star filled sky, and watched a dark square set into the wall of the villa. A window. Her window. He told himself it was because he needed to make sure she didn’t do anything foolish like try to run. Moreso it was because he’d always handled problems better when handling the elements of the problem, be it reports, evidence, vid footage, etc. In this case, there was nothing to handle but Kristin -No, not ‘Kristin,’ but ‘Shepard’- and that was somewhere he wasn’t going to go. So, he sat in the dark, hands turning his eyepiece over and over, peering with just his natural eyesight at that dark window. Thinking. Or trying to. He really couldn’t count what he was doing as ‘thinking,’ not when he kept coming back to the same thing; examining that gut feeling that told him that despite all logic and reason, he could trust her. He just wished he had something to back that up.

Menae, Palaven’s moon, was high over head by the time Garrus sighed and stood, fitting his eyepiece back into place.

“Don’t fuck this up, Shepard,” he told the window, and went inside to try to get to some sleep before the morning. Tomorrow, he’d go digging. But for tonight, he could trust. Just a little longer.
The next day progressed suspiciously as usual. Shepard actually managed to sleep in somewhat, and was woken not by the alarm on her barely-functional omnitool, but by a pounding on her door by what sounded like a small fist.

Moaning, putting a hand to pounding temple, Shepard fought to free herself from the hammock-bed and strode to the door in the nude. Her own lack of modesty combined with the turian utter lack of need for it meant her personal boundaries of propriety had seriously deteriorated, and she felt no embarrassment when she cracked open the door, fully expecting Meda or Gabias to be standing there.

And she was half right. Gabias was there, hand upraised to knock again, small mandibles flared wide as they would go; he was positively bouncing. She hadn’t, however, expected Garrus to be standing right behind him.

Huh. Now that was odd. Why would she be suddenly very aware of her nudity -not self conscious or embarrassed, just aware- in front of him but no one else? It had to do with their...conversation from the night before, she decided, remembering the exchange in a rush.

“One second,” she muttered, shutting the door in a way she was sure broke dozens of turian rules about quellen decorum. She found a pair of jeans and a blank tank with Garrus’ slightly stunned expression fixed in her memory, and pulled on the clothes and snapped on her anti-radiation medication dispenser before opening the door again. That stunned look had faded into one of wry amusement. Gabias seemed not to have noticed anything amiss as he grabbed her hand before she could say anything, dragging her out into the hall. She noted that his other hand held Garrus’ firmly.

“You have to come see!” He declared, clearly ecstatic with something. “It just arrived, Mama said it was Uncle Garrus,’ but then he said he didn’t know what it was, but you’ve gotta know, and whatever it is it looks awesome, and...” The contrast between his golden, inexplicably delight and last night’s weighted gloom was a sharp one, and she was sure Garrus had noticed it, too, judging from the glances they exchanged as Gabias hauled the adults through the villa and outside. The main garage was actually underground, as Shepard had seen her first day at the Vakarian home, but further away from the villa was another garage, an older one. She’d worked in and around it a number of times. Now, with Gabias pulling her and Garrus towards it’s open door, she saw it had a new occupant.

She gasped. Commander Shepard, military special ops, hardened combat veteran, gasped and felt a ball of emotion well up in the back of her throat.
Garrus looked at her. “You know what it is?”

“Know what it is?” She breathed, dropping Gabias’ hand and moving towards the gleaming beauty. “How did you know what it is?”

“I don’t,” he said wryly. He put a hand on Gabias’ head; the boy had been bouncing in place. He calmed slightly under his uncle’s hand, swapping the bouncing for wiggling.

Shepard trailed a reverent hand along the side of the red creation, careful not to drag more than just her fingertips.

“Nineteen sixty-seven Shelby Cobra GT500,” she breathed. “And I’ll be damned if this isn’t the original paint...seats...” She peered inside the tinted windows, then reached for the handle and popped the door open on the driver’s side. The smell of old, well cared for, oiled leather hit her like a physical blow. Faint under current of cigarettes, engine oil, artificial air fresheners. She moved around the open door to the front of the machine, fingers finding the catch just beneath the lip of the hood, and popped it open. Gabias gave a squeal of glee. She glanced at him with a grin, and saw that Garrus was looking very much like a man who was trying to look very much not as interested as he actually was.

“You like machines?” She asked the shorter Vakarian. Gabias nodded enthusiastically, and she grinned. “Just like your uncle, huh?” Another nod, and Garrus snorted. “C’mere,” she told the boy, half distracted by the vision laid out in front of her. Modern and tech savvy she may be, but she was a sucker for classic mechanical works of art.

Gabias scrambled over, and Garrus followed at only a slightly more sedate pace. She grinned wider as the adult peered over her shoulder as Gabias went on his toes to see over the grill to get a better view of the engine. As if she were speaking to Gabias and Gabias alone, she began to point out the different components of the engine. If Garrus asked a question or two, she pretended the inquiry had come from Gabias.

“How do you know all this?”

“Most all ground vehicles on Earth functioned basically the same until they started implementing technology reverse engineered from the finds on Mars,” she explained, reaching out to prod at various seals and wires and tubes, testing the security and viability of each. Real rubber pieces, God damn...
“As for this model in particular, it’s famous. Finding one in pristine condition out here? It’s like...like finding one of your old sacred temples underneath Manhattan, I guess.” At last she did find one modern concession among all the gloriously original components; a fuel converter. Fossil fuels hadn’t been used in generations. Whoever had owned this beauty hadn’t just sat her in a show room somewhere or in a dark garage, she’d been actually driven and enjoyed. She felt a pang on behalf of whoever was missing her now.

“So it works?” Garrus asked, and she could tell he’d forgotten himself, or else given up on the pretense of mature distance. He sounded eager, and he didn’t try to calm Gabias’ bouncing this time.

“It looks like it should, once we figure out what this fuel converter can handle.” She reached for the thing, moving her fingers over it, looking for embossed numbers or letters, anything that might tell her more. As she did so, Garrus began voicing options, some chemicals that were familiar, others not for the sole reason of their name being unfamiliar. Several were viable options, and he told her he could get ahold of most by the next day. A few he he had on hand.

Gabias had plopped himself down on the driver’s seat, twisting the wheel around pretending to drive, making noises she realized were supposed to be that of an engine. She reached in as she passed the open driver side door and scratched at his fringe in an absentmindedly affectionate motion on her way to the gas cap. She popped it with a twist, and peered inside, using the light of her omnitool. She grinned, and moved back to the driver’s door.

“Scoot,” she told Gabias, and the kid moved over to the passenger seat. She slipped inside, almost sighing against the cool leather and the seat designed for a human form.

The ignition was keyless, she saw. She spotted a few other electronic concessions, but overall the look and feel of the original dash had been maintained. She flicked at the controls, and the dials came to life. Sure enough, the thing had a full tank still.

“Garrus!” She said, raising her voice to be heard from inside the car. “Make sure your hands are clear of the engine!”

“Clear,” he called back, and with a wild grin she started the engine, revving it as she did so. The red beast snarled, and after an initial jump of surprise, Gabias next to her began cheering. Outside the car, she thought she heard Garrus give a whoop, as well. Despite herself, despite everything, Shepard laughed.

She let the engine calm, watching the RPM dial plummet and hover at a more sedate number.
“I’ll take a sample of what’s in the tank,” Garrus told her, coming to lean on the open door, looking casual. “Use it to narrow down what we can put in it safely.” He must have only just been awake when Gabias had grabbed him, too, she realized. He wore only loose drawstring pants, the same ones -or similar to- he’d worn the day Markin had attacked her. And no shirt. She didn’t wonder at why she’d noticed that. You didn’t go into the field Shepard was in without a healthy sense of curiosity. Granted, she’d seen plenty of nude turians during her sessions with Parasini, and even seen Garrus sans clothing once or twice since her arrival. It was nothing new.

Except, this was the first time she’d felt curiosity when looking. She’d seen him move the night before, seen him dance with Sidonis. Looking at this body in front of her now, she wouldn’t have thought it capable of moving like that. It peaked her fascination with mechanics and physics as much as anything else.

A shout came outside the garage, and Solanna poked her head in.

“Gab!” She called. “Your tutor is here! What are you doing?”

Gabias scrambled out of the passenger side, rushing to his mother and jabbering about how the machine was noisy and awesome, talking so quickly Shepard could hear his mandibles clacking against his jaw as he ran. Over her son’s head, she gave Garrus a look that clearly conveyed, ‘We’ll talk about this later,’ then ushered the boy out.

Garrus chuckled. “I’m going to hear it later,” he said, stretching. She silenced the mustag’s purr with a flick of her fingers on the controls, watching him. He seemed oddly relaxed around her, considering. Had he reached a decision, then? Whatever that decision was, he seemed calm about it, accepting. Which meant that even if she found out his decision was not in her favor, there would be little she could do to change it. So she decided not to stress over it. She’d watch, listen, and wait. Like she always did.

“Stay here,” he said after a moment, and she realized they’d been staring at one another again.

“Where are you going?” She asked as he moved towards the door.

“Just stay,” he said, grinning at her over his shoulder. “I’ll be back.”

She leaned back in the bucket seat of the mustang, closing her eyes and breathing in the scent of
leather. It was almost...peaceful, this moment, this lingering glow. If one good thing came out of all of this, for her personally, it was Gabias for sure. Other things...maybe. But Gabias for certain.

He returned, as he’d said he would, fully clothed and carrying a pair of packs. She saw him coming, and she popped the trunk. Not expecting it, he paused, almost jumping, then gave her a look via the rearview mirror that had her grinning. He deposited the packs, then moved to the passenger side door that Gabias had left open. With some careful maneuvering, he managed to fit. It was cramped, but he fit. Shepard flicked on the electronics, and with a sigh pressed a button. Garrus glanced up as the roof of the mustang began to bend and fold, retracting back into the compartment between their seats and the trunk. Garrus grunted, sitting up straight. His legs were still cramped, but at least he wasn’t doubled over. It might not have been so bad if the bucket seats weren’t so definitely not designed for turians.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “Hippie-era engineers didn’t have aliens in mind when they designed this thing.”

“Obviously,” he replied, hitting a few keys on his omnitool that had the whole back wall of the garage lifting up out of their way. She’d had an idea of what he’d had in mind the moment he’d left and said he’d return, and now with that idea all but confirmed, she grinned widely.

“Where to?” She asked. “We can get about two-hundred and fifty miles out of this thing.” She hoped the VI translator would be able to convert the distance measurement. It could, apparently, since he nodded in understanding.

“We’ve got plenty, then,” he told her. “I’ll direct you.”

“Surprised you’re letting me drive,” she told him, backing out of the garage slowly. It had been a long, long time since racing up and down her grandfather’s crop duster airstrip in Texas in his old mustang. It hadn’t been a Shelby, but still. “Not afraid I’ll kick you out and run for it?”

“Ha,” he said. “Pretty sure I could catch you. This thing can’t go that fast, not stuck to the ground like it is.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” she said. She looked over at him, smirking. “Please tell me the route you have in mind has a nice, long, flat portion?” He nodded, and she let preemptive satisfaction settle on her features, ignoring his sidelong glance of suspicion.
Garrus’ directions were good, and within a relatively short amount of time and only two stall-outs, Shepard -with no little ribbing from Garrus- was at ease behind the wheel again.

“So,” he began, sounding deceptively conversational, given that she knew what was coming. “The transport you were on when you were caught. If you’re Alliance military, what were you doing on a civilian ship? In civilian clothes? I know Alliance uniforms, and what you were wearing wasn’t a uniform.”

She wasn’t surprised he knew what she’d been wearing. Knowing him, he’d researched every piece of vid footage, reviewed every word she’d given at the interview at the quarantine center. She fought against the alluring relaxation that had begun to grip her as they’d settled into the drive. He was directing her around the Vakarian estate, she realized, past the boundaries of the immediate grounds around the villa. Away from the city. Away from anyone who could overhear.

“I wasn’t active at the time,” she said, still trying not to lie. “The Alliance uses civilian transports to free up military vessels for...more important things.” She hesitated, then decided since he’d apparently decided to extend his trust long enough for further explanation, she should return the sentiment.

“My father -my real father- was a civilian contractor. He was Alliance himself, when he was young. Met my mother, a professional ballet dancer in London, and when his term with the military was up, he married her. She wouldn’t marry him before that. They’d planned on settling on an agricultural outpost. Mindoir.”

Garrus whistled, and odd sound coming from a turian oral configuration. “I heard about that colony.”

She nodded. “We barely missed the raid that killed everyone. One week sooner, and we would have been there. Instead, my father decided he wasn’t done helping the Alliance.”

“I’m guessing your mother wasn’t happy with that.”

“Hell no,” she snorted. “Made him compromise. Wouldn’t let him re-enlist, but she let him use her inheritance from her parents to buy a ship, a big one, and contract out to the military, shipping supplies, people, whatever was needed, to non-combat locations, freeing up military vessels and personnel for...more dangerous routes.”
Her tale paused as Garrus gave additional driving instructions. Despite herself, she kept glancing at the scenery. Away from the villa grounds and the city, it was wildly beautiful. More jungle than forest, with the sense that the greenery would overgrow the road at any moment.

“What happened to them?” He asked. She glanced at him. His tone was...gentle? Had he picked up on something while she’d been talking? She hadn’t said anything to convey they were gone, but someone he’d guessed. She turned troubled eyes back to the road.

“Batarians. Got us afterall, Mindoir or no Mindoir. Dad heard a distress call...” She shrugged, slightly. In her mind, she heard her mother telling him to leave it alone, they had deadlines that couldn’t be missed, they could pass on the call to the first Alliance patrol they encountered. Her father hadn’t listened.

“Only reason I knew anything was wrong was because I wasn’t in bed like I was supposed to be. Got back to my room in time to wake my brothers, get them out of the room.”

They were still young, in her memory. Ten and six. Her best friends, her playmates, her personal tormentors and wards. Her worst failures.

“We had a skeleton crew, that route. It was the holidays. Dad was always a sucker for family, so anyone with loved ones was let off. He’d take on temps with no family if he had to. Cost more that way, but...” She trailed off, lost in memory for a moment, only enough of her attention spared for the road and its smooth curves, the rumble of the mustang beneath her hands, and the vibrating presence of the turian next to her.

“Go on,” that turian prompted, and she realized at once how much she’d been elaborating. She shook herself. Storytelling wasn’t her thing. It was nice, though. In a way. The only other person she’d talked to like this was Anderson.

“Suffice to say, the encounter didn’t end well.” That was putting it mildly. She’d left her brothers in a secluded corner of one of the cargo bays to fetch a shotgun from the weapons locker she wasn’t supposed to know the code to, but did. She’d returned to find three batarians manhandling her brothers. She’d shot one in the head. A second had turned to her, firing close enough to make her dive behind a crate. Then she’d heard two more shots, and her brothers’ shouts had ceased. What she’d seen when she’d forced herself to look around the crate was a sight she’d seen in her nightmares every night for the next decade. And occasionally after that, as well.

Garrus seemed to sense she wasn’t willing to elaborate further.
“Your job,” he went on. “I take it you’re not a corporate consultant?”

She laughed. Short, remnants of bitterness from her memories. She pushed past them, as she had hundreds of times before.

“That would be a no,” she clarified. Did she want to tell him what her actual job was? She could tell part, she supposed. One of the benefits of having multiple MOS’s. “But I do know a good deal about machines and tech.” It was obvious why she couldn’t tell him about her sidejob as a female James Bond, and given the circumstances of recent ‘explosive’ events at the Vakarian villa, she thought it would be a bad idea to tell him her second specialty. That left her ‘secret geek identity,’ as Jenkins had so often put it.

“Should have guessed that,” he said, sounding amused. He tilted his head back, clearly enjoying the wind. She herself was liking it, as well. Feeling the rushing air tug at her hair made her glad it was so short, something she’d seen to herself shortly after arriving at the villa, with no apology to Parasini’s wasted efforts at growing it out.

“Next,” she prompted. “I know you have more.”

“You think you know me,” he scoffed.

“Not hard to figure you out, Vakarian,” she replied amiably. Abruptly she sat up straighter, peering ahead and grinning. “You said there’d be a straightaway,” she reminded him. “Is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” he said, nodding. “Why?”

Her grin widened. “You said something about being able to catch me in this thing if I shoved you out? Want to test that?”

“Surprisingly, no,” he responded dryly. “But I admit, you do have me curious about just how fast this thing— sweet spirits, Shepard!”

Halfway through his confession, she’d downshifted, felt the red beast’s momentum shift, opened the clutch, and floored the gas pedal. The mustang leaped forward, prompting his shout. The
whole chassis shifted subtly with each gear she climbed, the roar of the well-maintained machine thundering down the road. Her eyes flicked between the dials, balancing her awareness of what they told her with what she felt, and judging each shift accordingly. She knew she wasn’t extracting the mustang’s best performance, not by a long shot, not on her first ride. But Garrus didn’t know that, and he sure as hell didn’t seem to care, not with the way he was now hollering and shouting. She realized she was cheering and laughing just as loud.

By the time they reached the end of that stretch of road, a companionable air had settled around them. For a brief time, the questions were forgotten. Shepard knew better than to hope it would last, but for now...

She glanced over at Garrus, who was grinning at her. For now, even if tomorrow brought turian police to take her away to never see daylight again, she had this. Commander Shepard, racing an antique Ford Mustang with Garrus Vakarian.

There were worse ways to spend your last days of freedom.
I want to love you but I better not touch

I want to hold you but my senses tell me to stop

I want to kiss you but I want it too much

I want to taste you but your lips are venomous poison

‘Poison,’ Groove Coverage

Chapter 12

She did more talking that afternoon in that damn car than she had since she'd been a teenager. Or drunk. Either way, it had been a long while.

And he matched her, word for word, story for story. She was careful to avoid any tales that involved missions that didn't line up with the tech-head profession she'd claimed, which still left plenty of recollections from boot camp, tech school, and her N7 training. She referenced people by their callsigns when possible, and nicknames only if they hadn't had one. She wondered if he did the same. He really had no need; he wasn't the one trying to be discreet. His research on a 'Kasi Shepard' might not turn up much, but she was pretty sure a cross reference of 'Shepard, Maverick, Chalmun Bar, drunk military chicks' would turn up a vid or two.

Anderson had not been happy with her the morning after that particular excursion.

Garrus had eventually directed their journey to a shoulder of the narrow road, one that dropped sharply down into the tops of green trees below. They'd been climbing steadily since that straight portion of road, and now Shepard was gifted with the fruits of that long drive.

"I've seen a lot of spectacular views," she said, getting out of the mustang, staring. "But damn..."
"I may be somewhat biased," Garrus said casually, leaning against the side of the vehicle, arms crossed. "But yeah... 'Damn' always about sums it up for me, too."

A sea of green in every shade rolled out beneath them towards the hazy horizon. Above, tumulus clouds of a dark silvery blue churned in the distance, only partially obscuring flat-topped mountains- mesas, she realized, incredibly high ones. The contrast was beautiful.

He watched her for a moment, turian expression unreadable, then moved away towards a small building -more of a hut, really- situated not far from them.

“Odd place for a latrine,” she commented idly, and heard him give a snort of amusement.

“The Vakarians have owned this land for as long as the name has existed,” he began explaining, opening the door and ducking inside. She followed, and leaned on the doorjam of the old-fashioned hinged portal. “At some point, the Heirarchy decided portions of our land should be annexed, because they held historical monuments. Temples, a small village, cave paintings, that kind of stuff.”

“I can’t imagine that going over well.”

“It didn’t. My ansecstor handled it so badly, in fact, she was removed from the political arena. Her son -my great grandfather- won it back by brokering a compromise. We got to keep the land, but we also assumed responsibility for maintaining and honoring those monuments. This is a monitoring outpost. It keeps track of the seismic and atmospheric activity around the important spots. If the readings are too high, we go out and take a look and see if anything is damaged.”

“And you do this yourself?” She asked as he squatted down by small console, syncing his omnitool to the thing and scanning the read out.

“Not usually. But I needed an excuse to get away from the house for a while.” He shot her a meaningful glance, and she gave a rueful grin. An insistent chirp brought their attention back to the monitoring equipment, and Garrus sighed. “And here I was hoping to be back in time for lunch. Meda’s making sicero steaks.”

“My heart bleeds for you,” she said, chuckling. He gave her an odd look, which she filed away for later examination and continued, “I take it this means there are some ruins that need examining?”
“A few, but the worst one is also the closest. We’ll eat, then go poke around. We should be back in time for dinner. Maybe they’ll be some steak left...”

She couldn’t help it. She laughed. Men, it seemed, had one-track minds no matter what species they were. He gave her another odd look, then shook his head and stood, exiting the hut and locking it behind him.

The two packs he’d tossed into the back of the mustang contained basic survival gear -apparently getting lost in the Palaven jungle was a very real danger- as well as a human-friendly meal in hers. They ate in relative silence, perched on the hood of the mustang and watching the thunderstorms in the distance roll and churn and stab the sky and the mesas with forked bolts of blue-white light. An insistent wind had built, making Shepard glad of her shorn hair. As it was, the air was charged enough to make the fine strands begin to frizz, and the looks Garrus kept shooting her told her exactly how entertaining he found this fact. Although, she had her compensation when they again decided to test-taste each other’s cuisine. The speared chunk of blue-purple meat reminded her of pineapple porkchops gone rancid, but the look that spread across his face, comical despite the limited range of motion his plated features could give, at a bite of her mozarella cheese stick was worth it.

She let him drive when they set out, after giving him a basic run down of the mechanics. He caught on quick enough, though they never went above third gear, and eventually he let her take the wheel back, since he still had hopes of getting back in time for dinner.

The tension between them was not entirely gone, despite the casual air to the outing. She still saw him cataloging and comparing her comments, looking for discrepancies. It was one of the reasons she was glad she’d stuck to the truth as much as possible. It made keeping track of her lies easier.

The ruins, as Garrus had promised, were not far- least, not as far as the driving was concerned. He had her pull off the road and into a small clearing, kept free of the overzealous jungle growth by a high stone wall. A narrow path led out of the clearing and into the deep green foliage, one that had Shepard eyeing the deeply shadowed recesses with apprehension. Like all N7 graduates, she’d had her share of hostile environment training, survival training, the works. Didn’t mean she was fond of dense, sweaty, toxic jungles with far too many convenient blind spots for predators to hide in. Garrus, it seemed, shared her wariness, since at her pensive glances he made a point of showing her the subsized carnifax he had strapped to a hip holster, which she had of course noticed eons ago. He surprised her, however, when he slipped a wickedly jagged-edged knife from his boot and flipped it, holding out the hilt to her. She raised an eyebrow at him.

“If you were going to kill me,” he told her conversationally. “You’d have done it by now.”

“Maybe I was just waiting for a more convenient time,” she said, just as casually. She took the
knife, and the sheath he offered, hooking it through her belt. “Like, a walk through a infamously
dangerous jungle? It wouldn’t hard to dispose of a body in there.”

He chuckled, pointedly turning his back to her and moving on to the treeline. “If you’re going to
stab me, at least clean the blade after. That’s an antique.”

Despite herself, she laughed.

The trek through the moist growth was as unpleasant as she’d anticipated, but made somewhat
bearable by her surprisingly amusing guide. He rarely glanced over his shoulder at her, which she
took as a gesture of goodwill. They saw no sign of the predators he told her about, and she gathered
that perhaps there were not as many of them this close to civilization as he had hoped to let her
think. She found the idea of him trying to make her nervous and watching her reaction...amusing.

Their conversation dwindled as they progressed, both growing more alert the further they went
from the road. It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence, oddly enough. Similar to the quiet she thought
she might have enjoyed with one of her squadmates. And there was a thought that should have
made her nervous... Beginning to think of an enemy as less-of-an-enemy was a far cry from
starting to think of said enemy as an ally. That was dangerous. Not to her mission...she knew she’d
be able to do what needed to be done with the time came, whatever it was that needed doing. No,
what was dangerous was what it would do to her if ‘what needed to be done’ was something that
got him killed. Him, or the boys, or Solanna, or Meda...

It wasn’t something she enjoyed thinking about. She considered herself a strong individual, but
there were some things even the strongest couldn’t bounce back from. And the things in her
nightmares, more and more lately, were things she knew she wouldn’t be able to recover from, not
and still be the same person.

“Here,” Garrus called, pulling her away from her dark thoughts. She turned from where she’d been
scanning a deeply shadowed space beneath a tree, and saw her turian guide push aside an arm of
heavy palm fronds. Beyond, a crumbling heap of stone was visible, barely keeping back the
encroaching ring of jungle foliage. Vines crawled all over the structure, and stubborn plants
sprouted from between foundation stones. Circling around, she could make out the parts of it that
had once been walls, the remnants of a pillar, the caved-in section of a vaulted roof. Most of the
destruction looked old, but she asked anyway.

“Is it supposed to look like this?”

“Well, no, typically the roof wouldn’t be on the ground...” he rumbled at her, and she shot him a
pointed look that had him holding up his hands innocently. “It looks the same as it did last month,” he continued, more serious. “Most of this damage happened decades ago, before we started monitoring the ruins. Now we’re just trying to keep it from getting worse.” He was moving carefully between large stones, most of them in the process of being devoured by clinging vines. She followed, spotting various pieces of blinking tech that were obviously motion detectors of some kind. For keeping track of animal activity, she supposed. And vagrants, most likely.

Garrus looped around the structure, taking vids and snapshots of various structural points, including a few that looked days away from collapsing entirely. Shepard kept him in sight, but wound up doing her own inspection. The temple was old, possibly as old as any of the pyramids or Greek temples back on Earth. Faint, very faint etchings and carvings were visible on surfaces that were somehow shielded from rain or wind, either by position or more leafy vines. Most seemed to depict the expected sort of ancient worship, turian stick-figures (as Shepard couldn’t help but think of them) positioned before great glowing monoliths, offering up sacrifices of food, animals, even - in some- their own children. One of the more detailed series of carvings was on a long piece of segmented stone that might have been part of an angular pillar at one point, but now lay face-up in the mud, protected by a convenient tree that had fallen onto the temple at just the right angle to shield the carvings from the worst of the elements. She followed along the pillar, examining the story it held in the dying light. It was not the setting sun that was robbing her of illumination, but the thunderstorm she and Garrus had observed earlier rolling over them.

The tale etched onto the pillar was interesting, but not nearly as intriguing as what she found when she reached the end. She tilted her head, frowning at the pattern swept into the damp earth, the crushed plants. If she didn’t know better, the small patch of relatively clear ground near the pillar and fallen tree had been recently host to a shuttle landing. A small one, to be sure, but those patterns in the mud...they looked like they’d been made by a pair of thrusters, just the right size for a personal shuttle, or ‘aircar’ as many humans called them, echoing the days of sci fi legend back on Earth.

She circled the marks, growing more certain the longer she looked. She glanced up at the sky. If it rained -and it looked more and more like it would- the tracks would be washed away entirely. She noticed, too, that the pilot of the aircar had found the one spot blinded from the sensors by plants and rocks.

There was a peculiar pattern pressed into the mud, right where the underside of the aircar would have been. She took a vid snapshot of it, and the rest of the thruster patterns. She still hadn’t decided whether or not to call Garrus to look at them, when a shout snatched her attention away from her find. A half a heartbeat behind the first shout, she heard the unmistakable rumbling echo of rocks moving.

“Garrus?” She shouted, her voice swallowed by a sudden clap of thunder. She winced at the volume, looking up at the low-lying clouds. Far lower than she was used to seeing, owing to the different atmospheric conditions of this alien planet. She’d have to be satisfied with the vids, she decided, moving to where she’d heard the shout originate. She called out again, and heard an
answer, the words indistinguishable.

Following the shouts led her to a jagged hole near the edge of the ruins, set up against a crumbling wall. Part of the hole looked like it had been there for eons, while the part furthest out, the part that Garrus had probably thought safe to stand on, had broken away entirely, with fresh bits of broken vines clinging to the edges to tell her how new the collapse was.

“Garrus?” She called down, getting as close as she dared and shining her omnitool’s light into the hole. She heard a cough, and a response in turian. She paused, then with a grin despite the circumstances she called, “Is your omnitool broken again?” The response was again in turian, and sounded frustrated. She chuckled. He didn’t sound hurt, and the silhouette she saw below, dusty and faint, told her he was standing.

She backed away a few steps, and knelt in the mud to dig through her pack. There was rope, of course- no survival kit would be complete without a length of decent rope. As she unraveled the length and hunted for something to secure it to, the rain began to fall. It fell hard, in tiny drops that stung. She ignored the pain that was hardly more than an annoyance, and found a sturdy tree not too far, and set to looping the rope and securing it with a swing hitch knot, tugging and tweaking to make sure it was secure before moving to back to the edge of the hole.

He shouted something when he saw her, something she thought was roughly equivalent to, ‘fuck yeah!’ She lowered the rope, and saw him reach for it. Both cursed at once when they realized it was roughly three feet too short, even for how tall he was. The rocks strewn around him were either too small to make the difference, or too large for him to move. They tried getting him atop one of the larger ones, and her swinging the rope towards him. He caught it several times, but only the very end, an inch or two, not enough to get a good grip on. She heard him cursing in turian.

Above, lighting speared the sky and the rain, surprisingly cold rain, fell harder. She was soaked, and rain ran into her eyes and made it hard for her to see. She hoped the combined efforts of the anti-radiation subdermal implant, and the medication dispenser on her wrist would be enough to stave off the worst affects of being doused in radioactive soup.

He was shouting something up at her, his tone subdued, wary.

“Not that you can understand me, with this damn thing broken, but you need to go get help,” he told her, sighing. “And if you’re going to run off, now would be the time. You’ve got that knife, the survival kit, that radiation dispenser will last you a few weeks.”

She stared down at him, an explosion of lightning flooding the cavern below with blue-white light,
throwing the turian into sharp relief. He didn’t know she could understand her, but that didn’t change what he was saying. He was putting his life in her hands. Granted, he didn’t have much of a choice, stuck down there as he was. But there was a very good chance that if she chose to run off, as he seemed to half expect her to, he’d be put in considerable danger by exposure alone, forget the chances of further collapses or a hungry hunter coming along. There was also the strange tracks she’d seen.

She made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat. She should skip out. He was right, she could survive long enough to make her way back to civilization and find an unsecured terminal and make contact with the rebel cell, and either hope they’d hide her or else keep her head down and pray for extraction, which was as likely as a snowball on Venus. Either way, she’d gathered all the intel she was going to from her current assignment, that much was obvious.

She stared down at him, the darkness hiding his face but she knew he was staring back. Another flash of lightning confirmed it, and with a frustrated growl she called down, “Stay there, I’m coming down.” And she pulled the rope back up, fashioned herself a makeshift harness, and eased herself over the edge. She kept the slack in a tight grip, lowering herself one hand over hand at a time. She ignored his shouts, sounding almost angry. She grinned to herself, at the image of him scowling up at her. The contrasts between them kept growing; who would have thought it, an Alliance undercover agent, rescuing a turian against her better judgement?

When she’d lowered herself as far as she could, she reached for him, motioning.

“Come on,” she said. “I don’t know the strength of this particular rope but I do know that it’s digging into my ass and thighs and it is not comfortable.” He snorted at her tone, still scowling, and from the boulder he was standing on, below her and to the side, he reached for her, and she reached for him, letting go of the rope and using both arms. He clasped his taloned fingers around her forearms, and she latched hers around his, and with a nod, he pushed off from the boulder. His weight yanked her arms, but she’d been ready for it and instead of her arms being yanked from their sockets entirely, they just shrieked in pain. She only grunted.

He climbed up her arms, surprisingly agile for a species definitely not designed for climbing. He didn’t use his feet at all when he ascended the rope, using powerful arms and shoulders to lift himself fist over fist up the rope, then haul himself over the edge. She tried to watch him climb, but the icy rain rain into her eyes in narrow waterfalls. Once she was sure he was over, she started to climb back up, ignoring the agony of her shoulders. They weren’t damaged, just strained. The pain would pass.

After a moment of pulling herself up, she felt the rope jerk, and suddenly she was rising much faster. Garrus, above, was pulling her up. She reached the lip of the hole, and thrust out a hand blindly. Three warm, thick digits closed over her hand and wrist, hauling up and forward with one final pull. She stumbled, and he caught her, both breathing hard. With cold rain drenching them
and lightning and thunder rocking the sky, they fell over into the mud, laughing.

“You crazy pyjak,” he said. “What if the rope had snapped? You’d have been stuck down there with me.”

She couldn’t respond, obviously, not without letting him know she understood him. And while understanding a word or two was expected given her exposure, her rather complete grasp of the language would lead to other questions. Questions she’d just begun, she thought, to alleviate. She wasn’t quite ready to give up the small measure of trust she’d begun to gain. To earn. She couldn’t say why that trust was becoming more and more important to her, but it was.

He was pulling her to her feet, and pushing her pack into her numb hands, the rope coiled around his arm. He pulled her towards the ruins, carefully navigating around other spots that looked weak. The temperature was dropping, with the cloud cover growing thicker, and she was suddenly fighting shivers. Muscle exercises to keep the blood flowing to the core were uncomfortable, since most employed the torso and the biceps, the latter of which were still in considerable pain. But she made herself do them, made herself flex fingers and toes to keep them limber as Garrus led them down into the ruins, out of the rain and into darkness. Light flared from his omnitool, revealing a central chamber that was surprisingly intact. The last thing she wanted to deal with was another cave in.

Out of the wind and rain, it was slightly warmer, and she stopped shivering. They spent a moment examining the sizable room, listening to the furious storm outside. Garrus sighed.

“Thousands of years of predicting Palaven storms,” he said. “And sometimes we still get it wrong. This monster wasn’t supposed to hit until tomorrow.” He looked at her and pointed outside. “Storm,” he said.

“Storm,” she echoed, and he grinned. A shiver hit her again, and she set to wringing out her clothing as best as she could. She should strip, she thought, get out one of the blankets until her clothes were dry or it was time to head back to the road, whichever came first. She recalled her reaction to him seeing her nude that morning, and decided she wasn’t that cold.

Apparently, he’d noticed her shiver, and knew what it meant for a human. He pulled out one of the blankets and held it out to her. She shook her head. He gave an exasperated sigh.

“Stubborn,” he muttered. He pointed at her, and surprised her by using words in her common language. “Cold. Bad.”
She grinned at him.

“Not that bad,” she responded. “I’ll be fine,” she said, and turned to look around the room further, possibly for anything to burn for a fire. She knew Palaven storms were infamous for their longevity. They might be stuck there awhile.

A hand on her shoulder turned her around abruptly, and she set her face in a fixed expression. “Garrus,” she said curtly. “Let go. I said I’m fine. I’m not so stupid as to let myself die of hypothermia when there’s nice handy blankets nearby. Now let me go.”

He didn’t. He instead raised a talon, and tapped it gently against her lower lip. Again, using words in human common he said, “Blue. Not red, blue. Blue bad.”

She bet her lips were blue, or at least purple. She was surprised he had enough vocabulary to include basic colors. She sighed.

“Yes, blue lips are bad, but not deadly.”

“Stubborn,” he growled again.

“Yes, stubborn,” she echoed, exasperated. She tried to step back, but his grip firmed. Adrenaline was high, nerves on edge, her annoyance with herself and her situation peaking. She reached up, reflexive, and clamped her hand down around his wrist, shifting his grip on her shoulder with a deft twist of her fingers. The abrupt movement had him grunting as she pulled his hand away from her in a similar maneuver she’d once used on Markin. Her fingers were stiff from cold, however, and he broke her hold easily enough, reaching again for her shoulder.

His protective streak was admirable, it really was, and she’d found it honorable enough when he hadn’t known who she was. Now that he knew the truth, however -or at least more of it- she found it annoying. She couldn’t say why. He wasn’t being overly protective. In fact, right now he was being the sensible one. She thought maybe it irked her because he shouldn’t be like that towards her, and she knew he knew it, and he was ignoring it. Well, she was ignoring it, too, to a point, so why did it bother her that he was disregarding the ‘should’ and ‘should nots’ of their relationship, as well?

He reached for her again, and she swerved to the side, and he missed. He narrowed his eyes at her,
and reached again. She sidestepped neatly, praying her numb toes wouldn’t find an uneven surface to trip her on. He was cold, too, and his reactions were slowed almost as much as hers were. But again he reached, and again she dodged, only to be caught on her side by an extended leg suddenly blocking her. She hopped back, put off balance but her sudden, unintended change of direction, and he closed in, arms going around her middle and lifting her bodily. His height was an advantage as he held her, a good foot off the ground, and carried her towards the blanket he’d dropped. She hung there, stunned for a moment, torn between indignation and laughter.

She waited until he dropped her onto the blanket, then lunged low and hard, catching him around his narrow, vulnerable middle, carrying him back several feet and driving the wind from his lungs. She dropped to her haunches and swept his legs out from beneath him while he was still unbalanced, then swung herself atop him. Turians typically had much better reach than humans when it came to hand to hand, but once in close the human flexibility factor won out, giving humans the advantage when the fight inevitably went to the ground, as all fights did.

Except, he’d been ready for her move. As soon as her legs were astride his middle, he heaved her off, hands around her waist helping her momentum as he flung her over his head. She curled and hit the ground with her shoulder, grunting as she rolled. It wasn’t a conscious decision that made her move the way she did, twisting and rolling to the side, it was the sort of instinct honed by years of grappling with various scum and setting herself against a wide variety of skillsets. But it was perfectly timed, and instead of grabbing her from behind and lifting her again, Garrus arms hit nothing but dusty stone. She rolled to her feet, and while he was still backing away she swung. He raised an arm to block, deflecting her blow to the side and returning with one of his own, aiming low. She arched to the side, letting his arm pass to her side. She slammed her arm down that side, trapping his elbow against her ribs, keeping him in close while she reached with her other arm for the back of his head, getting her hands around his fringe and pulling his head back-

He started growling, and with a heave, he simply lifted the arm that was trapped against her, giving her the choice of letting go or being lifted into the air again. This height and strength advantage were really beginning to annoy her. At the last second before he would have lifted her off the ground, she threw her weight back, taking him with her. Back on the ground, his height wouldn’t matter, and she’d only have to deal with his strength.

He did something odd, as they fell. He moved his free hand to the back of her head, cushioning it against the fall. She was so startled, her grip on his fringe slackened, and his head moved forward, forehead nearly smacking into hers as they fell. The fight seemed to go out of both of them at once, which was good since the fall had knocked the wind out of her as thoroughly as she’d knocked it out of him earlier.

“Well,” she said when she had her breath back. “It seems our...disagreement...” she was still short of breath, it seemed. “...is now moot. I’m much warmer now.” She grinned at him, but the grin faded when she noticed he wasn’t returning it. His mandibles were slightly parted, and he was breathing deeply, slowly. Smelling her, she realized with a jolt in her lower abdomen. Now why did have that sort of reaction?
“This really wasn’t a fair round, you know,” she said, and her voice came out far softer than she’d intended. His hand, at the back of her head, began to flex and relax, flex and relax, drawing the tips of those talons across her scalp. The sensation made her jump, slightly, her hand on his fringe twitching. He hissed, of all things, and she drew in a sharp breath. Abruptly, her conversation with Kelly sprang to mind at the very same time the insatiable curiosity that had first led her to her chosen profession -paid snooping- flared sharply.

This was not good.

She removed her hand from his head, planted both hands on his chest, and shoved. He grunted, but moved. He stood snagging her hand as he went and pulling her up with him in an echo of how he’d pulled her from the collapsed hole.

“I’ll check on the storm,” he said, turning abruptly and leaving her with the packs. Truth be told, she was glad for a moment to collect herself. Threats of torture, imminent death, high risk situations, she could handle all those with calm aplomb. Suddenly realizing she had an acute curiosity as to the sexual performance of the turian she was supposed to be willing and able to kill at the drop of a hat? That one had her a little off balance.

She was drier now, thanks to her risen body temperature. Either way, she’d stated the truth; she was plenty warm now.

He returned a short while later, freshly doused in cold water. She wondered if an icy shower did the same for turian men as for human men. Either way, she tactfully said nothing when he came back, simply handed him one of the towels and one of the canteens.

“Another hour,” he said, in turian. Sure enough, roughly an hour later the furious roar of the storm died down to a whisper, as abruptly as it had risen. They redid their packs, and set out into the jungle. She trusted him to know the route. She’d been careful to mark in her memory certain stones and trees she thought would help her mark her way, but even with those markers she would have had a hard time finding her way back to the road.

The mustang was soaked, of course, since they hadn’t thought to put the top up. But they were wet enough that sitting on wet leather didn’t make much of a difference. They made their way back to the Vakarian estate proper, the villa drawing closer as the silence between them grew louder. The tension of trust -or lack thereof- was gone, replaced with something else entirely, something neither of them had expected. But there it was. She thought she shouldn’t be as surprised as she was. Here was an individual possessing of all the traits she’d ever admired, and she’d never been one to let the package of a person dictate her attraction. Granted, previously the only things to detract from
packages had been young versus old, fat versus fit. Not a carapace versus skin. She found herself laughing softly to herself as she drove, and after a moment, she heard an echoing chuckle from beside her.

She glanced over, at the same time Garrus glanced at her, and the absurdity of their situation hit them both. They rolled into the garage that they’d first exited early that morning to the sound of their own loud, almost hysterical laughter.

They entered Meda’s kitchen still chuckling, though it had faded to something clearly only kept up to mask the lingering tension. Even that faded abruptly, however, when they saw Solanna, Meda, and Saren Arterius standing around the kitchen table, the first two looking tense, the latter looking utterly out of place in the family surroundings.

“Kyr Vakarian ,” Saren greeted Garrus, and ignored Shepard. “Your family worried for you when you didn’t return sooner. ”

“I was caught in a storm,” he said, gesturing to his sodden clothing. “It appears our weather technology is not quite as accurate as we’d like to boast.”

“How unfortunate,” Saren commiserated, sounding utterly uncaring. “I’m here on a matter of some urgency, I’m afraid, or I would spend more time inquiring on more polite things.”

“There was another attack, Garrus,” Solanna said, sounding tired.

Garrus demeanor changed at once, from wary of Saren, to tense and fully on alert.

“Not on us, dear boy,” Meda hastened to add.

“The Victus family,” Solanna murmured. “Their eldest son, Tarquin…. They were sent a bomb, like us. He...he opened it, tried to defuse it... He warned everyone else in time, but...” She trailed off. Shepard kept her face carefully confused and uncomprehending, though she did let some of her sympathy show. It was obvious from tone and demeanor that Solanna was grieved. To her side, she saw Garrus’ fist clench and unclench.

“The Council has seen fit to give me leave to handle this matter,” Saren told them, voice void of sympathy or gentleness. “For now, I’d like to move all prominent families known to have pro-
human sympathies to a secure location, until the extremists are brought to justice. Immediate family only.”

It was kind of funny, really. She should have been flattered. Saren wasn’t so pointedly ignoring her that it was obvious, more like he genuinely didn’t care to register her presence, but the moment the last bit of his declaration hung in the air, every one of the Vakarains -and Meda was, of course, counted among them- glanced to Shepard. Briefly, but she noted it. And so did Saren. The Spectre fixed her with a glance very much like the one from the night of the party, as if she were a uniquely colored bug.

“I think this needs to be discussed further,” Garrus said after a moment of pregnant silence. “Let me go get changed, and we’ll talk properly, Spectre. If you’ll excuse us.” He took Shepard by her arm, the first time he’d touched her since their...altercation at the ruins, and both of them felt and ignored the slight jolt that passed between them. He pulled her out of the kitchen and into the hall, and didn’t stop until they were in front of the door to his chambers.

“Why here?” She asked, momentarily forgetting his lack of an omnitool. He pulled her inside, removing his broken omnitool and tossing it onto the couch, dropping his wet pack onto the floor beside it. She dropped hers by the door while he rummaged through his desk drawers.

Determined to behave as if nothing had happened, she also made herself remove her shirt and jeans and wrap herself in a blanket that was laying across one of the oddly shaped leather divans. Most all turian furniture was wood, stone, or leather, since anything less sturdy stood too high a chance of being ruined by claws and spurs.

He did a double take when he turned around, then shook his head slightly and set to clamping the spare omnitool he’d fished out around his wrist. It flared up around his arm, the orange glow illuminating his face.

“That’s better,” he said, and once again the VI translator was regurgitating his words into syllables she was more familiar with.

“What’s going on?” She asked immediately.

“Not sure just yet,” he told her, tearing off his shirt and tossing it on top of where she’d dropped her own wet clothes. He disappeared into his bedroom, reaching for the clasp of his pants as he moved. She had to ignore the electric thrill that raced up her spine at the sight, remembering that stripping, for turians, held no sexual connotation. Still, she enjoyed the view... Much less bony than one would expect.
“I need you to stay here,” he told her, re-emerging a moment later, clad in clean, dry slacks and pulling on a fresh shirt, adjusting his eyepiece as he did so.

“And why’s that?” She crossed her arms over the blanket wrapped around her.

“Because I don’t like Spectre Arterius, and I didn’t like the way he was looking at you, last night or just now. Just...stay here. Please.”

The fact that it was a request, rather than demand, made her eventually nod. She’d been planning on ducking into the Vakarian library to research those tracks she’d seen at the ruins, or perhaps outside to a window convenient for evesdropping. Now, she knew, she’d do exactly as he asked and stay. Because he’d asked, and because she was confident he’d tell her everything he knew once he knew it. He met her gaze as he neared, heading for the door behind her.

“Just...stay put,” he said, somewhat lamely. She nodded, and he left, and Shepard was left waiting, naked, in Garrus Vakarian’s room.
Chapter 13

We regret our sins,
But we sew our own fate
Under my mask I remain vulnerable,
Under my mask I smile.
Even alone and afraid I will be waiting,
Run with me now, Soldier of Rome.

-‘Now We Are Free’ Lisa Gerrard

Chapter 13

Miranda Lawson was, in a word, unique. Not perfect, as so many were quick to say, since perfection both as a philosophical and genetic issue was one ever under the duress of change, and thus undefinable for more than a set period of time, but she definitely counted as ‘unique.’ She’d been confirmed as one of the most powerful human biotics known to exist so far, even among the school of ‘promising’ young biotics kept safe on a station known only by name. The location of Grissom Academy was one of the Alliance’s hardest kept secrets. It was also rigidly guarded against escapees, as well as attack. Miranda had been sixteen when she’d fled the dark fortress, and eighteen when she’d been found by the man known to most as the Illusive Man. To her, he was Jack.

He’d promised to keep her safe and out of her father’s hands if she’d follow him, and he’d kept his
word. She could hardly think of a place further from her financial tycoon father’s grasp than Palaven itself. How Jack had managed to find and set up their little base of operations, she herself wasn’t entirely sure. A lot of money had changed hands, that much was certain, and Miranda thought more than a few government officials were more or less in Jack’s pocket, through virtue of blackmail if nothing else. She was an intelligent individual, and she could think of no other explanation to explain how he’d contrived to erect a top of the line base beneath one of Palaven’s oldest and well-known historical monuments. Most of Palaven’s people had left their age-old spiritual practices behind them when they’d discovered spaceflight, but maintained a healthy respect for their history and thus kept eyes on the physical reminders of their ancestors. ‘Hiding in plain sight’ she supposed was the term for them, if one allowed for the technological advancements of thermal cloaks and EM fields.

Miranda’s day was scheduled to be unusually light. She’d already had a solidly triumphant rendezvous with one of their more aptly placed agents, a man she herself had recruited and recommended based on a previous relationship with the individual. He’d managed to secure the final piece of information necessary for the crux of their whole plan. Now, she was on her way to a debrief with another one of their operation’s agents to use that crucial information, followed by a meeting with Jack, interrogation of another agent suspected of being turncoat, and then...nothing. That was unusual, and she didn’t expect it to stay that way. Nonetheless, she’d be lying to herself if some part of her wasn’t mildly hopeful that she’d manage to keep a few hours free for her own use. It had been awhile since she’d used even five minutes of her time for something as mundane and pointless as, say, a manicure.

The briefing room - just another stone chamber fixed with modern lights and cold metal table and chairs- she entered held one other occupant, a slight woman with tumbling curls of auburn and brilliant eyes like emerald chips. She was proof that perfect beauty existed without genetic tampering. There were some who might argue that this fact was a contributor to Miranda’s dislike for Kelly Chambers, but that was hardly true. No, Miranda’s face went coolly neutral in her presence because of the woman’s shameless flaunting of her lack of loyalty. To anything, or anyone. She was a living embodiment of the lifestyle of ‘anything goes.’ She’d never known the agent to turn down the chance to attempt anything new, no matter how vile, unethical, or...unsanitary.

This, of course, in and of itself was not a horrible character flaw, as flaws went, but it went against the grain of Miranda’s nature. She was only human, after all, and sometimes personality clashes were just that- clashes of opposing temperaments. She acknowledged this, even as Kelly’s friendly greeting made her insides twitch.

“I don’t have long,” Kelly told her, pulling a long chain free of her neck and hair and setting it on the table. On the chain was a pendant in a classic turian design, and hidden within its glinting whorls was a disguised OSD chip, one that would contain all the data Kelly had managed to glean since their last meeting. The woman’s free access to the chambers -and thus, terminal- of the son of one of the Hierarchy’s most influential political activists had come in very handy indeed.
“You never do,” Miranda replied, lifting the pendant and keying up her omnitool’s interface. “Start talking.” She always preferred to hear what she could straight from the agents themselves, when possible. There was something about the deliverance of information via mouth and ears that didn’t translate to lines of coded text on hidden data chips.

“Things are coming to a head, after this morning,” Kelly told her, referring to the newest round of attacks on various Palaven families. Several were dead, and multiple delivery services were under investigation for delivering packages loaded with timed explosives. Leads on who had sent the packages went nowhere. For once, this actually hadn’t been Jack’s work, Miranda knew. Attacking those supportive of ending the war was counteractive to his plans.

“Several families have already vacated their city homes and left for undisclosed locations. There’s talk of ending this year’s Arena meetings early until the culprits are caught.”

Miranda fought the urge to swear. If reports were accurate, the voices in the Arena were closer than ever to issuing a ceasefire and approaching the Council to broker peace talks. If they ended now...

“What Advocates have been most vocal?” She asked, and Kelly gave her the names. “Those are the ones we need to ensure stay in the city and continue the discussions. If we play this right, this might actually move things along.”

Kelly tilted her head. “How so? The only families attacked are those in support of peace. If they leave, the only voices left will be those in favor of continuing on.”

“Then we make sure the pro-peace Advocates aren’t the only ones in fear for their lives,” Miranda said coldly, working at her omnitool to call in a number of operatives through secure channels. Kelly’s face paled slightly, but Miranda didn’t even look at her as she relayed her instructions to the woman.

“You’re to find a way to see Commander Shepard, today. The sooner the better. You’re to give her this message...”

Saren Arterius was an individual of action. Words were useful, and only a fool disregarded their
potential power, but it was action that drove the universe. Words may spark the thoughts to prelude those actions, but nonetheless it was proven that nothing actually happened or was accomplished until someone took it upon themselves to act.

With that thought in mind, Saren couldn’t wholly disapprove of his brother’s plan, though the secrecy and deception did not sit well with him. He was not an honorable turian, not in the sense portrayed in vids and novels to the turian youths, but he’d accepted that as the price for being who and what he was decades ago. Honor was a luxury ill afforded by those who’d chosen his path, and he considered it a cheap price for the reward of galactic security.

Garrus Vakarian, on the other hand, was a man to whom it had never occurred that the two - securing security and maintaining honor- could not be mutually exclusive. He was the sort who had idolized the Spectre the media had wanted Saren to be, not Saren himself. At least the man had been easily disillusioned with no discernible grudge left to linger and complicate things.

As it was, Saren was growing impatient with the Vakarian family as a whole. The family patriarch had been respectable enough, another man who got things done and damn the cost. His son had shown promise, but now that Saren had spent more than a few moments in his presence he was forced to consider rescinding that assessment. The daughter was well enough, though she seemed solidly set in her role of sister and mother, not nearly assertive enough to garner more than a passing sliver of Saren’s attention. Not for the first time since he’d been shown to a well-appointed room with a long table and walls full of antique books and scrolls and paintings, Saren wished heartily that Vakarian the Elder were present to deal with matters.

“I’ve heard enough,” Garrus declared after roughly an hour of discussing various plans. “Solana, you’ll take the boys and Meda. I’ll follow in a few days once I can get myself out of here. No, don’t argue. I can’t leave just yet and you know it. Besides, last we heard from father, he was supposed to be home any day. Someone needs to be here to let him know what’s going on.” He turned to Saren. “I imagine you have more residences to visit, more extractions to coordinate. I’m sure you remember the way out.” With that, he left, his mind clearly already elsewhere.

“You’ll have to forgive him,” Solana said into the silence, her tone dry. “He’s been under an unusual amount of stain since coming home to take care of things in our father’s absence. He’s not usually this...tactless.”

Meda, off to the side, gave a subtle snort that belied her mistress’s words. Solana ignored her, as did Saren.

“As your brother said, kyria, I remember my way out.” Without further words, he left. Others might have left her with wishes of good luck, a hope for a better setting for their next meeting. Not Saren. He was many things, but a casual liar as not one of them.
He left to tell his brother that they would have to delay his search of the Vakarian home another few days, until Vakarian the Younger vacated the premises.

Garrus went to his father’s office following the meeting with his family and the Spectre. It hadn’t been so much a meeting, as Saren informing him of their options. For hiding. Sending his family to safety was one thing, but this...this felt like running. Truth be told, he was glad of an excuse to stay longer. He really did have things to take care of, things he’d been neglecting these past few days. He’d need the time to think, about the attacks -something wasn’t adding up- and about...other things.

Those ‘other things’ were kept firmly from his mind as he dove into the maelstrom of political fracus that had built over the past week and had been whipped into a climaxing frenzy by the events of that morning. The conference vidcall was a mess only by turian standards. Faces were rigid, words were clipped, monologues ran longer than normally permitted, as close to ‘rambling’ as a political Advocate would let him - or her- self come. To Garrus, it was still a racket, though nothing compared to what he’d seen in a few briefing rooms at C-Sec once or twice.

True pandemonium didn’t come until a news packet broke into their tense discussions.

“Spirits...” one of the older Advocates swore, watching the same scene of footage they all were. The bulletin update had hit all their omnitools at once, and they’d all turned to the same broadcast. The remnants of a city villa burned below the hovercam that flew above the scene, a reporter’s voice solemnly overlaying the images with information. Namely, that the whole family had been killed in the blast. A political family known to have pro war views, dashing the former opinion that the fanatics had been pushing the goal of continuing the war on the human race.

Confusion took over, then, and Garrus lost himself in hours of arguing, shouting, planning, and eventually threatened to pull all his weight as his father’s stand-in and pull absolutely every single instance of investment, miliary holding, political support, and financial sway out of the Arena entirely. Something about him must have conveyed just how stone serious he was, because abruptly the pandemonium permeating the vidconference ceased.

One of the only other Advocates who’d been trying towards productivity -Nim, of course- managed to break the icy silence.
“It is obvious now that whoever is behind these attacks has one goal; chaos. And we are giving them their wants. I, for one, am not in the habit of caving to the demands -silent or otherwise- of terrorists. At this point it doesn’t matter if this war is against humans, batarians, salarians, or the spirits-condemned rachni! Thirty years ago, this would never have been permitted to go on as long as it has. How long has it been since the first attack? How much progress has been made by local officials in their investigation? How much of that lack of progress is due to the neglect of the funds and resources they need to do their job, funds and resources allocated instead to this damned war? Does anyone even remember why it started? It doesn’t matter, not anymore. To hell with honor and vengeance! Do you think the crew of those ships destroyed in that first encounter would want us to avenge them this long while we let children and families burn on our very homeworld?”

The real answer to that was of course not. It hadn’t been about avenging the crew of the Licernia in decades. Instead it had been about pride, image, jealousy of their status as the galaxy’s warriors. And, of course, profiteering. War was a very lucrative business if you were involved in the right industries.

Garrus sat back, watching the images of those who were actually physically present at the Arena watch Nim, who had taken the floor and was proceeding to chastise them all like unruly children who’d only just found their epidermis hard enough to face sunlight and radiation for the first time. Watching her, he was reminded of a particular conversation he’d had earlier that very day, riding in an alien contraption of metal and rubber and leather...

And how was it, that in the middle of potentially one of the most key meetings in Palaven’s political history, he was thinking of her? Not just thinking, but remembering. Remembering the ease of their conversation, the fluid banter, the way they’d moved through the jungle as if they’d partnered in dozens of excursions before. Her rather inventive rescue of him from his predicament in a caved-in sinkhole. Her stubbornness, his stubbornness, the way her vitalia had flared when he’d grabbed her shoulder. The scuffle that had quickly warmed numb limbs with something other than simple muscle friction and increased circulation....

Another silence followed Nim’s impromptu tirade. Then, with the air of dignity Garrus found far more appropriate, another Advocate spoke his agreement. And then another. And another. And another...

Garrus listened and watched with something akin to awe as here, now, in a meeting that had been intended to discuss the safety of potential targets of a rampant radical group of terrorists, the Arena instead finally came to a decision that countless previous meetings and hearings had failed to achieve.

The war needed to end.
Nim was appointed to lead a delegation that would outline the steps to be taken to bring the conflict to a close. Of course, she recruited Garrus to her team, something he’d have to snark at her later for, while in truth he was somewhat glad of it. Politics he may hate, but the chance to see this whole thing ended, in person? And she was right, he had contacts on the Citadel no one else had, and those contacts would come in handy when it came time to take their plans to the Council.

Garrus, when it was his turn to speak, chose his words carefully. “I think, given the timetable in which we hope to accomplish some semblance of peace, there is need of a...goodwill gesture.” He paused, letting the murmurs of agreement give way to the suggestions of others. No one suggested the most obvious one, he noted. He waited for an opening, and voiced the suggestion himself, as he suspected everyone had been waiting for him to do.

“We legally recognize the quellen,” he said. “In accordance with our own traditions and laws, the end of a war signals their release. Obviously, a sack of grain and a flask of water and a string of beads as payment for their service won’t quite cut it, in this era.” A few low chuckles greeted this. That was a good sign. If they could show amusement at his quips, then they weren’t rigidly against the idea, which would make what he was about to suggest possibly better receivable.

“We allow human vessels to approach Palaven,” he went on. “Possibly as close as Menae. It has the facilities to process the many quellen we have here. We shuttle all quellen to be transferred back into Alliance custody.”

“You’re assuming they would even come,” spoke an Advocate -Silonius- into the silence. “They’d think it a trap. I know I would certainly assume it was a lure.”

“Then we find pilots among the quellen, give them shuttles and supplies, and let them find their own way home,” Nim cut in. It would be more costly that way, which was why Garrus hadn’t suggested it right off. Better it come from her, who already had the momentum of their agreement with her earlier suggestions.

Gestures of thoughtfulness moved many heads, and talks proceeded from there. Garrus let loose a sigh of relief, quietly and to himself. If things went well, the next hour or so of talk would see the outlines of an official proclamation and legal movement to release all quellen...

Kasi.

Kasi would be, essentially, free. No longer under his ‘protection,’ no longer -theoretically- bound
to serve his family. Technically no longer in fear for her life for her military history. No more secrets. No more hiding.

A new sort of relief flooded him then, at the same time as an odd sort of trepidation gripped him. What now? There was no denying there was something about her, something about their interactions and the way they played off one another. He’d had enough glimpses of that in their short time together to know that it was just the barest edge of something potentially much greater. Now that he had the option, to allow himself to view her as an equal, did he want to see that greater thing? To see what it was and where it led?

Definitely.

Shepard was frustrated. In fact, she was close to being aggravated, frenzied, irritated- even possibly giving up entirely.

The omnitool Garrus had given her was absolutely fried. As advanced as technology was, apparently it was still subject to the law of physics that stated ‘electrical things and water do not mix.’ Unless, of course, the goal was to kill something standing in water with that electrical thing, in which case they mixed very well. But that was not Shepard’s goal at this point in time, and so that little loophole was of no help.

She had, with the aid of some tools she’d found in a drawer in Garrus’ room, managed to pry out the memory core of the omnitool and discern that it, at least, was mostly unharmed. She’d be able to retrieve the vids she’d taken of the tracks in the mud, at least. If she could find another omnitool to swap memory cores with, or a way to hook it up to the terminal. Neither option was readily available, however, as Garrus was currently wearing his spare omnitool -and apparently there wasn’t a second spare- and the terminal in front of her was just different enough from ones she was used to using that she didn’t see a way to hook up her memory core without leaving traces of her actions.

Some habits died hard, and leaving digital fingerprints was a habit she wasn’t quite willing to let go of. She trusted Garrus, and possibly Meda and Solana- she didn’t trust the rest of the planet just yet. Or the rest of the turian race, for that matter. Maybe if they ever decided to call a ceasefire and sit down like civilized adults, she’d consider it. Until then... It was just Garrus.
And that was a whole different sort of tangle she’d yet to unsnarl, beyond the fact that she did want to figure it out. She still had no reasonable expectations of leaving this planet alive, or any time soon, or even of surviving beyond the week - not once Nomos returned, anyway. With that in mind, her approach to the tangle that was Garrus was somewhat more reckless than she usually handled her dilemmas. It boiled down to...what did she have to lose?

A knock on Garrus’ door, the one leading into the hall, heralded the arrival of the last person Shepard expected to see. Kelly Chambers swirled in, shutting the door behind her and putting her back to it, an urgent look on her face. Shepard was on her feet, her air-dried clothes back on once again. A more superficial woman might have noticed the comparisons between the two women, the differences in cleanliness -Shepard was still somewhat dirtied from her foray into the jungle- dress, hair, and other such feminine things, but all Shepard saw was that the woman in front of her was not the same Kelly Chambers that she’d met on previous occasions.

“What’s wrong?” Shepard asked at once, command in her voice. Kelly was clearly conflicted, and Shepard wondered if seeing it was a result of the severity of the woman’s confliction, a lack of deception skills -something she doubted, given Kelly’s assignment- or something else.

It passed in the moment Kelly looked up at her, a confident smile on her face as she glanced around the room, then to Shepard. She looked the other woman up and down, taking in her rumpled appearance and grinned.

“You took my advice and did some grappling with him, didn’t you?” She teased, flouncing down onto one of the leather divans. Shepard just raised an eyebrow. Even if she had -and technically, hadn’t she?- did Kelly think she’d tell?

Sighing, seeing she’d get no more out of her companion on that topic other than the eyebrow, Kelly sat forward, suddenly much less flippant.

“I’ve got a new message for you,” Kelly said, sounding almost grave. Shepard frowned as the woman continued. “Another of our operatives was placed similar to you. The difference is, the Advocate he’s been staying with has access to somewhat more...sensitive information than your Vakarian does. Namely, access to plans and schematics.”

Shepard waited patiently. She’d never been one to encourage theatrics. Kelly, seeing Shepard wasn’t taking the bait, sighed yet again.

“Access to the planetary defense grid,” she said. “We have it.”
Shepard, in that moment, thought of a number of instances throughout her career when she’d been given news that she’d known would have potentially catastrophic fallout. The news of a friend’s fiance cheating. The news of her father choosing a more dangerous route that one fateful day. The briefing room with three admirals, a consultant, and Parasini, and the news of her selection for a highly specialized mission.

And now she was about to be handed the codes, coordinates, schematics and anything else this other agent had been able to glean, to hand over to the Alliance. With this news, coupled with the data bursts she herself had sent pertaining to locations of the government’s capital, military bases, the training grounds on Menae... They’d strike hard and fast, and the war would either end...or be flared into something that would, at best, never end. At worst...humanity would be wiped from the face of the galaxy. There was no way the Council would ignore a scorched-earth attack on a Citadel race’s homeworld. Not even the turians or the batarians had gone that far, that she knew of. Even the genophage had been biological, not outright destructive.

Kelly was still talking, and even while Shepard’s mind had been absorbing the implications, she remembered what the agent had been saying. It has another habit she’d never let go of.

Once the information was relayed and memorized, Kelly stood, glancing to the door. “I told Sidonis I was worried about you and had to see you. He came along, he’s talking with Garrus. Looks like your turian just finished with some big meeting, he looked ready to chew leather.” She patted Shepard’s shoulder. “Be careful, they can be rough when they’re in a bad mood.”

Shepard raised her eyes to the ceiling, exhaling slowly through her nose. The woman was hopeless.

As Kelly was leaving, she nearly bumped into another figure that out of the corner of her eye, she thought for half a second might be Garrus himself-

“So, Norius,” she said, turning and seeing that the blue-marked Vakarian that was somewhat too short and slightly too narrow in the shoulder to truly pass for his uncle. Kelly escaped, and Norius stepped in, looking somewhat awkward. He looked past her to her disassembled omnitool.

“Broken?” He asked, and she heard his words recycled by his own omnitool. He’d gotten ahold of that VI program, too. Wasn’t that thing supposed to be hard to get?

“Yeah,” she said, glancing at it. “Got wet. Must be an older model, even human ones are more waterproof than this one was.”
He nodded, moving past her towards the parts on the desk, picking up one component and going over it with careful hands. It was obvious he’d handled pieces of tech before. Seems like the techie gene ran in the family, she thought with a slight smile.

“So is there something I can help you with?” She asked, turning to follow where he’d moved to desk and crossing her arms casually. He frowned, mandibles twitching slightly out to the side and down.

“I’m leaving for the Academy in a few days,” he said. Clearly, he hadn’t yet been told about what the other attacks would mean for his family, that a Spectre had shown up to sweep them all away to secluded safety. Well, it wasn’t her place to tell him. She settled into her stance- she wasn’t sure what to expect, so standing with her feet apart, shoulders squared, arms crossed loosely but defensively was her default posture when unsure of anything.

“I’m sure you’ll do very well,” she told him diplomatically. “I’ve seen you with your sparring tutor, and heard your mother praise the reports from your professors at school.”

He nodded, and looked for all the world like a nervous teenager. It would be cute, if it wasn’t so odd. Norius had never been her friend. He’d tolerated her, at best, although the whole saving his life thing had seemed to finally convince him she wasn’t about to spirit his brother away into the night for some vile human ritual.

“I owe you an apology,” he said after a long moment, sounding as awkward as he looked. “I wasn’t very...courteous to you when you first arrived, and I had no reason to be so suspicious of you. You saved my brother, me, and Meda likes you, my mother trusts you, and my uncle...well, he seems to like you a lot, too. He talks about you at dinner a lot, and when we played that trick on you with the tools and the tree, I thought for sure he was going to scale us...well, me, since it was my idea.” He turned to her now, shoulders hunched in a universal gesture of embarrassment. “So, I’m sorry.”

She looked at him, wide eyed despite herself. This was not what she had expected, not at all.

“Did Solana put you up to this?” It sounded like something she might do, if she was thinking she’d have to leave Shepard behind to possibly face another attack alone.

Norius bristled, and she held up a hand. “Allright, she didn’t, nevermind. Apology accepted.” She gave him a slight smile. “I know that’s not easy, what you just did. Especially when you’re thinking you might have to go off to kill humans like me in a year or so, if this war doesn’t end.”
He shifted from foot to foot nervously, not having expected her bluntness, and her grin widened. She nodded to the disassembled omni-tool. “You as good with these as your uncle?”

“Better,” he boasted, clearly glad of the topic change. “Uncle Garrus is better with vehicles and weapons, but since I’m not old enough to really deal with either... I got good at omnitools and interfaces.”

“Think you can get anything off that memory core?” She asked. He picked it up, examining it closely, then nodding.

“Yeah, I think so,” he said. “Why, what’s on it? Uncle Garrus can just get you another.”

She paused, then decided to trust the kid. It wasn’t like she’d done anything she thought the kid wasn’t allowed to know.

“Found some odd tracks up by some ruins your uncle took me to earlier today, thought I’d do some research, try and figure out what could have made those marks. No one’s supposed to be up by those except designated caretakers, the way your uncle explained it.”

Norius gave her an odd look. “Why would you care about the old ruins?”

She gave him a twisted smile. “I have an soft spot for old architecture,” she confessed, and that was partially actually true, but mostly it was because she had a natural inclination to find things that didn’t fit and find out why they didn’t fit and why they were in places they weren’t supposed to be. Such as marks left by a vehicle in a very odd place where no vehicle was supposed to be allowed.

“You took that old ground transport Gabias was talking about?” He asked, sounding curious.

“Yes, we took the ‘old ground transport’ up to one of the monitoring stations, then went to check out one of the nearby collapsed temples, and got caught in a storm. Found the odd tracks, took some snapshots, then my omni-tool got fried in the rain.” She unfolded her arms, putting her hands on her hips instead. “I see you got his detective instincts as well as his affinity for wires and circuits.” Of course, most technology didn’t use things as basic as wires and clunky circuit boards anymore, but the meaning seemed to translate all right.

He ducked his head somewhat sheepishly. “I’ll, uh...I’ll go see what I can get off of this, if you
don’t mind me taking it.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t mind. Just bring it back, even if you can’t get anything off it.” Since she was pretty sure she could. He nodded agreement, and left, clearly glad to escape with something to do.

She went to the terminal, belatedly realizing she’d given away her only real project and time killer. Evening was falling outside, and she realized she hadn’t eaten since their early meal on the hood of the mustang, looking out at the approaching storm. The same storm, she thought to herself, that had come and gone...and seemed to be coming again, if the sound of the wind outside was any indication. How long had she been tinkering away in here?

Kelly had mentioned Garrus seemed to have been busy, first with Saren, then meetings, then Sidonis. Who were the meetings with? It was easy to forget that Garrus was only on Palaven to fulfill his father’s obligations...likely he’d had to get in contact with his fellows regarding the attacks and the implications. Not for the first time, Shepard regretted her inability to glean much from his father’s study, but that was one place where the cameras and motion sensors were kept running full time, and she’d yet to find a way to bypass the security measures. If Garrus took the whole family to that secure location, she might find her opportunity then.

She sat at that terminal, knowing she was stalling with her thoughts of food and storms and meetings. It wasn’t something she normally did, procrastinating. But this was...bigger than she’d anticipated. She’d told herself she’d do what needed doing when the time came. Well, the time had come. And her worst fears were part of it- she had no way of knowing if one of the locations the Alliance would choose to bombard was here, or somewhere that the Vakarians might be hiding, thinking themselves safe from attacks.

She put her head in her hands, recalling the events since the beginning of her mission. Parasini, Nomos, the criminals on the baited transport. The turian mercenaries, batarian slavers’ interest in her. Saving Gabias from Ian, Solana’s determination to repay her, extraction from the decontamination center. Her first days beneath the Vakarian roof, marveling at how fate hated her, Markin’s hatred, Meda’s patience. Gabias’ worship, Norius’ suspicion. Garrus’ indifferent, honorable fairness. Then his interest. Her explorations, their conversations. His passion, dedication, devotion to his family and his beliefs, his faith in the goodness that was out there. In her, the strange little human female he’d found planted in his household. That trust of his she found herself so wanting to deserve...

The questions, the answers- the confessions. The secrets kept back, the wishes for a circumstance more conducive to trust and truth and...finding out the ifs. That ridiculous car ride. An antique mustang on Palaven, really? Really? It was...surreal. The jungle had been surreal. Keeping at his back, not because she hadn’t trusted him at hers, but instead instinctively guarding it... Then the rain. The ruins. The dry chamber with the partially collapsed roof - ‘They’re usually not on the
ground,’ he’d joked with her- and their...entanglement beneath it. What would have happened, if she hadn’t pushed him away?

Her thoughts swirled, and eventually her head found its way to using her arms, on the desk, for pillows. She didn’t truly sleep, or at least she hadn’t thought she was all that deeply unconscious, but the hand on her shoulder -an eerie echo of earlier that day- was completely unexpected. She hadn’t heard anyone come in, or come up behind her. She jerked, one hand reaching around to grip the hand while her other elbow went back at an angle that, male or female, would hurt. There was a clatter as something was dropped by her assailant, but she ignored the distraction and whirled out of the uncomfortable turian-style chair. Her elbow had driven the wind from the hand’s owner, and she raised her other hand, settling only half-awake and charged with adrenaline into a defensive stance-

There was a harsh, growling curse as she was hit by something, hard, across her middle and then driven back against the wall, being lifted and slammed, hard enough to daze her. She brought up a fist...and froze. Garrus was staring at her, straight into her eyes since he was lifting her up against the wall, bringing their eyes to the same level. He was regaining the breath she’d shoved from his lungs -again- and his mandibles were flared wide in a rueful grin. Her hand was at his throat, fingers poised to dig into rather sensitive bits of skin between the asymmetrical metallic plates. Her other hand was at her side, reaching for the knife he’d given her in the jungle. It was halfway out of its sheath, angled at his ribs.

His hands were much less threateningly positioned. One at her waist, supporting her as he lifted, and his other forearm across her breastbone and shoulders, keeping her upper back flat against the wall by the desk. His talons were deliberately curled away from her face, around her shoulders instead. Frozen as they were, the only movement from either of them for a long minute was slowing accelerated heart rates and regaining control of their breathing. The last vestiges of sleep, wiped away by the shock of surprise and adrenaline, left her and took with it the confusion and conflict that had plagued her as she’d drifted off. The scent of food wafted to her from where a tray, loaded with both dextro and levo cuisine, had been dropped in a mess of food and broken dishes on the floor when she’d struck him.

He’d brought her dinner. He hadn’t assumed she’d eat whatever was in her survival pack still by the door, but had brought her...bacon. And waffles. And coffee.

The coffee reminded her of their first real conversation, seemingly forever ago, when they’d swapped drinks and shudders and she’d first seen that fire behind that cool turian control, the same fire she saw now. It was inexplicable, and they both knew it. They also knew their lives were beyond fucked up, things were going to get worse, and neither knew what tomorrow would bring...

Why the hell not?
He was leaning in towards her again, inhaling. Her hand moved from his throat to the back of his head, fingernails trailing along the rough skin on the sides of his scalp, such as it was, as she went. He gave a low hiss, and something hot in her lower abdomen curled tight in response. He seemed to be thinking things along the same line as she, because he leaned in, hesitated, glanced up to meet her eyes again with those shards of icy blue, his gaze...asking. Questioning.

Without hesitation, she nodded, and used her hand at the back of his head to pull him closer. She’d barely nudged him before he moved, so fast, burying his face at the crook of her neck and shoulder as his grasp on her waist tightened and his arm across her shoulders moved down to grip her opposite hip. She slipped down the wall somewhat, enough for her toes and the balls of her feet to hit the floor, and her arms went around his narrow waist. He pulled her hips into his, and she felt his mandibles part at her throat, one getting tangled in her hair, and half a second later his tongue, long and rough, darted out to drag a line of damp, hot sensation up from her clavicle to behind her ear, exploring, finding the spots that made her twitch. She didn’t gasp- she’d never been noisy, but he paid attention to how and when she tensed, the hitches in her breath and the way her hands flexed their grip on his waist and clawed at his back.

His left hand moved to the side of her head, talons sifting through her hair. She thought he might have been trying to simply hold her still, so as to avoid cutting her with his teeth as he moved his mouth over her neck and shoulder, but she gave a little hiss of pleasure when those talons moved along her scalp. Accommodatingly, he kept those talons moving along through her hair. At some point he switched sides, and by that point her shirt was off and her hands were working at the fastenings of his own clothing. Agile fingers explored the soft spaces between the plates of his chest, feeling what felt like soft suede. He murmured his own encouragement, though at some point he’d removed his omnitool -probably while shedding his shirt- and the words were in turian and she was too distracted to understand and translate herself.

She mapped his chest, his back -what she could reach- his hips, his upper arms. She left that oh so sensitive waist for last, and he gave a low, rumbling growl into her hair that vibrated his chest against hers and made that hot whorl of something in her belly tighten sharply. She’d pulled his face out of her neck and hair, working her way along his mandibles with gentle nibbles -he wouldn’t feel kisses- that made his talons tighten and flex where they’d found their way to her rear. One strayed upwards, dragging a single talon up her spine. She arched, finally giving him one small, quiet gasp.

He was not, she’d learned, a patient individual by nature. He’d learned to be so when necessary. Clearly, he didn’t consider now one of those times, because he moved suddenly and hoisted her up in a manner clearly common between male and female turians, because it included curling his talons around her waist lifting. On a female turian with a much more angular waist, this would be a convenient gripping location. For someone as slender as she was, with more subtle curves and no angles save for where certain bones were more pronounced, his grip slipped. She caught herself by hooking her arms over his shoulders and then slinging her legs over his hips, and hooking her angles at the small of his back, something that would never have worked if she were turian- leg spurs would have stabbed him in the ass.
He adjusted to this new development easily enough, hands moving back to her rear as he carried her through the door and into the actual bedroom, nibbling gently at her shoulder as he went. As they reached the bed, her own teeth found a particularly large portion of suede-like skin between two plates hidden between where his neck met shoulder and slanted up to meet his cowl. He grunted, stumbled, and she found herself on her back - a most unusual position for her to be in without fists involved - on the oddly fluffy hammock-bed, her arms around his shoulders having pulled him down with her.

They paused, breathing heavily, taking stock of this new position before continuing carefully, cautiously, both of them very aware that this was the part that might require a little more creativity.

Suddenly, Shepard was rather glad for Kelly’s... brusqueness. And Parasini’s anatomy lessons. Somehow, she didn’t think this was what the agent had had in mind... or anyone who had been involved in planning this mission, really. What they didn’t know...

She put gentle hands on his chest, and pushed him up off her. He stood, and she ended up sitting at the edge of the circular bed, feet hanging over the edge. Hanging as it was from a frame suspended from the ceiling and anchored to the wall, it moved when she did, and they took an amused moment to steady themselves. She’d managed to undo the fastenings of his slacks in the other room, and now they hung loose and low over his angular hips. Something glistening damply was visible above the open gap of fabric, and she pushed his slacks off his hips to gather around his feet, catching on his spurs. A portion of skin free of plates or scales was swelling, the slit that partitioned it full of something thick and dark and glistening. She raised an inquisitive eyebrow up at him, and he grinned down at her, looking somewhat... sheepish? About what?

When he didn’t stop her, she moved a hand to where a thick, purple-blue head was emerging from its sheath. At her light touch, things moved along quickly - in half a moment, she was holding a respectably sized piece of evidence that he was just as curious as she was, wet with the fluids meant to aid emerging from its protective sheath. She glanced up at him, wondering if he’d stop her, and bent her mouth to the angular head. He did jerk, talons twitching where they’d been settled on her shoulders.

“You probably shouldn’t...” she heard him grunt above her. She looked up at him, lips quirked.

“If it is going to go... other places, then we might as well find out now if I am allergic to you. I do not think I am. I am not allergic to your food.” She savored his startled expression, then before he could question her sudden grasp of his language, she bent her head again, and took him all into her mouth and down her throat.
She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, in the areas of flavor or texture or reaction. She thought she got lucky in all those areas- he was not rough, and the ribbing along his length didn’t hinder her task, and his reaction was most satisfactory. His talons dug roughly into her shoulders, his hips moving in an instinctive motion she thought must be universal, a gutteral sound escaping his chest. The sound vibrated down his whole body, even down into her throat, creating a most unusual sensation for both of them.

In addition to all that...he tasted, of all things, sweet. Something between corn syrup and melted ice cream, the flavors growing stronger as she worked his length, absolutely intrigued by how he seemed to have no idea what to do with himself. His head was thrown back, mandibles flared, hands gripping her shoulders hard enough to bruise, breathing harshly and humming with the growls he was holding back.

Abruptly, he pulled her free, breathing ragged as he hauled her to her feet, shredding her jeans in his effort to get them off her. She grinned, and helped him and reveled in how alive she felt as he pulled her roughly against him, talons scraping up and down her sides and circling her waist obsessively, his wet, hard length pressed against her stomach, between them. She was reeling with how different the sensations were, and yet how similar. Tremors raced up and down her limbs, and the merest brush of him against her sent her body ablaze. Her mouth tingled only slightly from the fluid contact, and she could feel him practically vibrating against her.

“Kasi,” he said. “We...can stop here, if you want...”

She snorted, hauling his head down to hers. “That's sweet, but no.” She asked in Common, then in turian added, “I do not permit you to stop.” Her hand went to the back of his head, gripping his fringe harshly, reverting to common, “Fuck me, goddamnit, because if I’m going to regret this later I’m damned well going to enjoy it now.”

He grinned a universally male grin- something in her words must have crossed the language barrier, because he removed her hands from his head, transferring them both to his left hand, and despite herself she was surprised her wrists fit in his single grip. Then she didn’t have time to notice such things because he’d used both of her arms to turn her around. She grinned and obliged, bending over the bed, gripping the wavering frame as he moved behind her, hands splaying over her waist yet again. She felt something hard and hot at her entrance, and despite herself she did something she hadn’t done in years- she moaned.

The sound seemed to be all the encouragement he needed, and he pushed forward. Slowly, gently, taking his time, when they both wanted nothing more than for him to slam home. But this was uncharted territory, and he wouldn’t risk hurting her. She appreciated that, she really did, but if he didn’t hurry it up...
One stroke, two. Then a third, pressing in as far as he could, both of them gasping as his length and girth filled her absolutely perfectly.

“Garrus,” she found herself gasping, and she thought she heard her name from him as well. But they’d figured out that she wasn’t allergic, he wasn’t allergic, there were no pitfalls of anatomical misalignment, and with those discoveries the last of their inhibitions fell away. He thrust harder on the fourth plunge, harder again on the fifth, and then she lost count as he picked up speed, gripping her around her hips hard enough she thought she might bruise later, but it was all the support she had since the damn bed kept shifting and it was good only for keeping her balance, and not even that since she was definitely distracted-

She lost herself in the sensations, forgot she’d never been ‘noisy,’ and when he stopped long enough to pull her up and turn her around she found herself attacking him, shoving him back into a nearby chair with hardly a heartbeat between when his ass hit the seat and she was straddling him, sinking home with her head thrown back and her back arched as those delicious tremors once again began making her insides quiver. His hands found her waist again, guiding her up and down, his own head thrown back as she worked them both into a frenzy. The insides of her thighs were rubbed raw as they gyrated against his hips, but she didn’t care or really even notice, not once he leaned forward, pulling her into him, to nibble again along her shoulderblade and throat. Her nipples rubbed against his rough chest, the stimulation proving the final catalyst for her first orgasm, hard and rolling as it took her in waves.

Garrus stopped his ministrations at her throat, mandibles clacking against the sides of his face as he held her tight while she rode out the rippling spasms, jerking and arching into him. She could tell he was worried, when she calmed enough to regain control of her vision and saw him looking at her. She grinned at him, wondering what female turian orgasms were like -if they even had them- if hers had taken him by such surprise.

She began to move again, the edge taken off her urgency, and she heard him swear into her hair as he pulled her close, hands on her hips helping guide her again. He pulsed inside her, growing larger and thicker until it was difficult, even with liberal lubrication, to ease him in and out. He surged beneath her, rocking to his feet and lifting her with him, still joined, with his hands under her ass supporting her as he made his way back towards the bed. He bent over it, still holding her to him and keeping them linked as he set her down, settling on top of her. She kept her knees hooked over his pronounced hips, ankles locked at his back, as he began to move in her again. His thrusts were deeper, longer, and she thought she felt his whole length begin to...curl? Inside her? Sweet God almighty-

What had been a slow build towards her second climax rapidly swelled into something much quicker and stronger, and she felt his urgency rise as well, his thrusts becoming more frantic, harder, that swelling curl inside her hitting places that had never before been so thoroughly stimulated and pounded and... She fist her hands in the sheets, arching her back, crown of her head digging into the sheets, mouth open in a silent scream. Just as she began to regain control of her limbs and the spots across her vision began to clear, she felt him go rigid above her. No
spasming, no arching or grunting or shouting, just rigid...

Then he collapsed on top of her, and his entire body began to vibrate. Or close enough- he trembled so acutely it felt the same to her in her dazed state. She felt him pulse inside her, harder and longer and then a flood of liquid heat filled her, and she felt him release an explosive breath.

They both lay, breathing hard, his heavy weight limp atop her. It seemed to her that he didn’t move because he was spent or lazy, but because he couldn’t. Was something wrong? Had something negatively affected him after all? Just as she began to worry, he shifted, moaning as he lifted himself up on shaky arms, still catching his breath. He slipped free of her, stickiness coating both of them. He hooked a tendril of her hair behind her ear, and managed to roll off her onto his side.

“We’ll...talk in the morning,” he mumbled, looking at her from where he laid by her side. “For now... Sweet spirits, woman... I’ll have to apologize to Sidonis at some point.” He paused. “And thank Kelly.”

She groaned and smacked him halfheartedly on his chest. “First rule of human females- do not mention other females in bed.” She paused, then with a grin added, “But I need to give her my thanks, as well.”

He snorted. “We’re going to have to work on your diction, too. You talk like my old boss.”

She groaned again, laughing, and went to smack him again, but he caught her hand and said, dryly, “Let me guess, rule number two is, don’t mention bosses?”

“Close enough,” she replied sleepily.

He didn’t pull her into his arms, as some of her former partners had tried to do, and she didn’t insist on snuggling, as she’d never been prone to. But when he kept ahold of her hand, she found herself smiling, and returning his squeeze before exhaustion claimed both of them.

Bwahaha. ha. ha.
Chapter 14

Cause you can't jump the track, we're like cars on a cable
And life's like an hourglass, glued to the table
No one can find the rewind button, girl
So cradle your head in your hands
And breathe...just breathe

'Breathe' - Ana Nalick

Shepard’s curiosity had led her many places in her life. Some good, some bad.

Disobeying her father’s instructions to hide in her cabin had, for example, been both. Bad, in that she’d ended up witnessing the deaths of her family and the destruction of the ship that had been her home. Good, in that she had survived because of it.

The curiosity that had led her to try and see what she could do, how far she could go before stupidity claimed her life- that had become her choice to join the ranks of N7.

Wanting to go where no other human had gone willingly; Palaven itself. The lion’s den. Wanted to see, to experience, to know. And to help. To make things better. That curiosity had led her here.

Her curiosity had also found her waking up in some supremely odd places and circumstances. Underneath a bar with a bottle of Jack and a thong on her head that was not hers had definitely been near the top. In a trench caught between two warring colonies fighting over the philosophical rights of local fauna to attempt to cross breed with the terran species introduced to the planet had definitely been another surreal example.

This, though... Right here, right now...

The wind was loud, letting her know that yesterday’s storm still clung to the weather outside. Despite that, sunlight streamed in through the gaps in the curtains, strong and golden. It flooded the room, and for a moment when Shepard opened her eyes she could have thought she was on Earth, a place she’d visited only a handful of times but each time memorable for moments just like
this; when the sun began to creep above the horizon and for a handful of heartbeats, the world held its breath. Just as she was now, actually. It was partially survival habit, as much as appreciation for the beautiful golden moment.

Halfway through reaching consciousness, she realized she was nowhere she’d been before. She didn’t twitch a muscle, didn’t tense or alter her breathing, nothing to let anyone near her know that she was aware. After a moment, details about her surroundings began to remind her... The warm, angular body beside her. The sweet, familiar ache in key places. The chafing in other places was new, but blended with the aches in a way that she knew she could easily get used to.

She watched the light in the room shift from early dawn brilliance to the more mundane light of simple morning. As the light changed, so did her mood. The warm glow that had suffused her had faded as reality settled in. Great sex or no, the facts of her situation had hardly altered. Regardless of the inconvenient affection she felt for this particular turian, her job, her mission, had not changed. Still, she thought she could afford five minutes to do something she’d rarely done before-bask. Bask, and daydream. In a bit, she’d get up and do what she needed to do, and she’d put this little piece of heaven behind her. But for right this moment...

She imagined the war had ended years ago, as it should have. She imagined humanity had an embassy on the Citadel, and she’d met him there. Maybe they’d be assigned to work together, tracking a serial killer or collaborating intel to take down terrorist groups. They’d get to know one another while watching each other’s backs, laugh and tell jokes. She’d work up close, he from a distance, watching her six. Then, after years of a strong working friendship, they’d say, why not? And that friendship would become something else. It wouldn’t be forbidden, it wouldn’t be heartbreaking. For once, she’d have something to look forward to when retirement came along.

She held onto that dream for a moment, then let it go. And that was that.

The unfortunately human byproducts of morning breath, night sweat-and other sweat-all combined to quickly override the peace of this golden morning and force her to begin contemplating how to disentangle herself from the turian sharing her bed. Or rather, whose bed she was sharing, she supposed.

Slipping out from beneath the sheets without alerting him was laughably easy given her skillset, but she found herself lingering a moment at the edge of the bed. He’d stuffed a pillow beneath his fringed head to compensate for the difference between his head and his humped cowl. His mandibles were slack, and he was breathing deeply through his mouth. Not snoring, but close enough that it made her smile.

She left the room, and despite herself twitched a wry grin at the sight of the clothes strewn from the terminal to the bedroom. She picked up her jeans and shirt as she went, pulling them on. The
terminal hadn’t been shut down from the night before, so that saved her a moment or two of power up time. It had the same security settings and communications access as the one in the office that she’d used before. It was easier this time around to access what she needed, write the transmission program, and encode her message. It was a much larger message, much more detailed. The chances of it being caught were much higher, but she’d have to chance it. It wasn’t her call to withhold this information. Kelly had brought her exactly the golden egg the Alliance had hoped against all realistic expectation she might find, and it would end the war, one way or another. She had to hope they chose the right way to use the gift -or curse- she was about to give them.

“Forgive me,” she murmured, and sent the message.

Desolas was missing. There was nothing else to it- he was simply missing.

Saren growled at the empty room. He’d gone along with his brother’s plans, had agreed that for the sake of their goal certain sacrifices had to be made. He knew what the artifact can do, and knows that it needs to be contained and controlled. On that goal he and his brother had been in sync, but lately Saren had begun to take note of his brother’s increasingly erratic behavior. The once celebrated military hero had become reclusive, obsessed with the artifact. It seemed the longer they were in proximity with it, the worse Desolas grew. He never would have suggested the bombs in earlier years. Now, he’d planned the attacks as if they made perfect, logical sense. Saren agreed that it had resulted in the desired outcome, and he’d never argue with results, but the fact that it had come from Desolas...disturbed him.

Saren began to search the room for clues as to where his insane sibling might have disappeared to. He was beginning to suspect that Desolas was no longer in control of himself, and if that were the case then Saren did not plan on leaving the other Arterius to his own devices, not when there was an alien artifact with strange powers in the mix.

Kelly Chambers had led what many would call a very, very interesting life. Born to an affluent family on Bekenstein, she’d had the quintessential ‘white picket fence’ life. Private schools, tutors, extracurricular classes, class president, cheerleader, prom queen. Valedictorian, owner of her own business by age thirty- which in the modern age of the human lifespan being nearly doubled since the early twenty-first century was very young indeed. But as she’d learned from her psychologist father, many externally perfect people had imperfect interior flaws.
Kelly’s internal ‘flaw’ had been her attraction to the forbidden and dangerous. The typical ‘good
girl gone bad’ scenario. So when she’d been approached about a pro-human organization trying an
unorthodox plan to end the war, she’d jumped aboard. She hadn’t planned on landing in a
household of less than friendly aliens, but she also hadn’t planned on being wildly attracted to the
son of the very man she’d been supposed to spy on. She also hadn’t planned on day two of her life
in the Sidonis residence being quite literally scooped up by Lantar as she’d been sweeping a floor,
being deposited on a bed and asked point blank if she was willing to give it a shot. More turned on
at that moment then on any other occasion, she’d given it a very energetic shot. It had worked-
they got along in bed and out, and neither expected it to last indefinitely.

She was fond of him, of course. It was hard to willing share a bed with someone for so long and not
come to care for them to some degree, and she thought he possessed a measure of affection for her.
But they had a routine to keep it from going further than that- he fulfilled his duties to his family,
she fulfilled her duties as a quellen, they’d fuck and she’d be gone by morning. He bought her
pretty things, and she let him explore his every fantasy. Fantasies she enjoyed immensely, as it
happened, so she won out both ways.

The morning after having passed on that horrible information to Shepard, she had been the one to
return to the Sidonis city villa and tackle him . She didn’t know what he’d discussed with the
Vakarian turian, but she’d seen a look in Lantar’s eyes she’d never seen before, and she knew the
end was coming, in some way. Last night had been different- the edge of animalism she found so
damn hot had been tempered, and he’d been...something else. Almost contemplative, if that word
could be applied to sex. She’d liked it, and he had too.

And she wasn’t gone when the morning came, because when the time had come for her to leave -
and she’d pressed that longer than usual- and she’d moved to leave the bed, he’d simply pulled her
back. No words, no explanations, just locked her in place, and they’d slept like that. They woke
like that, as well, and although she had horrible kinks in uncomfortable places as a result, it was
oddly worth it.

When she ventured from the bedroom well after dawn, there was a message waiting for her amid
the junk mail she was tasked to sort through. Junk mail filters were good, but spam mailers had
kept up and it was still an issue, so her morning duties included filtering it manually so Lantar
didn’t have to. Most of her tasks included such little things, since most of the real work was
handled by professional, paid staff. It was also a perfect window for her communications to her
handlers and other agents. Neither the Hierarchy nor the Alliance had any idea just how
widespread and ingrained their resistance cell really was, how deep they were in every branch of
the government and social trees, how many events and sabotages and leaks they were responsible
for.

As she’d expected, one of the junk messages was actually for her. It was another message to be
passed on to Shepard, and instructions for her to extract herself to a specific pre determined point.
The resistance was going underground, pulling their agents. She assumed it was because of the impending Alliance bombardment.

After forwarding the message on to Shepard, not even sure if she would get it, Kelly sat back in the uncomfortable turian chair, realizing she had a choice; following the instructions to safety among the underground resistance, or staying. A year ago she wouldn't even have considered that there was a choice... And now she was dwelling on what that choice would end up costing her, either way she went.

“Kelly,” came the double-flanged voice from behind her. She looked over her shoulder at the naked turian standing in the doorway to the bedroom, and smiled at him despite herself. Who was she kidding? She had no intention of leaving him until he gave her no choice. And judging from the look on his face as she stood and turned to him, and he moved toward her, he wasn't going to be sending her away anytime soon.

Shepard couldn’t bring herself to wake Garrus and let him know she was going to seek out a shower and breakfast, not with the knowledge of the message she had just sent still so fresh on her conscience. Whether or not she believed she’d done the right thing, she knew he’d never forgive her. He might understand- it was her duty, and if turians understood anything, it was duty- but he wouldn’t forgive. Knowing that, even if he knew nothing, she didn’t think she’d be able to look him in the eye just yet.

So she managed to make it to her room and the adjoining bathroom without being seen, a feat even for her given the inexplicable hustle and bustle that filled the halls. When she finally emerged from her room, hair still wet, she found that the flurry of activity invaded every corner of the home.

She found Meda in the main hall of the villa, directing an army of employees. Meda spared her half a heartbeat of a moment for a rebuke for hiding while others were working, managing to fit an hour's worth of chastising in that short span. Then her hands were full with tasks, and Shepard had no time to do anything but obey.

Listening to the other rushing staff told Shepard what was happening- the family was being relocated to someplace safe, and it was happening now. She didn't wonder why Garrus hadn't mentioned this; they'd been rather distracted. She'd known this was coming, thanks to Saren's sudden visit the day before, but the abruptness surprised her. It shouldn't have, but she was the first to admit her head hadn't been on straight for a few days now. She knew that should worry her more than it did, and the revelation that it didn't was a startling one that she didn't have the faintest idea of how to explain.
Over the course of the morning, Shepard did something she had not done in a very long while; avoided something. Namely, thoughts of Garrus. He hadn’t come to find her when she hadn’t returned to his rooms, and she wondered if he was regretting anything. The night before had come out of nowhere, for both of them she’d wager, and she herself had yet to sort out her feelings regarding the event. She doubted he was faring any better, but did she have any way of really knowing? A few weeks of inexplicably rapid-growing comaradie and trust, and she jumped into bed with the enemy? That wasn’t like her. The only thing to explain it was...him. He was just different enough, the circumstances just unique enough, that she grudgingly let herself acknowledge that normal relationship parameters didn’t apply, not here.

To say that Shepard was perhaps somewhat less sharp than usual was to say a knife lacked a handle. Still perfectly capable of doing what it was meant to do, just somewhat less prepared. And so it was with unconscious effort that Shepard noted, as she cleaned and packers and covered things with anti static sheets, that she hadn't seen or heard fringe or scale of Solana. Or the boys. Perhaps it was to be expected, that the younger Vakarians had been out somewhere that they wouldn't get underfoot, but Solana should have been right alongside Meda, barking hurried instructions. Her absence struck a warning bell that Shepard had learned to never ignore.

Under the pretense of fetching more packing materials from a store room, Shepard excused herself from the room of turian's busy wrapping up antiques for storage- it was assumed the family would not return for some time. A sensible assumption, given they had no information to support the contrary.

She found Meda in the kitchen this time, hurriedly preparing something that Shepard recognized as one of Garrus' favorite dishes. Shepard realized that in the pandemonium of the morning, she herself had forgotten to eat. She helped herself to a box of umino bars in a pantry, testing into the nearly tasteless bar with efficiency. It was fuel, not food. As she bit off a bite she approached the turian matriarch, intending to try and surmise if Solana's absence should be cause for worry or not. Before she could swallow and ask, however, Meda rounded on her.

"There you are," she said, in a tone that Shepard had learned to mean she was only partially focused on Shepard, her mind juggling several other things behind those bright eyes. Before Shepard could tell her that she'd been precisely where Meda had sent her, the turian woman had turned to a loaded tray and lifted it onto Shepard's arms.

"Take this to the study, and be quick and silent, no time to explain, they've been waiting too long already." Shepard moved to turn away, wryly amused that her inquiry had been answered without the question ever being spoken. Something in Meda's face made her pause. Yes, Meda was hesitating.
"Is there something else?" Shepard asked probingly. Meda sighed, then seemed to come to a decision. She raised her arm with its omnitool already activated.

"Nothing, dear girl. Just because to check your omnitools messages when you've delivered that, it'll have your instructions for the rest of the day. Much quicker than delegating orders in person, with so much left to do... Well, go on! Nothing worse than cold desa fish...." And with that hasty string of sentences, Meda turned back to the counter.

Shepard had gave the back of Meda’s head a contemplative frown before turning to leave. She’d never seen the housekeeper sound or behave so...off. Something had her nervous. Shepard paid attention when people who were normally islands of steadiness went suddenly skittish- there was usually a reason that was of interest to her. She went over Meda’s words and mannerisms in her mind as she made her way to the study she had once used to send that first coded message to the Alliance. As she did so, one thing stood out to her- Meda had seemed anxious about the meal being tardy. To Shepard’s recollection, neither Solana nor Garrus had ever even mentioned it when meals were late, which they rarely were. Garrus, for one, usually forgot about meals altogether unless he was reminded. Shepard herself had brought him enough lunches and dinners and seen the look of surprise on his face to know that.

So, they had a visitor. Someone who Meda did not want to offend or seem incompetent by delivering a cold lunch.

Shepard stopped in at the door to the study, the one that led out into the same courtyard that Marik had once tried to kill her in. The barrier curtain above the courtyard kept out the furious wind she could hear beyond it, and she could see the crest of more dark stormclouds approaching. It looked to be a storm worse than the day before.

She counted the days in her head. Then counted again, calculated in multiple plausible variables for a variety of specific timeframes. A worrisome number of them had this very day contained within their very likely outcomes. She felt the adrenaline begin to mingle with the rushing blood in her veins, her heart-rate accelerating as she contemplated what -or rather, who- she might find on the other side of that door. She’d been incredibly lucky to have had the time she’d had. She’d accomplished more than her superiors could have possibly originally hoped for, especially with the transmission she’d sent that morning. She had nothing to lose by walking in, and facing her potential death.

Except for two things; one, Shepard would sooner gnaw off a limb than walk willingly into suicide. Two... Two, there were things she’d still prefer to tell Garrus on her own terms.

Down the walkway lining the courtyard, a turian staff member rounded one of the pillars edging the square of grass with an armful of boxes. Shepard shifted the tray to one arm, intending to
beckon her over. She’d let the other female -Niesa- deliver the meal, and Shepard would leave to execute one of her many contingency plans. She thought she might take the mustang and head into the jungle- the vehicle would be traceable, of course, but would let her get further from the villa before having to go on foot, and would force any search operations to expand their search radius exponentially.

Shepard stepped away from the door, arm raised to gesture.

The door opened. Shepard looked towards the one who stood framed by the opening, and not for even the barest fraction of a moment did she mistake the turian in front of her for Garrus, despite the startling resemblance.

There was no outcry on her part, or even from him. He moved, faster than she remembered he was capable of, faster than he once had in a cell so very far away from here, and in the span of time it took for her to toss her tray at him and raise her arms he was inside her guard, talons around her throat carrying her backwards, lifting her up and slamming her against one of the pillars. She hit hard enough that she felt something at her back shift with the impact.

“I told you,” came the calm voice. “The next time I saw you, I would end your life. I don’t know how you came to be here, nor do I care. A Vakarian keeps his word.”

“And I told you,” she gasped back, very aware of the points of his talons drawing blood from her throat. “That you were welcome to try.”

She released her hold on his hands at her throat, lifting her feet and planting them on his protruding hips, her hands going to his shoulders. With the combined muscular strength of her thighs, shoulders, core, she abruptly stood up, breaking his hold as she rose sharply, his arms not long enough to reach her throat with her standing on his hips. In one fluid, uninterrupted movement she raised her hands to grip an overhead support beam, then before he could react she removed her feet from his hips and directed them at his chest, sending him stumbling backwards with the force of her kick. She dropped to the ground, knees bending to absorb the impact, then moved at the same time he-

“Father? I heard a crash-” Solana stood in the doorway behind her father, the sound of the falling tray having brought her out. Garrus stood behind her, and Shepard carefully did not look at his face directly. Looking away from Nomos Vakarian would have been a bad idea in and of itself, and on top of that she had no desire to see Garrus’ current thoughts on his face.

“This concerns neither of you,” Nomos told his adult children, voice as stern as if they were still
young. “I’ll assume neither of you knew who she was.

“Who she... Father, this is-”

“The human who assaulted my ship and turned me over to Alliance forces.”

She *felt* it when Garrus jerked, taking a half step back. Felt Solana’s shock. Shepard wanted to close her eyes, let the moment wash over her, but instincts of self preservation kept her gaze firmly on Nomos, who likewise hadn’t taken his stare from her.

“Is...this true?” Garrus’ voice was a timbre she hadn’t heard from him before. Deeper, harsher...darker.

Keeping Nomos in her sharp peripheral, she shifted her gaze to Garrus for half a moment, met his gaze squarely, and nodded once, sharply. When she chose to speak, she did so with the full knowledge this was it. She saw the look in Nomos’ eyes, had heard the truth in his voice when he’d said he meant to see her dead. She chose to speak now, because it was the last chance she was going to get to be honest with Garrus. She couldn’t tell him everything- couldn’t tell him about the pods with the easter egg of infiltration info, couldn’t tell him about the underground resistance or Kelly or her communications. But she could tell him...everything else. Even if she wasn’t looking at him when she spoke, she knew he knew that her words were for him.

“I was aboard the Alliance vessel *Lincoln,* testing a new drive core,” she said. “We were attacked. My team and I defended the ship and removed the boarding party. When both ships had disengaged, I was informed that I had accidentally undone a very delicate plan which I had not been privy to. In an attempt to salvage what we could of the original mission, my captain set us on a pursuit to recapture the enemy vessel I had let escape. We attacked, and boarded. I lost one of my team. And took the vessel’s captain captive.” She renewed the intensity of her gaze on Nomos, which he returned tenfold. “We studied that captive. Watched him, learned from him. As his primary captor I was included. When my duties were over, I was permitted to take some leave I had been accumulating.” Ah, and here now was where she had to mingle truth with more lies. But these lies were to protect others, not herself. “My transport was raided by turian mercenaries. You know the rest.”

“Oh, I am aware of what they’ve told me,” Nomos stepped closer, and she found she couldn’t retreat to maintain the distance, not with the pillar still behind her. Moving to the side would be too decisive a move, and would spur him to act. She had to maintain the delicate balance they now teetered on, as long as she could. Genuine confusion found itself way to her face as he continued, and his words translated into something she wasn’t sure she was hearing.
“Very clever, your arrangement with your friend. Tell me, did you plan for him to die? Or was that unplanned? How did you know my daughter and grandson would be there?”

In defense of the elder Vakarian, she herself would not have believed such a coincidence. But for once, it was the actual truth.

“Haven’t you heard? I’m psychic,” she said, unable to help the wry lilt to her voice. She didn’t try to convince him of her innocence in this; she wouldn’t have believed herself. Sarcasm wasn’t something she had resorted to in a while, but she thought she might begin making use of it again. His reaction was most rewarding, despite the circumstances- He snarled something that did not translate, snapping at her with harsh clicks of his mandibles. She saw Garrus take a half step forward.

“I don’t know how you think she might have arranged for Gabias to be there when he was, father,” Garrus spoke at last. “But we told you of the fire. Do you think she arranged that, too?”

“She survived, didn’t she?” Nomos returned.

“Because of Norius,” Shepard responded firmly. “He helped me out. And because your son happened to be friends with someone who happened to have a human doctor quellen. Did I arrange all of that, too? My life must not be worth much to me, to take so many far-fetched chances. And what did I have to gain by all of this?”

“You seem to be under the impression,” the towering turian said, taking another step forward. “That I care overly much about explanations. In fact, I do believe just moments ago I informed you that I do not care. I made you a promise, pyjak.”

She would fight. She might even win and escape. She’d be tracked, caught, possibly killed in the capture. Probably executed as a spy once they’d extracted more information from her. When the war was over, they might hand over some heavily encrypted file confirming her fate, and she’d have a grave on earth, a white marker among hundreds, with her name and two dates, no more.

Her waking dream from that morning, the one where she’d had something -someone- to look forward to upon retirement chose that moment to flash to the forefront of her thoughts, just long enough to make her heart twist with regret before she shoved it aside. She thrust herself firmly again into the here and now, aware of her own death reflected back in Nomos’ eyes, his words still ringing in her ears.
“Then keep your promise, lizard,” she snarled at him. “If you can.”

In the moment that followed, Solana gave a sharp cry of protest, Garrus shoved roughly past his sister with the clear intent of intersecting his father’s upraised hand, Shepard tensed and prepared to dodge the clawed blow, and a small turian darted seemingly from nowhere, shrieking, and flung himself at Shepard’s legs. She fell, Gabias’s arms locked around her knees, and Nomos’ claws struck the stone pillar instead of her jugular.

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! stopitstopitstopit, grandfather stop!” It was the hysterical, nearly unintelligible babbling of a young child who had no grasp of what was occurring save one simple fact; people he cared about were fighting. Shepard disentangled herself from the boy, not counting on his presence to stop Nomos’ fury, and shoved the boy aside into Solana’s arms before turning to face her attacker again to find father and son staring harshly at one another. Garrus’ hand was locked around his father’s arm, jaws tense and mandibles clenched tightly shut.

Gabias’ cries finally grabbed his grandfather’s attention. Tension seemed to leak out of the turian, a very little of it, but enough for Solana to loosen her grip on her son. The boy rushed to plant himself between Shepard and his grandfather, breathing in ragged gasps of childish hysteria.

“Stop it!” He said again, clearer and more firmly.

“Gabias,” Solana said, voice firm. “Go to your room. Grandfather is glad to see you, but this is not something for you to see. Now go-”

“No!” The boy shouted, stamping his foot in a gesture so reminiscent of a human child Shepard blinked in surprise. “Not until grandfather promises not to hurt her! She saved me, she saved Norius, and Meda likes her, and Mama likes her, and Uncle Garrus likes her, and you don’t know her so you can’t be mean to her!” The last part had been directed at Nomos, who blinked in clear turian surprise at his grandson, then flicked his gaze briefly to Shepard. She was shocked to read her own thoughts mirrored there; whatever their vendetta, it would not be carried out in front of Gabias. He had to be removed from the scene before they could continue.

“Child, this is not-”

“You said so!” Gabias interrupted. “You said, if you don’t know someone, you can’t be mean to them until you do.”
In the tense silence, Solana suddenly gave a dry chuckle. “Didn’t you once tell me, father, to be careful of what you tell a child? They will remember your words at the most inconvenient times.”

Nomos gave his daughter a withering glare, then took a step towards Gabias and Shepard. Gabias jumped back, and wrapped his arms around Shepard’s legs. Nomos stopped, and took in the scene. Shepard’s hand had gone to the top of Gabias’ head of its own accord, and now she froze it there when she saw Nomos’ gaze land on how her fingers had made one brief, absentminded stroke across the top of the boy’s head.

No one moved, or hardly breathed, for a long moment. Nomos would not promise what his grandson wanted, because it conflicted with his first promise. Stalemate. Shepard thought about telling Solana to take her son and leave, far enough away where the boy wouldn’t be able to hear anything. She thought the other woman would do it.

Then Garrus spoke.

“Gabias,” he said, voice pointed. “Norius was told to watch you. Where is he?”

Gabias tightened his grip on Shepard’s legs, turning his face into her pant leg to hide it from the adults. Like the foot stomp, the movement shouted loudly of a human child’s mannerisms, even to someone like Shepard who had not spent any notable about of time around children. The movement clearly told everyone present that the answer the boy had was one he knew the adults would not like.

“Gabias,” Solana intoned her son’s name with the universal mother’s voice. Gabias shifted uncomfortably against Shepard.

“Gab,” Shepard said, suddenly feeling trepidation. The suddenly shy and scared boy beside her did not mesh with the child who’d just stood down his own terrifying grandfather. And Norius was many things, but irresponsible was not typically one of them. If he’d been told to watch his brother, then where was he?

She reached down and took Gabias by his shoulders, pulling him away from her leg far enough that she could crouch and look into his face, so much softer than his uncle and grandfather’s.

“Gabias, where is your brother?” She asked it with a milder version of the same tone she used on new recruits. Miraculously, it worked.
“He asked me not to tell,” he blurted. “But he said he didn’t know when we’d be coming back and he really wanted to try that red ground machine and he said he was fixing something for you and broke it so he was going to try to go get more before you found out and—”

Shepard felt the blood drain from her face as she translated the child-speak into an explanation. Norius had been trying to extract the vid-stills from her omnitool...had he accidentally erased them? And decided to go back to the ruins to try to take more stills? And he’d decided to take the mustang?

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” she muttered, too low for any of the nearby omnitools to translate.

“What is he talking about?” Nomos asked, his voice low.

“Gabias,” Garrus came closer, also crouching down to talk to his nephew. “Do you mean Norius took the red ground vehicle?”

Gabias nodded.

“Where?”

Gabias shrugged a turian shrug, more a roll of his shoulders than a true shrug.

“The ruins,” Shepard said, quietly. “I think he’s gone to the ruins.”

“What makes you say that?” Garrus asked after a brief moment, clearly reluctant to acknowledge her. Yet he’d moved to stop his father from opening her throat, even before Gabias had made his presence known.

“I took some stills when we were there,” she told him. “My omnitool was damaged in the rain, and Norius volunteered to see what he could do with it. I think Gabias is saying... I think he may have accidentally deleted them instead, and now he’s gone to see if he can retake the images.”
Garrus glanced up and to the side, up through the flickering barrier curtain at the roiling stormclouds above. Thunder and lightning chose that moment to flash and boom across their faces, and then it was Garrus’ turn to swear.

“Do you know which ruins he would have gone to?” Nomos asked. His voice was tense, and something she thought might be worry laced the double-flanged words.

“Yes,” Garrus answered, standing. Solana took her son by his shoulders, pulling him to her with a sigh. Gabias shrunk into himself, all his bravado deflated. Shepard wondered if she’d ever have the chance to tell the boy that he’d saved her life, even if only for a few more hours.

“Then we will retrieve him. When return, I will finish dealing with...this.” He glanced, almost dismissively, towards Shepard to indicate what he meant. “Lock it up until we return.” He turned, then, and strode away, fists clenched, back rigid. Garrus watched him walk away, then turned to Solana.

“You should finish getting things ready, Sol. We’re supposed to leave in the morning. No, don’t argue, we’ll bring him back, you know we will. The storm’s bad, but he’s old enough to know what to do.”

“Keep in radio contact, please,” Solana asked. “Let me know when you find him.” Her brother nodded as she turned, her son fighting her to turn back to Shepard, and left in the opposite direction as her father. Only when she was out of sight did Garrus reluctantly turned his gaze to Shepard.

She met his gaze evenly, but did not harden her stare. She had no idea what he was thinking, but she knew what she’d been thinking and feeling his shoes, and she did not begrudge him his confusion, his betrayal, his...hate.

“I’m not going to ask you to understand,” she said, voice quiet but no less steady for it. “But I want you to know, I do regret every lie I had to tell you.”

He reached out, towards her face. His own face was unreadable. She didn’t flinch or alter her gaze a whit. He settled his hand on her shoulder, and firmly turned her around, propelling her forward. She suppressed a sigh. She couldn’t really expect any more. Perhaps, if she somehow lived through this afterall, she might find him someday after this whole war had ended, and apologize fully. For now... For now, this was what she expected, and she understood it.
After a moment, she realized he was guiding her not towards her room, or in any direction that made sense. She was shoved through a back door out into one of the gardens she had secretly surveyed on one of her midnight recon outings, and into pouring rain. He stepped outside, alongside her, his more advanced omnitool able to handle the deluge like hers hadn’t. He turned her around to face him, made sure she wasn’t going to bolt, and released her shoulder. He removed his omnitool from his arm and flipped it over, pulling open a compartment that contained a set of small, essential tools. He used them to tweak at his omnitool for a moment, and Shepard saw what he was doing—manually disabling certain functions of the device. Namely, the ones that would allow it to be pinged and tracked. He handed it to her when he was done.

“I recommend staying under the cover of the trees until the worst of the storm passes. If you’re half as capable as I think you are, you’ll be able to avoid detection for a few days. Once we’ve all cleared out, you can come back and raid the villa for supplies. You can use that omnitool to keep tabs on the news networks. In a week or so, you should hear an announcement officially freeing all quellen. When you hear that, make your way to the main port, and you should find other humans being transported to Alliance space.”

She looked at him in clear surprise. Despite her usual habit of not looking a gift horse in the mouth, she couldn’t help but ask, “Why?”

He looked away. “If I ever see you again, I’ll strangle the answers I need out of you myself. Until then...” He stepped back. “Do you honestly think I’m eager to see my father kill you? I won’t pretend that I’m...” He exhaled sharply and looked away. “Just go,” he said at last. Then without another word he turned and retreated inside.

Shepard wasted only a moment of hard staring at the closed door before turning, and making for the edge of Vakarian property.
Chapter 15

Masquerading as a man with a reason
My charade is the event of the season
And if I claim to be a wise man,
Well, it surely means that I don't know

-'Carry On Wayward Son' - Kansas

Chapter 15

It had been a good long while since Admiral Anderson had felt the reassuring weight of an Alliance issue hardsuit settle onto his form. He found his hands still remembered the precise location of each clasp, every seal. His fingers clipped his weapons into their own snap-holsters at his back, thighs, hips, with the ease of ingrained familiarity.

There was a mirror in his cabin for the sake of ensuring uniform precision, not vanity. He glanced at it in his way out, though he knew he would see nothing out of place. What he did see was a man, aging and with an already tired cast to otherwise still-bright eyes. He'd been born old, according to his aunts. The years since his childhood hadn't disproved that assertion.

When Anderson emerged from the lift that had taken him down to the main hanger bay of the Alliance cruiser drifting just outside Turian space, he wasn't surprised to see the team that was already assembled there. Each was in full battle-rattle, each bearing an immobile expression.

Boon, Carver, Maverick, Sakino. Shepard's team, sans the dead Jenkins. Anderson saw the black bands still painted on the left biceps of each hardsuit. Those bands would be there for another month, but the look of hardened loss about them was permanent, Anderson knew.

"None of you were recruited for this mission," he told them, already knowing how this conversation was going to go. "We have no way of knowing if she even got our last message. She might not be at the extraction point. She might be killed trying to get to it, or we might be. We might be shot down on our way out. There's no reason for the Alliance to risk losing all of us, when one can do the job just fine."
"With all due respect, sir," Maverick shifted forward slightly as she spoke. "You already know we're coming with you." Dangerous to speak to an Admiral like that, even one with Anderson's laid back reputation. He saw the others shift their weight, backing her silently. He shook his head, suppressing a sigh.

"Into the ship, then. Sakino, start pre-flight procedures." He motioned them towards the small, sleek craft he'd requisitioned for this very endeavor. It was just big enough for them all, plus one more. His orders were obeyed with alacrity, and within minutes he was being given the go-ahead by the carrier's flight controller, the hanger's barrier curtain flickering to nothing to let them out.

And then they were away, with Anderson praying he wasn't costing the Alliance both an admiral, and one of it's best special ops teams.

Garrus knew people with rough lives. The vent rats -homeless kids- on the Citadel. Batarian slaves. The forever-indentured drell. Normally he was able to maintain a decent measure of respect for their hardships, if not outright pity. Occasionally, however, he did permit himself to acknowledge that at times, his own life was considerably less than pleasant.

The last month or so, for example....

Dealing with the Traders had shown him things he wouldn't have wished on anyone. His job had begun to feel more oppressive than ever. His father had been captured and ransomed by the enemy, while his mother had died alone save for Solanna. He'd been unceremoniously dumped into the role of a high-profile Advocate, experienced first hand the frustration of dealing with aloof Primarchs.

Then his nephew's life had been threatened, and a quellen of questionable background had been dropped into his lap. A quellen that had then proceeded to be one of the most unique acquaintances of his life....before saving his other nephew. And Meda, who had practically helped raise him, had taken to the human when previously she had been nothing short of rude to the new staff Solanna occasionally tried to bring aboard.

Garrus had let himself become intensely, dangerously fascinated with this human. Had trusted her, or something very, very close to trust. Had liked her, even. Hell, he'd slept with her, and it had been a considerably long while since he'd given into his baser male instincts so easily. He blamed the
curiosity planted by Sidonis that he'd ended up with Kristin -no, not Kristin, something else- in his bed instead of Nim.

"When this is over," came the calm voice beside him. "I expect a full account of events in my absence."

"Do you want the version you'll like, or the version closer to the truth?" Garrus retorted, in no mood to pander to his father's superiority complex. He wasn't going to give the older turian the satisfaction of the 'I'm a big boy now, start treating me like it' rant, but he also wasn't going to ignore the condescension anymore, either. He'd dealt with too much these past few months to put up with it.

Surprisingly, no rebuke was forthcoming. Instead, Garrus glanced over at his father to see him looking...thoughtful. He tapped a talon on the console of the aircar. The silence stretched into awkwardness long before Nomos actually spoke.

"You truly believe she saved my grandsons with no ulterior motives?"

"Yes."

"Hm."

Another extended silence, and then...

"You let her go."

"Yes." No hesitation. He heard his father snort, and that was the end of the conversation.

They made good time to the ruins, better than the human vehicle had, seeing as they weren't restricted to old roads. There was just big enough of a gap in the green canopy over the site for Garrus to navigate through. Parking, however, proved somewhat more problematic.

"That's odd, I don't recall granting permission to explore here," Garrus said, quickly scanning the perimeter of the ground below. He saw his father do the same, and motioned to a spot near where Garrus had fallen in, just the day before. Had it really only been a day? He turned his thoughts away from that particular memory, and carefully guided the aircar into a spot amid a boulder, a
fallen tree, and a half-standing wall that shouldn't have been big enough, but was. Thankfully the vehicle was open-topped, and they were able to simply jump out without bothering with the doors.

As father and son set to examining their surroundings, Garrus realized this was the first time he’d actually worked alongside the older turian. It was something he’d actively avoided for as long as he could remember, and now here he was, and the fact had almost slipped his notice entirely. Nomos didn’t indicate by word or gesture that he thought anything of the event, and Garrus shook himself of the realization. It was a useless observation, anyway.

Nomos had approached the two aircars that had taken up the small clearing beside the main pile of rubble that had once been a temple. There was nothing remarkable about them, except that there was nothing remarkable about them. No scuffs, no custom details, no special lights, tints. Even the plates were nondescript, lacking the usual indicators of regional orientation.

“Government issue,” Nomos and Garrus said in unison. They glanced at one another, then away to continue their search. Why would two unmarked vehicles be here, now? Garrus began to get that same feeling he’d learned to pay attention to, the itching just beneath his scales that told him he was missing something big.

“I don’t see any sign of Norius,” Garrus said after awhile of searching. No footprints, tire tracks - not that the terran vehicle could have made it this far off the road- or blowback marks in the dirt or grass to indicate other aircars. None of the artificial signals his nephew would have been taught in the earliest days of his survival training at the Academy. Even the intense wind whipping leaves and debris through the clearing wouldn’t be enough, just yet, to clear away all the signs that should have indicated if his nephew had come through here.

But where else could he be? Kristin had been so certain- No, not ‘Kristin,’ or ‘Kasi,’ Spirits take her... What had she said her real name had been? He refused to let himself remember.

“Let’s look inside,” his father said, motioning to the entrance. Garrus pushed back the flicker of memory when he walked beneath the half-collapsed temple roof. A cold, wet, stubborn human, whose previously almost forgotten vitalia had been thruming hard enough to...

“That’s far enough.”

The third voice was utterly unexpected. Both Garrus and Nomos whirled, small sidearm pistols whipped from concealment quicker than most could have followed. The one who’d spoken was just as quick, and although there were two of them and one of him, Garrus had no doubt this particular individual could drop them both.
“Spectre Arterius,” Garrus said levelly, cautiously lowering his pistol. Just an ever so slight amount, but still. “What brings you out here?”

“I could ask you the same,” The taller, scarred turian responded, glancing to Nomos. “Captain Vakarian. I’d heard you were…rather tied up. Good to see you none the worse for wear for your time with your…hosts.”

“Damaged goods fetch a poor trade,” Nomos responded with a glib tone that surprised his son. Garrus’ only betrayal of that surprise was a twitch of an eyeridge.

“Ah, so they didn’t torture you too badly? How fortunate.” Saren relaxed his stance, casually reholstering his weapon as if the two seasoned, armed persons in front of him were of no consequence. “Well, as pleasant as this chat has been, I’m afraid you’ve interrupted a very delicate operation. I’ll have to ask you to leave. You know I work alone, Vakarian.” He was speaking to the elder of the two with the name, but it was Garrus who spoke.

“Who flew the other aircar?”

A pause.

“Someone who also should not be here.” The response was terse, and the subtonals conveyed a clear warning to not press further. A good turian would hear the strongly hinted not-quite-a-command, and leave. He saw his father reluctantly holster his pistol and move towards the temple exit. Garrus stayed where he was.

“We think my nephew might be here,” he told the Spectre, lowering his weapon all the way, but keeping it out.

Saren glanced outside to the darkening sky. “Rather foolish of him, if he is.” Then he turned away from Garrus, clearly uncaring about the wellbeing of an inconsequential adolescent. Garrus’ talons flexed around his pistol.

“We’re going to look for him,” Garrus said, drawing himself up unconsciously. He saw Saren pause, but not look back. “We’ll try to stay out of your way, but we’re not leaving until we find him, or decide he’s not here.” Now he was the one to turn away. “Just a heads up.”
Saren didn’t respond, but Garrus heard footsteps heading towards the back of the temple. He motioned to his father almost casually, and to his surprise the captain fell into step beside him as they headed for a partially collapsed downward stairwell on the other end of the temple.

“You seemed...rather familiar with one another,” Nomos said, sounding thoughtful.

“I’ve run into him a few times since coming home,” Garrus told him. Thinking about this, he frowned. “Not entirely sure why. Seemed to just be...hanging around.” That tingling-scale feeling was back, milder this time, but still enough to make him glance over his shoulder in time to see Saren disappear down a corridor.

“Not important,” Garrus said, and beside him his father nodded. That, along with other things, could be pondered and discussed later. For now, all that mattered was finding Norius before the storm broke.

Neither of them heard the slight snick just before a perfectly square piece of the floor dropped out from beneath them, or the double sthip sthip of two darts leaving their firing chambers to find soft spots between plates. Barely five minutes after setting foot inside the temple, both turians were unconscious.

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A day to the hour had passed, and Shepard was reminded of how much she’d disliked wilderness training. Specifically, jungle survival. Almost as bad as open-sea survival, in the sense that there was water, water, everywhere but nary a drop to drink. Too many surfaces were unfamiliar to her, too many natural dew collectors looked like they might also double as poison wells. She took what moisture she could from puddles, and steered clear of anything too brightly colored. She didn’t bother looking for edible roots, stalks, fruit or bark- this was a dextro planet, afterall. Anything that didn’t kill her would probably give her one hell of a cramping session, and wouldn’t do her any nutritional good anyways.

So Shepard kept hydrated, best she could, finding trees to clamber up when the foliage around her went abruptly too quiet, too still- and once, was rewarded by the sight of a scaled, three-tailed veritible dinosuar slinking out of the bushes she’d been about to walk past. It had glowered up at her, before darting away. When she’d climbed down, she’d picked another direction- it was unlikely the thing had meant to eat her; with a snout like that, it had to have been able to smell that she wasn’t food. That meant she’d been about to walk over its nest, or into its territory, and neither
was something she felt like doing without a handy shotgun or two. Or a flamethrower. She was partial to those...partial to anything involving fire, really.

Two good things had come out of the past forty-eight hours, despite the emotional turmoil and chaos surrounding the Mistake and Nomos’ return. The first being, she felt like herself again. Commander Kastanie Shepard had shed the last remnants of Kristin Lambert, and holy hell did it feel good. No more pretending, no more lying, no more biting her tongue and no more subduing the core of who she was. She was on a new mission now, the mission to survive, and she’d be damned if a little damp, hot jungle was going to kill her now, after everything else.

The second, had come from the last source she’d have believed.

Meda, bless her hard assed sweet soul, was part of the resistance. Not the ones who had planted the bombs, thankfully, but one of the sleeper agents that even others. A fringe -no pun intended- member, someone who’d volunteered her aid should it be needed, but no more.

Well, that aid had been called upon.

Apparantly, the Alliance had sent the resistance one last message. One last communication, sent from Kelly to Meda, and forwarded to Shepard.

‘Nothing, dear girl. Just because to check your omnitools messages when you've delivered that, it'll have your instructions for the rest of the day. Much quicker than delegating orders in person, with so much left to do... Well, go on! Nothing worse than cold desa fish...’

Shepard had remembered the woman’s words. On a whim, since she had nothing better to do until the news streams announced the release of the quellen, she’d checked to see if she could access her old, broken omnitool’s messages remotely. She wasn’t sure it had even had messaging capabilities, since that hadn’t been one of the features she’d tried to re-enable.

But, there it had been. The lone transmission. One last message intended for her, one that it wouldn’t have mattered if anyone else had opened it, since there was nothing to decrypt. It was just a short snippet of a melody, a handful of notes from an old human folk song.

Shepard had laughed, then. One of the few real laughs she’d indulged in for a very long while.
“Anderson, you cocky bastard,” she’d hissed to her glowing orange omnitool, half in anger, half in delight. “You cocky, wonderful, heroic idiot.”

The song was a code in and of itself, one known only to herself and Anderson and anyone else he’d shared it with, since it had been of his design. Coordinates assigned to notes, times assigned to the pace and tempo. She listened to the snippet of music over and over again, partially to make sure she had it right, partially because, old as it was, it was the first bit of human music she’d heard since the inception of her mission.

When she was sure she had the location and time correct, Shepard silenced the omnitool’s speakers, and weighed her options. It didn’t take long for her to decide and plan. Within a few hours, she was back at the edge of land that marked the Vakarian villa’s immediate grounds. She saw no sign of life or activity. Even after only a day, when there could be no visible sign of change to indicate the abandonment, she thought the place looked...ghostly. The staff would have been dismissed, and Solanna would be gone to that safe place, with Gabias and Meda. Shepard truly hoped they were safe.

The villa itself was worse than the gardens. Anti static tarps covered everything, and anything decorative that had actual value had been taken down and packed away in locked storerooms. The kitchen was barren, and the sight of it caused a pang Shepard hadn’t been expecting. A small one, in the grand scheme of things, but it was there nonetheless. She found herself glancing at the pantry were the hilariously odd assortment of ‘human food’ had resided. She checked it, and to her surprise found a pack loaded with human Alliance MREs, a bottle with an attached water purifier, and a turian first aid kit.

Meda, again.

Someday, when the war was truly over, actually finished and not just on paper with some diplomats’ signatures, she’d have to find Meda. Tell her how the old woman had snuck up on her in her affections, and apologize for the lies.

Apologize...

Never, in all her life, had Shepard ever imagined she’d feel the need to apologize to one of her targets for her deceptions.

Shepard slung the pack over her shoulder, and headed for her old room, changing from the damp robes of a quellen, and the jeans she’d worn underneath, to a pair of loose slacks and a dark tank top. She didn’t take spare clothing- it wouldn’t take her long enough to get to the extraction point
to need them. A day, perhaps two if she ran into a need to hide for a bit. It wasn’t likely she’d run into a patrol in the jungle, but the Vakarian estate did sit on the edge of the Palaven capitol, and there were patrols that went out far enough for her to be cautious.

Among her things, she found a knife. The knife Garrus had given her in the jungle, before presenting his back to her, to prove a point. Granted, severely injuring a turian from behind was damn near impossible with that armored cowl of theirs, but the gesture had been on that crossed the species barrier just fine.

It was long, jagged, with purple-blue swirls in the metal. Eezo, she thought, though she hadn’t seen enough of it to know for certain. Well, he’d said it was an antique, and she’d seen the same rippling pattern on the blades of the weapons mounted on the walls of the office and Garrus’ rooms.

She fixed herself a makeshift holster with some knotted cord made from strips of twisted bedsheets, doubting there was anything more suitable left in the house that she could jerry-rig in a decent amount of time. She planned on having the knife in her hands most of the time, anyway.

There came a crash, just as Shepard was slinging her pack -bulging with a blanket, now- over her shoulder. She whirled and crept to the door, peeking out into the hallway with a quick glance. What she saw made her eyes widen in disbelief, and step into full view of the human women stumbling down the other end of the corridor.

Kelly Chambers was a beautiful wreck. She wore an extravagant ‘gown’ of draped asari silk in the most brilliant hues, reds and yellows, purples and oranges. It would have been gharish on anyone other than her -or a turian- and the oh-so-conveniently placed swaths of pleated fabric would have looked like a whore’s garment on anyone other than her- or a turian. As it was, she achieved a sort of careless, devastating beauty the likes of which were only spoken of in poorly poetic fiction and Greek mythos.

“Sh-Sheperd?” The other woman slurred as Shepard herself neared the other woman. Kelly slumped against the wall, one strap of her garment slipping off her shoulder, revealing what little of her breast had been concealed. She had a bottle in her hand. A half empty one. Shepard was willing to guess it wasn’t the first.

“Fancy meeting you here, Chambers,” Shepard said with aplomb, reaching out to twitch the garment back into a semblance of modesty. Kelly slipped further down the wall, landing on her rump in an inelegant heap. Still, long locks of red-gold hair tumbled forward over her shoulder in a curiously appealing manner. Shepard had learned ages ago there were some women just designed to be pretty no matter what they did. Thankfully, she was not one of them. Being helplessly pretty would have dampened her success on so many missions...
“He left,” Kelly hiccupped before Shepard had a chance to ask. “He...he said he’d keep me with him, and then he left. Him, and everyone else...” Shepard thought the woman might be about to cry, but a closer look at her face and listening to the rasp of her dry throat told the marine that this distraught female had already cried all the tears she had.

Shepard crouched down beside her as Kelly took a long, impressive swing from the bottle, coughing hoarsely when she put it down. The bottle cracked loudly against the flagstone floor, but Kelly didn’t seem to care that she’d almost lost the rest of her booze in a shower of broken glass and liquor.

“I...I stayed for him, you know?” Her voice was slightly slurred, but clear enough to tell Shepard that Kelly was likely not the lightweight she’d pretended to be at that party, what had seemed like ages ago. Shepard reached over and pulled the bottle from her grip, finding enough resistance to support her suspicion. She took a sniff of the stuff, and recoiled. Not human, whatever it was, but obviously capable of doing the job. She set the noxious-fume-spewing bottle carefully aside.

Then she reached out, and gave Kelly a full-armed slap across the face. The other woman was flung over onto her side, hard enough that her head rebounded off the flagstones with a startled gasp.

“Within another twenty four hours, the release of every quellen will be announced,” Shepard told her. She’d done enough hacking via Garrus’ omnitool to verify this for herself. “When that happens, you get your pretty ass to the spaceport- I know you know where it is. I don’t know what plans the resistance has, but I’m willing to bet it doesn’t include getting you off this planet.” She felt it safe to assume that, since Anderson wouldn’t have sent an extraction team for her if the human/turian resistance cell had the capabilities themselves. “Once they start investigating turian families who kept quellen -and you know they will- and it becomes known just how close you and Sidonis got, neither side will trust you. You need to get off this planet and back into Alliance space.”

She reached out and gripped the woman’s chin, pulling the green-eyed gaze around to meet hers. “Do you hear me, Chambers?”

The other woman nodded, a bit unsteadily. “Yeah,” she said, voice raw. “I hear you.” She pulled her chin free, and got to her feet, wobbling.

Shepard sighed. “Here,” she said, taking the redhead’s arm and slinging it over her shoulders. “You better sleep off the worst of this before you go anywhere.” She half led, half carried Kelly to her own room, and dumped the woman unceremoniously on the hammock-bed. After a moment of
contemplating the haphazard, sprawled form of skin and red hair and bright fabric, Shepard sighed and went to the kitchen and rummaged around for a pitcher and a small, steep-sided bowl that would serve well enough for a cup. She filled the first with water, and brought it back to the room, setting it near at hand.

Kelly looked for all the world to be completely passed out. She wasn’t particularly worried about the woman...it was unlikely she’d be found within a day.

“Shepard...” came the voice as the woman herself made to leave. “I’m sorry.” It was soft, full of grief, and not nearly as slurred now as it should have been.

“For what, Kelly?”

“For...goading you. I shouldn’t have. If I’d known how much this was going to hurt, I wouldn’t have said anything about you and Garrus.”

And there it was, that sickly knife of betrayal -her own- and the strong sense of Mistake that she’d been trying to avoid by censoring her own thoughts.

She thought she should say something understanding and comforting, something a woman would say to another woman in this circumstance.

Instead what she said was, “Sleep this off, Chambers, and get the hell off this planet.”

If there was a response, it came after Shepard had left the room and shut the door.
Chapter 16

Once more into the fray...
Into the last good fight I'll ever know.
Live and Die on this day
Live and die on this day...

-Jon Treloar

Chapter 16

The first thing Garrus registered upon rousing was that in order for him to suddenly start feeling and thinking, he must have just been in a state that prevented him from doing so previously...

He'd been unconscious.

Sounds and smells came first, the taste of something bitter in the back of his throat. Sensations were slower, and he recognized the feel of a paralytic in his system. One talon, one joint, one muscle at a time he urged his brain to overcome the drug and reconnect with various parts of his body.

His hands were manacled, as were his ankles, to a coldly metallic chair. There was a contraption around his jaw and mandibles that let him breathe just fine, but opening his mouth was beyond him.

He was also naked.

Well, that might complicate things...

There came a muffled sound from somewhere beside him, and Garrus managed to crane his neck to see his father, also sans a stitch of clothing, trussed up to another metal chair obviously not meant for turians. Garrus made what noise he could with a tongue and mouth still somewhat numb, and Nomos looked over at his son. He blinked, looked past Garrus, one of the spines of his fringe
twitching in surprise. Garrus turned his head and looked at what had caught his father's attention, and made a strangled sound of his own.

Not two steps away from him, mirroring his uncle and grandfather, was Norius, still out cold. And on the other side of the youth, another short span away and also strapped to a chair, was none other than Spectre Saren Arterius, who was just beginning to stir. Garrus wasn't sure what he expected out if the Spectre as far as reactions went once he was conscious, but the sudden howl of fury was not it.

Within moments, a portion of the ancient stone wall in front of them, aided by modern hydraulics, slid aside. A human in black and white armor stepped through, leveling a heavily modified weapon-a rifle of human design- at Saren's furious face.

"Shut up," the human told the Spectre, using the turian common language with apparent ease. Saren's response was to growl, which earned him a rifle-butt to his left mandible. There was a cracking sound, and Garrus felt a twinge of sympathy as Saren's head snapped to the side, the assaulted mandible clearly fractured. Saren didn't utter a single hiss, either of pain or defiance. The glare he leveled at the human, however, made Garrus go cold.

His point made, the human turned and began to walk out. Norius chose that moment to wake, doing so abruptly rather than sluggishly as the adults had, a detail that told Garrus which drug had been used; a common one utilized mainly for young turians undergoing dental work. Adolescent turian systems absorbed the drug quickly, while changes in an adult's system made the process slower.

Immediately, Norius began to struggle, making loud noises of panic. Garrus did what he could to get the boy's attention, but the human was already striding towards the turian youth, rifle raised-

“That’s enough, Agent Barnes.” The voice was cool, female, and utterly in control. Garrus, being naked and thus without his omnitool’s VI translation, only caught the gist of the command, not the actual words. Even if he hadn’t, however, their effect on the man with the rifle would have given the information needed to infer what the woman now standing in the doorway had said. He stood down immediately, turning from the turian youth to slip past her, back to his post outside.

The female human regarded the prisoners for a moment, and in that time Garrus returned her examination. She was tall by human standards, and slender. Coiled muscle was visible beneath the snug suit she wore, thick dark swaths of the ‘hair’ stuff pulled forward over one shoulder. A sidearm was strapped to one thigh, but her hands were nowhere near it, as if she were ignoring it. No, that was incorrect- she was aware of it, but in the same way someone was aware of their ear. Always there, always ready to be used instinctively, but you didn’t need to constantly fondle it for it to do its job and be there when you needed it. The weapon was an extension of her.
Garrus had learned early on to be wary of people who handled armaments as if they were part of themselves—those were the people who knew how to respect and utilize those weapons to their fullest. Pairing that with the command she had exerted over the male, and the way she coolly surveyed her captives now, Garrus decided that he’d rather not ever have her oppose him personally.

“My apologies for my coworker,” she said, her words now echoed in turian by her omnitool. “You will not be harmed, but you will not be released. I’m sure you can figure out why for yourselves.”

She turned to leave, stopping only when Saren’s gaze managed to catch and hold hers. She hesitated, then left. Saren growled, and Garrus was pretty sure the Spectre would be biting out especially harsh obscenities if the gagging contraption hadn’t been interfering with his ability to speak. Garrus would likely have been doing the same, if he thought there was any point. Instead, he set his energy to a better task; figuring out how to get out of his restraints...

After Shepard left Kelly in a somewhat cared-for state, she retrieved her supplies and, after a quick sweep of the villa so as not to miss anything else useful, she set out back towards the jungle. She had some time to spare before her rendezvous with Anderson, but the last thing she needed was to be found by looters, or a security detail patrolling the abandoned home.

At the crest of a hill near one of the gates that would let her out of cultivated greenery and into wild jungle, she found herself looking back over her shoulder. Despite everything, despite what she’d had to do and despite the fact that the house she looked back on had seen one of her very, very few regrets...she had felt a measure of peace, down there, of...domestication. Something she never thought she’d experience. At least, never something she thought she’d enjoy, to a certain extent. It was...eye-opening. About herself, about her life and where it was going. She supposed she’d always owe that to the Vakarians, whatever else happened.

Just as she was about to turn back to the gate, she spied a flash of light refracting off of something moving, and frowned as the silhouette of a familiar aircar pulled into the long driveway that curved around the side of the villa, to the back entrance and the underground garage. She recognized it as Solana’s personal vehicle.

What was the Vakarian matriarch doing back here? Shepard thought they’d all be sent into seclusion...
Shepard weighed her options. Indecision was not usually one of her mental processes, but she came close to it now. Eventually she decided to go down and see if it really was Solana, and go from there. If nothing else, she felt mildly responsible for the drunken sleeping beauty sequestered inside, and didn’t think it would bode well for the redhead if she were found now.

She made her way down to the garage, keeping out of sight of the security cameras -which were probably deactivated- out of habit. When she reached the garage and came within sight of the sleek blue aircar, she frowned. It was definitely Solana’s. Shepard made her way inside, through the kitchen, a tickle in the back of her mind reminding her that this was how she’d entered the Vakarian home for the very first time. An irrelevant detail, but one that nonetheless made itself known.

She found Solana in Garrus’ room, looking furious- and terrified. The turian woman whirled upon sensing a second presence, and Shepard was reminded of something that had, until now, been an unimportant fact about herself; that annoying ‘vitalia’ various turians had mentioned was unusually strong in her presence. It had alerted Solana to her silent approach.

If any of her future missions involved extreme stealth and turians, this ‘vitalia’ was going to make things difficult on a level she was not going to enjoy, despite her penchant for inviting challenges. But that was something to deal with later. For now...

“What are you doing here?” Shepard asked the woman, in turian. If she was surprised at Shepard’s grasp of the language, she didn’t show it. Perhaps Garrus had told her.

“I could ask you the same,” Solana replied. “I thought my father might have killed you. I hoped he hadn’t. I’m sorry I didn’t stay to find out... I owed you that.”

“You owe your children more,” Shepard conceded. Honestly, it hadn’t even occurred to her to resent her. If it was one thing Shepard understood, it was priorities, and how sometimes the arrangement of them could be...uncomfortable.

Solana trilled her appreciation for Shepard’s understanding. “Speaking of family... Have you seen any of them? Garrus, my father, Norius?”

Shepard frowned, sharply. “I assumed they were with you and Gab. They didn’t catch up with you? Meet you at the haven the Spectre sent you to?”
Solana shook her head. Shepard noted that the other female was dressed...differently. Paying closer
attention, she realized Solana was dressed for trouble. On a human, she would have recognized the
clothing and slight bulges instantly. On a turian, having been immersed in a comfortable, relaxed,
safe family home, it took her an extra moment to process the data and realize that Solana was,
beneath those loose slacks and shirt, armed to the teeth. She quirked an eyebrow at her, and
Solana’s expression hardened.

“I haven’t seen them since they went to look for Norius.”

Shepard’s jaw tightened as she did the mental calculations. Over a day. Garrus, Norius, and Nomos
hadn’t been seen for over a day.

“Any communications?” Shepard demanded. Solana shook her head. “I assume you tried pinging
their omnitools? No GPS data?”

Again, Solana indicated negatives. Shepard scowled.

“I was headed to the ruins,” the turian told her. “I thought I’d start with the last place I know they
were headed to, and stopped here on the way...just in case.”

Shepard nodded, agreeing with the plan. She fixed the woman, the mother, with a hard stare. “You
should be with Gab,” she said. She tilted her head slightly in a manner more reflective of her time
with turians than any human gesture that might have been similar. “Do you trust me?”

Solana blinked, mandibles fluttering at the abrupt question. She exhaled, sharply. “Yes,” she said
name is.”

Shepard grinned despite herself. “Shepard is fine,” she said. “And if you trust me, then go back to
Gabias. I’ll head to the ruins and check things out.” She raised her arm, activating her omnitool. “I’ll
keep in communication with you,” she said. “If I find anything, I’ll let you know.”

Solana hesitated. “I trust your intent, Shepard, but my father and brother are no forces to be
ignored. If something happened to them... I mean no offense, human, but I doubt whatever is
keeping them from contacting me is something you can handle.”
“No offense taken, Solana.” She paused, considering the other woman’s words, then said, “Do you remember the day we met? At the docks?”

Solana nodded, warily.

“What did you think of me then?”

“Before or after you saved my son?”

“Before.”

“I...had no thoughts. I didn’t even notice you.” Solana’s tone and posture indicated she knew she was being led, but not where.

“Don’t you think it’s odd...with all that you know of me now, that when you saw me then, nothing about me stood out?”

“You were just another human,” Solana told her. “No threat, no danger.”

Shepard smiled coldly. “Exactly.”

Solana absorbed the implication. “This isn’t a spaceport, Shepard. This is an ancient ruin, and the remnants of a storm. You can’t fool a storm or dangerous rock or mudslides or wild animals into thinking you’re not dangerous. They don’t care.”

“Do you think any of those things you just listed could keep your father and brother from Norius? From contacting you, or at least making it home? A day is more than enough time for them to have made their way back here.” Shepard was growing impatient, but thankfully she didn’t need to press further. She saw on Solana’s face that the turian had been thinking the things Shepard had just voiced, but hadn’t wanted to believe their likelihood. At last she exhaled, deflating somewhat, and nodded.
“All right,” she said. “Take my aircar, I’ll call a cab.” She raised her omnitool, and sent Shepard the ignition code, as well as the frequency for her personal comm line. “You keep in touch, you hear me? Regular intervals.”

Shepard nodded, quirking a lip at how the motherly tone came so very close to a few drill instructors she’d known. She saw Solana hesitate, then the woman growled low, muttering something the translator didn’t pick up.

“Follow me,” she said tersely. “There’s something else I should give you.”

Curious, and wary by habit, Shepard followed Solana to a storage room.

“The staff doesn’t even know this is here,” Solana told her. “Just my father, Garrus, and myself. Norius would have been shown when he returned from the Academy and could be trusted with the information.” As she spoke, the turian’s three-fingered hand was working at a concealed keypad in the wall. The red holographic interface swapped to green, and a panel in the wall slid aside. Four trays slid out and tilted to an angle easier for viewing what the held; weapons. Big ones. And boxes of thermal clips, heatsinks, ammo cartridges.

“You’re right,” Solana said. “I doubt very much it’s a storm or a rockslide that’s keeping my boys from coming home to me. I’m not going to send you after them with just my brother’s old katar knife.” She nodded to where the blade hung from Shepard’s waist, then gestured to the weapons. “Please tell me you can use at least one of these.”

Shepard, listening with half an ear, was already scanning the weapons in front of her, with both her eyes and her omnitool. At length she reached out and pulled free a long, slender weapon painted dark green and royal blue. Horrible colors for a sniper’s weapon, seeing as blue was a color that would attract more attention than, say, black grey. But it was the closest to the one she’d trained with, according to what the schematics on her omnitool and her own eyes told her. ‘Armax Arsenal,’ the read-out told her, was the manufacturer. This particular model’s name translated to ‘the Punisher.’ Her lips quirked despite herself in amusement.

“That’s my brother’s favorite,” Solana said, voice soft and filled with barely suppressed fear. Here was a woman with iron in her veins, and she was terrified of the fate of her family. Shepard had seen it before...it was one of the reasons she’d never had much interest in family, beyond her unit. It was too big a weakness for someone in her line of work.

“It’ll do,” she said, reaching for the matching back-holster. Once the heavy sniper rifle was settled, she added a pair of pistols to a set of thigh holsters that required no small amount of jerry-
rigging to get them to fit comfortably on her legs. Another knife, this one with a sheath, went to her ankle. Satisfied, she nodded to Solana, who closed the hidden armory up, relocking the panel and leading Shepard out of the storage room, locking it up, too.

Shepard waited until the cab came, partially to make sure Solana wouldn’t change her mind or try following, and partially to make sure she didn’t find Kelly. Once turian woman was out of sight, Shepard headed for the aircar, grabbing extra supplies on the way since she now had a means of carrying it all. She was walking in virtually blind- assuming there was anything to walk into. And, according to the time and the instructions sent by Anderson via that little snippit of music, she was running short on time.

She always had worked best under pressure.

Desolas was exuberant. Elated. Ecstatic. So much time waiting, so much distance covered, so many sleepless nights wasted... And now it all paid off.

It was glorious. The monolith rose before him, sleek and perfect, the epitome of design and technology. It called to him in a way nothing else ever had. Not quite with a voice, more like...guiding emotions. He knew they were not his own, of course, but that didn’t matter. They’d picked him. Among all the ones who had come near it since it’s discovery on Shanxi, it had remembered him, called him from across the galaxy, had chosen him for their emissary. It would be him who led the turian people to greatness, him who welcomed their saviors back into their places as living spirits, true gods.

The humans who guarded this place, this cleverly hidden base, hadn’t been able to stop him, especially not after he’d managed to make his way to the central chamber, where the monolith stood. He was Desolas Arterius, a decorated general for good reason, brother to the best Spectre in centuries- and they hadn’t been expecting him. They’d been cocky. He took injuries, of course, bad ones. He might have died shortly, if his hands on the monolith hadn’t brought their blessing, their restoration and healing. He was more than renewed, now... He was better. He was their Emissary, gifted and blessed by their favor.

The humans who had come against him then had proved useful rather than a nuisance. One by one he picked them off, dragged them to the monolith, forced them to see the beauty they had been trying to hide.
Then the humans were...changed.

Not as he had been changed, of course, not blessed- but cursed. While he grew larger, stronger, faster, they shrunk to skeletal husks of their former selves, armor becoming loose and falling away as it deteriorated around their thinning bodies. He felt them, then, at the edge of his consciousness. He could direct them, he realized, and once he learned how to do so, he laughed and laughed as he sent them against their former compatriots.

Then he had come...not in body, but in voice...

“Desolas.” Jack Harper’s voice resonated in the chamber, over the moans and shrieks of the mindless, cursed humans lumbering around him. They were doing his bidding, dragging the bodies of their fallen former fellows to the monolith- some had life enough left in them to be changed.

“So I see,” the human voice replied. The Emissary’s grasp on reality was...tenuous, but the remnants of his former self recognized the hint of condescension in the human’s tone. Language was no issue- they fed the knowledge of all speaking creatures directly into his mind.

“You don’t realize what you’re doing, Desolas,” the human continued, the patronising tone continuing. “You think you’re doing your people a favor, but you’re wrong. If you continue this, if you do what they want, you’ll be handing the turian people over to be nothing more than a slave army. An army they’ll use against the rest of the galaxy.”

“You’re a fool,” Desolas growled in reply, looking up and around the room at nothing. There were no visible windows or speakers. “This is the future of the turian race...and the human race.” He gestured to one of the stumbling, gape-mouthed humans with blue geometric patterns beginning to spread across his skin. “You cannot stop it.”

There was the sound of a hefty sigh. The Emissary, guided by the monolith, sought out a console.

“You gave me a good run, Jack. Took me over three decades to find you and the monolith.”

“It should have never been found. It was a booby trap, Desolas. They planted them on hundreds of worlds, hundreds of systems, waiting for the day when a new sentient race came across it and let
them know we were ready for harvesting.”

“You’re right,” the Emissary told him, placing his hand directly on the haptic interface of the console, not bothering with the keypads or scanners. He felt his gifts go to work on the console; touch was all that was needed. “You’re so very right, and so very wrong, Jack. It was a beacon, to let them know we were ready for them...that is true. But not for harvesting. For elevation.”

Prompted by his hacking, all the doors to the chamber that had been locked down when he’d made his way here slid open with sharp hisses. He smiled a vicious, toothy grin.

“I found my monolith, Jack,” he said to the air. “But I’ve yet to lay my hands on you. Hide, Harper. For all the good it’ll do you, I suggest you hide.”

Lornas Kuinn looked up in surprise when the doors to her cell abruptly slid open. In fact, all the cell doors were opening... She poked her head out, careful to keep her body angled to the side. All up and down the hall, other captives were cautiously looking out. There was a moment of stunned silence...

Pandemonium broke out, and in an instant the lane of cells was flooded with turians, herself included. Most of them had been removed from their cells and dragged to interrogation chambers often enough to know which way not to go- except that Lornas figured that once the humans who had kept them here realized what had happened, they’d know which way their turian prisoners would have bolted, and they’d all head for that direction.

Whispers between cells said that the other direction, towards the chambers none of them liked to think about, was a dead end. But they were all hooded and gagged when brought there, so she doubted any of them could know for sure. If nothing else, going that way might buy her some time to avoid the panicked throng and whatever trap might lay the predictable way of escape.

So, going as quiet as if she were back home on Rocam catching garden lizards, Lornas made her way down the hall to a large, heavy door at the far end. It, too, stood open, the dark passage beyond it looking foreboding and dim as the lights flickered. She forced herself to breathe evenly, to not flare her mandibles and gasp for breath as she wanted to. There were doors along the length of his second, darkened corridor, which was encouraging. Not a dead end, afterall.
The doors were also open, and as she stepped into the hall, she heard a loud metallic thump emanate from the one at the far end. She jumped, taloned feet scraping on the stone floor. A heartbeat later, there was another metallic thump. She stood, frozen, as the thumping continued. She ducked back into the other hallway, peeking her head around the corner...

She wasn’t meant for this. She was only a backwater colony kid, only in this mess because she’d caught a ride with a less than reputable transport ship that had decided to land just outside the city instead of the main spaceport... When authorities had protested this action right after touch down, she’d bolted into the jungle. She could survive, she knew, it wasn’t that much different from home... Except, at home, there hadn’t been clusters of hostile humans hidden beneath ancient, sacred temples.

The thumping stopped. She looked around the corner again, and her jaw dropped, mandibles flaring wide and tilting down in shock.

There was an adult male turian, naked, bound to a chair, in the middle of the hall. His colony markings put him as a Palaven native, but that didn’t much matter. What did matter was that he’d spotted her, and was making urgent noises behind his gag. She remained frozen for only a moment, then shook herself and ran down the hall to help him.

“What did you do to earn this thing on your face?” She said, coming up beside him. “Bite one of the humans?” Fingers accustomed to working traps and snares set to work removing the gag, dropping it to the floor in disgust once it was free of his face. He worked the kinks out of his jaw, shaking his head back and forth.

“Thanks,” he said, and Lornas felt her crest -which had begun to grow a new set of improper fringe spines during her captivity- flush. His voice...and the Palaven accent... She jumped when he caught her staring, hurrying around behind him both to undo his bindings and so he wouldn’t see her embarrassment.

“What are you doing here?” He asked her.

“Wrong place, wrong time,” she said, almost muttering, suddenly embarrassed of her own backwater colony accent. To keep either of them from dwelling on it she asked, “What about you?”

He snorted. “Pretty much the same.” The bindings came free, and he moved his arms around to his front, flexing the muscles to work out the kinks while she set to work at his ankle restraints. She got the left one undone the same time he handled the right. He stood, stretching.
“What’s your name?” He asked her, heading back into the room he’d chair-hopped out of, which had been what had caused the thumping.


“Nice name,” he said over his shoulder. She saw why he’d gone back in the room; there were two other turians strapped to chairs, an older male and a younger one, both looking furious in general, while also relieved to see her and the male she’d untied. They both also had homeworld markings, in deep blood blue. While her male was untying the older one, she went to the younger.

“Thanks,” she mumbled. “What’s yours?”

“Garrus,” he said. Then, with a pause that matched hers to the millisecond, he added, “Vakarian.” She wasn’t sure if she wanted to be insulted or laugh. She settled for somewhere in between, her left mandible fluttering with wry amusement. His jaw free of the gagging contraption, the younger turian she’d just freed snickered at her expression. She grinned at him before moving on to undo his wrist restraints.

Once all three males were free and stretching cramped limps and jaws, Garrus came and took her by her arm, pulling her aside.

“I want you to do me a favor, Lornas.”

She made the mistake of nodding in agreement before hearing what he wanted. Damn that voice of his... He grinned at her, as if reading her mind.

“You’re going to stay with us while we try to get out of here, but if myself or my father there,” he gestured to the older turian. “Tells you to do something, you do it, understand?”

She bristled. “I can take care of myself,” she said. “Got you out, didn’t I?”

“I would have handled it, though your help was much appreciated,” he said, and for a wonder she believed that he would have handled it. Though, that might have been because she’d believe anything that came out of that mouth...
“Allright,” she agreed. He nodded, and turned to the other two. She noticed rather belatedly that there was a fourth chair with restraints, looking as if they’d been recently occupied. She frowned at it... No, that made no sense, if there had been a fourth turian that had gotten free, he or she would have freed these other three.

Dismissing the fourth chair from her mind, Lornas followed Garrus and his father and the turian her age -Nomos and Norius, they introduced themselves- out of the room and, hopefully, towards freedom.

She couldn’t wait to never run away ever again.
Chapter 17

The general who wins the battle makes many calculations
in his temple before the battle is fought.

The general who loses makes but few calculations beforehand.

'The Art of War' by Sun Tzu

Chapter 17

Jack Harper was the sort of man who grew quieter the angrier he became. His exterior icy calm was proportional to the internal fiery fury, Miranda knew, and at that very moment the man was a veritable frozen sculpture. He hadn't moved a muscle since her entrance and declaration, and she wasn't about to prod him until he thawed himself somewhat.

It had been less than half an hour since the turian-turned-abomination calling himself the Emissary had escaped the central chamber containing the Monolith, and so far none of their -her- security measures had slowed him more than the time it took him to find a console and just...touch it. Even her tactic of remotely de-activating them had bought mere seconds, no more. Ordering the security forces to fill the consoles full of mass-accelerated bullet shavings hadn't done much, either. The Emissary would simply find a few wires, grip them, and the next obstacle in his way would be removed.

Miranda might have been nervous if she hadn't been so damn furious. Jack had seemed surprised by none of this, so if he'd known what they'd potentially face why the hell hadn't he warned her? Miranda Lawson was also the sort of person who would display calm silence when at her most irate. It made for very quiet arguments.

Eventually, right when her duty would have made her speak again, he rose to his feet, approached one of the many panels in the walls of the control room, and retrieved his hard suit hidden behind it. While he donned it, still without having spoken a word, she monitored the situation throughout the base via direct info feeds to her omnitool.
"Damn it," she muttered, seeing the Emissary and the flood of stumbling blue thralls trailing after him. A few still wore pieces of armor. Their little operation had never been affluent enough to provide their employees and agents with uniforms or issue unit hardsuits, so the armor components she saw were mismatched in color and quality, but each one meant an enemy that would be just slightly harder to take down.

The data scrolling across multiple holographic screens provided cold numbers as well as video, and Miranda felt her fear -and thus her fury- ratchet up a notch. If the counts were correct, over seventy-five percent if their forces had been corrupted, turned against them. Moreover, they were headed for the escape route Miranda had thought secure. It wasn't compromised yet, but a glance at another screen told her that the forces she had set to hold the route were depleted by half. A quick scan of the base's departure logs told her where they'd gone- fled into the Palaven jungle.

Jack was in his hardsuit by the time she was done reviewing how fucked they were. He gave her a grim, tight-lipped nod and she turned to lead him out, feeling the hum of her biotics as she went.

If she got him out of this alive, she was demanding a pay raise.

Neither Garrus or his father were strangers to high-tension environments. Both had served their mandatory term in the military, and in the elder's case had never left. In the younger's case, he'd simply moved to a different sort of warfront; the Citadel. Corporate crimes possessed their own sort of brutality, and could lack the comparative simplicity of war, with the loss of limbs replaced with loss of livelihoods. Add in the depravity of the spirit that was a part of any densely populated metropolis, crime syndicates like the Traders, and Garrus could say with a measure of certainty that his eyes had seen their own share of horrors.

What father and son beheld now, however, challenged every definition the males had held regarding the words ‘carnage’ and ‘nightmare’ as they surveyed the scene behind a set of hydraulic doors. Bodies both human and turian were sprawled, broken and bloody, down a long stone corridor. The few lights that remained were dim and flickered rapidly, making it difficult to discern the color of the sea of blood that soaked the earthen floor. Blue in one area, red in another, and a sickly mixture of clotted purple where the opposing amino acids mingled together. The shrieks the jammed doors had given off when being pried open echoed down the hall, gaining an almost organic sound as it reverberated between stone and earth and dead things.
There was a third sort of corpse choking the hall, as well. Something ungainly and skeletal, both human and turian, with gaping mouths and wide, sunken eye sockets. Their grey flesh seemed to crawl with lines of blue-black insects burrowed just beneath the skin, and Garrus thought that there was something not quite thoroughly dead about the way those pitted eyes seemed to watch them.

"Oh, Spirits..." Lornas, the runaway they'd acquired, breathed sharply. Norius said nothing, but the faint hum of his youthful vitalia spiked sharper than anyone else's.

"Just corpses," Nomos muttered firmly, and stepped through the doors ahead of his grandfather and uncle. His boots squelched in the mire of spilt entrails and gobbets of shredded organs. Fresh, rank smells rose to fill the air every time he took a step. For a heartbeat, Garrus saw the handiwork of the Traders. As Nomos pulled his grandson behind him, Garrus nudged the runaway out into the hall, bringing up the rear himself. The arrangement was automatic on the part of the adults; dead or not, the bodies exuded a menace neither had ever felt from anything living.

This was, of course, the only way out. They'd been lucky beyond explanation when they'd found a terminal still powered by a dead repairman's portable generator. The struggling little power source had given enough juice for Garrus to find and download a portion of the base's blueprints, and that slice of map had contained one , and only one, viable way out. This way. Through a veritable nightmare of gore and destruction.

"How is this place even here?" Norius asked, his voice hoarse, a rough whisper that made him sound older. Nomos exchanged a glance with his son, over his shoulder and over the heads of the two adolescents. They both knew that such a question, however valid and heavy in their minds, was pointless until they'd returned to civilization. But in the interest of keeping the younger boy sane, they talked of it anyway.

"This base is a good ways beneath the surface," Nomos told his grandson, voice analytical and cold. Garrus knew that his father would be taking the existence of a secret human base on Vakarian soil as a deeply personal affront. "I doubt the geological surveys of the temple ever went this deep, since they would have been concerned with damaging the ruins without cause."

"That might explain how they've stayed hidden, but not how they got down here in the first place."

Garrus looked, with mild surprise, at Lornas. She had a firmly puzzled look fixed to the jut of her brow ridges, one that abruptly reminded him of Gabias. It was the same look his younger nephew wore when presented with a particularly interesting -and perplexing- situation. And the question at hand was definitely interesting and perplexing.
"My guess is that some serious money changed hands. Probably used the cover of the contractors we hire to periodically clear the jungle growth away from the temple." Garrus would have to make it a goal to have a chat with a few key personnel in that contractor's employ.

"Possible," his father conceded, which was a surprise seeing as he himself had screened the company, and the elder Vakarian was ever reluctant to admit fault in anything. In his father’s defense, Garrus had rarely known him to be at fault in the first place. In addition, their current predicament wasn’t exactly conducive to arguing, not with the contents of a turian stomach clinging to the wall beside him, along with the pulverized stomach itself.

Nomos continued, “I’m more concerned with the ‘why.” He paused to kick the torso of a human aside, ignoring the sounds of distress from Lornas and his grandson at the sight of long lengths of slick entrails slipping free with the movement. “The amount of coordination and foresight needed to get a place like this up and running, without the knowledge of the Hierarchy, is...”

“Disconcerting.” Garrus finished. “Whatever goal they had in mind can’t be good for us.” Garrus saw his father nod his agreement, but said nothing.

The other end of the hellish corridor was blockaded by a pile of more bodies and a mobile shield generator, a bastard model comprised of a mishmash of turian and batarian tech. Garrus doubted the thing would have withstood a single shot, but its dead projector arms were sturdy enough to use to gain leverage in the door’s sparking crack. Thankfully, the door wasn’t jammed as its twin had been, simply too damaged to open on its own. A fraction of Garrus’ strength had the thing flying open, just in time to admit a shambling, howling, faintly turian-shaped blue figure into their midsts.

Norius gave a wordless shriek, Lornas screamed, Garrus cursed as he shoved the flailing thing off him, warding off its surprisingly forceful blows with quick blocks of his own. It stumbled back, straight into his father’s arms, where its neck was promptly seized and snapped by Nomos. It crumbled, the end of a wailing roar dying in its throat. All four living turians stared at it for a long, poignant moment.

“Yeah,” Garrus said, peering down at the thing as it twitched. “I think that definitely counts as ‘not good for us.’”
In another time, another place, with different people, Saren Arterius would have considered this an ‘interesting’ day. But this wasn’t another time, this was now. This wasn’t another place, this was Palaven, the homeworld. And this wasn’t different people, this was his brother.

His brother, and his hoard of howling, mindless creatures. Saren had tracked Desolas through the converted underground ruins to this chamber, a storage room of some sort. His brother was standing to the side, seemingly in a trance while the shambling blue enemy units tore apart crates and boxes and shipping compartments. They moved with a synchronization that made Saren think that his brother’s ‘trance’ had something to do with it. This theory was tested and proven when Saren emerged from his hidden observation, and all activity halted in absolute uniformity. Not even a growl or shuffled footfall could be heard. For half a heartbeat the world was frozen in time, which was all the time that Saren needed to feel the room, count his opponents, analyze the now unfamiliar visage of his brother, and come to calculated conclusion that he was wasting his time.

“I knew you’d follow after me,” Desolas spoke, and it wasn’t the voice Saren had heard since boyhood. This was an alien voice, something that reverberated against the stone walls and seemed designed to elicit genetically ingrained fear responses.

“I had to see for myself that you were beyond redemption. You’ve been foolish, brother, and I cannot help you anymore. You’ve turned your back on your people with this stupidity, and I won’t be dragged down with you.”

It was as if Desolas hadn’t heard him. “They have plans for us, brother. Such glorious plans... Not just for the turian people, Saren, but for us... They know of you, through me... They want you.”

Saren had dealt with his share of insane leaders before, and on a level this was no different. On another level, it was very different.

“Come with me, and I will see what I can do to ensure your dignity and honor are maintained.”

Desolas turned his gaze, icy and unnaturally blue, to Saren, and said in that ominous voice, “A pity.”

The blue horde came to life again with hollow howls and thunderous footsteps as, in unison, they rushed Saren. The Spectre, one of the greatest, took barely a glance at what was flooding towards him, did the observational math in a fraction of the time it took for the mass to take single steps. He knew then what he’d known when he’d first observed the room; he was beat before a single blow had been exchanged. With a furious growl that was swallowed by the echoing snarls of the advancing thralls, Saren Arterius turned and fled.
The storm that was brewing made the one she'd weathered with Garrus beneath an ancient, ruined roof look like a spring shower. Torrential rains had become visible on the horizon as she'd driven the mustang around a bend, shielding the distant mountains from view behind a curtain of ominous grey. The storm front rolled closer, visibly, even as Shepard guided the aircar through a gap in the jungle canopy, and she resigned herself to the fact that she now had nature’s wrath to deal with as well as a turian family to locate.

“It never rains, but it pours,” she muttered under her breath with no small amount of irony lacing her voice. She moved the aircar carefully between two thick tree trunks, hoping the ancient flora would shield the vehicle from the worst of the storm. Aside from not wanting the thing destroyed beyond all repair, it would be convenient to actually have a getaway vehicle should it prove necessary to have one.

She kept one hand resting readily on the butt of the rifle slung to one side, her other arm raised with the glow of the omni tool’s navigation interface turning the foliage around her from deep greens and browns to mottled shades of orange. The bulk of her supplies she’d left in the aircar, the few things she’d brought attributed to common sense and personal experience; the weapons, the omnitool, first aid kit (such as it was), a few umino bars, a canteen of water. The basics- defense, medicine, food, water. No matter how far technology advanced, any land-living- sentient species worth its salt -or species equivalent- could survive with the basics.

She found the ruins more easily than she expected to, and was suspicious when she realized there was absolutely nothing amiss. The wind was barely discernable this deep in the jungle, and the rain had yet to reach the Vakarian lands- if Norius or his uncle or grandfather had made it out here, there should have been tracks. But there was nothing marring the loose soil surrounding the crumbling ruins, no prints, no broken twigs, tangled vines, or disturbed ferns. Even the pattern of back-drafts from the hovercar engine she’d and photographed on her last visit was gone. It was pristine, as if no one and nothing living had come this way since the temple had been abandoned.

Which meant she was in the right place. She knew first hand, from her few days hiding in the wild, that there was too much wildlife activity in the area for a place like this to be untouched. This level of ‘perfectly natural’ was a ruse. A good one, but she’d bet a ruse nonetheless.

Shepard set for the temple entrance, her intuition telling her that Solanna had been right to be as worried as she’d been, even if -so far- all Shepard had to go on was a lack of dinosaur shit.
Inside, she had to initiate her omnitool’s torch function, illuminating the cavern in a steady, eerie orange glow. She examined the ground closely, noting that the layer of dust was perfectly even. No trace of any passage, human or animal or turian. Even the marks from hers and Garrus’ scuffle were no longer discernable. Their visit had been long enough ago that it was possible simple time had camouflaged those marks, but even so there should have been something...she couldn’t even locate a bug carcass. And Palaven had big bugs.

Exploration showed that there were four halls leading off the main chamber, one at each corner, which lined up with Palaven’s equivalent of the cardinal directions. One had collapsed, and judging from how settled the rubble was, how caked with mud and seedlings, it had collapsed a while ago. A second and third corridor led out and down into darkness, but the fourth...

About a dozen steps into the fourth hall, the one pointing the local equivalent of west, was a wall. The stones were segmented in precisely the same shape and size as the others that comprised the rest of the temple, the same color and even texture, worn and cracked. Something about the wall caught and held Shepard’s interest, the children’s singsong phrase ‘one of these things is not like the others’ running through her head as she compared this hall to her mental schematic of the other three. Even the collapsed hall had crumbled further back than this wall stood. Her hands skimmed the surface of the stones, sensitive fingers trained to feel for hair-thin trip wires telling her that her eyes were not lying, this was a simple stone wall.

In the end, it was the dust. In a place as ancient and unkempt as this, any ninety-degree angle formed by wall and floor should have long ago been rendered a slope by the dust and dirt that would have filled the space. The walls to her right and left demonstrated this- there were no angles, only piles of dirt hard-packed into the corners. But the space beneath this wall in front of her was a clean right angle.

It was a false wall.

At the precise moment when Shepard stood back, convinced she now only had to find out how to open said false wall, her theory was proven when the wall itself moved, revealing a tall, visibly irate turian in a slate grey hardsuit. Both the human and the turian took abrupt steps back, eyeing one another. Weapons came to hand with the ease of practice honed to instinctual levels. With him in armor, and she in pants and tank tee, she was already aware of their inequality before factoring in the height, the armaments, and the Spectre insignia emblazoned on his shoulder. It was the insignia that sparked her memory once paired with the odd configuration of his mandibles.

“Arterius,” she greeted, keeping her tone amiable enough to be an almost amusing contrast to their circumstance.

“You know my name,” he responded.
“Willing to bet you don’t know mine.” He hadn’t lowered his pistol a millimeter. She didn’t lower her rifle.

“If I wagered, you’d win that bet.” There was interest in his gaze, for a moment, but it was damped beneath an icy gaze almost instantly. “If there was adequate time, I’d demonstrate why it is a suicidal idea to level a weapon in my direction. Since, however, time is rather short I’ll make you this one time, very rare offer; stand down, and I won’t waste the time it would take to kill you.”

“Counter offer. You holster yours, I holster mine, you tell me why you’re in such a hurry, and we both go on our merry way.”

He shifted his weight forward, bringing the barrel of his pistol close enough to her face for her to read the specs stenciled on the sides.

“I don’t recall opening the floor to debates.”

Further discussion was prevented by a sudden howl, emanating from deep in the hall behind Saren. It was high, and hoarse, and sounded like every bad horror vid sound effect blended into one. Her distraction was miniscule, but enough for someone like Saren. He knocked her rifle to the side, backhanded her across the face, and took himself swiftly past her and out of the temple while her skull was ringing. She didn’t waste breath or focus on expletives, but on clearing her head with breathing exercises. Blood dripped down her face from the scrapes left by Saren’s armored knuckles, deep enough she thought they might scar. Not that it much mattered, with the side of her face still ensconced in burn tissue.

Once her equilibrium balanced itself out, she swiped at the blood with the back of her hand, checked her weapon, and set on down the hall with the sound of that inhuman shriek echoing around her.

"They're looking for something," Garrus stated, his tone dark. They'd come this far, through a nightmare of gore and very real monsters, only to find their way to freedom blocked by a room full of the things Garrus was certain he’d know by smell alone for the rest of his life.
“Something large,” confirmed Nomos. The hall they’d been traversing had led them to a second-level walkway of sorts, overlooking a storage chamber where the sea of moaning blue forms were tearing open any container larger than a standing turian. At the far end the room, a larger turian with familiar features stood surveying the frantic search.

“What do we do now?” Norius and Lornas were kept back, away from the edge of the walkway that Garrus and his father had crawled to, to get a better look. His whisper was barely audible. When the two adults made their way silently back to the threshold of the door, out of sight of the masses below, Norius repeated his question.

“We wait,” his grandfather answered, and Garrus shook his head.

“We should double back,” he dissented. “I can find another terminal, maybe one with a better map. There’s no telling how long those things will be down there, and no way to tell if they’ll come up here looking for their target. If they do, we’ve got nowhere to go.”

“There are no cargo containers up here,” his father argued, with the same tone of stretched, condescending patience Garrus had heard his whole life. He stiffened, and prepared to push his point when the impending argument was derailed by a single, piercing, shrieking whistle from below.

“Stay,” his father commanded absently, and moved to skulk to the edge of the walkway again. Garrus, of course, promptly ignored him and followed after.

One of the larger crates in a far corner had been dragged free of its surroundings, towards the rough middle of the chamber. Empty cargo containers were shoved messily aside by flailing limbs, until Garrus and Nomos had a good view of what was being pulled free of the larger compartment.

“Careful!” The larger turian boomed, and at once the stumbling mass of human and turian thralls froze. They continued, slower, the ones immediately beside the artifact suddenly much more coordinated. Shambling or no, they were unproportionally strong, as evidenced by the fact that only a few of them were required to haul free their prize of its container, and stand it upright.

“Spirits...” Garrus swore lightly. “Is that...?”

“A Prothean beacon.”
The blue creatures moved aside in unison, and the larger turian advanced towards the beacon. Garrus got a better look at him, and swore more colorfully. Desolas Arterius. With his own set of blue-black, metallic veins etched along his neck and right mandible, across his temples. What was he doing here, of all places? At least that explained Saren’s presence...

Abruptly, the beacon began to pulse a faint green, and the light flared as Desolas approached.

“A functional Prothean beacon.” Nomos’ addendum was punctuated by Desolas being suddenly snatched up into the air by an invisible fist. He gave an inarticulate cry that sounded half computerized, hanging there for several heartbeats before the veridian light vanished as abruptly as it had displayed itself, and Desolas fell heavily to the floor. After a moment, the crowd around him began to move in jerks and spasms. Two turian-shaped creatures came forward, lifting Desolas onto their shoulders, and carried him from the chamber. At length, the masses began to follow, shambling out after what had to be their master.

“As I said,” came his father’s quiet voice. “We wait.”

“What was that light?” Lornas asked, quietly from the door behind them.

Nomos and Garrus exchanged glances. For once, Garrus’ mind wasn’t on his frustration with his father’s persistence at always being right.

“No idea,” Garrus admitted. “But I’m pretty sure it’s not good.” His eyes were on the doors below leading into the chamber. There were two, one of which hadn’t been visible from his vantage point before so many crates had been moved. It was the one that was now opening. The hall beyond it was shadowed, so at first the slight glint of blue had him thinking it was a shambler come back, or else lost and wandering like the ones they’d encountered before.

Instead, the bit of blue proved to be from a very familiar sniper rifle, the butt of which was visible over a shoulder. A human shoulder. A human female shoulder.

Garrus felt, more than saw, his father go rigid beside him, a cold sort of stiffness that throughout Garrus’ childhood had always preluded brief, but intense bouts of violence. Sometimes verbal only, sometimes not, but always painful.

“Steady,” Garrus said automatically. He heard his father’s jaw tighten, but the man didn’t move. They watched Shepard step warily into the chamber, clearing her surroundings with sweeps of a
Haliat Stiletto that also looked very familiar. Its mate was strapped to a thigh, he saw, along with an antique knife with a distinctive hilt. She’d found the family armory. And kept his knife. Not that he was surprised at the latter- it was a good knife, she’d be a fool to throw away a good weapon.

They watched her find the beacon, eye it with minimal curiosity before she continued to survey the room. She was about to round the crate the beacon had been held in when she spotted them while scanning the catwalk. He watched her stance shift, watched her move her feet to duck behind the crate before recognition registered. She relaxed, slightly, raising her free arm to gesture-

Green light bloomed behind her, and before anyone could so much as shout, Shepard was hauled into the air in the same manner as Desolas, back arched and a scream of both startlement and pain torn from her throat. The Stiletto fell from her grasp, clattering to the floor. Garrus was on his feet, heading for the steps that would take him down to the ground floor-

Nomos slammed into his son, pinning him in place against the wall.

“Don’t be foolish,” his father snapped. Garrus wrested free, and used the gift of youth and speed to evade further attempts to stop him. As his foot hit the lower level floor, the green light vanished, its leaving accompanied with a loud snap, crack, and boom, followed by an audible thud, a body hitting the ground. Crates blocked Shepard and the bacon from Garrus’ view until he’d dodged around them and vaulted over a few others. He smelled blood in the air, and something like a prelude to a thunderstorm. The beacon was smoking, charred cracks marring its previously smooth surface. Garrus doubted it’d light up ever again.

Shepard’s body came into view, and he stopped, surveying where she lay crumpled, her clothes singed and smoking in some places.

And beyond her, filling the other doorway, stood a cluster of those spirits-damned blue creatures, human and turian both. Their gaze was locked on Shepard. Over their heads, Garrus spied a larger turian thrall, one with bits of mismatched armor. It flared its mandibles, jagged, broken teeth snapping at the air. He roared, and the dead things shot forward with surprising speed, straight for Shepard.

Garrus sprinted.
Chapter 18

I wear this crown of thorns
Upon my liar's chair
Full of broken thoughts
I cannot repair

-'Hurt' Johnny Cash

Chapter 18

In the way of the only semi-conscious human mind, time was both speeding and crawling by. Shepard, in the fleeting, accidental moments when she remembered who she was, knew that whatever was happening to her was not something she was likely to survive. Beneath the deluge of incomprehensible information being forced into her brain, a small fragment of the sentient homo sapien found it mildly ironic that she had survived bullets, explosions, torture, espionage gone wrong, incensed drill sergeants, batarian raiders, the war, a suicide mission, N7 training... Only to be put down by what amounted to a corrupted file download and hard drive incompatibility.

Data and unintelligible information, seeking any available space, began to overwrite the minuscule corner of her awareness. There was no resisting it, there was no stopping it.

Then, whatever had been 'downloading' finished...and began to extract itself forcibly into the folds of already overloaded grey matter. Amid the flashes of images and echoes of inhuman screams stemming from memories that were not her own, Shepard realized that the hell that was her own mind was just beginning.

Garrus reached Shepard’s inert form just as the first of the indigo monstrosities stumbled within a few steps of her. He scooped up the dropped pistol, aimed, fired, the familiar recoil shivering up his arm, and the nearest attacker fell with a hole in its forehead and a spray of blue, red, and grey flying out behind it. A glance at the ammo readout told him his clip was full, minus the shot he’d just taken. That meant either she hadn’t encountered anything that needed shooting on her way to the chamber, or the other pistol was empty.

There was no time to check either scenario, as the rest of the horde neared. He adjusted his footing and grip, and set to making sure they got no closer. The rhythm of his own weapon, the lack of guilt for killing mindless thralls, the safety of his family on the line, all combined into an odd mix of severity and elation. There was nothing but the pull of the trigger, the chambering of a mass accelerated bullet shaving, the smooth recoil, the notice of a slight misalignment of the scope that he had no time to adjust, and the next target. There was a distinct lack of smugness that usually came with hitting his marks so perfectly, however, as he realized that with so many still coming he’d have to sacrifice accuracy for speed. The rapidly lowering number on his ammo counter was also helping kill his buzz.

He spared a glance down at the human he was standing over, and gave her a solid kick in her hip.
There was no time for gentleness or finesse. He could see far enough down the hall that the creatures were coming from to tell he probably had enough rounds left to take care of those he could see. But if there were more around the bend... When his bullets ran out, if the other pistol wasn’t full, they’d be in trouble. His rifle, which he could see was still strapped to her back, wasn’t meant for close range.

He’d gone back to shooting, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Shepard’s form shift. Thinking she was waking, he opened his mouth to snap something, then caught sight of a second form behind him. For a half a heartbeat he thought the creatures had somehow flanked him, then he recognized Nomos.

“Let’s go!” The elder Vakarian commanded. He had Shepard slung over a shoulder, Garrus saw when he glanced behind him, and was making his way back towards the stairs up to the catwalk. Not willing to question providence when it decided to smile on him for once, Garrus began to retreat after his father, keeping an eye on the frontline of advancing shamblers and taking out the ones that got too close. At the stairs the things would be forced into a bottleneck, and Garrus could conserve ammo by being more precise again. It would also, hopefully, buy them time to figure out how to get the hell out of this place.

They reached the stairs, and Nomos’ long legs ate up the steps three at a time. He focused on the situation, the problem at hand and how to handle it, and not the fact he’d just assisted his son in rescuing the individual responsible for the deaths of several members of his former crew, as well as his own incarceration, illness, and separation from his family.

The individual responsible for his absence from his wife's death and funeral.

He told himself he’d sort out the issues later, but on the lower levels of his multi-valenced thoughts he thought that it would be rather odd to someday kill something he had saved. More than odd-illogical. He glanced back at his son, and exhaled a growl. Sometimes, logic was damned inconvenient.

He reached the top of the steps, where his grandson was brandishing a knife he’d acquired, and the runaway girl a piece of debri with a jagged edge. No self respecting Turian would be caught without a weapon for long when outside the sanctity of home. He nodded at the two, then deposited the human non-too-gently on the floor in the doorway. He removed the second pistol from a makeshift thigh holster as he did so. He could hear the rapport of the other pistol, steady and measured, coming from midway up the steps. Nomos turned to see his son backing up the stairs, taking out the abominations that followed. They were coming faster than he would have liked, but they hampered their own efforts with scrambling over one another to get up to their quarry. If they’d had the intelligence, they would have seen that following up the steps in the first place was a bad idea, but shoving and flailing against each other as they were was even more counterproductive. Like they were, the hardest thing Garrus had to deal with was tracking their unpredictable movements.

In the pack slung over the human's shoulder, beside the rifle, Nomos found spare ammo clips. Nomos took a stance at the top of the stairs, and set to thinning the tide. He shifted out of the way as Garrus reached the top and joined him, handing him a clip which Garrus promptly swapped with the spent one. It was then that Nomos realized the boy had held out the weapon for the last few moments as a bluff, to see if the creatures would be slowed by the mere threat.

“Of all the foolish, irresponsible, moronic-”
“Lecture me later, dad,” Garrus responded through clenched mandibles, with a tone that wasn’t remotely appropriate from a son to a father. Nomos ground his own teeth, resisting the urge to snap at his offspring. Both of them brandishing fully loaded weapons, they set to picking the things off the stairwell as they advanced.

“What are you doing? Do even know how to use that thing?”

“No, but you should, you’re about to go to Academy, right? Thought Homeworld boys like you got special training early on?”

Nomos glanced over his shoulder, as did Garrus, both too intent on the moment to display the annoyance they felt at a distraction. Lornas, the young female, was removing the long-barreled rifle from the human’s back, pulling ammo clips from the pack. She handed the rifle to Norius, muzzle first. The youth jumped out of the way, grabbing the barrel and directing it out over the room full of enemies.

“Watch it!” He snapped, then pulled it from her grip, muttering something as he also took the clips and began to load it, albeit with the slowness of someone lacking familiarity.

“Norius,” Garrus called. “Come here.” He kept shooting right up until his nephew came up, rifle pointed down. "Change places with me.” At Norius' sudden limp-mandible expression Garrus added, " You're better with this Stilleto, and I'm better with my rifle. And I have an idea."

Norius's jaw clicked shut, and he took his incle's place, pistol in hand.

"Normally I would instruct you to aim for the chest, as it is a larger target and easier to hit. However, only shots to the head seem to affect these...things.” Nomos grimaced- in all his career, he’d never had to use a word like 'things' as the best descriptor. It rankled of generality, where he like specifics. For now, though, it couldn't be helped. He kept shooting, careful with his shots. He'd only seen one more clip per pistol in the pack. Behind them, he heard Garrus curse over the rifle. Beside him, Norius acknowledged his grandfather's words with a curt nod, and proceeded to carefully -and somewhat slowly- help his grandfather keep the things back. They were coming much slower now, hindered by their own fallen dead.

With the new slowness of their enemy, enough of Nomos thoughts were freed up to wonder, briefly, just how he'd ended up here, with this particular set of individuals, facing this predicament. It was all extremely odd, even among the horrors he’d seen in his time. He thought that this was something the Hierarchy would have to disclose to the Council, once he’d made his report.

There was a roar from the far side of the room, and something about it made the spines of his fringe stand on end. A glance at Garrus showed him his son had tinkered with his rifle as much as he could without a workbench and tools, and now had it set on the metal railing, kneeling to peer through the scope. Garrus was a noted marksman and sniper, he knew. It would have been something worth being proud of if the boy hasn't disregarded that skill and turned down countless offers of promotions to special teams in favor of a life at C-Sec. Citadel Security was a fine calling, but Nomos knew the honor of the work had had very little to do with his son's choice.

“What is that?” The girl, Lornas, exclaimed. The origin of the roar came into view, and Nomos let slip a curse he hadn’t uttered in the presence of family since his own youth. It was another of the turian-shaped thralls, but bigger, and with a nearly full set of armor.

“Dead,” Garrus responded, and the rapport of his rifle rang out in the chamber. The oversized turian’s head rocked back, but he did not fall. Nomos, almost absentmindedly, took out a blue human that had ascended too far up the stairs for comfort. Norius took out a second. A second shot
echoed from Garrus’ weapon, this time to the chest, made it stumble, but no more.

A surge of blue limbs came up the stairs, and all of Nomos’ attention was caught up in taking down the ones that his grandson missed. An ominous click from beside him let him know Norius had run to empty, and out of his peripheral vision he saw the youth fumble for his last clip. Behind him he heard Garrus take a third shot. The monstrosity was closer to the stairs now, and Nomos didn’t need to turn to see it fall to its knees. A fourth shot to its head, like the first, and it crumbled.

Then something odd happened. All the other creatures in the room...stopped. Frozen in place, some of them, others teetering as they suddenly stopped moving while in precarious positions.

“Well that’s interesting,” Garrus said in a tone that was entirely too genuinely fascinated.

“What happened to them?” Norius wondered aloud.

“Hive mind,” Nomos ventured, with little doubt given what he’d just witnessed. He reached back to Lornas. “Give me that,” he said, and took the long jagged piece of metal she’d been brandishing, and used it to prod at one of the blue creatures that had come near. It toppled backwards, taking a few of the ones that had been behind it down as well. When they didn’t move beyond what he’d inflicted, he set above shoving them further down the stairs. Behind him, Garrus set Norius to the task of watching over the room with his rifle in hand while he came down and helped his father to shove the unresisting creatures down into a pile at the base of the steps. When that was done, he set to hacking at their more vulnerable parts with the jagged length of metal.

“What are you doing? We should be getting out of here.”

“Can’t leave them behind to pursue,” Nomos said between grunts of effort. He heard a sigh, and turned to see his son trudging back up the steps, then down a moment later carrying a knife, and not the one Norius had found. it was one of Garrus’ own, one of the traditional ones. He frowned.

“You had that on you?”

“No,” he said, and offered no further explanation, instead moving to help his father disable the thralls with well placed hacks and slices.

That they’d both opted for this ammo-saving method without speaking of it showed a measure of likemindedness Nomos had once hoped to find but had thought he might not. Nomos gave a grunt, and returned to his task, Garrus beside him.

An hour or so -it was hard to tell- had passed since Garrus had laid eyes on Shepard, time that he’d had to let the whys and hows of her arrival stew in the back of his mind while he kept watch for the next overgrown turian alpha. It became a simple enough routine- watch for the next alpha, take him down before he could regain complete control of the creatures Nomos hadn’t managed to hack or stab sufficiently. Their munitions had lasted them far longer this way, but it still wouldn’t last forever. Eventually, Garrus theorized, one of the alphas would come with a new horde already enthralled, and Garrus would be out of rifle rounds. That was worst case scenario. Best case scenario was that the limited population of this underground facility had been exhausted already and now lay in various states of dismemberment around the chamber.
With Garrus’ luck, they’d end up somewhere nearer the more unpleasant of the two options.

Attempts to leave the chamber proved difficult. Twice now new alphas had entered, once from each exit, making either route an equal gamble. There were no working terminals in the room for Garrus to access for new maps, and his knowledge of the base from his previous glimpse was sketchy. Both he and his father were reluctant to give up the strategic high ground they'd made for themselves without more information, but time was running out- in combat, time could be measured in direct proportion to your supplies and ammo, and both were lower than the two veterans liked. The umino bars found in Shepards pack were long gone.

"I'm heading back," Garrus said. The declaration, though softly spoken, broke the tense silence like a rock through a glass pane.

"I did not see any likely exits." Nomos was regarding him with level blue eyes.

"Neither did I," he responded. "But we weren't exactly taking our time to explore, either. If nothing else maybe I can find another terminal." He looked to Shepard's prone form, still where she'd been dropped by Nomos. Her limbs had been repositioned to something that looked mildly more comfortable, but Nomos certainly hadn't been the one to do it, and Garrus hadn't -still couldn't- quite bring himself to touch her. He’d suspected the runaway girl of tending to the human, since she seemed the type. Now, however, he caught Norius checking Kris- Shepard's pulse, feeling her brow for a temperature. Garrus felt mild surprise at the sight, then remembered his nephew was close to graduating and entering the Hierarchy military, and as such he would have had classes on humans, and recently. He wondered of it was curiosity or duty that made the youth check on her.

Garrus stood, tearing his attention away from the silent alien. He was surprised his father hadn't argued, or said much of anything, but decided not to question small mercies. He handed his rifle to his father, who took it in an experienced grip and began, almost absentmindedly, to adjust the sights. It was common knowledge that Garrus hadn't gotten his crackshot skills from his mother.

"Spirits' luck!" Lornas blurted as he passed her, and despite everything he cracked a grin.

"Thanks," he said, and palmed the control panel for the door they'd locked behind them. It cycled open, and he went through into the dim hall of scattered body parts and sparking wires.

Someone was there with her, in the darkness. Or a shadow of someone. Someone she'd never met, who'd died millennia ago, but whom she knew as well as she knew herself.

He was speaking to her, a stream of consciousness her mind turned into words. Words she somehow understood without remembering learning the language. It wasn't the syllables she understood, she realized, but the intent behind them. Like their minds were linked.

'No, not linked,' he said. 'Shared.'

'How?'

'It does not matter. This is all that matters.'

It wasn't dark, anymore. Fire lit an alien skyline, the screams of millions shredding eardrums that didn't actually exist.

'What's happening?' She demanded. The pressure...her skull was too small, her brain too slow...
'The end,' he said. 'Though, if you can learn from our failures, not yours.'

And he showed her the death of a galaxy.

He took only the knife with him. If the others were attacked, it would be en masse and they'd need the projectile weapons more than him.

The dark, empty halls were, in a word, spooky. He was secure enough in his masculinity to admit it to himself- there was something otherworldly about this place. The fact that he knew it had once been the site of an ancient, barbaric temple to primitive and violent gods didn't help. It was as if they still held sway here, and were extracting their revenge for being forgotten on the flies that had stumbled into what remained of their web.

Spooky.

The smell, however, did wonders for distracting his imagination. He'd never thought the scent of rotting Turian body parts could be outdone, but he'd been wrong. The stench of rapidly decomposing human remains made what he'd smelled of the Traders' work back on the Citadel a veritable *bouquet* by comparison.

He explored every doorway, every corridor, working his way back towards the holding cells. Most doors led to dim rooms where his omnitool illuminated labs, desks, sleeping quarters. He found two terminals that hadn't been self-destructed or riddled full of holes, but both were offline and he found no more cobbled-together generators to bring them to life. The only thing that gave him encouragement was that he noticed he was steadily going up. Not by much, but it appeared that the chamber with the beacon was at a deeper level than where he was now. It made sense that any exit would be closer to the surface, not further down. So he kept on.

The place was bigger than he'd initially anticipated, too. Most halls and rooms were the original temple architecture, stone and earth with pipes and power lines grafted to the ceilings and walls, with only the core of the place sporting paneled floors and walls. He estimated that the place had held only a fraction of the population it was capable of, and it made him wonder what the people who'd built the place had had in mind...

Sounds reached him, the barest disturbance of the air. He might have chalked it up to his stimulated imagination except this his eyepiece had informed him that the sound waves were indicative of footsteps. Very, very quiet footsteps

Garrus ducked into an alcove of intricately carved stone, and waited. He kept the polished, reflective blade of his knife in the shadow of his body, just in case whoever was coming had a light. The move proved to be a good one, he saw, as the owner of the footsteps grew audibly closer and he saw a dull, wavering red light illuminate the hall. Garrus frowned at those footsteps- they didn't sound right. And who would be traversing these grisly halls on their own? Had a prisoner gotten lost? An employee left behind? The steps were too measured to be those if an enthralled shambler.

In another moment he saw why the footfalls had sounded odd. It wasn't a single person, but four, walking quietly and in sync to mask their numbers. They were human, three males and one female based on the silhouettes of their hardsuits. They were also armed to the teeth.
They moved past him in a practiced sweep, somehow missing him in the shadows-

Or so he thought, until the group stopped, two just past him and two right before his shadowed alcove. As one -private comm channel in their helmets, he thought- they turned and trained a myriad of weapons at his head and chest. He raised his hands in the universal sign of cooperation.

One, the tallest male, removed one hand from his very large carbine to motion to a spot against the far wall. Garrus moved, slowly, trying to think of who they were and how they'd gotten here. The number of humans on the Turian homeworld who were not quellen was starting to reach an embarrassing number. Their armor indicated military, as did their practiced synchronization.

He turned to face them when he reached the wall, hands still up, knife gripped loosely and in plain view. He wasn't an idiot- he was good, but not good enough to take our four armed, armored, and trained professionals such as these, not without a sharp alternation to their circumstances.

One of them, the female, stepped back and traded her weapon for an omnitool interface. A rudimentary reverse-engineered model, he guessed, or else based off of second-rate tech from a neutral race such as the barbarians. He recognized the program she brought up a moment before she spoke.

"Seeking human female, us." The translation was rough and garbled, but he recognized the words well enough. The female glanced down the hall, and he knew from memory that there was a pair of mangled blue corpses there. The human spoke again. "Alive human female."

It was one of those moments in which Garrus remembered why he'd gone into investigation, aside from his other motivations to get off Palaven. Memories, information and inferences flitted across his consciousness like streams of data, the pieces of pertinent info clicking into place to provide him with a flash of intuition.

Three men, one woman. A trip to these very ruins in a red Terran vehicle, Kristen telling him tales of her life, many featuring three men, one woman, a fourth male recently lost. Add in the new knowledge of Kristen's identity as Shepard, an Alliance special ops commander...

Three men, one woman. A team. Shepard's team?

"Shepard." He said the name and watched their reactions. It was subtle- they controlled themselves well. The fact he caught the movements at all was a testament to his knack for observation and his time with dealing with humans. Their recognition of the name became more apparent, however, when the shortest male stepped forward and pressed the muzzle of his assault rifle into Garrus' chest, hard.

"Show." The short male snapped, the omnitool on the female's arm barking out the translation. He wished, sorely, that he'd been able to recover his omnitool after being captured. With it he would have been able to explain.

A name emerged from his memories. A story about Shepard and a female cohort in a bar...

"Maverick," he tried, looking at the female. He saw her recoil slightly, and silently preened himself for guessing correctly. Hopefully knowing one of their names would put it in their minds that his knowledge of Shepard's name wasn't something sinister. Seeing as there was a good chance she was still inexplicably unconscious, he'd need that thought to occur to them before they shot him...

Assuming he even led them to her. He had his nephew and the girl to think of, and he doubted his father would appreciate him leading a squad of enemy humans to their not-so-secure location. He
watched them, convinced now that behind the dark, polarized visors of their helmets they were communicating on a private frequency that his eyepiece couldn't detect let alone pick up.

"Show Shepard us," came the eventual demand, though it seemed to Garrus to be somewhat less hostile.

Garrus weighed his options, then nodded. "Follow," he said, heard the omnitool spit out the translation, and with exaggerated slowness he headed back the way he'd come. He prayed to any Spirits listening that he wasn't making a colossal mistake...he thought he'd filled his quota of those for the year.
Chapter 19

Parting is all we know of heaven,
and all we need of hell.
-Emily Dickinson

Chapter 19

In Maverick's not so humble opinion, they were all crazy. Boon, Carver, Sakino, and herself. All of them. Batshit nuts, without a doubt. They’d done some insane things while under Shepard’s command, but this? If she were honest with herself, it sounded like something Shepard might have swept them up into, if the reason were good enough, but that was just it- Shepard hadn’t been the one to come up with this bucket of insanity. Oh no, that had been Anderson. Admiral Fucking Anderson. Maverick had always known he and Shepard were tight -father and daughter tight, even- but this?

Insane. Mental. Certifiable.

“Creepy…” Boon murmured through their closed comm link. The angle of his helmet told her he was talking about the contorted blue corpse -human- frozen in the act of clawing at a closed door.

That too, she thought to herself.

“So,” she said into the wary silence. “Anyone thought that this guy might be leading us, I don’t know, somewhere other than to Shepard?”

“He knew your name, Mav.”

Damn Sakino, always with the logic.

“Doesn’t mean he’s taking us to the Commander.”

“Doesn’t mean he isn’t.”

“Quiet, both of you,” Carver cut in. He was watching the alien, who had stopped at a doorway and was looking at them intently. They waited, watching him. Without needing to be told, Maverick and Boon turned sideways and aimed their weapons down the corridor, watching for threats. Carver and Sakino kept theirs trained on the turian.

He pointed at the door, and started to speak, slowly so as to let the translator VI pick up what it could. Only a handful of terms were spat out, garbled but intelligible.

“Sounds like there’s more of them on the other side,” Maverick guessed. “People he doesn’t want us to hurt.”
“People he wants us to promise not to hurt,” Boon corrected, sounding dire. “He said ‘keito’ and ‘ritten.’ ‘Vow’ and ‘children.’”

Maverick sent him a sharp look, which he wouldn’t see through the polarization of her visor. “Since when are you an expert on turian languages?”

“Since Anderson gave us our mission.”

“That was less than twelve hours ago.”

Boon ignored her. Carver tapped out a response into the VI interface, rather than speaking.

“What are you telling him?” Boon asked.

“That if there really are any children, they won’t be harmed.” Carver turned his head towards them. “That’s an order.”

Maverick scoffed. “No shit.” She gestured with her weapon. “Let’s go, already!”

Carver finished his entry, and projected it. Modulated words, lacking a true turian’s dual toned vocals, echoed in the quiet corridor. The alien nodded, turned, and keyed open the door with visible tension and apprehension in his movements that even the humans could recognize. When it had cycled open, he stepped through, and Shepard’s squad moved to follow.

This was going to be bad, no way around it as Garrus saw it. Definitely one of the more tense moments of his life- Shepard’s people behind him, his father and nephew ahead. He’d spent the walk back here thinking on how to handle it, how to make every second count, stretching his tactical abilities to their limit. In a few moments, perhaps less, Vakarian senior would spot the humans holding weapons to his son’s back and for once Garrus hoped his father would hold his stoic, analytical way of handling unusual situations. The seconds bought by his father’s way of thinking before acting might buy Garrus the time he needed to keep everyone from killing each other.

“Hold it!” Garrus snapped as soon as Nomos spotted him, gesturing for him to maintain his position when he spotted the armed unit. “Don’t do anything stupid!” The words had been chosen carefully, despite what he knew his father would think. The accusation of stupidity made his father look at him for a moment, then back to the humans, that extra time allowing Garrus to move, to tackle his father to the ground just as the elder Vakarian began to raise the rifle he held. Garrus’ shoulder hit him in the chest, and then everything seemed to happen at once, everyone on the balcony erupting into a flurry of movement. Norius raised the pistol, Lornas shrieked and back pedaled away from everyone, the human squad moved to surround Shepard’s prone form, and across the expanse of the chamber, something roared.

The roar made them all freeze. Garrus pulled himself up off his father, who rightened himself just as one of the humans switched off the polarization in its -his?- visor, and met Garrus’ gaze squarely.

The thing roared again, and somehow an understanding was reached between turian and human.
Garrus looked to his father, who’d witnessed the exchange. He gave a terse nod of reluctant agreement to the silent accord.

The human male gave instructive hand gestures to the others, all but the one who had knelt beside Shepard. On other side of the group of humans, Lornas was visible holding herself still from bolting, while Norius stood, uncertainly, clearly unsure whether to turn to the new threat or keep his pistol on the humans.

“Norius,” Garrus said, voice calm but firm. Norius hesitated, then came around to stand beside his uncle and grandfather. Lornas scrambled after him.

“Sakino?” the human male with the visible face spoke to the kneeling one, who was taking Shepard’s vitals.

“She’s fine, just unconscious,” Garrus told them. The VI sputtered the translation, and the one called Sakino nodded.

“Permanent-sleep?” another asked. Garrus assumed that to be the mangled interpretation of ‘coma.’ Any forthcoming answer was interrupted by another howl, and the faint sound of scraping echoing down the hall on the far end of the chamber.

“We need to get out of here,” Nomos said harshly. “We don’t have enough munitions to last through another wave.” Garrus eyed the humans’ weapons in vain- the configuration of their ammo clips weren’t compatible with turian tech. A shame.

“Agreed,” said the human male. He took one solid step towards Garrus, holding his weapon nonthreateningly to the side. He gestured to himself with his other hand. “Carver.” He then held out the hand.

Garrus felt his father tense beside him, but the veteran said nothing. Even he understood the benefits of joining forces, given the situation. Garrus took it upon himself to answer the human’s call for peace.

“Vakarian,” he said, waving his hand at himself, then also holding it out. As he expected, the human took it, shook it up then down once, firmly, then let go. They both stood back.

Carver turned to his squad, and said something to Sakino that neither Garrus nor the VI caught. Sakino removed something from a pouch at his thigh, something long and cylindrical. He popped a slender cap from one end, revealing a long, thick needle.

“Hold her,” Sakino ordered. The female human -Maverick- slung her weapon behind her on its strap and knelt, holding Shepard down by her shoulders. She nodded to Sakino, and then Garrus had only a moment for the alarm he felt before Sakino raised the needle, and plunged it down, directly into Shepard’s heart, with enough force to make the impact sharply audible. Shepard’s eyes flew open, and her scream mingled with the sudden gale of howls that echoed across the cavern.
Shepard’s world was being shredded. Somehow, she’d begun to understand. Somehow, she’d been given the ability to hold, assimilate, consume the information that had been forced upon her. The miracle of the human mind had begun to unravel it all, to make sense of it in ways she could utilize.

But all of that was being undone. Somehow. She wasn’t sure how, but all of the understanding and planning she had compiled was being...disintegrated. Like clay washed out of a mold before having the chance to set.

It didn’t matter how, or why. What mattered was that she had to retain as much as she could. She had to warn them all.

She had to remember.

“Come on, Shepard, come on!”

Images and sounds, memories and fleeting impressions, it all swirled at the forefront of her mind, even as the waking world hauled her sharply into its embrace. She had to remember…

If it hadn’t been that her mind had just been mired in too much information, too much sensory input from whatever it was that had invaded her head, she would have been swimming in confusion as she came suddenly, painfully awake. As it was, reality proved to be a downgrade in information level. She knew she was still in the cavern, but in a different spot. She knew that her squad was around her, Maverick holding her down, Sakino leaning over her with a spent needle full of a special cocktail called ‘Satan’s Kick’ by those who’d been unfortunate to experience it. This was the third time it had been used on her, which helped her cope- she knew what to expect, and braced herself.

The mix of drugs, including a large dose of concentrated adrenaline, speared its way through her system. Her major organs lurched into overdrive, her fight or flight instincts honed to painful impulses as she flailed, unable to stop herself, against Maverick’s hold. A wordless cry made its way past her lips, interrupted only by deep gasps for oxygen. She fought against her body’s programed response to the drugs, wrestling them back down under her control. When her flailing and gasping had slowed, Maverick released her shoulders.

Shepard sprang to her feet, pacing a short distance as electricity raced up and down her limbs. Her over-aware mind made notes of the presence of others, their locations in relation to hers, their armaments.

The rising squall of shrieks, howls, rumbles- the sound of an advancing horde. The realization and acknowledgement pushed the churning memories of nightmarish visions sharply aside. Later- she could analyze it all laterk herself, realized she was gripping the metL railing that kept her from plummeting down onto the cavern floor. She was staring at the smoking remnants of the Prothean relic she's been near when...

Well, that answered the 'how.' She'd figure out the why later. As if to punctuate that decision, another soulless roar filled the room.

She rounded on Carver. “Tell me you have a way out of here.” He grinned.
“Yes ma’am.”

“Yes ma’am.” She moved away from the railing and scooped up her pack, fighting the nausea that was forcing bile up the back of her throat. Sweat was beginning to make her skin gleam. As she rose from retrieving her -lighter- pack, she met a pair of blue turian eyes.

“We’ll talk about the mustang later,” she told Norius, in clear turian words. The youth gave her a sudden sharp-toothed grin. Behind him, she saw the two older turians exchange looks. Nomos and Garrus. Neither of whom she wanted to deal with, even if the situation had been ideal.

Boon handed her one of his sidearms, and they retreated back through the open door just as a dozen of blue, partially armored turian thralls came lumbering through the maze of crates in the room below the balcony. Once they were all through, Garrus shut the door and sealed it with a jab of a familiar knife through the control box. Without the box to signal and control the pressurized gears, it would take a coordinated effort -and time- to pry it open.

They moved quick, the armed humans in front, Shepard and the youths in the middle, the turians bringing up the rear. They came across no resistance, and eventually stopped at a hole in one of the stone walls that looked to have been recently made. Carver led them through, and on the other side was a stone shaft leading sharply upwards. They wasted no time in scrambling upwards.

The drugs in Shepard’s system did their job. Experience told her she was injured, exhausted, hungry, and thirsty, but she felt no pain, no fatigue, nothing but nausea and the drive to move. Her subconscious told her that there were more important things, things that would need to be addressed as soon as she wasn’t in immediate danger for her life. But that was later. Now was running, now was hoping she didn’t crash until they were all out of the danger zone, now was not letting herself realize fully that she was alive, that the Vakarians -and an extra tagalong she didn’t recognize- were running alongside her. Now was her squad, here, on Palaven. Rescuing her.

She decided she liked now.

There was no poetic emerging into sunlight, at the top of the shaft. They figured that out when their feet first hit the rivulets of water, and heard the thunderous storm raging even before they finally reached the exit. The world above was awash in another famous Palaven thunderstorm.

“Time?” Carver asked, raising his polarized visor against the radiation. He activated his external speakers for Shepard's benefit.

“Twenty,” Boon responded tersely. Shepard felt her gut wrench in a way that had nothing to do with her nausea. Twenty minutes to reach their evac point. If it was the same point she’d been given earlier, then there wasn’t much of a chance they’d make it, not from the ruins.

Not on foot.

“Norius.” She rounded on the youth, speaking in turian as none of them wore omnitools, and she knew first hand her squad’s program wouldn’t be up to snuff. "I said we’d talk about the mustang later. It's later. Where did you park it?"

Norius looked around, clearly trying to get his bearings in the downpour. The clearing they’d emerged in was not the same one that had held the crumbling temple and their original entrance. Glancing up, he spotted a gap in the tree canopy that showed him the faint glow Menae, only barely visible through the cloud cover.

He focused on the moon, clearly recalling his lessons on navigation.
"If we're west of the temple, then that way. If we're east, then-"

"The other way." She swapped languages. "Carver? Happen to know our location in relation to a big stone temple in desperate need of a remodel?" At her request, Carver pulled up his own nav system. Shepard ignored the warmth of sheer satisfaction at once again being in charge, with people she trusted, adrenaline - both natural and drug induced- tuning her senses to max.

"That way, almost a full klick. It's also the same direction as our evac point."

A stroke of luck. Those were unusual enough in Shepard's life to make her wary. Well, more wary.

"Care to share what's going on, Shepard?" The question, spoken in the turian language, was phrased with excruciatingly careful neutrality, with only the slightest emphasis on her name. A lesser woman would have winced.

Shepard turned to Garrus, fully aware if their size difference as she noted how close he'd come.

"Our extraction point is too far to reach on foot in time. The vehicle I took is by the side of the road, even further than the aircar Norius drove. Even if it wasn't, that thing can't traverse terrain like this." She gestured to their surroundings. "We book it to the aircar, and get off this planet before the Spectre or the escapees or anything else notifies unfriendly individuals to our presence. You and yours take the mustang and get out of here before any more of those things find their way to the surface and get people out here to deal with this."

He only blinked, but she thought she recognized the look of someone looking for a flaw and not finding one.

"Commander. Eighteen minutes."

Shepard broke off the budding staring contest and turned away.

"Let's move!" She barked, hoisting her pack higher on her shoulders and checking her pistol. She called over her shoulder, "Our vehicles are the same direction and there's safety in numbers- keep up if you can!"

She didn't look back again, but she heard the sounds of four individuals crashing through the foliage behind her and her team, and smiled grimly despite all else. She had expected to be torn on whether or not to risk slowing down for Norius and the female, but it proved to be a nonissue as even the shorter legged turians kept up easily.

Predator race, Shepard reminded herself, and kept going.

They reached the aircar with seven minutes to spare, all of them huffing. Shepard felt the drugs in her system begin to fade, the pain in her side, chest, shoulder and most of all her head, all beginning to demand her attention. She ignored them all, focusing on her surroundings. They'd passed through the clearing with the temple entrance, careful and watchful of anymore shamblers, and she knew precisely where she was now.

Rain pelted all of them as Shepard keyed in the access codes, then turned to the turians while her squad piled in. "You know how to get to the mustang from here?" She waited until she saw gestures of understanding from both adults before responding to Carver's call of, "Six minutes, Shepard!"

She backed away from the turians, one of her many unimportant background thoughts suddenly seizing a moment of her focus- this was, very possibly, the last time she 'd see any member of the
Vakarian family, good or bad. She thought of Gabias, Solana, Meda, and was mildly surprised at herself for feeling regret.

She didn't have time to dwell or analyze. She looked at Norius and said, "Keep your brother out of trouble, and don't you ever scare your mother like this again."

"But-" Norius tried to take a step towards her, but was stopped by one of Garrus' hands on his shoulder, and the fact that Shepard had turned away and climbed into the aircar. She rapped her fist on the hood as she did so, and the vehicle rose into the air.

She made herself look at Garrus, and their eyes locked. She kept her gaze steady- she owed him that. When they were about to clear the top of the trees, she slid the door to the aircar shut.

She didn’t blink once, and neither had he.

It was Lornas who spoke first, after the hum of the retreating aircar faded.

“Did the human speak-”

“Yeah, she did,” Garrus cut her off. Another pause. This time Norius ended it.

“Did she say ‘spectre?’”

Nomos and his son exchanged glances. They hadn’t missed that part, either. Had Shepard run into Saren Arterius? How? Had Saren told her of their location? Or had he not even spotted the human? Once, Garrus would have said it unlikely someone would have gone unnoticed by the famous Spectre Arterius, but then again that would have been before that someone had gone unnoticed in his own home.

Well, perhaps not entirely unnoticed… Just not recognized for what she was.

“It does not matter,” Nomos declared. “I think it high time we vacate this Spirits-forsaken place.” He placed a heavy hand on Norius' shoulder. “We shall have a lengthy talk when we are home, you and I.”

“And I bet your mom will have a few words for you, too.” Garrus added.

“After today? She can shout all she wants and I won’t even want to shout back.” Norius sounded fervent, and Garrus chuckled lightly despite everything.

They followed Shepard’s directions, and found the ground vehicle with a branch fallen across the back end, though thankfully the damage was not bad enough to affect its drivability. They got the thing on the road and headed for home.

The silence in the aircar was deafening. The sounds of the storm outside was dulled by the thick materials separating the passengers from the wind and rain, so that that the sudden calm and quiet
made Shepard’s ears ring. She knew they’d make the evac point in time. Barely, but they would. The abrupt lack of ‘running for her life’ let all the other ailments she’d been suppressing seem all the more loud, suddenly, and she let herself press her hands to the side of her head and lean her elbows on her knees, eyes shut against the dim interior lighting.

“Hold it together, Shep,” Boon told her. They all still had their helmets on, visors in place. Habit. Letting down even one piece of your guard could mean an errant bullet through the skull. She felt suddenly naked, as she hadn’t felt in all her time on Palaven, without her hardsuit.

“Holding just fine, Boon.” She managed to crack a grin. “So, what are you all planning on doing with your lives once the brass has had your asses on court benches? You can’t tell me this rescue was sanctioned.” She didn’t mention the communique from Anderson, since it hadn’t mentioned anything about a rescue team.

“Let’s just say you owe Anderson a drink,” Carver said from the pilot’s seat.

So, this had been part of his extraction. She’d hoped he’d just bring himself to get her off planet, and while she was grateful for the extraction she couldn’t help but feel a twinge of annoyance at the man for endangering them all. They weren’t even off the planet yet. They could all still end up dead, or in turian prisons -no quellen status for them now!

“Commander.” Boon’s serious tone pulled her out of her silently building irritation. “We’ve got a problem.” He was tapping furiously at his omnitool interface. “Anderson says there’s a projectile heading for the ruins. Specs say it’s a missile. A big one.”

“How big?” She asked automatically. Boon tilted his arm so she could see for herself, and she swore. Colorfully.

“Step on it, Carver!” She said, gritting her teeth. Their time to reach Anderson was just that much more narrow, now- their evac point was inside the fallout radius for that nuke. Who had sent it? And why?

The answer hit her like the proverbial ton of bricks.

Saren Arterius. The Spectre. She didn’t know how she knew, but she knew. Saren was cleaning up the mess left behind by whoever had built that place and created the blue thralls, and he was doing it in typical Spectre fashion- loudly and without leaving any evidence behind of what it was that had needed eradicating in the first place. Typical turian-

Shepard’s hands clenched where they’d fallen from her head.

“Turn around,” she said. Carver looked at her sharply- they all did. “Turn around! Set the scanners to look for specs matching an old earth ground vehicle leaving the area of the ruins, and tell Anderson to get out of range of that missile.”

“Shepard?”

“If we won’t be able to escape the blast in an aircar, they sure as hell won’t be able to outrun it in a fucking mustang! Now turn around!”

Carver complied, but the others continued to stare. Maverick lowered her visor, looking incredulous.

“I’ll ask about the mustang part later. For now- for turians, Shep?”
“Two of them were kids, Mav.”

“Turian kids!”

Shepard didn’t respond, just fixed her subordinate with a level stare. Maverick went on.

“And what if we can’t escape after we pick them up? Can this thing even carry four more?”

“It can, though not comfortably, and someone would have to ride on the roof,” Sakino volunteered, sounding oddly calm considering.

“We’re not leaving kids, Maverick.” Shepard’s voice was low and intent.

A pause. Then, “Understood, Commander.”

Shepard’s headache built behind her eyes, but she continued to ignore it. Apparently, she wasn’t done rescuing the Vakarians today.
Chapter 20

Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife!
   To all the sensual world proclaim,
   One crowded hour of glorious life
   Is worth an age without a name.

-Sir Walter Scott

Chapter 20

Anderson was not, by nature, a poetic man. He had however once heard an analogy for life that he thought rather suited realists and dreamers both.

'Life is like a book,' his aunt had told him. 'With the time between each sunrise and sunset being one single word in that book. Not a lot by themselves, but you put them all together and they can make a lovely story.'

His uncle had promptly provided an addendum. "And sometimes, boy, the word for that day is 'shit.'"

Anderson thought today fit that analogy quite nicely. Even had a dramatic sunset to finish it off. Although, as nice as the explosion of color on the horizon was, that wasn't what held his attention. Instead, the threat of a very real explosion had him running dozens of calculations simultaneously on the haptic lumagel interface spread out before him.

The numbers weren't good. His best guess coupled with the info from some very expensive tech on his stolen shuttle told him the missile heading for the ruins was big and nasty enough to level the area and cause a cascade collapse of the subterranean complex. By some miracle the missile had been launched from a station on the other side of the planet; that was the only reason they still had any god forsaken chance.

He sent off another message to Shepard's team. He wouldn't leave without them (he got them into this mess), but damn if he wasn't going to encourage them to hurry the hell up.

"How long?" Shepard asked.

"Coming up on them now," Carver replied.

Sakino had managed to delve into the aircar's inner workings while they were in the air and disable the speed governor with the precision of a surgeon. They'd halved their eta to the mustang as a result, but the lack of concise numbers had Shepard twitching, metaphorically. In reality, she was the picture of calm, leaning forward to rest her elbows on her knees, face stoic.

"I see them," Maverick said. Shepard peered out her window, and gripped the door lever when she
saw the red car come into view. The turians inside had already spotted them, likely hearing their engine come up behind them. They were too far to make out expressions, but Shepard envisioned surprise and suspicion.

"Bring us alongside to their right," Shepard instructed, then hauled open the door as they neared.

"What are you-" Garrus was driving, and he shouted at her as he saw who was opening the door. She interrupted him.

"Nuke headed for the ruins! Won't escape blast radius in the mustang!" She pointed to Norius, gesticulated what she wanted.

She saw Nomos, scrunched almost comically in the passenger seat, half rise up, anger on his face, mandibles flared.

"Message from Anderson, Commander!" Boon hollered behind her. "We don't have time to argue!"

Shepard looked back at Garrus.

"Please," she said. Trust me, she wanted to add. Odd, how she thought those words might have the opposite affect if she actually said them than if she implied.

Nomos was talking, angrily, his tone scornful. The wind tore the words away from her ears; they were both traveling far faster than was safe. Distantly, Shepard recognized the stretch of road they were on. It was the same one where she'd once, seemingly so long ago, shown Garrus what an old earth ground vehicle could do.

She saw blue eyes narrow, saw the thoughts flitting behind them. It made no sense for Shepard to risk her team being discovered like this. Unless she was telling the truth. Unless not everything had been a lie.

"Norius!" Garrus called, over the wind. Shepard didn't let her show the relief she felt- they weren't out of danger yet.

To his credit, the youth didn't hesitate. He'd been watching, knew what was going on and what was wanted of him. With careful attention to his balance Norius stood, one hand on the headrest of the driver's headrest. Shepard braced one hand on the doorframe, felt Maverick loop strong fingers through Shepard's belt, and reached her other hand down to Norius. His three-digit hand closed around her wrist, her fingers around his. Body language conveyed what they did not have time to say; she rocked back and forth slightly, quickly, matching his slight bending of his knees. On the third time, Norius jumped, Shepard pulled, and Maverick hauled them both back into the car. Norius's shins banged loudly on the doorframe, but he didn't utter a peep of complaint.

When Shepard went back to the door and reached out again, Norius was beside her, also reaching.

"Lornas!" He called. The other youth, the female, looked utterly terrified. "Just do what I did!"

She hesitated. A bark from Nomos got her moving, albeit shakily. When she at last grasped Norius' hand, her other in Shepard’s grip, there was no coordinated rocking for momentum. She was smaller and lighter, and together Shepard and Norius were able to hoisted her into the vehicle.

When Shepard reached for Garrus, he shook his head.

"Someone has to drive this thing!" He shouted. Shepard looked at the stretch of road they had left. Once the road began to twist and curve, it would be almost impossible to stay steady enough to get
anyone else on board, no matter how good Carver was.

Over Garrus' head, she and Nomos matched stares. He would not go before his son. Garrus would not go before his father, not when it guaranteed the elder would crash and burn.

Shepard had done a lot of stupid things in her life.

She was about to top them all.

Garrus felt the vehicle rock and bounce on it's shocks as something landed in the seat behind him, and spared a glance at the rear view mirror. He blinked, taking in what he saw.

"Well, can't say you don't know how to make a statement," he said, sounding far more calm than he felt. Shepard flashed him a surprised grin via the mirror. His father just stared at the human crouched on the back seat.

"Get ready to move over," she shouted near his ear. He shifted over as far as he could while maintaining control. Shepard stepped nimbly over the seat, slipped down beside him, and shoved her foot next to his. They maneuvered in the tight quarters with the sort of precision and coordination only two persons who were intimately familiar with one another could achieve. When Shepard was fully in control of the mustang, Garrus wasted no time arguing or debating with either of them. He knew his father's mind well enough to know it'd be an exercise in futility. And if he didn't know Shepard's mind as well as he once thought he did, he at least knew her type; whatever their issues, she had taken on the rescue of him and his as a mission, and she'd let the world burn before she failed.

Garrus planted a booted foot on the top of the car door, missing it's window thanks to the fallen tree they'd found the car under, and reached up. The ones he thought were called Maverick and Boon hauled him up, a third armored human -Sakino- anchoring them from behind.

Inside was cramped, but they fit. He'd never let Solanna know her insistence on the bigger, fancier model had saved his life.

"Your turn, grandpa!" He heard Shepard shout from below, and through a window saw her point up at the aircar without taking her eyes off the road. What she said next was garbled, but he thought it was, "Children and elderly first!"

"Commander!" Maverick hollered down. Shepard spared a glance up. His translator was off, but he understood enough. "Limit reached! Any more and we'll lose too much speed!" Her meaning was clear- any more aside from Shepard.

Garrus' fist clenched. Why hadn't he thought about weight restrictions? How long did they have? Did they have any information on what kind of nuke was coming? Any kind was bad, but how big? How fast? Where from?

He watched Shepard argue with his father. He was mildly surprised at the older man; Garrus would have thought his father would care little for a human dying in his stead. Perhaps he'd misjudged him. Or perhaps Shepard was that remarkable. Likely, it was somewhere in the middle.

Garrus gripped Maverick by the shoulder and moved the human firmly out of his way. The motion
caught Nomos' attention. As soon as his father's sights were on him, he reached out a hand.

"Dad. Mother can wait."

Nomos' mandibles flared. Shepard's grip on the wheel tightened, her jaw shifting beneath that oh so interesting layer of taut skin. Only half a moment passed, and Nomos surged smoothly to his feet, and reached up to grasp his son's hand.

At the same time he and Nomos fell back into the car, he heard Maverick shout, "Commander!"

"You have your orders, Carver!" Shepard's voice boomed from bellow, wind be damned. At the controls, the human palmed in a command, and the door slid shut remotely. Maverick barely pulled her head inside in time. Garrus felt the aircar surge upward, gaining speed as it fought to get ahead despite the extra weight.

Without bothering to start the argument that would follow any attempt to take the controls from Carver manually, Garrus instead reached up and flipped an auxiliary control panel down from the roof. He hit the emergency command, and the aircar gave a sudden lurch.

The humans began shouting, their tones demanding. Garrus couldn't understand them, until one of them switched their translator AI back on.

"What do you?" Maverick demanded.

"Saving Shepard," was all he said. It would take too long to explain that this was a feature Solanna had had installed once Norius had been old enough to drive. If anything happened to the passengers in the front, this secondary set of controls could be activated and operated by even a child to keep the vehicle from crashing. Nevermind explaining about the cliff drop off Shepard was about to come up on and his plan to use it to save them all.

He could only pray to any Spirits still listening that she figured out what he was trying to do.

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Watching the aircar pull away from her slower vehicle, Shepard began to think of what to do next. She knew a lot about explosives. Even if she didn't, an idiot knew that a detonation large enough to reduce a centuries old ruin of solid stone to gravel was bad news for anyone within several kilometers, at least.

She couldn't worry about her team or the Vakarians. With Carver's piloting, Anderson somehow feeding them info, and Garrus' lay of the land know-how, they'd be fine. She had to believe that, because she couldn't spare the brain power to worry. She had minutes to figure out how to survive having a ringside seat to an explosion the size of a battle cruiser.

The long straight strip of road ended, and Shepard guided the mustang around the bend and into the part of the jungle that dared grow right up against the cliff edge.

The jungle would be no protection. The massive trees would be just as likely to crush her as shield her. She needed a stone shelter, preferably one just into the ground enough to be protective, but no so deep as to bury her alive if aftershocks made it unstable. She didn't know enough about Palaven
tectonics. Or if the explosive would be big enough to affect tectonics. She just. Didn't. Know. Enough.

And that pissed her off.

She rounded another bend, and nearly slammed on the brakes. Here, there was nothing between the road and the cliff edge but empty dirt and rocks. Just beyond the edge of the cliff, was the aircar. It hovered there, side door open, Garrus and Maverick reaching. Shepard stared at them; they were shouting, but she couldn't hear their words.

The road curved back into the trees to circumvent a massive pillar of boulders, leaving the aircar behind.

Shepard's mind raced. What were they doing? What were they thinking? Did they want her to jump in? No point. Then they'd all die. Might still all die anyway. What the hell were they doing? What was their plan after she was aboard? Their options for escape would be limited after that; sheer distance would be unlikely to save them. That left up, to an altitude the aircar wasn't designed for, or down, which...

Shepard grinned.


Shepard didn't waste time berating herself for not thinking of it herself, and hoped against hope she hadn't missed her one chance at that last bend. If she remembered this road well enough, she should be coming up in another curve that brought her right alongside the cliff. She'd have seconds to judge the aircar's height and distance relative to hers, calculate the mustang's speed, how high she could jump, how much of her vehicle's velocity she could count into her own momentum...

She had next to no margin for error, and no omnitool or HUD to help her out. She had to guess.

Her life, their lives, hinging on how accurate Shepard's best guess would be.

The jungle receded, the road swerved right along the cliff, and there was Garrus and Mav, shouting.

Shepard floored the accelerator, shifting in ways the engine did not like, ekking out every scrap of speed she could get as she veered off the road and over the rocky terrain. She put one foot on the seat, contorting herself to keep one foot on the accelerator and prep to jump. She was still too far to hear the shouts of those waving to her, but she thought they were jubilant.


At five, she pulled her foot off the accelerator, gripped the top of the windshield, braced her feet against the headrest, and as the mustangs front tires hit open air, she leaped.

For a moment, she was airborne, gravity's grasping fingers held at bay by momentum alone. She watched the windshield scrape the bottom of the aircar as it sailed over the edge and then down as physics took hold.

Behind her, the horizon exploded, a halo of red and gold barely visibly over the top of the jungle canopy and then immediately shrouded by the massive dust cloud that rose to swallow everything.

Five and three fingered hands closed around her arms, her already bruised ribs age slammed into the bottom of the doorframe, fingers slipped. She grasped at anything, caught fabric, held tight.
"Down, down!" She heard Garrus shout in his own language. Carver must have understood anyway, because the aircar suddenly plummeted like a sinking stone below the top of the cliff line. For a moment, her bottom half flailed upwards like a fishtail, and in that moment she was at last hauled inside. The door slammed shut, but not before she got a glimpse of the surging wave of dust, debris, smoke, and flaming foliage shooting out over the top of the ridge, kept horizontal by the force behind it.

The aircar kept to the cliff face as the explosion followed the path of least residence, racing out along the ground above then shooting out into open air as if that ground still existed. Carver dodged the worst of the debris falling all around them as the initial blast subsided and gave way to rockslides that tore the cliff face to unrecognizable ruin, sending boulders as big as they were tumbling down.

They rode out the storm clutching any handhold they could find, injured more by colliding with each other than any hard surface or broken glass. Carver and Sakino called out their information, supplemented by Garrus and Nomos showing them the handful of useful features found on a family vehicle designed to keep a politician's family safe. The secondary antigrav boosters saved them when a fall tree landed on their back end, it's roots whipping down to snap back up into the underside, shattering one set of boosters.

Shepard knew from experience that what felt like hours was probably only a few minutes. It took them all a moment to realize when they hadn’t felt the shock of an impact or the lurch of Carver dodging a tree in a several minutes.

“Setting down,” Carver said into the silence, his voice betraying no hint of the adrenaline Shepard knew had to be coursing through him. God knew she was pumped full of it. “This thing’s too damaged to fly an inch.” He maneuvered, best he could, to a relatively flat portion of ground and set them down with a rough jostle.

The radio crackled at them, and Anderson’s voice filled the vehicle.

“Shepard! Tell me you pulled some stunt out of your ass and you’re all alive! Shepard! Goddamnit, Kas! Answer me!”

Shepard leaned over Carver’s shoulder in the cramped confines, and opened her end of the channel.

“We’re alive, Admiral.”

There was a heartbeat of silence, and Shepard imagined David closing his eyes, allowing himself a moment of relief before moving on with the emergency at hand.

“I’ve got incoming, Shepard. My evac is no longer valid.”

“Get out of there, Admiral. We’ll find another way.” She didn’t let her gaze slid to Garrus. She had no idea where he stood on things, and wasn’t about to count him as a potential escape vector.

“Too late, Kas.” He paused, and the silence was heavy. “It was-”

“Tell him to surrender, and to keep his channel open.” Nomos was suddenly somehow beside her, his large frame defying the laws of volume and space, speaking low and quick in his language.

“Tell him to-”

“Shepard? Who the hell is that?”

“I’ve got a few passengers, Admiral.”
“Shepard,” Nomos bit out. “There is no time. I do not have the words in your tongue. Tell him to exit his vessel and use this phrase…” He said something that even she couldn’t translate, but she went with her gut and relayed the instructions to Anderson.

“You sure about this, Shepard?”

Not at all. But her gut was.

“Absolutely.”

“Allright. Here goes. Exiting the shuttle.” There was the sound of movement, armor on decking, the hydraulics of the hatch, the rush of wind. Distantly, Shepard heard turian shouts and sirens. Oh, this was going to look bad to the Palavenian authorities...a massive nuke, authorized by a Spectre who probably didn’t bother to report it through the proper channels first, and now they find a sole human insurgent mere miles away from the blast?

She heard Anderson repeat the phrase Nomos had given, twice, shouting it. It was clumsy, but she thought he did a passable job of mimicking the right words. It sounded ceremonial. She heard the turian shouting cease, abruptly. When Anderson said the phrase a third time, it was lower, almost conversational. One of the turians must have approached.

Her guess was confirmed when another voice, a turian one, came over the channel. Beside her, Nomos relaxed almost imperceptibly, and began talking. It took her a word or two before she understood that he was speaking a dialect she wasn’t quite grasping. A word here and there was similar to the language she’d come to speak rather well, but most of it was unfamiliar, more formal sounding.

The turian on the other end replied in kind, sounding wary and surprised. It became apparent, from the inflection and few words Shepard could grasp, that they knew one another.

Shepard blinked at Nomos.

Was he…?

She looked to Garrus, and the plain astonishment on his face was enough to confirm it.

He was.

He was using his influence to save Anderson.

To save them all.

Shepard let herself fall back into one of the seats. She took a moment and examined each of her team. A few bumps and bruises, but the taxpayer’s money had done their job in protecting her people with layers of carbon fiber and ceramic plating. Out of habit more than anything, she looked over Norius and the female youth as well. Garrus she looked at because, well, it would have been more odd not to look him over after so blatantly inspecting everyone else. If he returned her examination, holding it a moment longer than she had, she chose not to notice. Now was not the time to analyze their issues. Their potential.

Satisfied no one was significantly damaged she let her shoulders slump and her head hang low, eyes sliding shut. It wasn’t over, not by a long shot, but she’d learn to take advantages in the lulls of chaos that was her life. She did not sleep, exactly, but she dozed while Nomos and the turian he was talking to hashed out their plans. It bothered her that she could not understand them, could not make her own contingency plans around theirs, but she also knew when not to waste energy
stressing about things beyond her control.

Things moved fast after that. Nomos spoke briefly to his son, and exited the vehicle. Mav, Sakino, and Norius had gotten out already which made the confined space somewhat less confined. With Nomos out it was almost roomy.

“Rescue is on the way,” Garrus said into the silence. “They’ve got your Admiral already. He is unharmed.” She nodded, and translated for Carver, who relayed the info to the team outside. Wouldn’t do to shoot the local red cross. She rubbed her hands over her face, wincing as her fingers slid over a cut above her eyebrow. She didn’t remember getting it. She rarely recalled getting injured.

A clawed digit entered her field of vision, tracing around the gash. “They’ll be bringing a medic.”

“I’m fine.”

“Shepard.” His voice held the equivalent of an eyebrow raised in incredulity.

She snorted.

“Really. I am. Been through worse.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” he drawled, leaning back. He’d taken the seat across from hers, and while the limousine-like seating arrangement had been advantageous when they’d had to stuff it to capacity so recently, now it made things...uncomfortable.

“Commander,” Carver said from the driver’s seat. “Incoming.”

“Join the others,” she told him. Carver glanced briefly to Garrus, then nodded and got out.

They were alone.

She looked at him, surprised to find how hard that was. Somehow, somewhere along the way, this individual had come to mean something to her, beyond the stress-induced sexcapades she’d indulged in. She’d thought she’d prepared herself for ‘after’ hours ago in the ruins. For probably never seeing him again. They both knew the general plot of their story from this point on; authorities would arrive. The humans would be separated, quarantined, questioned. If things were favorable, they might be returned to the Alliance in exchange for high profile prisoners, much as Vakarian was once traded. The war would end, eventually. They might be alive to see it. They might not. If they were… Well, the galaxy was a big place.

A long silence stretched between them. There were words, she knew, she should say. ‘Sorry’ and ‘I wish it were different’ and ‘I won’t forget you.’ She thought she saw the same words dancing behind those oh so expressive blues of his.

A bang on the exterior made them both look sharply to the source. Mav, rapping harshly on the window, gestured briskly and Shepard understood it to mean their guests were in sight.

“Time to face the music,” she murmured, and Garrus gave a huff of amusement.

“Humans and your idioms,” he said, and she grinned as she moved for the door.

“Idioms, sarcasm, stubbornness, and stupidity. It’s what we’re known for.”

“No,” he said from behind her. “That’s not all you’re known for. Not after today.”
Then they were outside, and there was no more to say. On the horizon, something had caught both their attention. Two shuttles. Two non-combative shuttles. One decked out in turian colors and sigils. The other…

The other was Alliance. Anderson. Her evac had finally arrived. Her mission was over.

It was time to go home.

**The End.**
Chapter 21

Epilogue

Five Years Later

They’d christened it the Normandy. A concession to the human half of the design team, after the Alliance had bowed on the unorthodox (for humans) bridge design the turians had pushed for. Shepard thought a name in exchange for something that might make or break this experiment was a poor trade, but she hadn’t been consulted. She hadn’t, in fact, even been made aware of the ship’s existence until the press release announcing its construction was underway a year ago. She’d watched the morning news feed, coffee in hand, as they played a clip of that year-old announcement right before showing the completed vessel’s grand unveiling.

Precisely five minutes later, Anderson had come knocking on her door, invitation in hand.

Well, the Alliance brass called it an invitation. But the number of stars and bars involved told her it was the fanciest set of orders she’d ever received. Printed on good linen-pressed paper, signed with fountain pens worth more than her monthly salary.

“It was one of the conditions the Council agreed to, in lieu of the Alliance demanding reparations from the turians,” Anderson explained over coffee in her drab little kitchen, watching her absorb the words on the paper. She hadn’t been involved in that discussion, either, despite having been lauded post-briefing as a (unknowing) key player in ending the First Contact War. Her career in espionage had ended that day she’d seen those two shuttles approaching, though she hadn’t known it until she’d been released back into the galaxy and seen her face plastered on every vid screen from Earth to the Citadel.

Her undercover antics, the anti-war movement on Palaven, the ‘redirecting’ of a nuke away from the planet’s capital to a ‘harmless’ region of jungle had all been wrapped up in a neat package and laid at her now sanctified feet. No mention of blue-veined thralls, a Spectre’s brother gone insane, or said Spectre’s attempt to murder dozens of captive turians and humans, along with herself and half the Vakarian family, to cover up said brother’s insanity. No mention of a suspiciously capable quellen.

The Vakarians were hardly mentioned at all, except to say that Vakarian senior had been instrumental in coordinating the peace proceedings, taking over from where his son had left off in their governmental arena. As for where Garrus Vakarian had gone after his father had taken up the family duties, the media either didn’t care or had been paid not to care.

Shepard dropped the heavy paper and leaned back in her chair. She picked up her cup, sipping at the black drink gone cold.

“I’d ask ‘why me,’ but that seems pointless,” she said finally. She was torn, and she knew Anderson saw it. This new mission was...huge. Bigger than huge. Historical. She’d never wanted anything so high profile as this was guaranteed to be, but after having her name and face toted as
the poster-Marine for peace over the past few years, she’d been fighting against having her career reduced to dinners, interviews, and PR stunts on behalf of the Alliance. It had almost been enough to get her thinking about not re-signing when her contract was up, like she’d always planned.

This...as watched and paraded as she’d be, at least she’d be doing something.

“When do I leave? And whose my new CO?” she asked, and Anderson grinned.

“Think you can handle this? You’re barely out from under my wings, Vakarian.” The green-eyed turian’s tone was part bait, part sincere. He glanced to his blue-eyed companion beside him, took in the younger Spectre’s posture and stance. Controlled. Very controlled. He only saw his former protege hold himself this carefully still when he was trying to conceal something. Or reign in his legendary temper. All reports said Vakarian was a relatively easy going turian, almost too relaxed by society standards some said.

Except when he wasn’t. He recalled a particular incident a few years ago, the first mission he’d let his friend take point on. The ringleaders of the Traders had begged for death before Garrus Vakarian had been done with them. After that there had been no more rumors of his father pulling strings to get his son at the top of the list of potentials.

“You know I can, Kryik. If you thought otherwise, you wouldn’t be here.”

“I’m just curious why you insisted. I’ve never seen you pull familial rank before.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” Vakarian murmured under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh no that was something.” Nihlus Kryik looked more fully at Garrus, the aforementioned curiosity spiking. “Another human saying? And people call me overly fascinated with them. If only they knew about you, my friend.” Garrus only snorted.

Their conversation was halted by the arrival of the lift they stood in front of. The ship had docked ages ago, but something had delayed the ambassador’s party considerably. When the lift doors slid apart and the two turians took in the collection of persons within, they understood why.

“Spectre Arterius,” Nihlus greeted his old friend and mentor.

“Nihlus, my friend,” Saren’s voice was smooth and polite as he greeted his former pupil. He acknowledged Vakarian, a full Spectre, with hardly a nod. Such was their way, Nihlus had learned. Attempting to foster conversation between the two always proved fruitless if he was lucky, volatile if he wasn’t.

“We shall speak later, you and I. For now, however, I think it best if not all of us keep the Council waiting. Perhaps I’ll be able to talk them around to sense before it’s too late.”

“Humanity has earned the right to enter one of their own into your super police,” a voice snapped from behind him, and Saren stiffened while the other two turians looked to the human ambassador.
“Ambassador Udina, glad you could make it.” Nihlus pressed friendliness into his voice with a will. He liked humans well enough, more than most turians, but this one grated on even his last nerve. Saren strode past them without another word, heading up the wide, sweeping stairs towards the long, slender walkway that would take them to the platform before and below where the Council would see them. The turian, salarian, and asari Council members were already there.

“Spectre Kryik, Spectre Vakarian. May I introduce humanity’s candidate to the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance Task Force, the Alliance’s hero, Commander–”

“Kastanie Shepard,” Garrus filled in, taking one measured step towards the female human who stood beside Udina. Nihlus looked sharply at his friend- the humans would not have heard it, but to turian ears there had been...something in his voice. Something Nihlus couldn’t place, but made that insatiable curiosity of his flare. He noticed that behind the Commander another, darker toned human looked wary, also. Anderson, Nihlus was pretty sure his name was.

The female, the potential Spectre, gave Garrus one measured nod. Inexperienced as he was with those malleable human faces, Nihlus thought she looked...guarded. Understandable, given what she was walking into.

“Spectre Vakarian. I understand you’re to sponsor me to the Council?”

“I am,” was Garrus’ only response. Nihlus wasn’t sure he’d ever heard his friend’s subvocals so tightly regulated. Better and better.

“Don’t let his reticence fool you, Commander. He pulled rank on me to get you.” Nihlus put in. The Commander turned her gaze on him, and he felt the flicker of a grin spread his mandibles at her. Oh, this was going to be good.

“If you want a boring shakedown mission to a backwater human colony so bad for some Prothean museum piece, you’re welcome to come along,” Garrus drawled out.

“Shall we? The Council is waiting.” Anderson broke the sudden tension, and gestured past them all to where Saren was gesticulating grandly.

Nihlus and Garrus stepped aside, and by silent agreement the Commander stepped ahead of them all. They fell into step behind her, and together the three humans and two turians headed up the steps to see if they could make history without shedding blood, blue or red.
The End.

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