**All That We Are**

**by** Leonia42

**Summary**

Author's note: This is a complete, first-draft work that has had little to no editing which will be cleaned up for better readability presently. The protagonist is based on the turian sentinel from the MP side of the ME3 campaign.

"An old turian sergeant is given a second chance to do all the things he once took for granted but just as his life takes a new direction, war threatens the entire galaxy including the homeworld of his people. He must figure out what he stands for and find the courage to fight for the ones he loves against a foe that will show no mercy."
Chapter 1

Magnus was not impressed.

The pale orange glow of street lights began to flicker into being to indicate the beginning of the station's night cycle. At least he wouldn't suffer from erratic sleep patterns, which was the only good thing he could take solace in with such unfamiliar surroundings. That was assuming he would be able to find rest in such an unlawful place, hopefully he wouldn't need to stay long enough to worry about it.

Aside from maintaining the galactic standard 20 hour cycle, there was nothing normal or predictable about Omega. From the moment he stepped off the shuttle the old turian found himself feeling the unsettling paranoia of his youth, the kind of instinctive response that told one to be on the look out for trouble. The unsettling sights and smells kept encouraging him to nudge the sidearm on his hip. He hadn't had to use a pistol in a very long time but its weight was a welcome presence.

As he tried to take everything in, he was mildly aware of the foot traffic around him. Aliens of all sorts crowded every nook and cranny. He couldn't guess where they all came from or where they were all going and was constantly having to watch his step. Most of the species were vaguely familiar, an occasional asari or salrian here or there but the rest were completely strange. Especially the humans. No two of them looked remotely alike, it was hard to tell that they were of the same species with their different hair and various skin tones.

Like everyone else on the station, they wore drab and unglamorous colours trying to meld into the scenery which made it even harder to distinguish one from another. Nobody wanted to stand out in that crowd, a low profile was just as valuable as a sidearm for protection. Magnus was sure that his own cabalist-issue armour would fit right in with all its dirt and cracks from excessive field use. He only wish he had remembered to check how well it fit before he had to wear it extensively for the first time in years.

The flight from Citadel space had left him disoriented and tired, a reminder of how little travelling he had done in his life. He was also mildly hungry but wasn't sure of where to begin looking for a meal that was both dextro friendly and halfway appetising. Everything looked so brown and unappealing, thick smoke hung in the air with no where to escape to. Eventually he settled on a small, lightly populated cafe on a street corner that looked somewhat cleaner than anything else in the vicinity. He could at least catch his breath, gain his bearings and order something light to keep him going before he was forced to find some lodging for the night. If only he had caught that earlier shuttle.

As he had suspected, the cafe was mostly empty. Only a single human staff worker was on hand to take drink orders, probably the owner of the establishment. Magnus quietly ordered what he figured would be something safe, a bland tea that was popular on the colony worlds of his people. He noted two asari talking in a corner and a single batarian messing with an omnitool on the opposite side of the room but no one else of interest. Good, maybe he could relax for a few minutes without worrying about who may or may not be watching his movements. All the same, he made sure to take a table that gave him a nice view of both entrances.

Once he was satisfied with his beverage and had heard enough business as usual politicking on the vid screen (the usual speculation about tensions between the System Alliance and the Hegemony leading to an escalated conflict and an unrelated reminder about the Hierarchy's increased dreadnought production), he decided to reread the text transcript of the audio distress message
that had brought him there in the first place.

The e-mail with the recording had read simply:

To: Sergeant Magnus Thorn of the Invictus Cabal
From: Andronicus Thorn (rank/legion data not given)
Encryption Level: Moderate, familial authorisation code required upon receipt
Title: Help
Text: See attached file, utmost discretion required
Transcript: If you're receiving this (and by the spirits I hope you are), then I am in need of immediate assistance. I'll keep it simple, things haven't been going well lately and I suspect that my luck will run out soon. I know we haven't talked for months and I'm sorry and I'll make it up to you some day, I swear it but right now my life is on the line. Probably. Actually, I'm not really sure what will have happened to cause this message to go through. But I can tell you where to find me if I've resorted to sending it. I can't explain more than that, not like this. We need to talk face-to-face, brother. Meet me at the following coordinates. If I'm not there, I'll get another message to you. Some how. Oh and please, please don't tell mom or dad. You've always been good to me and I'm counting on your help (and discretion) now.

The transcript had failed to capture the sound of dread in his younger brother's voice but he could not forget the earnest way his brother had pleaded for help. It wasn't unusual for Andronicus to get himself into a sticky situation but it had been several months since he had checked in with anyone in the family. Magnus hadn't had the time to think too much about his brother's absence, his workload had gotten busier as new cabalists demanded his attention back home. The message was too vague to be useful on its own, even if he had wanted to hand it off to more knowledgeable authorities. And his superior had been pushing for him to take some time off, preferably off world for a short while before the next batch of trainees were ready.

So there he was, completely out of his comfort zone with nothing more than a single message for direction. This was a personal, family matter (whatever the situation actually was) and there would be no orders from the lieutenant or anyone else to guide him. He would have to rely on instinct and his usual cleverness to figure out where his brother was, why he was in trouble, and how to get him out of it.

But first he needed to know more. His surroundings needed to be evaluated, the original message could not be traced to the coordinates mentioned. Already he was getting the feeling that his brother was not telling the full truth of his predicament and he wondered if he wasn't quite the victim that he had portrayed. Impatiently, he refreshed the messages on his omnitool but there was no second message as had been promised. And there was no sign of Andronicus or anyone that knew anything about him.

Unsure of what to do other than waiting for a message that might not arrive, Magnus opted to take a walk through the nearest marketplace. Though it was night time, there seemed no slowdown in the amount of people going about their business. Maybe he could find one of those infamous information brokers or someone who knew of one that could help. The exercise would do his mind some good at any rate.

It had been many years since Magnus had had to handle gathering intel instead of simply analysing what he was given by cabalist operatives. It had also been many years since he had left his homeworld and been thrown into what he considered a civilian environment. The cabal was a place of security and military precision, there was order and everybody had their place. On the streets of the Omega space station, there was utter chaos and confusion.
Every where he looked, he saw something new and amazing. Quarians and volus in their strange suits with their mechanic voices trading what looked like little more than scrap metal, asari and their non-asari partners adding an element of sophistication and prestige to the scenery, a hulking Elcor walking on its arms like some sort of beast of burden parading along. He even noticed a small shop where humans willing allowed their own hair to be cut off and reshapen, the very idea made him flinch with revulsion.

Half of the other shops along the way sold wares he could only guess at, many were traditional places where members of the respected species segregated themselves from every other species. A krogan fish stall here, a batarian knife shop there. And yet he didn't get the impression that each species was intolerant of any other, at least not where the exchange of money was concerned. The melting pot experience seemed drastically different than what he had seen on vids of the Citadel where the buildings were pristine and well-tended. Everyone on Omega seemed desperate for something, whether it was money, food, or recognition.

As he continued along the maze-like streets, he slowly began to realise that he could not recognise most of his surroundings. It was hardly a surprise given the patchwork nature of the local architecture. Eventually everything began to look the same. The market stalls were beginning to thin out. He had seen few hotels or any other places of temporary lodging and got the impression that he was approaching the start of a residential area. Darkened alleyways added new twists and turns to what had been a broad and well-lit footpath.

He chided himself for being so foolish and letting his curiosuity get the better of him. He hadn't meant to wander for as long as he had. The lack of a crowd and the quieter surroundings made him feel suddenly exposed, like waking up without one's armour on. He turned a corner and brought up his omnitool for both light and a quick look at the time. Maybe he could even find a map if he looked hard enough on the extranet.

None of the initial searches were useful. He tried again, using the name of a street sign that he remembered from several roads back. It was the best he could do, if only all names had been more familiar and easier to recall. As he continued to mess with the device, he felt more and more uneasy about his position. Casually he shifted his weight, reminding himself that the pistol was not the only weapon he had on-hand. A lightweight sniper rifle sat comfortably in its holster along his back. It didn't have its usual modifications in place, the thermal scope would have drawn too much attention from any would be thieves. But it was still a good, reliable gun that could be used at mid to long range. It also carried sentimental value as it had been a gift from Andronicus a few years ago. Magnus never could figure out where or how his brother had acquired what had once been a very elite human weapon.

Suddenly he felt guilty for his careless manner of dealing with his brother, he should have tried harder to communicate with him before rushing off to an unknown world without any sort of plan. Alone and out of earshot of anyone, he thought he might playback the audio version of his brother's message. Maybe he had missed something important. Before he could do so, there was a loud thud noise from behind him followed by a rough and unprovoked blow aimed at his shoulder.

The noise had turned out to be the armoured boots of two miscreant batarian teenagers sneaking up on what they thought was unsuspecting victim. The first jab from one had missed quite by accident as Magnus was turning around to check his blind spot. The second from the other newcomer had not. Luckily the ablative plating of his armour absorbed most of the force.

"Ow," the unfortunate thug exclaimed, having not expected the medium armour to be nearly as tough as it was. On the outside the material appeared almost soft and there was little shine left to indicate that it might something more sturdy than a jumpsuit with fancy legion markings.
The wake up call had given Magnus enough time to focus his biotic barriers into existence. While most armour had kinetic barriers powered by the electronics within the physical suit, a biotic relied on their own internal power reserves to maintain a similar layer of protection. The effect was basically the same but the biotic barriers were much more subtle in execution.

Clearly neither of the batarians were familiar with this concept and didn't realise what they had gotten themselves into. One aimed a pistol and let off a shot at point-blank range, attempting to cripple their target while they planned their next move. The barrier rippled and a blue light discharged where there bullet had been. This phenomenon confused the pair long enough for Magnus to draw his own side-arm.

"Hey old man, put that toy away before someone gets hurt," the one with a pistol barked. The other one reached for a weapon on his back.

"We just wanted to talk, no need to be so hostile," the other jeered now with a shotgun cradled under his arm.

Magnus wished he could read their facial expressions for any sign of what their intentions were but wasn't sure which pair of eyes were used for what. Not that it mattered, they obviously weren't looking for a nice chat. How had they got the jump on him so fast?

"Yeah you totally need to chill out. We own this street see and you have to pay the toll. If you can't afford it then we'll take that gun off your hands. No, not that one, the bigger one. That's all we want. Actually, we might just take that and all the credits you have. If you'd be so kind," the one with the pistol droned on mockingly while the other tried to move in a bit closer to flank Magnus.

Even if he had wanted to comply with their pitiful demands, there were very few credits that he could offer them. One of the boons of cabalist life was having everything provided for each member of the cabal. Food, shelter, armaments, transporation, everything. There was little need for disposable income for a group of people that were isolated from the rest of Hierarchial society. Money could be traced and potentially jeopardise operations that were almost always secretive. No turian was a civilian and no cabalist was a mere soldier.

The flanking batarian was savagely flung by an invisible force into a wall, hard enough that dark liquid began to run down his nose. The pistol wielder only got off one glancing shot before his weapon dropped from his hands. He yelled out in anguish as an electrical current ran over the nerves of his omintool arm. Magnus held his own omnitool up close to his body so the overload effect could continue without interruption should the other batarian regain his feet too soon.

The first assailant quickly raised his shotgun as he slid down the wall but was unable to aim it properly after hitting his head so hard. The other finally jerked his arm far enough away from Magnus' grasp to break the connection and scrambled to find where his weapon had disappeared to. Being an honourable turian, Magnus did not hinder the batarian's efforts and preferred to fight an armed opponent than one who could not defend himself. The recovering batarian finally gave up on trying to handle his heavier weapon in what was quickly becoming a close quarters fight and madly leapt at Magnus from behind, throwing punches and kicking his legs madly.

But Magnus was a highly trained cabal operative and was able to side step around most of the unorthodox movements. The few kicks and lunges that found their target were met with jabbing spurs and the blunt end of Magnus' pistol, he wasn't too keen to inflict grevious harm if it wasn't necessary. The batarian fell to the ground to catch his breath and check on his partner's progress, not ready to try his sporadic melee again without some help.

The other batarian was trying to put distance between himself and the two brawlers, having given
up on locating his weapon and realising that they had bitten off more than they could chew with what was supposed to be a simple robbery. His friend called out to him but there was no honour among thieves. Infuriated and coasting on adrenaline, Magnus threw a glowing field out from his talons and the escaping batarian stopped in his tracks. He began to shriek as he had done before when his omnitool had been overloaded but the shrieking began to escalate rapidly into a terrible cry.

His partner watched in horror as Magnus intensified his attack, the mass effect field was generated in thin air around its victim. A pale blue light ripped through the thin layer of the field as dark energy erupted on a visual scale. He had not wanted to kill or injure either of the teenagers, they were misguided and definitely criminals but they probably hadn't been given much choice given the environment they lived in. They had chosen to attack, however, and that made them enemies regardless of their moral nature.

Nothing was more deplorable than disloyalty, whether in the Hierarchy or elsewhere. The second the one batarian had elected to abandon the other to his fate was the second he condemned himself. All the same, Magnus had not intended to use such a powerful warp attack on him, how could he teach a lesson to a dead man? He hadn't meant to let the attack persist long enough to disintegrate the sentient being's flesh and bone but once the energy was released it could not be controlled. What an awful way to die, atom-by-atom, molecule-by-molecule ripped apart. It would be a long time before he could forget those screams.

Afterwards, Magnus asked a travelling salarian merchant who appeared to be on his way home for some directions on where to find a place to sleep and was relieved to have something go right for once. He had had enough misadventuring for one day and was still a bit rattled by the confrontation with Omega's miscreants. At least he had managed that particular situation on his own, even if it hadn't gone the way he wanted. Maybe he wasn't losing his edge just yet.

The short journey to what was barely more than a cheap hostel was sobering. The streets were lined with the homeless, most of which looked dishelved and forgotten. A few of the unfortunate souls carried weapons and brutish attitudes that weren't too different from the two batarians that had assaulted him earlier. But most had little to nothing at all to their name aside from ragged clothing and an open fire for warmth. It was unlike any world Magnus had ever been exposed to, he was so used to his creature comforts and the things most everyone in Citadel space took for granted.

At one point there was a rickety shelter where he could make out the shapes of hunched over turians and what sounded like sickly quarians talking in hushed tones. What business did any turian have in a place as run down as that? The Hierarchy provided everything one needed to be successful and happy, what could possibly turn someone away from such a life? He noted that most of the turians were either barefaced or displaying gang-like face markings that didn't represent their colony of origin. Were they ashamed of their heritage or social outcasts? Some were even so bold as to not wear gloves, their bare talons gleamed dangerously to warn off any potential threats. Outside of Hierarchy space it was deemed excessively rude to show one's talons in public, it was a sign of utmost disrespect, a reminder of a barbaric past before technology had elevated their civilisation to be on par with the rest of the galaxy.

Magnus didn't meet any of their glowering glances as he walked past, he wanted to fade away into the background and pretend they didn't exist. Perhaps that's what they wanted as well, to hide away from their duty and obligations like cowards, to fight like animals over scraps of food and pride. He was disgusted with what he had seen that day and already wishing he could return to his comfortable bed in the barracks on Invictus. The hotel didn't provide the same quality of comfort but it had a bed and a clean shower to scrub off the persistent stench of desperation that enveloped every bit of the station. He swore to himself that he'd not wear the same suit of armour again once
he could afford to get rid of it.

The old turian took a good long look at his reflection before turning in for the night. He was glad to be reminded of what the Invictus violet markings looked like against his cheeks and mandibles. His dark carapace almost seemed black instead of dark brown due to the small room's low lighting. He couldn't tell if cracks were beginning to show on his face or if the mirror was just dusty, it wouldn't be so unlikely at his age. Every day he was looking more and more like his father except his eyes were brown and not hazel. Most of the features were unremarkable, he didn't have his mother's piercing golden eyes or imposing presence but his crest was a respectable length unlike his younger brother who had often suffered teasing from his peers. No battle scars yet, not where others could see anyway.

Could be worse, could be better, he thought to himself. Better to be average and alive than extraordinary and likely dead at a young age. Then again, most men in their 40s would have had families of their own by now. Not Sergeant Magnus Thorn though, he was too busy trying to avoid promotion and retirement to be like everyone else. No more soul-searching tonight, he reminded himself and pulled away from the mirror. It was time for sleep followed by one last grand adventure. There was no point in worrying about what to do after that, life was unlikely to change any time soon.
After was felt like a few minutes but what had actually been several hours, Magnus was rudely awaken by a loud, persistent banging on the door to his room. With much reluctance and without enough energy to fully buckle his armour on, he rolled out of bed. He took a quick glance around to reorient his groggy senses before approaching the disturbance of what had been a brief and pleasant nap. If he needed a weapon, he knew it would be in close reach on the night stand on top of his other gear.

"What do you want?" he demanded before opening the door. It wasn't the most polite way to greet someone but neither was it polite to wake someone up who was trying to sleep in what had turned out to be rough neighbourhood full of shouting and fighting in the middle of the night.

"Delivery for you," came a scratchy voice from the other side. "Open door. We give you message. No questions, ok?"

"A delivery from who?" Magnus had never given his whereabouts to anyone and the only person who knew he would might be coming to Omega was his brother. Cautious optimism began to fill his mind, speeding up the waking up process. It could be the second message from Andronicus.

"Blue Suns, heard of them? Mercenary gang, pay really well. Hey, we said no questions!" the stranger said again but Magnus was certain he could only hear one person talking.

"What do they want with me and are you sure you're at the right place?"

"Yes! Know where everybody is. Not paid to chat. Take message then we leave."

Still rather confused by the manner in which the stranger spoke, Magnus decided to open the door and was minorly surprised by the sight of a creature he had only read about on rare occasion. A vorcha wearing nothing but a loincloth and a satchel full of "deliveries" held out a small OSD. Now he had seen everything the galaxy had to offer. The small object was forced into his hands before he could make any further inquiries and the busy vorcha left without another word.

The device contained a short text-message and a small map:

"We have your brother. Come to our warehouse by the shuttleport to discuss payment options for his release. Looking forward to doing business with you.

- The Blue Suns Mercenary Corp"

Rather underwhelmed with the amount of details, Magnus searched the file stucture on the OSD multiple times for any hidden data but there was nothing else on it. He was grateful for the map and the polite tone but couldn't figure out what they meant by releasing his brother. Was he some sort of prisoner? Suddenly he felt slightly sick about the prospect of having to break his brother out of a privately own jail. He had expected that some credits would probably be needed to bail him out of whatever trouble he had wound up in this time but nothing had indicated that the situation might be worse than a few unpaid debts. That wasn't the sort of crime people got locked up for on a world without any judicial system. Letting out a big sigh and rubbing his chin slightly, Magnus came to the conclusion that he would have to see what the Blue Suns were going on about. It was the only information he had so far to follow up on.

The warehouse was a lot larger than he been expecting and he was doubly surprised by the efficiency the mercs ran it with. Who knew that a private army could operate with such order and
precision. He showed his OSD to a human working the front desk of what appeared to be a fully functional office. It was the most civilised scene he had seen since arriving on the lawless station. The female (or at least he thought it was, she did have those strange bumps that the asari all had) pointed him in the direction of a lift that would take him to the section of storage designed for moving shipments out of the warehouse and onto space bound vessels parked nearby. He wasn't sure why that's where he was being told to go but didn't question it.

When he got there, he realised it wasn't just merchandise and other physical goods that were stored there. There was a a short hallway with a pair of imposing batarians in full, heavy armour guarding a reinforced door at the far end ready to greet him. They both had their arms crossed and looked absolutely bored, their sidearms were holstered in plain sight

"You Thorn?" one asked casually without moving.

"Yes?"

"Good, boss-man says you can talk to the prisoner before deciding if you want to pay for release. Must be in a good mood today, usually just asks for the money first."

Well, that answers that question, Magnus thought to himself. Things were starting to look fairly grim. He couldn't wait to see what his brother had to say about it all. The batarian guard ushered him into the next room which lead to a small area full of small holding cells, all of which were empty save for one.

"Hey it's your lucky day, someone's here to see you," the guard greeted the lone prisoner, still holding the door to the main room open for Magnus but not moving towards the cell.

"Not falling for that again," a familiar voice responded dismissively. The grey-skinned turian looked over his shoulder and was about to say something else before the sight of Magnus left him speechless.

"Right, well, you look like you can take care of yourself if you have to," the batarian nodded at Magnus with approval. "Don't take too long." He left the two brothers alone, to which Magnus was both thankful and somewhat annoyed by. It wasn't exactly the sort of reunion he would have preferred to have.

Andronicus broke the awkward silence first, "You're finally here! I didn't think you'd come."

"Yeah.." Magnus rubbed his mandibles slowly as he tried to think of what else to say. Of course he had come for his brother, why wouldn't he have? But the circumstances were too unsettling for him to dismiss and he had to know more. "Ando, what in the name of spirits are you doing here?"

"It's a long story..

"Last time I heard from you, your unit was working on a new initiative in the Attican Traverse to protect colonists from pirates. It's been months since you checked in after that assignment, we thought something might have happened to you."

"Yeah, well, lots of stuff happened. Maybe we could talk about it later after you get me out of here? Your timing couldn't be better, another day and they would have shipped me off to one of their prison ships. The Limbo or something. Would have cost a fortune to get me out of there."

"And how much is it going to cost to get you of where you are now? I don't make nearly as much as you do or as much as mom and dad. Why not call them for help?"
"Because...ok, let's just say I fell in with a bad crowd. Or rather, my whole unit did and I'm all that's left. I was just following orders you know, being a good little soldier. None of this was my idea. I didn't really want to ask you for help but had no where else to turn to."

"I can't do anything until I know what's really going on, and why are you sitting all the way back there in the shadows. Feeling embarrassed or ashamed, maybe both?" Magnus could feel anger rising in his voice, his brother had never been especially straightforward and he wasn't keen on dragging the truth out of him. He was going to get some answers and he was going to get them soon.

The younger turian picked himself up off the small cot of a bed and leaned in closer to the edge of the cell so that his dark green eyes were level with his brother's. Magnus let out an audible gasp at the sight of Andronicus' face, the familiar violet Invictus markings were faded and covered in scratch marks. His brother looked no different than the unruly barefaced turians that he had seen at the shelter the night before.

"What the hell happened to you?" was all Magnus could manage to say. "Did the mercs do that, does it hurt? Damn it, Ando, you've been in some stupid situations before but this is definitely the worst. No wonder you didn't want to bring mom and dad into this.

"What, oh yes, it was terrible-" Andronicus looked away and scratched the back of his neck as he always did when he was trying to come up with a good lie.

"Don't lie to me, damn it, don't I deserve better than that? That human downstairs told me you were a member of the mercs before they locked you up for thievery. Thievery! Why you'd join a group that's hardly better than batarian pirates is beyond me but that's not all you did, is it?

Spirits, what happened to your squad in the Traverse and why should I even begin to consider helping you if you're nothing to be upfront and honest?"

"I knew you'd be mad and you're not going to understand the why of it but alright, here's what happened:

My squad was protecting a vessel that had been boarded by batarian slavers. It was a mixture of aliens, a bunch civilians that couldn't protect themselves. Things were going alright for awhile but a second ship approached while we were fighting off the batarians. We assumed they were getting reinforcements, nothing we couldn't handle or so we thought. Turns out they weren't a normal group of civilians after all, some muck up with our intel probably, nothing new there. They were valuable not just to the slavers but to the Blue Suns who had just shown up. Something about escaped workers for one of their mines.

So we had both the batarians and the mercs to deal with but it quickly became obvious that the mercs wanted to help us and get their civvies back to work. Who were we to interfere? We were guards, ordered to defend not to make moral decisions. Besides, the mercs offered to compensate us for our efforts and it was a really good arrangement. We worked together to stop those bloodthirsty batarian scumbags and at the end of it we were offered to join ranks with the mercs on a more permanent basis.

They outnumbered us by a lot at that point since we had a few casualties from the fighting so our leader accepted the deal. And then we ended up here on Omega, one bad deal followed by another until eventually I wanted out. I wasn't going to end up dead because of a stupid decision my squad leader had made months ago. All I needed were enough credits to get out of here, then I could be free and self-sufficient, not owing anybody anything ever again. The short version is that I got caught stealing from the coffers. And here we are."
Magnus couldn't believe it and he noticed that his brother had avoided explaining what had happened to his unification markings. A simmering rage that had been stewing since he had entered the room finally boiled over, "I thought you were in trouble. I'm supposed to be on shore leave now but instead I'm at the ass end of the galaxy looking at someone who claims to be my brother throwing away a good life that he didn't have to work hard for at all."

He pointed at his own face, at the markings that they had once shared for emphasis and continued, "Spitting on the accomplishments of our ancestors, defiling our heritage, reveling in who knows what other blasphemous acts you've been getting into. You've only ever cared about yourself. How many times have I stuck my neck out for you before and how many times have you returned the favour?

Did you know that our mother finally achieved the rank of admiral last month, something she's been working towards her whole life? Do you even care? You go missing for months at a time on a regular basis and when you can't get what you want, you get others to do it for you.

Have you no honour, no sense of purpose? Does the concept of being part of a meritocracy mean absolutely nothing at all?"

Now Andronicus was equally angry and he leapt to his feet, the brothers faces only separated by a few centimetres and the bars of the cell.

"You have no right to lecture me, none at all. Nobody has the right to tell me what I can and can't do with my life. Shouldn't you of all people understand how unfair our lives are? You were taken from a loving family and forced to live in seclusion because of some mishap that rendered you biotic. What kind of society does that!

You're just a tool to be used and discarded by the will of the primarchs. Of course all you have are good things to say about them, they give you nice, simple orders and control your life for you. But I won't be used like that, I'm an individual. And so are you. So is every single turian out there. Those seperatists on Taetrus had the right of it though their methods of expressing it were extreme. Sometimes that's what it takes to change the world."

"You're beginning to speak treason, Andronicus," his older brother warned, purposely igoring the fond nickname that he had used for him all his life. Magnus took one final look at his brother then signalled to the batarian guards to open the door.

"You're going to leave me here? But I'm family. Isn't helping others important to you?"

"Don't you dare play the family card. If anyone finds out about what you've been up to, anyone important that is, then all three of our careers could be in jeopardy. Mom's admiralty, dad's chief engineering job, mine with the cabal..we can't risk you soiling the family name. We're still serving with dignity and distinction, all except for you. Perhaps you should think on that for awhile. A long while."

And with that he left the warehouse with his brother still inside it behind. He was going to need a stiff drink or two to mull things over.
Chapter 3

He had certainly had more than one or two stiff drinks though the actual number was a complete mystery. There were plenty of bars too choose from on Omega and none of them were to his liking. The music was of poor taste and obscenely loud. So were the people that didn't seem to notice. The dancers got all the attention, both the asari and human females alike. Nobody wore any practical clothing and there was an unhealthy amount of visible sidearms and other weaponry for a civilian population. It had taken many a turian brandy to make all the colours and smells blend together into the background.

Staring intently at a nearly empty glass, he tried in vain to relax. Everyone else had someone to talk to while the old turian only had the bottle for company. It was pathetic. He could have forgiven his brother and they could be sitting at the bar together laughing about his recent streak of misfortunes. He thought again about his brother's face and the radical changes he had made. There was nothing to laugh about.

He couldn't think of anything more terrible then turning one's back on the people, an entire society that loved and embraced them. Despite what Andronicus had said, Magnus had never felt his life in the cabal had been unfair and he had always been proud to be part of it. Not every biotic had been as fortunate as him to experience normal life for much of their childhood and adolescent years but he was sure that if others had they'd still respect the effort that the cabal put into making their lives better. There was no mischievous plot to control the lives of individuals and in fact turians enjoyed many individual freedoms that other races did not in their respective militaries. Help others and others helped you, that's how things had worked for centuries. That was the significance of the unification markings, a reminder that they were all part of a greater whole and to never let internal strife tear them apart again. Magnus could not begin to comprehend any other perspective on the matter, the idea that his brother could turned his stomach into knots.

Where had his family gone wrong? Had he not been a good brother, standing up for Ando when the other kids picked on him? Should he have let him fight his own battles and develop a sense of self-worth without intervention? What if their mother had been less ambitious about her career and spent more time at home? What if they hadn't been so stubborn about making a living on a lightly populated colony world in the first place? What if he hadn't been biotic at all and had died early on of the cancer they all thought he would develop and Ando no longer had the shadow of an old brother to grow out of?

So many questions without answers. The shore leave was supposed to give him much needed time to relax and cool off but so far Magnus found the free time stifling. Too much thinking, not enough action. He'd rather do drills all day then think about his private life. Nothing was making any sense, much less so with the excessive amount of brandy in his system.

He knew when he had drank one too many drinks. Once the internal debating turned to philosophy, it was time to bid the bar farewell. He wasn't young enough to go at it all night long any more. And he was starting to feel lonely and sorry for himself, regretting his decision to not let Andronicus out when he had the chance. How would he explain that to their parents? The bill for the night's drinks was nearly as damning as his own conscious.

He turned to leave but stumbled a few times along the way and nearly bowled over a human who hadn't been very good at moving out of the way.

"Watch where you're going, you stinkin old bird-man," the human yelled in a thundering voice. He still hadn't made any effort to move, intentionally forcing a confrontation.
"I wasn't aware they let pyjaks in here," Magnus retorted without hesitation, he had definitely drank past his limits and had moved from the self-pity stage to the angry at the world stage of mental deterioration. A fight seemed like a good, logical thing to do at that moment, whether verbal or otherwise.

"That's cute, come up with that one yourself did you? Come on now, I think I deserve an apology and a new drink. Also my mates here deserve some too," now there where three of them. They all wore patches on their shoulders that indicated membership of a gang or similar and hairstyle that defied the laws of physics. The one doing all the talking had no hair at all and wore an obnoxious pair of sunglasses as if he were outdoors. All were fit males without any obvious weapons which meant they'd probably fight dirty if things turned nasty.

"All out of credits, go hassle someone else. Either move out of the way or I'll make you move," he reached for the butt of his pistol to show that meant it, not afraid of letting off a few warning rounds indoors if he had to further reinforce the point. It's not like he'd get arrested and thrown in a jail like Andronicus, right? And even if he did, maybe he could apologise to his brother and they could come up with a wicked plan to break out together. That'd actually be fun, he toyed with the idea.

He thought he saw a punch being thrown, or maybe he had imagined it. Either way, it was all the encouragement he needed to throw one of his own. He was slightly amused at how fragile the human's jaw was, the cracking sound was almost louder than the grunt that came with it. It didn't take long for the two lackeys to jump in and grab each of Magnus' arms behind him. They struggled in finding a good position to prevent him from breaking out of the lock and suffered a few stomps to their little feet for their attempt. Still wearing full armour, Magnus had more leeway in how much damage he could take and put out and it wouldn't take them long to figure out that hand-to-hand combat wasn't going to cut it if they wanted to subdue him.

The three humans weren't the only ones to notice this fact. One of the krogan bouncers at the bar was already beginning to walk toward them but a single asari in commando leathers put her hand out and nodded to him. He shrugged and backed off but kept a close eye on the scene as it unfolded. The asari seemed like less of a threat and Magnus had almost forgotten she was there at all. As she approached the escalating dispute, she shot off two rounds from her Carnifex to quiet the room of onlookers who were beginning to cheer the fight on.

"Take it outside and don't bother coming back. All of you. Now!" she gave them each a stern look while holding her gun out in case they tried to argue with violence.

"What, we've been paying well all night. Don't kick us out, he's the one that started it," the human pathetically tried to sway the asari.

"Don't care. There's only one rule in this bar and you've broken it. If you're not willing to comply then I'm more than happy to call in my sisters. My commando sisters. And maybe the krogan over there who's cracking his knuckles. The one with the Claymore. We'll happily escort all of you out of here. Or you can drop the tough guy acts and go back to what you were doing. Your choice."

One of the humans tried to reach for a knife that had been dislodged during the short skirmish but the asari pulled it out of his grasp with her biotics. To add further insult she stamped her boot on his hand and he squealed out like some sort of farm animal.

"I'm not asking again."

"Ok, ok. Boys, let's drop it. This guy isn't worth our time," with that all three humans relinquished their knives to the asari and went back to the bar to continue their binge. Only on Omega would
they be allowed to continue paying for alcohol after such a display.

"You ok, old man?" the asari was talking to Magnus now, she reached out to tentatively touch his shoulder but he pulled away instinctively.

"Fine, everything was under control. I didn't need your help."

"A simple thank you would have been nice. I've seen those three do some real damage before, you got away lucky."

Magnus didn't say anything, he just shrugged his shoulders indifferently and waited for the pestering asari to go away. Then he took his own leave, deciding he had had seen enough of Omega and what it could do to a man. The reckless behaviour was beginning to frighten him, he had never been one for public displays before and couldn't afford to make mistakes like his brother. It was nigh time he found a shuttle back home. To Invictus and the cabal where life was straightforward and predictable.

The long walk to the nearest shuttleport was boring and uneventful and the much needed sobering up process was beginning to take effect.

"Alms for the poor?" a craggy, female voice begged from the shadows, breaking Magnus' reverie.

"Go away," he growled at her. "I haven't got anything to give."

"But you do, everyone has something. A reading then? First one is always free."

"A what?"

"I will read your fortune and you can decide if you want to donate a few credits afterwards."

"I'm kind of in a hurry to leave this rotten place behind. Maybe next time."

"We both know there won't be a next time. Come now, it won't hurt," he could barely see her in the darkened roadway. How long had she been following him? He felt her reach out to touch his arm, much like the asari commando had tried earlier. He tried to pull away, nobody had any business being that close. But he couldn't tear her off of him. The nearest light showed that she had dark blue skin and pensive, aqua eyes that looked right through him. Another asari. Couldn't they all go back to Thessia and leave him alone?

Her eyes suddenly turned black as they stared intently into his. Both her palms were on his cheeks and all his senses became fussy and unfocused as she whispered something that sounded like, "Embrace eternity." Everything went dark for a few seconds after that.
When he came to, he was face down on a bed of blue-green grass with wildflowers that he had only ever seen on his homeworld. There was the sound of squaking birds overhead and a gentle, warm breeze encouraged him to get up. As he did so, he noticed that the sky seemed familiar, the warm glow of the sun was beginning to set and a red planetoid could be seen rising to take its place. The planet that looked almost like a moon except much smaller was definitely Temerarus which meant he must be on Invictus. It felt like he had just woken up from a dream, as if everything on Omega had been a figment of his imagination.

He looked about to make sense of his new surroundings and saw for a split second the shape of the asari leaning against a tree before she faded away into its shadow. He could hear the banging of tools not too far away. On the hill above the tree line was the house he had grown up in, with its large veranda that overlooked the jungle below. He could just make out the form of his mother working outside, probably doing the gardening as she had enjoyed doing when they all lived together at home and she wanted time to herself. She'd always complain about getting dirt under her talons but they knew she enjoyed growing her own fresh herbs to add to the nightly dish. It was surreal, back then she had been a normal wife and mother, looking after her family and tending the home instead of barking orders on the flight deck of whatever ship she was serving on.

Well, she did a lot of barking of orders at home too, Magnus reminded himself. He still wasn't entirely certain what was going on. He could remember the physical sensation of mindmelding with the asari and he was certain that he wasn't dreaming. Perhaps this was one of his own memories that she was showing him. She wasn't a very good fortune teller if all she could show was the past.

He continued down the hill, trying to recall if he had walked through that part of the jungle before. It was as unruly as it had been in his childhood, full of vines and dangerous creatures in the underbrush. Though the forest was so close to the family home it could still be unpredictable. But he had enjoyed the thrill of playing outdoors as a kid, there was always something new to discover among the trees. He followed the sound of tools working on wood until he reached a small clearing.

Two turian children were stretched out on a platform up in a tree banging pieces of wood onto frames that had already been erected. He smiled as he remembered how they had convinced their dad to let them build the tree house, their mother wasn't supposed to know what they were getting up to. As far as she knew, they were out hunting with their father, or helping him with strict orders to not so much as carry a gun until they had proven they could handle moving targets effectively. The boys were still quite young, Andronicus was seven and Magnus twelve but like all turians they were eager to learn how to shoot things as soon as they were allowed to do so.

From memory, Magnus seemed to recall he had been doing much of the work that day since Ando was too busy trying explaining his grand plans for when the treehouse was finished. He was under the allusion that they were close enough to the migration patterns of some local game that they could practice shooting from the tree but Magnus hadn't been so convinced. Neither of them had a rifle of their own anyway so the concept wouldn't have worked even if Ando had been right.

The real, older Magnus spotted his father, Marcus Thorn, leaning over a workbench nearby scanning a large piece of scrap metal with his omnitool. He was always tinkering with something, a man of few words but big ideas. His hunting rifle was leaning nonchantly against a stack of crates that contained raw lumber for the secret project. All the boys together, away from their mother...
getting up to mischief. Those were the days.

"Ando, hand me that wrench over there would you? Ando?" the younger Magnus called out but Andronicus had descended from the platform when his brother was busy and had disappeared.

While Marcus was distracted by whatever it was he was designing on his omnitool's screen, Andronicus had taken the opportunity to get a closer look at his father's rifle. He wasn't quite old enough to do targetting practice yet but he had watched Magnus learn how to do it a few times. The gun was lightweight and easy to move even with his small hands. The real Magnus watched as his brother began to climb the rope ladder up to the platform to show off his prize. As he made the climb, he bumped the heatsink with his free hand, not realising that the weapon was still cooling off from recent use.

The younger Magnus nearly jumped at the sound of his brother's scream. He quickly looked over the edge to make sure their father hadn't seen what Ando had just done but he was still working, probably listening to music on his visor given his lack of a response to the commotion. He hauled his brother up to the platform to get a good look at his injured hand, hoping he could find a way to take care of it without drawing attention. If either Marcus of Sibyl had found out that one of their sons had touched a gun they shouldn't have then both were likely to be punished for it.

"Don't be a baby, show me your hand," Magnus demanded. With his usual reluctance, Ando finally conceded after he was certain that Magnus wasn't going to scold him.

"Damn, going to need more than just medi-gel for that. How are we going to explain a burn..." he looked around at the various tools on hand for some inspiration.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Andronicus kept repeating as he tried to keep himself from screaming out again. The burn was still fresh enough that his carapace was beginning to flake off and show the leathery skin underneath on his palm. There was unpleasant smell over the wound.

"It's ok, try and relax. I can handle this. Don't say anything and if mom or dad ask you anything go with my lead. Got it?"

"Right, ok. It hurts, Magnus. Can you fix it?"

"Um. Not really but there's a small medkit down there somewhere. I'll have to put the rifle back anyway. They can't find out about that, I'm almost ready for the next stage of target practice. What were you thinking, Ando?"

"I wanted to show you that I was right, this is a great spot for hunting."

"We can track game from here, maybe. Let's worry about that after we sort you out."

After Magnus made sure things were the same as they had been before, he bravely interrupted his father and tested his half-truth story on him. Marcus was noticeably concerned but not angry, not like their mother was going to be. He asked his eldest son to help find a strip of bandages that could be temporarily wrapped around Ando's singed hand and the two silently braced themselves for the retelling of their own version of events for Sibyl's inevitable interrogation.

Andronicus was putting on a brave face despite what had transpired and when their father was far enough ahead on the trip back to the house, he grabbed his brother's hand for reassurance. Magnus pretended not to notice but didn't discourage him. He was used to his little brother being accident prone and self-conscious as a result of his clumsy nature. There was no point in making him feel worse about matters.
"You boys were almost late again, I hope you have something to show for it. I could use something for tomorrow night," Sibyl greeted them. She wore her casual uniform even when she was at home. Dinner was still cooking judging by the smell of roasting meat and spices. For a moment, the three of them though they were in the clear, Ando tried shoving his hand behind his back. Always observant, Sibyl caught him doing it and in the blink of an eye she was on top of him, examining the damage.

"Who wants to explain this?" she said without looking at her husband or eldest as she undid the hasty bandage. They both noted that she didn't ask direct the question at Andronicus.

"Um," a rather timid Magnus began, his father gave him an encouraging glance but said nothing. "It was my fault. We were playing Krogan v. Rachni and I was the krogan warlord using a mighty Claymore. Except the Claymore was actually a smouldering gun which I was pretending was a Claymore, you see. And Ando was the Rachni Queen and we were having a mock battle while Dad was tracking some footprints and just passing the time with a little game."

"Wait, why did you even have a smouldering gun on a hunting trip?" she asked suspiciously. She ran one talon gently over Ando's palm to test how deeply the flesh had been affected and he squirmed in response. "And why wasn't Ando wearing gloves?"

"Magnus wasn't wearing his either," Andronicus tried to offer helpfully but stopped immediately once he caught his brother's glare. That had been precisely the kind of comment that Magnus had told him earlier to keep to himself.

"I always carry my toolkit when we're away from home," Marcus chimed in. "I've been trying to refit a cooling unit to that old Viper that I've been experimenting on lately. The heatsink keeps malfunctioning but it's a good gun aside from that. I didn't think much of it."

"You should keep a closer eye on them, what if it had been something more dangerous?" she said in a more sedated tone though making an effort to treat everyone fairly. Marcus was used to it, if one of them was in trouble then they all were. Or at least, that's how it looked to the children, later she would apologise and they'd have a laugh about it in private once the boys had been put to bed for the night.

"I'm sorry," he said in an equally mocked voice. At this point in their lives, the boys had not picked up the body language between their parents that allowed them to communicate without the children knowing. But the real Magnus re-observing the scene could see the way they looked at each other. They had always been really good, loving parents that took their roles seriously.

Sibyl sighed when she was sure the wound would need a proper clean up and ointment. She applied a tiny bit of medi-gel to numb the pain long enough for her to drag Andronicus to another room so she could dress it properly. Once the new, better bandage was applied, she sent him off to his room until dinner time. Magnus paced around the dining area impatiently, wondering what she'd do with them while his father busied himself by checking messages on his terminal.

"Magnus, you should have worn your gloves. He's always copying what you do," was the first thing she said upon her return.

"I know, I wasn't thinking.."

"You should always be thinking. You're a Thorn like your father and you have a lot to live up to. Some day you're going to be in a legion and have people looking up to you for orders. You have to set a good example or they'll get themselves killed. Or you killed. Either way, it won't end well.
Now, I want you to work twice as hard on your drills this week, no more target practice until you pass your next exam with perfect marks. You can start shooting again once you've earned your own weapon," So it was to be a lecture, punishment, and a reminder that he wouldn't be making any significant progress any time soon. It could have been a lot worse but to a twelve-year old she may as well told him he'd never amount to anything.

When she left the room, Marcus came over and gripped Magnus by the shoulder, "I'm not sure whether to be proud or dismayed by what you just did for your brother. Did you think I'd buy that story any better than your mother would? He could have blown his whole hand off if he had tried to fire that gun. There was a reason I had left it alone to cool off.

You should never be willing to take the blame for somebody else's actions. But you did the right thing. You put his needs before your own. If you ever have to choose between helping a family member or performing your duty, you will choose family every time. Even when they're wrong. Especially when they're wrong. Remember that, son."

How had he forgotten all that? He shouldn't have hesitated when met with his brother on Omega. The words of his father still echoed in his mind as he looked over his shoulder at the asari watching him and the scene began to dissolve around them.

"You were supposed to read my fortune, not show me the past," he said.

She said nothing in response and left him to be alone with his thoughts.

----

"It's your lucky day, Thorn. Someone's paid for your release. Now get your leathery hide out of my jail."

"What, seriously? Was it Magnus that paid the release fee? Is he still here, I need to talk to him."

"I don't know, kid. I just do the paper work. Does it really matter? Let me unlock your omintool. There you go. That's everything then. Oh and one more thing: don't come back here. Next time we see you, you'll be dead."

"Got it, thanks for the hospitality. No hard feelings."

Andronicus' omnitool began beeping madly with messages without the jamming mechanism in place. He only looked for the one marked with the the Thorn encryption sequence.

"Didn't tell mom and dad, don't worry. Might not be retiring as soon as I expected, you're bounty was exceptionally high. Not sticking my neck out for you any more after this, you've been given too many second chances. Try not to get into more trouble, Ando.

Good hunting,

Magnus"
Chapter 5

"The difficulty with fighting other biotics is that you may not always be aware that your opponent is a biotic until they use their abilities against you and by then it might be too late. Always test your enemy's defense for weaknesses. If you can't take them on successfully the first time then live to try again when they're exposed, armed with the knowledge of what you’re up against. With that in mind, let's continue our lesson on kinetic defenses," Magnus was now back in the classroom teaching a group of advanced biotics on how to get the most out of their powers. Teaching had always came naturally, the sharing of knowledge was easier than the acquisition of knowledge but his students always kept him on his talons with fresh ideas and inquiring minds.

"Last time we practiced creating fields for protection. Barriers can be used for all sorts of purposes and they are your greatest strength. You can use them to supplement your armour's kinetic barriers for extra absorption when cover is limited, or to cover during the vulnerable time when you're kinetics have been broken and are being repaired, to power attacks such as nova and charge, you can even detonate them to create a shockwave affect around you when too many enemies are closing in. But to get the most of your barriers, you must not only know how to cast one and maintain it but know its limitations.

And that leads us into how to reocgnise a barrier on an enemy and how to break it. So long as they are maintaining their barrier, they are free to use their biotics in an offensive manner. If you break the barrier and force them to recast it then they will have to resort to evasive maneuvers which gives you breathing room and a great opportunity to push the advantage.

Now, who can tell me how to tell if you're fighting against a biotic barrier instead of a kinetic shield?"

"Sir," one student waited for acknowledgment then continued, "You can't actually see a barrier like a shield. Not when fired on anyway. The only way to know its there is if a biotic attack like throw or pull 'bounces' off the enemy and has no effect. Different biotic attacks have a different visual cue when they bounce off."

"Correct, which is why it's easy to be unaware that they are present until you've already engaged your foe. However, unlike kinetic shields a barrier will not protect it's caster from debris or weapon fire, as you mentioned. It will only repel biotic attacks and only for a short while before breaking.

Now, I'm going to cast a barrier on myself so that you understand how to notice and respond to it. I want each of you to think of whichever offensive power you think has the best chance of breaking through and cast it at me. If none make it through, that's ok but make sure you recognise the visual cues that are triggered. However, bonus marks will go to whoever can penetrate the barrier successfully.

Ok.. go."

An invisible biotic barrier enveloped most of Magnus' body though the class could not see it with their eyes. The mass effect field that he generated created a high gravity well around him that was designed to act as a temporary shield for a short duration. Without his proper armour and kinetic shields on, it would be easier for the students to break through the barrier and cause physical harm. He doubted any of them would be able to do so on their first try. Despite his age, he was physically fit enough to take a few powerful blows if they happened. The cabal always demanded the best from everyone of its operatives and he was no different.
Each of the eight trainees did as they were told, none repeating the attack tried by whoever went before them. They use some easy and predictable powers such as shockwave, pull, throw, warp, as well as more creative attempts. A small singularity that only lasted a few seconds and resulted in a few giggles from the other trainees, a reave attack that nearly worked forcing Magnus to replenish his barrier's strength for the next attempt, a nova cast by one of the students showing off that he could create his own barriers as well, and a biotic charge that nearly concussed the desperate last student who couldn't think of anything else to try.

He let them all have another go but nobody could break the barrier entirely. As they began to queue up for the third time around, he noticed the door to the back of the room had been opened and someone new had entered the room. The distraction nearly caused him to stagger as a rather forceful throw caught him on the shoulder where his barrier was weakest.

The offending student apologised profusely for catching his trainer unaware. Magnus reassured him that he hadn't done any damage and had came the closest to breaking through of any of his peers during the lesson.

"Perhaps the lieutenant who now graces us with her presence would like to demonstrate how to break a barrier properly?" he spoke to the newcomer and the rest of the class immediately turned to salute the superior officer. It was a bluff meant to alert his students that they were being watched. They might take the opportunity to impress her with their progress which could look good for him as well.

"I was just observing but if you're so eager to be humiliated then I can happily oblige you, sergeant," she said warmly, smiling a bit. Observations and evaluations weren't uncommon but he didn't think that's why she was really there. He had wondered when she'd have enough free time to meet with him since his return to the cabal.

He laughed, trying not to lose face since she had called his bluff, "If you think you can do it, then by all means."

"Let's keep things interesting," she said as she approached the front of the room. "How about a spar, a proper one without weapons. Biotics and hand-to-hand only. It's hard to understand proper barrier defense without seeing the concept in action, right?"

"Right," he hesitated as he tried to evaluate how tough she'd be. Like him, she wore her dress uniform and carried no weapons. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen her fight and wasn't sure what style to prepare himself for. The room began to buzz with excitement as the students began placing bets on the outcome of the impending duel. He couldn't back out now and if he lost they wouldn't be too disheartened. One student had already left the room and announced the fight the rest of the training corridor.

Now to make a fool of yourself, he thought to himself. Lieutenant Liana Viatrix had been his commanding officer for several years and they had become something close to friends during that time. He had never been on a mission with her and had only rarely seen her in the training rooms. As the leader of the Invictus Cabal, her job kept her constantly busy. He noted that she was only a few years younger than him and doing much better for herself in terms of career. And she always gets what she wants, one way or another.

As more students and their teachers began to crowd the small lesson hall, Magnus began to feel a bit nervous. He typically kept to himself and barely knew the names of the other teachers who only stayed stationed there as long as their orders told them to. Viatrix had been the only other cabalist that he knew much about. She insisted he had a better reputation among his colleagues than he thought. He wasn't entirely sure why he suddenly cared what they thought of him or his abilities
but wasn't keen on disappointing anyone.

"I can go easy on you if you want..." she whispered so only he could hear as they prepared to start.

"Don't, that's not fair to you or anyone else. I'm tougher than I look," he boasted with more confidence than he actually felt.

The rules of their bout said that the victor would be whoever broke the other's barriers first, if barriers were used by the caster for an attack it would be allowed. Their omnitools were set to let off a chiming sound when they detected the absence of barriers on their user. Once the room was quieted down, the pair of fighters bowed to one another and the spar began.

They started with some basic punches and kicks designed to test each other's reflexes and agility. She was a lot faster than he had expected and it wasn't long before he was knocked to the ground by one of her upper kicks, her spurs tangled with his long enough for him to lose his balance. He had to resort to detonating his barrier earlier than he wanted to gain enough room to plan an offensive move.

But she was almost right on top of him by the time he had prepared his warp field. The biotic attack flew harmlessly past her as she tried to keep the pressure up, blocking each jab and punch he could throw. He thought he saw her smile at him before she teleported backwards. Maybe she was going to go easy on him after all.

He watched as she gathered a field in her hands, unsure of what she was planning to do with it. Without a second thought, he punched the ground beneath him and forced a rippling shockwave to manifest between them. It wasn't an overly powerful attack but it might keep her unbalanced or interrupt whatever she was doing.

A small vortex came into being in the same position as the shockwave and the two unstable fields collapsed on each other in an explosion that threw both fighters back, increasing the distance between them. The singularity had aroused a few "oohs" and "ahhs" from everyone since it was such a hard power to wield but they were quickly disappointed with its short lifespan. The explosion rekindled their enthusiasm. Magnus could hear the crowd cheering them on, his students audibly louder than anyone else and chanting only his name.

Now was his chance to go on the offensive while she was busy getting back up. He started to create a warp field again, more powerful than the last but as he was about to throw it at her she blinked out of existence. Thinking she was teleporting again, he let go of the energy at where he thought she would reappear. The audible chiming noise from both their omnitools went off as she came crashing into him with the full force of a biotic charge, his warp hitting her as her barriers were down and another biotic explosion was set off at close range.

She had nearly knocked all the breath out of him and hadn't moved after landing the attack, her body draped over his in an awkward fashion. It took a few moments for her to pick herself off him and open her eyes. He had never realised how attractive she was until she was so close.

"What the hell did you hit me with, Thorn?"

"Warp, nice charge by the way."

Finally she detangled her legs from his and rolled gracefully back to her feet. She offered him her hand and helped him back up.

"Looks like it was a draw. You are a lot tougher than I gave you credit for," she said wryly.
The crowded room began to disperse and empty out. Magnus gave his students their assignment for the week and told them to be ready to practice their barriers against one another for the next lesson. They were noticeably more excited about the next lesson than the homework assignment and started breaking off into pairs before being dismissed for the day. Once all the energy had been drained out of the room, he was left alone with the lieutenant.

She leaned casually against the desk and watched silently as he collected datapads and other personal materials to take back to the barracks.

"So what did you really want to talk about?" he said at last when the silence had grown too awkward.

"Well, we haven't had a chance to catch up since you got back and my schedule's been tighter than usual. I was going to ask you up to my office for one of our usual quiet chats, maybe crack open a fresh bottle of brandy after a full day's work was completed. But every time I try to grab a few moments to myself, the terminal starts blinking and there's a new set of orders to carry out.

The Invictus primarch keeps asking for my opinions on the most mundane things, keeps bugging me about the state of my officers and how ready they are. Ready for what, I ask him, and he just stares at me like I'm supposed to know what he's going on about," she sighed and crossed her arms, not looking to see if Magnus was even listening. Her omnitool lit up for a second as a new private message was delivered. "I bet that's him again, damn it. Wish I had been given some R&R orders like you."

"It wasn't as great as it sounds," he admitted. He watched her drop her arm to turn off the omnitool instead of checking the message and slowly turned to look over at him.

"Yeah, might have been a bit lonely out there. What did you end up getting up to?"

He ignored the first comment because it was a matter of personal opinion if loneliness was either a good or bad thing and such a discussion would be uncomfortable on multiple levels. "Oh not much, didn't end up visiting the Citadel like I planned on but that's ok, there will be other chances. Saw some family and kept out of trouble. Nothing interesting to report."

"I wasn't asking for a report, I was asking as a friend," she said pointedly and he couldn't tell if he had some how irritated her or not.

"Ok, Viatrix, you've got my attention for the present so let's have that quiet chat. Shall I escort you to your office, seeing as you need to be going there soon anyway? We can talk along the way, take the scenic route. End with a glass of brandy and gracious salutes like usual."

"Oh Magnus, you're almost starting to sound charming," she laughed softly and grabbed him by the arm. He hoped nobody would see the affectionate gesture, it was important to keep up professional appearances. In the corridor they went back to walking normally though the pace she set was slower than he would have preferred. Was it his imagination or was she standing a lot closer than she needed to?

They talked at length about a variety of topics, everything from galactic affairs to the small uneventful things Magnus had missed over the last two weeks. The lieutenant mentioned that she had a couple of dossiers for him to pick up from her office and that he would be expected to show up for a debriefing in the next couple of days. While internally curious about the mission he was being lined up for, he knew not to ask unnecessary questions. She would give the details when it was the right time to do so.
When they got there, he tried to politely decline the social offer of drinks with the CO. But she was stubborn and wouldn't accept no for an answer. The brandy did smell nice and the cushy chairs on the other side of her desk were inviting. He reluctantly agreed to one drink if she promised to check her messages and make sure he wasn't interrupting something important.

"Alright, you've been persistent though I don't know you're so worried about someone else's orders," she said after pouring the amber liquid into crystalline glasses.

"I'd hate to be responsible for your getting into trouble," he responded, accepting the glass when it was offered.

"Such a gentlemen," she gave a half-smile then tapped a few keys on her console. "Ah, it's an invitation. I do hate these sort of social gatherings designed to soften the officers up just before they're given orders that they aren't going to like. Even better, it's a military ball. Why would I willing go to something like that. Oh, its mandatory. Great. Hm..")

He knew exactly what she was thinking when her eyes met his then. "Not unless you order me to and even then I'll appeal to the primarch to over rule it."

"He'd love that far too much. But no I wasn't going to ask you to worry about it. Would you really have said no?"

"Absolutely, ma'am. It's time I get back to planning for tomorrow's class. Didn't you have some dossiers for me?"

"Yes, here you are. I can't believe you'd not even hesitate to decline such a prestigious gesture. It would be a great opportunity to rub shoulders with the higher brass and I could have bragged about all your achievements in the tactical division. Plus it would be less awkward than turning up alone."

"Permission to speak freely?"

"You don't have to.. oh very well. Granted."

"An elegant woman with your reputation should have no trouble finding someone willing to accompany her to such an event."

"You don't always have to be an uptight soldier. Why can't you be more open to personal conversations? Sometimes I'm not sure if you have any opinions of your own and then you.. Wait, what?" she cut her own ranting tyriad about Magnus' character short and stared blankly at him like he had just entered the room without her knowledge. She reached for the bottle to pour another glass and drank it down in one swift motion, still stunned by the compliment.

"You look busy. I should get going," he jumped to his feet, eager to be far away from her presence and saluted, waiting impatiently for her to return it.

"Dismissed, sergeant," he barely heard her say.
Chapter 6

The first thing Magnus did once he reached his own, private room in the officer barracks was to put the growing pile of datapads he had collected throughout the day on his desk. The terminal blinked with messages but he could read them later. The second thing he did was remove his boots, which should have been the first thing but he had nearly forgotten with so many thoughts cluttering his head. The third was unrolling the meditation mat under his bed to do his daily routine before starting in on administrative tasks.

Clearing his mind proved more challenging than most nights. He kept trying to make sense of Viatrix and what she really wanted from him. He had always admired her and enjoyed their candor but had never thought of her as something more than a friend. What she had said regarding his inability to partake in personal conversations and relationships was more or less true though he didn't see why that was such a problem. As long as he did his job and she did hers then that's what really mattered. If she wanted his counsel then he would freely give it as he always had. Something about her movements and attitude had implied she wanted more than that, however.

And if that wasn't enough, he had sent mixed signals of his own without entirely meaning to do so. He had seen it as polite thing to say at the time but when the words were out he knew it would be miscontrued as more than a mere compliment. She might think that he wanted something more from her and decide to end their positive, friendly relationship with a request for his reassignment. He had worked too hard over the past few decades to see all his effort thrown away because of social incompatibility with a female officer.

You big idiot, he said to himself. If she didn't think you were interested before, she'll think it now.

The thing that bothered him most was that he wasn't entirely sure any more that he wasn't interested. When she had been laying on top of him earlier that day, he didn't mind it at all. Even if she had nearly bruised the back of his head as a result. No wonder he wasn't thinking so clearly.

He needed something boring to focus on if he was to have a successful meditation before bed. Rules and regulations usually did the trick. Of course, he could only think about the cabal's strict mandates regarding intimate relationships between personnel. There was little opportunity to develop anything long-term with another cabalist and there was zero opportunity to mix with anyone outside the cabal. Operatives were constantly being moved between one cabal and another as missions dictated where they were most useful, most of the officers were also subject to the ongoing shuffle. And if that weren't hard enough, marriage and family-making were completely outlawed.

The cabal was a very different type of legion from the rest in the Hierarchy. They were secretive and only called in for the most extreme missions, essentially behaving as a mix of special forces and intelligence for the other legions. Biotics were a precious commodity and were treated as such. Many scientists had tried to find ways to force biotics into existence with direct exposure to eezo but most of the experiments proved unethical and not entirely practical so every biotic that was discovered naturally became a unique asset. Similar experiments were done to try and reproduce biotic effects in the children of biotic parents and all of those ended in failure. There was no value in two biotics having children together as far as the Hierarchy could tell. And that sentiment trickled down to relationships between biotics who had very little personal time to engage in such social behaviour anyway.

It could have been different for the other species as far as Magnus knew. The asari seemed the most carefree in that regard. He had never put much thought into it seeing as he was so
incompetent at conversing with the opposite sex in the first place. Viatrix had always been different but on reflection that was because she had sought him out and not vice versa. There were very few fraternisation laws to worry about in the way that humans did in their militaries so that wasn’t one of his worries.

What was worrying were some of the things she had implied. It was impossible to understand what she had been driving at with her mini-rant. While he did have opinions of his own, he saw little point in sharing them if they weren’t relevant. And he didn’t think he was nearly as closeminded as Viatrix had nearly accused him of, his lateral thinking had been the distinguishing characteristic that had made him so successful as a cabalist tactician. This was arguably the same characteristic she found so attractive about him. All of it created a circle of thoughts that were leading him nowhere.

Magnus preferred to keep everything in his life simple, predictable, and professional wherever possible, everything from relationships to his personal living space. The room around him was mostly bare aside from the essentials. One corner served as an office with two chairs that never got used, a desk, three banners behind that displayed the insignia of his cabal, colony of birth, and the Palaven standard in the middle, and a vid screen linked to his computer terminal. Between that and his bed was a workbench flanked by a weapon’s rack and an armour display mannequin dressed in the armour that had been passed down in his family for generations since before the Unification Wars.

The armour was the only sentimental decoration in the whole room, its bronze-gold tint made it look like something that belonged in a museum. Magnus had been working on modifications for that armour since he was a boy, changing the heavy materials to something lighter and more flexible for a biotic to use. He had made up for the thicker plating’s extra space with pockets designed to hold extra rations and small munitions. At some point he wanted to convert the ablative plating into something that could support a holographic, tech-armour interface but without sacrificing any structural integrity. He had already painstakingly restored the original colours and seen the different layers that his ancestors had contributed to each piece over the centuries. While most in his family had used the suit as a display piece, a few had actually worn the armour into combat and some day he hoped to do so as well.

Looking over at his progress on the armour was enough to inspire him. He began to feel some sense of inner peace and concluded his meditation session. There was much to do without the pestering interruptions from unwanted thoughts.

He checked his messages before digging into the lesson plans and the six dossiers. There were two from the Astrid, the cruiser-class ship that both his parents served on, one message from each requesting a vid-chat in the near future. A few bits of spam and an anonymous thank you that he suspected had came from Andronicus. And a response from the cabal’s STG informant to his request for information.

When he had returned to Invictus, he had asked Kelmor, a biotic salarian that had been exiled from his homeworld, to keep a close eye on Andronicus’ movements via his omnitool signature. The salarian hadn’t asked too many questions and had proved to be a reliable intelligence gatherer in the past, often hacking into STG databases to help the cabal on its various missions. Magnus didn’t know him too well but had always had more trust for salarians than any other alien species and had given some monetary compensation for having to do extra work in his off-duty hours. The message wasn’t too revealing and only told that Andronicus Thorn had left Omega Station for the asari world of Illium.

The dossiers proved more interesting than he expected but he couldn't work out why he in
particular had been given them. All were for fresh recruits, randomly selected judging by the differences between them. Three of the six dossiers weren't biotic at all, three were male and three were female, two had the same surname and appeared to be siblings. He looked again, not just siblings but twins and both biotic, he couldn't believe that was even possible. Ages ranged from 17 to 18, the period where fresh adults had finished basic training and were beginning specialist training and awaiting their first legion assignment. Magnus was used to training turians of all ages since the cabal took in all biotics that had revealed their potential but specialised in advanced biotic defenses that only the older students were ready for.

After perusing through the dossiers and trying to guess what his next assignment might be, he sent a message back through the extranet to confirm the receipt of the messages from the Astrid. It would take several hours with his level of clearance to even reach the ship which always made planning live-chats across the galaxy with space vessels somewhat difficult. Unless the Astrid would be near a mass relay and its respective comm buoy in the next day or two, it could be weeks before he could have even a short chat with his parents. They were likely expecting to be in such a situation in the near future or wouldn't have bothered to get in touch too soon.

He suspected his mother's new rank came with a higher priority level for the network so communication should become easier between them. Not that he was overly eager to entertain the usual sorts of questions and give the same answers ad naseum. The usual order of their conversations went along the following: Have you been doing well? When will you be up for promotion? Will you accept the promotion this time? Are you even thinking about your career at all? What has your brother been getting up to? Have you been saving for retirement? When will we get to see you next? Have you met a girl yet?

The last was usually asked by his father in an attempt to remind Sibyl to ease up on their son who was by all accounts quite successful at his job despite his lack of ambition. They both were well aware of the cabal's restrictions on relationships and Magnus' complete lack of desire to have one and they had no hopes for ever seeing grandchildren from either of their sons. It was a wonder they could find any reasons to care about them at all but they insisted on being a part of Magnus' life whenever possible.

Sometimes he could see the benefit in being sheltered like the rest of the cabalists who had been taken from their families at much earlier ages. They couldn't know what they were missing if they had never experienced it, truly ignorance could be bliss. Of course it wasn't all bad, he had good memories from his childhood such as the one the asari on Omega had pulled out of him. That was part of why he was so stubborn in staying assigned to the Invictus cabal and didn't go out of his way to elicit attention elsewhere. Invictus was his home and home was safe.

The next morning he was summoned to the debriefing room next to Viatrix's office. She had told him it would be several days off so it had come as a bit of a surprise. The boardroom was full of officers he didn't recognise, most from other cabals and the leader of the meeting was a direct aide to the Palaven primarch. The atmosphere in the room was tense, the handful of non-biotics on cabal grounds was a strange sight. They could tell they were out of place, each looking around with suspicion and awe.

The mission objective was simple. The primarchs had agreed that it was time to introduce a shift in the relationship between the cabals and the other legions. For reasons they wouldn't go into, it made sense for every branch of the military to know the tactics of every other and to know how to work beside them on the battlefield. It wasn't a radical concept, forcing biotics and non-biotics together but there were long established social taboos to overcome if cooperation was to be successful. Magnus was curious as to why they were only coming to the conclusion now rather than hundreds of years ago. The process would have to be gradual given public perception of the cabals
but given the results they had delivered during the uprising on Taetrus several months back it was deemed a good time to change how they operated.

They were going to introduce the new training regime slowly with fresh recruits. The new squads would comprise both biotics and non-biotics and they would train side by side until they were eligible for legion assignment. Magnus had been selected as one of the first trainers to teach the new squads. Every cabal would have a similar squad to his to see if the initiative was worth pursuing further. He wasn't sure what to make of it, maybe his background at having lived so long away from the cabal had factored in and he wasn't exactly excited to work with such inexperienced soldiers. But those were his orders and he would proudly carry them out for the good of the Hierarchy.

The room emptied out and the offworld officers were invited to tour the cabal grounds before catching a shuttle back to the fleet. They wouldn't be permitted to stay long, despite the new approach to an open-door policy. Viatrix had politely declined the offer to join them, stating she wanted to go over the finer details with Magnus.

"You probably weren't expecting those orders," she tried to make polite conversation once they were alone.

"Not exactly, no. But it's about time we were treated with some decency instead of suspicion by our own kind. We work just as hard as they do, probably moreso given the higher risk missions we take on. Surprised to see High Command taking a direct interest though, did you notice how nervous that aide looked?"

"Yeah, well, most non-biotics are very superstitious, some of the cabalists are too. He probably doesn't recognise the difference between biotics and sorcery, bet this plan wasn't his idea. They tried to feed me some line about it not being safe enough for the primarch himself to be present, can you believe that?"

"So, you had more orders to give or qualifications to add to the ones just given?" he was back to being professional again.

"Oh, right. I already gave you the dossiers, everything else on this one is up to you. And I mean that, you've got a great mind when it comes to experiments like this. Do what you think is best and if it doesn't work, we'll work the kinks out for the next batch of recruits.

I really wanted to get you alone for a moment to ask if you were doing ok. You bolted from my office the other day and I wasn't entirely sure if I had said something to bother you?"

"Hmm," Magnus rubbed his mandibles as he always did when he wasn't certain of something. She thought she had offended him? How in the spirits had she came to that conclusion. He thought he had said something out of line. Now was the chance to clear the air for good on the matter.

"I was being pushy, wasn't I. You can be honest with me," she said softly.

"That's not quite how it felt," he leaned against the large boardroom table and invited her to sit beside him. She did so but kept a bit of distance so not to agitate him like the previous day. He wasn't forthcoming with anything else so she took the cue to speak her mind.

"I enjoy your company a lot, Magnus, and your opinions. You're the only other soul around here that I can talk to about anything, business and personal. Our situation is hardly normal, only now do the other legions see the value in what we do. There won't be any social revolutions regarding the treatment of biotics outside these walls. And even inside sometimes it feels more like a prison
than headquarters. So, yeah, maybe the stress of all the work lately has me seeking someone to distract me from it all. I know, that sounds terribly unprofessional but we all need a bit of down time. What good is down time when its spent alone?"

"I've never really thought about it that way before," he said honestly. "And I value our time together as well. What more is needed?"

She stared at him then as she tried to think of a response, those yellow-green eyes that were so bright and observant looked rather dull and sad. Had he said the wrong thing again?

"You're right, things are ok as they are. I'm sorry for things getting...weird, so much on my mind these days."

"I hear that. Don't worry, I'm not going any where any time soon so if you need to talk about whatever.. I'll be here. Granted, developing entirely new teaching plans for non-biotics is going to be challenging and time-consuming."

"You'll figure it out, you always do. When do you want to meet your squad?"

"Are they already here? Then as soon as they finish orientation. I want to know what I'm getting into here."
"They're staring at us again," one of the recruits said, nodding at the other turian's shoulder to indicate from which direction.

"Let them stare. If one starts moving over here, I'll give them a nasty surprise," the other female said as she casually slipped off a glove under the table. She wanted to eat her meal in peace and had no qualms with detracting the cabalists from interrupting her.

"You've been itching to pick a fight since you got here, Atreides," another of their unit spoke up, this one a male biotic.

"I don't like it here, nothing feels right," she said dismissively as she tucked into the food on her plate. "And keep your opinions to yourself, Quintus."

Two more of their squad-mates joined the table, each with double the helping of food than either of the non-biotics. Quintus had already destroyed most of his excess by the time they sat down.

"Still can't get over how much you biotics need to eat every day," the first female greeted them. "But the cuisine is a lot better than what we got in basic."

"We have bigger appetites because we're asked to do more than non-biotics," the female of the pair reminded them for the upteenth time.

"It'd be nice if they'd cut us as much as slack as you three, well, two. Where's Krysae anyway?" said her twin brother.

"Making nice with the locals as usual, at least one of us is fitting in," Atreides jerked her thumb in the direction of a non-biotic sitting at another table surrounded by giggling females.

"Telling grossly exaggerated stories again, no doubt," the female twin said.

"Now, now Riona.. you were just complimenting his storytelling abilities when we were in the line earlier," her brother taunted her.

"Hey Lucien, you going to finish all that before it goes cold?" Quintus asked him.

"Yes, go get some more if you want it."

"Would rather stay here instead of drawing more unwanted attention."

"Don't look now but the Envy Squad has shifted their attention to our good friend over there," Atreides watched out of the corner of her eye as the group at the table that had had been behind her was now moving past them to the one with Krysae and his collection of admirers.

"Maybe he can hold them off single-handedly while we eat in peace for once," said the other non-biotic female of the group.

"Wouldn't count on it, Kasamir. I'd hate for them to pick a fight now, would never hear the end of it if we had to save his hide," Atreides was already beginning to move out of her chair and the rest of the squad could see her exposed talons.

"You'll get us all into trouble before we've even started training," Lucien hissed at her, his sister, Riona, was tugging at Atreides' sleeve to stop her.
The one called Krysae was talking at great length with the older cabalist students. No punches were being thrown and the sound of their voices indicated a cordial conversation. The newcomers were joining his group of onlookers. He turned to smile at his squad-mates and waved.

"Wow, who needs enemies when you can have friends," Quintus said with astonishment.

"He is very charismatic," Riona admitted as her gaze lingered on him. She grunted when her brother punched her lightly in the shoulder.

"That kid is a menace," Lucien concluded and both Kasamir and Atreides nodded in agreement.

"Have to give him credit though. Even us biotics aren't wanted by these people. You'd think we ran over their prize varren with the way they have complained all week. It must be because they can smell how awesome we are," Quintus laughed and finished off the remains of his meal.

"Speaking of how awesome we are, when are we getting our assignment? This orientation business is super boring," Atreides inquired as she reluctantly put her gloves back on.

"It's obvious isn't it? Biotics and non-biotics working side-by-side for the common good. We're legends in the making," Krysae said as he stole a few bits of food from Lucien's plate and sat down with the rest of his squad for the first time that afternoon. Lucien glared at him and biotically "pulled" the food back to his own plate. Krysae shrugged and pretended to not be bothered by it.


"Who told you that?" Riona asked curiously.

"You pick up on things if you listen closely," Kasamir shrugged.

"Doesn't sound very successful if you ask me," Krysae seemed unimpressed. "Who'd want to spend their whole life on the same colony and in the same job position? You gotta get out there and see the greater galaxy, broaden your horizons, meet all the important people and leave your mark so that history never forgets you."

"Says the green recruit who hasn't done any of those things and probably never will if he can't keep his mouth shut," Lucien grumbled.

"We'll find out more soon, provided we don't get lost on the way. Not that it's possible given how many times they've gone over the cabal's layout, down to every minute detail. Do they assume because we can't use space magic that we are intelligently inferior or something?" Atreides asked rhetorically.

She then got up to take everyone's trays away to which they were all thankful. The six of them wandered off in different directions after that. They had about an hour of free time to do with as they wanted and they were all eager to be away from the prying eyes of the cabal's overly judgemental veterans.

---

Magnus looked over his squad for the first time since receiving the orders to train them. They were in his classroom then, standing at attention and looking entirely out of place. He wanted to get the introductions out of the way and go over their new, rigorous schedule. From what he had heard, they weren't adjusting well to their new surroundings and the rest of the cabal wasn't being entirely
hospitable to their unannounced presence. For their sake, it would do them good to give them something else to focus on. He only had a month to get them ready for their first mission and didn't want to deal with any unavoidable disruptions.

He began with a basic roll call, each soldier gave a brief salute when their name was called:

"Atreides, Tarina. Kasamir, Althea. Krysae, Blaine. Marcell, Lucien. Marcell, Riona. Hm, we'll have to use first names for you two. And finally, Quintus, Silas."

I'm sure by now you're aware that you are by no means the usual squad that we train around here. We're starting a new program focused on coordinating tactics between biotics and non-biotics, which you've probably already figured out. You are one of the first squads of your kind and the expectations for you are very high. Those expectations are not just my own or those of the Invictus cabal but of the entire Hierarchy, the formation of this squad was requested by Primarch Fedoran himself.

We'll be doing all the stuff you'd normally be doing right after basic except you won't be choosing which field you want to specialise in. And that means you'll get to do a bit of everything. You were randomly selected to be here but I was not randomly selected to be your teacher. I've been a biotic since I was sixteen, I know what it's like to grow up outside this place.

But I also know that Invictus is the best colony in turian space for training elite soldiers. Your first mission will be a month from now, a standard patrol in the dangerous jungles beyond the base. It will be a test of survival and teamwork. Everything we do until then is preparation so please take it seriously.

You will have to rely on your other squad-mates to do well here. And you want to do well to get a good recommendation for legion assignment afterwards. With that in mind, I want all of you spend as much time with each other as possible. There's nothing I can do about the rest of the cabal, you're training is different from theirs but you will not operate in isolation. None of you signed on for this but that's what makes you such a great control group for this project, you get to set how high the bar will be for the rest. So in these early weeks you need to start trusting your fellow squad-mates and getting to know their strengths and weaknesses.

I will try to keep things in balance as best as I can but your critical thinking and approach to everything we do is just as important as how well you perform. Biotics aren't any tougher than non-biotics, they approach the same situations with the same tools but it's their ability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances that make them excel. There are limitations to both styles of combat. I want you to find them and learn how to compensate for areas where your fellow squad-mates struggle. Whether you're a biotic or non-biotic, it doesn't matter, we're all soldiers here and we have a job to do, so let's get on with.

Today I want to go over each basic biotic ability and familiarise you with how they function. Offensive, defensive, everything in between. It's going to be a long lesson."

He gestured to three biotics in the squad to step forward and put them through their paces while the non-biotics watched on impatiently. It was the best way he could think of to figure out where his biotics were in their training and it quickly became obvious that the twins couldn't keep up with Quintus' repertoire of biotic powers. All three lacked discipline and precision, their fields constantly fizzled out right after being cast and missed their targets. Given their age, it was disappointing to see how unrefined their technique. The only surprise was how powerful Quintus' abilities seemed to be despite the L2 amp that he wore like the rest. One of his singularities nearly tore the classroom apart, forcing the entire squad to evacuate the room.
That was about when Magnus had had enough, he wanted to get into pairing the biotics off against the non-biotics to teach them how to evade attacks but he had overestimated the progress level of his students. He dismissed them all for a short break while he tried to readdress his approach to how to teach them. Luckily there was still a bottle of Viatrix's favourite brandy under his desk, a present from long ago that he was most glad to have at that moment.

He wasn't dealing with advanced students any more and he could tell that the young adults still had issues of their own beyond combat training to resolve. He had seen Krysae dozing off at one point, agitating Kasamir at another and Atreides wasn't paying attention to the lesson at all. Of the three, Kasamir seemed the most at ease and interested in what was going on around her and he was eager to see what she could do. He concluded that he ought to use the next lesson to focus on the other half of the squad, hopefully their abilities would be far more impressive.

When they had all reconvened, he went through all the abilities again on his own. The six of them watched attentively as he walked them through what each power looked like and how it was used. The non-biotics especially were in awe of the effects, never having seen anything like it in basic training. It was late in the evening by the time he was satisfied that they had gotten off to a good start. There would be plenty of time to get to know each individual and what they were capable of.
"How did you create such a big singularity? That was unreal," Lucien asked Silas when they were all gathered in the barracks. They had a few hours to kill before lights out and there was a new sense of excitement hanging in the air after their first lesson.

"I don't know," Silas answered with disbelief, clearly rattled by the experience.

"I couldn't believe he even asked us to do one, everyone knows turian biotics can't produce useful singularity effects," Riona chimed in from her bunk. Tarina had the bunk above hers and made a dismissive noise.

"Clearly you were misinformed, Marcell," she said then went back to typing a message on her portable terminal. She showed little interest in the small talk that was transpiring.

"I just concentrated intensely on where I wanted the field to go and pictured it in my head. I didn't think anything would actually happen but the sergeant seemed impressed. Well, before he was yelling at me anyway.Quite the first impression, eh?" Silas explained with a laugh.

"Better than how he responded to Riona and me," Lucien said neutrally, not giving away if it made him feel inadequate or not.

"It was just the first day. If we didn't need the training, we wouldn't be here. Besides, I didn't even know how to make most of the fields he asked us to do. He's expecting way too much, too soon. It's going to be like that hardass we had in basic all over again.."

"I didn't get that impression. Aren't you guys supposed to know this stuff already?" Althea piped in.

"They should," Silas agreed. "Anyway, Riona is right. It was the first day of many. We can only get better from here. Who's up for some clawball?"

"I'll play," Lucien offered and his sister immediately claimed they were on the same team. Blaine offered to team up with Silas, probably in an attempt to show off.

After playing a few rounds in the tight space between their bunks, Blaine started to throw a tantrum about how unfair the game was.

"How about you don't use biotics to move the ball," he tried to suggest.

"What fun is that? The whole point is to test reflexes and reaction time," Riona argued.

"Because some of us only have our hands, come on."

"At some point you're going to have to work with us and our abilities, you won't always have a choice," Lucien said pointedly.

To antagonise him further, Silas moved the ball just centimetres out of his reach with a pull field. Blaine couldn't resist and reached for it but it was knocked off course in mid-air by a throw field from Lucien. Again Blaine went after it, not willing to give up so easily. Riona completed the triangle around him and smashed the ball away as it got close to her. Each of three biotic moves had illuminated the room as they were used, an electrical crackling noise could be heard every time the ball was moved. Blaine tried helplessly to recover the ball like a varren being taunted with food.
just out of his reach.

From the shadow of her bunk, Althea watched each physical move they made and tried to calculate the time between biotic abilities as they were used. Tarina was still ignoring the rest of them, completley occupied by her terminal with one leg hanging lazily over the edge of the bed. Eventually Blaine decided the best approach was to knock out the biotics themselves and he threw himself at Lucien when the ball was heading in his direction. Lucien stumbled back, focusing too hard on the mentally intensive exercise to keep an eye on Blaine's movements. Riona responded with a nova attack, a forceful shockwave that threw Blaine back towards Silas who responded by diving for the nearest, empty bunk. The result was Blaine's face meeting Tarina's exposed leg on the bunk above and she kicked at him with her boots still on.

"Shove off, Krysae," she barked at him as she twisted around to see what all the ruckus was about.

"Was that really necessary?" he whined at her, wiping at his face as if she had just cut him with a knife instead.

"Watch out or it might scar over," Althea teased him. They all snickered as Blaine ran off to the bathroom to check his precious faceplate for damage. When he was gone, she asked the biotics if she could take his place in their game and they agreed. Tarina declined the offer when it was extended to her and warned them to quiet down. Althea had no trouble intercepting and grabbing the ball in mid-flight without the assistance of biotics like Blaine had.

The next day, Blaine had a laugh of his own when they were asked to show their marksmanship skills. The twins did suprisingly well with pistol accuracy but Blaine took top marks for every weapon category. Althea was right on his spurs though and he was sure she would show him up soon if he let her. Tarina and Silas were only at an average level but Silas was clearly making up for the difference with his biotic powers. It was hard to tell what, if anything, Tarina was good at besides telling people off. She had a recognisable temper that was either going to be her undoing or an asset depending on how she chose to use it.

The following weeks were spent in a similar fashion, each day harder than the last. Magnus kept pushing his squad and occasionally they pushed back whenever he went too far. The process was just as new to him as it was to them and he was grateful to learn something new.

They began to act as a cohesive unit, mostly getting along despite their differences in personality and ability. Blaine remained the thorn in everyone's side but the group had learned to tolerate his antics and when it came to training they all put on a professional face. Even Tarina was doing well with every task that was given to her, her boldness and tenacity earning her a place as the unofficial leader of the squad when Magnus wasn't present. Silas continued to harness his biotic power and Magnus was convinced he was a L3 like himself, putting in a request to upgrade his implants when they got back from their survival training mission.

The twins were reluctant to engage in practicing with the others unless ordered to do so and eventually Magnus had to rotate who was paired with who for each exercise to ensure everyone had a fair chance. He could tell something wasn't entirely right about them, their knowledge of biotics wasn't nearly as high as it should have been. Some digging around in the database proved that they had enlisted themselves at age 16 instead of being conscripted as others were. There were no details on either of their parents aside from their mother's name and the colony they were born on. He didn't want to be intrusive but thought the upcoming mission might give them a lot of free time to talk if they so chose to.

He was also looking forward to getting away from the confines of the cabal base again. While his last foray into the great beyond had left him with a sour taste, he was anxious to trek through the
wilds of his homeworld and show his students wonders that very few others ever got to see. It wasn't going to be as dangerous as a proper mission but the opportunity to test his skills and that of his squad was too good to pass up. Survival treks had been one of his specialties when he was new to the rank of sergeant and he had always enjoyed the personal challenge that each outing gave.

As long as he was still testing and improving himself, there was no need to think about retirement. Granted, if he didn't accept a promotion soon he might be forced to think about the inevitable against his will. If he and his squad performed well then there was a high likelihood that that particular pyjak would be off his back once and for all. Besides, he was starting to like his squad despite their lack of experience or discipline. They were his squad and he had the power to see them through their goals. He would never have children of his own and while they were technically adults, they still had much growing up left to do both on and off the battlefield. Unlike the students that passed through his classroom every other month, he was beginning to feel attached to those six individuals.

On the eve of their journey into the harsh environment of Invictus, he found himself full of apprehension and excitement. His gear stood by the doorway to his room, ready to go in the morning ahead. He sat alone on his bed with an empty glass and tried to calm his nerves so that he could get a decent rest before forced to sleep on the hard ground for a week. He had kept meaning to refill the glass but had to remind himself that he had to regulate his hydration levels and alcohol wouldn't do him any good then. Maybe some tea but the kettle seemed so far away, he was going to miss the comfort of his own bed.

Was he forgetting to do anything, he checked his omnitool to make sure he had responded to all the messages he had. There was nothing he had failed to respond to, he had talked to his parents only two days before. There was nothing important that needed his attention. He was only going to be away from a reliable comm service for a week, nothing urgent should come up.

A message came through as he had resigned himself to getting up to put the kettle on.

"Care for a last minute pep talk? Be over there soon. - Viatrix"

He barely had time to finish making the cup of tea and prepare a second mug by the time she arrived.

"Nervous?" was the first thing she asked.

She noticed the pile of gear by the door along with Magnus' boots and dutifully took off her own pair before allowing herself to be invited in. He handed her a mug of tea and hurriedly removed a stack of papers and datapads from one of the unused chairs by the desk.

"No, well, maybe. What brings you down here?" he asked.

"We've seen very little of each other since you started your new assignment. I wanted to see how you were faring."

"I'm fine. Busy but coping. As I'm sure you are," they sat close to each other and he was reminded of how awkward things had started to get between them a month before.

There hadn't been a chance for them to catch up since their chat in the boardroom and he spent what little free time since then thinking about how he had let a potential relationship slip through his talons. She was the only woman he had found attractive in a long time, it would have been so easy to make a move given her interest in him. But he had downplayed it, putting duty and respect ahead of personal pleasure.
"Definitely, some things never change. You remember that ball that I was invited to? It's coming up soon. You'll never guess who asked me to go with them."

"Who?" his stomach twisted as he realised somebody else was capitalising on his missed opportunity.

"That slimy Invictus primarch, Caedus Drakar. He's trying to make 'amends' as he calls them. More like he wants to parade me around in front of the other officers and primarchs to show that he has a working relationship with the cabal. That's all they ever talk about lately, new initiatives such as the one you're involved in. Having the support of the cabal is apparently good for making someone look important. And he's lost a lot of support over the past year, no wonder why given his political ambitions. There's hardly a soldier in that man at all. Next he'll want to run for Councillor. But that's not really what I meant to talk about," she looked over at him, he was trying to look very interested at nothing at all. "Oh, did you want to go after all?"

"No," he laughed and again focused on her. "If you don't like this guy very much, you shouldn't have to put up with him."

"Yes, well, he outranks me by a few tiers and it's better to not give him an excuse to remind me. I'd still rather go with you if the circumstances were different. You wouldn't have to talk to anyone, just have a few drinks and show your presence. It could have been a fun night out. Although, the timing would never have worked anyway since you're heading off base soon and the event will happen while you're away."

"Liana, do you believe in second chances?" he blurted out without much thought.

"I.. it depends. What do you mean?"

"We've barely seen each other lately and the longer we are seperated, the more I think 'what if?' and then I go back to be boring and nothing happens. You've been my CO for awhile and we have an amiable relationship. Couldn't ask for more than that. And yet, I find myself wondering about all sorts of things. Most of it doesn't make any sense and I have no idea what I want. How do you figure it out?"

"I've always been good at figuring things out and making decisions, hence my rise in the ranks," she stared hard at him as she tried to pick the right words. Magnus was being far more casual and candid than she had ever seen him, it could have been the nerves of the mission breaking down his usual defenses. Or maybe he really was trying to make an effort for the first time. "Magnus, I came down here to wish you good luck tomorrow. But not as your CO. I'm not worried because there's no one better qualified to take those kids out there than you. I think I'm just going to miss having you around for a week. Hell, I've missed talking to you for the past month. Isn't there some human expression that goes like 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' or something? It's like that."

"When I get back from this, we're going to have to have a long chat about what we want from each other. A reassessment of our relationship, if you will. I'll have plenty of time to think out there. It'll be great motivation when we're low on rations and the rains start washing away our path," his deep brown eyes couldn't look away from her green ones. He felt her hand touch his softly. It was already obvious what they both wanted but Magnus couldn't do anything the easy way and that's what kept her going. The hunt itself could be as invigorating as actually catching the prey. Whatever the lieutenant wanted, she usually got in the end.
The morning was dark and deceptively cool as the crew gathered at the vehicle entrance for the base and did their last minute prep. Krysae was already starting to complain that they couldn't take one of the all-terrain vehicles out for a drive. The twins were double checking their packs to make sure they had split things evenly between them. Atreides kept fidgeting in a suit of armour she had never worn before while Kasamir and Quintus began to quiz each other over basic first aid and made sure everyone had a tube of medigel. They all gave their CO a quick salute when he arrive and circled around to hear what he had to say.

There were no fancy speeches or lectures, only a sense of anticipation and an eagerness to get on with their first day of walking. He double checked all their gear, making sure each of them had adhered to his bare minimum list of requirements though most had managed to make room for extra items. Everyone except Kasamir was going to be carrying more weight than they needed to but that was their choice. They all had a bedroll and a pack full of tools, rations, light munitions, flares, everything that would be needed.

The armour they wore was standard issue jungle camouflage with only a blue and purple line on the sides and in the collar to indicate that they were part of the Invictus Cabal and not some other legion. The biotics wore lighter versions than their non-biotic counterparts, another point Krysae had quibbled over but the girls didn't mind. Their helmets had adjustable visors with built-in holographic HUDs that could be controlled via omnitool for when they needed to use thermal or night vision.

All were required to bring a Phaeston assault rifle for their primary weapon but given the option to bring a second weapon of their choosing if they thought it necessary. The Phaeston was relatively lightweight and versatile for any situation, whether at long range or short range, and they had a healthy supply of extra thermal clips between them should they actually need them. Magnus didn't think giving them a choice for another weapon was a wise idea but part of the experiment was to let them make their own decisions, mistakes and all. Atreides had opted for a lightweight shotgun which sat easily on her belt below her pack and Krysae had tried to get approval for a prototype sniper rifle without success. The rest were inclined to stick with the weight they had, it was going to be a long hike over varying terrain and there wasn't going to be a whole lot to shoot at anyway.

Magnus brought his favourite sniper rifle, the Valiant given to him by his brother with the thermal scope reinstalled since its last use, and told the others that he'd show them a thing or two about hunting while they were out. This was enough to excite all of them since none had fired a gun at a hostile in their lives and wouldn't likely be given another chance to hunt wild game. The idea of having to kill and butcher their own meal was the right motivation some needed to use their rations wisely.

The formed up with their gear and followed Magnus onto their first mission. Normally when groups of cabalists were leaving the base there would be a bit of ceremony and an honour guard to show them out but there was nothing to see Magnus and his team off this time. The cabal still had not accepted the unique squad as one of its own and he hoped he'd find a way to fix that by the time he was given his second squad. Nobody's spirits were dampened by the lack of attention and he nearly had to jog to keep one step ahead of his energetic squad-mates. They were going to regret wasting that burst of energy so early in the day before the sun could beat them down.

Luckily the glow of Caestus crossed the horizon minutes after they had broken through the tree line around the base, allowing them to avoid most of the harsh rays with the jungle's towering
canopy for refuge. The humidity began to rise as the morning warmed up and all of them began to shift in their suits, trying to escape the extra moisture. It was still morning and the intermittent rains would provide some relief if they came. They started following a footpath that had led them around some of the impassable foliage but were quickly losing sight of it as the dense flora began to dim their surroundings.

More than once Magnus was forced to encourage the squad to pick up their pace. They were so overwhelmed by the sights and sounds around them, slowing down to look at everything, some even taking pictures with their omnitools. Though he could appreciate the beauty of his surroundings, it was a view he had seen countless times before and he recognised the importance of not stopping to give nature a chance to show its darker side. They still had much ground to cover before the reached the hillier, unpredictable land with all manner of obstacles tucked between the trees. He tried to point out that they'd be sick of the untamable environment soon enough but doubted they would believe it until it happened. Part of him was glad they could see it all up close instead of on a vid screen, so few soldiers would be exposed to hostile environments when they were in their most serene and passive states. Not that the jungle was either of those things on its best days but at least there weren't any enemy troops to be wary of.

"Try to imagine if this was a combat mission, look at all the places your enemy could be hiding and waiting to ambush you. You'd be carrying more gear than you are now, probably supplies to another unit or on a surveillance mission. They wouldn't send you on foot through an area like this unless there was no other way to get to the objective," Magnus tried going back to what he knew to keeping them focused: treating the outdoor exercise like any other classroom lesson. Besides, the quiet was beginning to unnerve him and make it harder to tell when they were falling behind. Picking his way through roots and thorny underbrush, he continued on with his comparison, "Let's say your enemy was a biotic, for example. A pack of feral varrens, maybe a unit of asari commandos, or a single krogan warlord."

Quintus laughed and the others quickly joined in, "That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it, Sarge? A krogan would never wait for its prey to come him."

"You never know," Magnus was glad his helmet hid the smile. Quintus had a habit of making the most astute and humorous observations.

"He'd get bored and give away his location by headbutting a tree," they giggled some more.

"Maybe so, but the point I was trying to get to was how would you know what to expect. Intelligence is only so helpful when things get hot, you have to react instantly with only foreknowledge and instinct at your disposal. Ok, let's pretend their human biotics instead of a krogan. They can see you before you can see them. They probably get to attack first. What do you do?"

"We need more context, sir," Lucien spoke up from the back of the group. "Are we alone? Are we armed? How far away are potential reinforcements and can we contact them?"

"Good questions, Lucien," Magnus continued, "Say you're in a squad of six like you are now, armed with what you are now but not able to rely on backup because communication is a bit dodgy as a result of a down comm tower. The enemy could be any where and you don't know what they are yet."

"When they expose their position, aim for the head. Always aim for the head," Krysae added. It wasn't a very elegant answer but Magnus wasn't quite sure how to point that out to him. Sometimes simple solutions were the best approach to an unknown situation.
"Yes but what if they throw a biotic attack at you that staggers you back or pulls you off your feet?"

"Then your squad provides cover fire while you get yourself together," Atreides thought for a second more, "Or you could take one for the team since you were the idiot that drew the enemy out in the first place. Sit the fight out so the others can clean up your mess then bandage you up afterwards."

The weren't sure how to respond to that and Magnus was too busy trying to get through a tough briary bush with his omniblade attachment to hear half of what she said. He was certain it was the usual tongue-in-cheek dig that served to remind her squad to not get on her bad side. There was definitely a crack in her carapace (or as the humans like to say "a chip on her shoulder") that he hadn't quite placed yet but hoped to address at some point.

"As a biotic, I would put up a barrier field around the group while we tried to figure out what we were up against. And other biotics on the squad could help reinforce it," Riona chimed in as they each took turns ducking under an uprooted tree that was wedged between two others and blocking the direct route forward.

"Or throw a singularity in their general direction and let it do all the work for you so you can get onto more important things like watching out for deadly krogan warlords," Quintus got another laugh from everyone, including Magnus that time. He could already tell that it was going to be a running joke which hadn't been his intention. It could serve as a morale boost later when they were tired and aching from climbing.

"The thing with biotics is, they're vulnerable while they're using their abilities. They have to pick between their weapon or a power which gives you a chance to get a shot in to immobilise them. If you're paying enough attention when they use their first power then you'll know which gesture is their tell and you can deliver the first shot into whichever arm they cast with. If they can't use their powers or hold their gun properly, they're easy pickings," Kasamir contributed later when the conversation began to die down again. Magnus had almost forgotten she was with them given how quiet she had been. She was the star pupil of the group, evaluating and re-evaluating everything until she was sure there was only one definitive answer. Her patient, deductive style of thinking was very similar to his own.

"Very good, all of you," he lauded them.

The trees were beginning to thin out and give way to more troublesome shrubbery and uneven ground. Light was streaming in through breaks in the canopy and nearly blinded them after the darkened hours that had already passed. It was only mid-day by the time they reached the rocks that required delicate balancing and they could hear the trickling of a stream nearby that would weave in and out of their path for the rest of the day. The rocks became more smooth as the stream got bigger, creating small waterfalls and slippery stepping stones which they tried to avoid when possible.

As the stream became a river, more and more wildlife could be heard in the dense vegetation. Most were birds, lizards, insects, the occasional snake disguised as benign vine that only moved when unsuspecting vermin crossed its path. Bigger, much more dangerous animals left markers of their passing: footprints, gnarled bones, trampled and broken foliage. There had been a distinct lack of mammals but as the rulers of the predatory pyramid they generally kept to themselves unless disturbed. The squad started to hold their weapons in more combat ready positions as they continued onwards, relying solely on their CO's expertise to warn them if they were approaching trouble.
The river's current began to increase with intensity and the rushing noise of rapids drowned out everything else. On the other side there was craggy, rockface that seemed indomitable against the encroaching jungle on the opposite bank. They were going to have to cross the river at some point anyway to continue in their westerly march but no one was eager to climb a mountainside. The river had to be fjorded before the rapids became impassable and the seven of them had to slowly work their way across with only each other for support. Once across, they took their packs and helmets off and dug into their rations greedily while Magnus tried to warn them about conserving energy for the next stage.

He took point and started the treacherous climb, glad that it wasn't so steep that they would need any climbing gear but wary of loose gravel and the lack of any plants to contain the soil. Making his way from one large boulder to another and picking the most direct path that he could manage, the rest were inspired to follow suit. At the top of the summit, he took his own small break and waited for the others to catch up. When they were all gathered, he pointed out the comm tower in the distance as the last sign of civilisation that they'd see for the next week. They were standing on the edge of Invictus' notorious frontier and the sight of the jungle like a sea of green in every direction was humbling.

The sun beat down on them as they made their way unhindered across the plateau's surface. It was just the kind of easy walk they needed to let their muscles relax again. Though there were less plants and animals tucked away into the rocks, every corner they rounded gave another surprise. They passed pools of water that standing water that attracted the worst bugs they had had to deal with so far. Large herbivores with nimble legs scattered at the sounds of the newcomers with their heavy boots. Snakes slithered away, frightened by the bright assault rifles that reflected the glaring sunlight back at them. Nobody had to fire a shot and it was easy to become complacent with the wildlife so easily dissuaded.

"Is anyone else bored yet?" Krysae vocalised what they were all feeling but knew better than to express.

"Keep moving, we don't make camp until nightfall so the more ground we cover, the better. You don't want to be stuck out here when the monsoon rains come through," Magnus wasn't in the mood for his complaints, he was trying to figure out the best way to navigate back down to the forest floor and away from the potholes and unsteady rock formations that he really hadn't planned on going through.

"Wish it would rain, could use some cloud cover and maybe these damn bugs would go away," he grumbled. Magnus noted that he was carrying his helmet on his belt attachment instead of wearing it and was tempted to point out the obvious. If the kid didn't learn from his own mistakes he wasn't going to be much good to the rest of them.

"What bugs? They've not been bothering the rest of us," Atreides also didn't point out the obvious. She was always looking for a reason to give him a hard time and most of the time he had deserved it. "You're not wearing some stupid cologne are you?"

"I'm not an idiot," he growled at her.

"Maybe not but given your exam scores you're not a genius either," Kasamir said neutrally, often avoiding conflict but never passing up the chance to correct someone.

"Ah, yes. So says Mrs. Perfect. Why does the rest of the squad even need to exist when we can have you doing all the work of an entire legion? Don't think I don't know what your game is, Kasamir," he was beginning to gloat.
"Relax man," Quintus tried to break up the tension, "Enjoy the nature walk, you're going to have a lot of new stories to tell people in the mess hall."

Kasamir didn't respond and tried to ignore her more jealous squad-mate. But Krysae had an axe to grind and they all knew the sergeant had offered to scout ahead and wouldn't be able to intervene.

"So proud and proper. Won't even look at me," he pressed on but nobody was taking his defense.

"Knock it off, Krysae," Atreides was glaring at him as she removed her pack.

The rest stopped to see what Krysae would do this time. Kasamir kept ignoring him until something bounced off her helmet from behind. Krysae had resorted to throwing rocks to get the attention he wanted and nobody else knew what to make of his childish behaviour. Kasamir popped her gun's heatsink and reloaded the thermal clip inside without turning around. That was enough to make Krysae hesitate, he knew she was as good a shot as he was.

Suddenly he fell flat on his face with Atreides grappling him from behind.

"Assaulting a squad-mate while on a mission? Yeah, you're definitely an idiot."

"Get off me you crazy woman," he struggled but she had his arms locked behind his back. His spurs couldn't reach her either.

"Say you're sorry," she demanded.

"No," he vehemently refused. She used her free hand to push him further into the ground by the back of his neck until he begged her to stop.

"That's really not necessary, Atreides," Kasamir tried to pull her off but Atreides was too fired up and elbowed her hard when she got close. "Really, we don't need to do this here. The sergeant will be nearly a kilometre off by the time we get going again."

"He needs to be put in his place," Atreides said between clenched teeth. Krysae managed to squirm enough to get some leverage with his legs and kicked her in the shin. She tried to wrestle for control again but he had enough momentum to throw her off balance. Neither could regain their footing and they pushed and shoved as they tried to put the other back down. At some point, Atreides had him on his back and by the time Magnus had got there she was punching the troublesome kid in the face repeatedly.

"That's enough, get off him, Atreides. If I have to make it an order, I will," Magnus yelled in a tone none of them had heard him use.

"He's not getting away with picking on Kasamir any more, I'm making sure of it," she yelled back and didn't let up.

Kasamir looked over at her CO helplessly and he knew she hadn't asked for any of it.

"Lucien, Quintus, get Krysae back up. Kasamir, with me," they sprung into action to break up the fight and with all of them working together managed to pull them apart. Magnus and Kasamir had a tougher time keeping Atreides' flailing limbs in check, her bloodlust was unquenchable.

"We're going to be thousands of kilometres away from the base soon, traditional disciplinary action will have to be skipped. We're also an hour behind schedule. Do not let this happen again. I don't care what the problem is between you two and don't care if you work it out or not. Let's get through this patrol and stay focused on what's best for the squad as a whole. Got it?"
"Yes, sir," they both acknowledged.

"Now, we're going to have to follow some caverns to get back on track. I'd really like to get through them before nightfall. Move out," they remained quiet for the rest of the day's journey.
Chapter 10

The caverns proved to be a radically different environment that required the squad to rely heavily on night vision imagery via their visors. They were cramped with formations on both the ceiling and floor and slowed the squad down as they were forced to get through many area in single-file. Luckily there were no bats or other strange creatures hiding in the depths. Against his better judgement, Magnus decided the best way to keep Atreides and Krysae seperated was to have one take point and the other the rear until they reached a suitable location to make camp. He would have felt better taking the lead himself but though the added responsibility might help Atreides cool off. If they were still bickering later he would alternate the positions since it was the fair thing to do.

As troublesome as Krysae was, he hadn't been given many chances to stand out from the squad and everyone deserved a fair go on a training exercise. He could either prove he was more capable than they all believed or fail miserably and let someone else take the spotlight. That's how the meritocracy worked, only those who demonstrated that they could manage being at the top were allowed to be there. It took great effort and dedication to remain in any single position and even more to rise higher. Magnus only let the thought cross his mind briefly, he was the highest ranked among the squad and his word carried the most weight out there in the jungle. There was no further point to aspire towards for him, even if it was a temporary state of affairs.

To her credit, Atreides did a satisfactory job of leading them out of the darkened caverns and back to the banks of a much more mellow river. She even seemed to enjoy it and had a newfound sense of dignity about her movements. Caestus was beginning to sink in the sky above, signalling the first hours of evening and everyone sighed with relief. They had never walked so much in one day in their lives and even Magnus was feeling a soreness that he was no longer accustomed to.

He noticed that their tiredness was no necessarily a result of muscle fatigue and basic ration bars without much sustenance to them. Naturally used to Invictus' 31 hour day cycle because it was the world he was born on, he had taken for granted how others managed the adjustment away from the galactic standard 20 hour day. On base and surrounded by artificial light, it was easy to forget that every planet was slightly different in such a regard.

"It's not much further, you've all done a great job today, even with the disruption," Magnus tried some positive feedback to keep them going during the hardest leg of the day. Nobody said anything, they were too focused on staying awake to waste energy.

He heard someone stumble behind him and suspected it was Krysae but it had been Riona instead. Krysae was giving her a hand back up and letting her lean on him a bit. Was it a noble act of helping a damsel in distress or did the kid have an alterior motive? Either way, it was none of his business so Magnus pretended not to see it.

"Sir, what am I supposed to be looking for in a camp site exactly?" Atreides said over the radio in their visors since she had gone too far ahead.

"Something defensible, preferably," he said.

"Roger that. How about a cave?"

"That'd work nicely if it's big enough and only has one entrance to cover."

"I've got just the thing, sir," there was the sound of muffled movement in the background as she
changed position. Then in a much quieter voice she whispered, "Except there might be a tiny problem."

"What?"

"It belongs to someone else. Someone really big. I think it might be a mother defending its young, whatever it is."

"Hold your position, Atreides. Do not do anything until we've caught up."

"Um, you might want to hurry then. Because I think she thinks I'm on the menu."

"You heard her. Pick up the pace everyone, weapons drawn but don't fire until ordered."

Adrenaline spurred the squad into action, with their CO in the lead. They jumped down some ledges left behind by the river and struggled to keep up with Magnus who already had his rifle loaded and ready. He wish he had asked for more details about what sort of creature they'd be facing but was certain their sudden arrival would be enough to scare off the majority of the large game in the area. And if not, he had some armour-piercing rounds at the bottom of his pack if they were truly needed. The assault rifles carried by the rest of the squad were mostly carried to scare creatures off and weren't precise or lethal enough to kill something quickly the way a well aimed sniper rifle could.

By the time they reached the small clearing near the cave entrance, Atreides was pinned to a wall of a stone with her shotgun pointing shakily at the strangest creature any of them had ever seen. The creature was only a metre or two away from her, its huge body was tensed up and ready to strike, a snake-like double pronged tail waved furiously behind it. It was brandishing claws while making a strangle shrieking noise with it's long beak, trying to warn the intruder off but not realising that it had her cornered. It took them a minute to realise that the bear-sized animal might have been a wingless bird given the feathers and the talons on its hind legs. Behind the needlelike spurs on each of the four limbs were the small feathery bodies of minitature versions of the animal huddling around their mother for safety.

"A chimaerus.. didn't think they were anything more than folklore," Magnus said with astonishment as he waved his squad to set up a perimetre to block off its escape.

"Surprise, they're real," Atreides said sardonically. She didn't sound as scared as she looked though her gun still remained unsteady as if she wasn't sure which part to aim for. "We don't have to kill her do we? I mean, she hasn't hurt me. Yet. And they say there's nothing more dangerous than a mother protecting it's child, right? Those scales on her back look really tough. It's going to take more than one shot and the first will piss her off. And guess who's closest to those razor sharp claws. Besides you shouldn't kill a mother in front of her kids, that's just mean."

"Calm down, Atreides, maybe if she doesn't think you're a threat she'll wander off. Or...maybe not, watch out!" Magnus backed off instinctively when the chimaerus reared itself on its hind legs. It screeched at Atreides again and showed off its claws as it prepared to leap towards her.

Not taking any chances, he left off the first round from the Valiant at medium range into the back of its neck but the scales prevented the bullet from penetrating deeply. There wasn't time to dig for special ammunition, he tried two more rounds until he was forced to reload and they sucessfully redirected the creature's attention onto himself. As Atreides had predicted, the mother chimaerus was angry and it charged his position forcing the entire squad to scatter.

He heard his squad-mates double-checking their thermal clips, their trigger fingers itching for the
order. But if the scales of the chimaerus were resistant to sniper bullets then the Phaestons would need to spend at least a full clip to get through to the vulnerable insides and there weren't enough spare thermal clips to waste on a single animal. They needed something that could hit fast and hard, something like the Eviscerator that Atreides was holding.

"No one fire at it, keep out of range if you can help it. Biotics, try to keep it restrained. Non-biotics, give the little ones some warning shots, we don't have to kill them. Atreides, you're going to have to do the most damage. Aim for her throat, where the feathers are. We'll keep her exposed so you can get the right angle."

"What, why me?"

"Because you brought a shotgun. You all have your orders."

"But I can't kill an innocent creature and take its home. That's not fair."

"We can debate the ethics later, need you to focus Atreides. Only you can bring it down," he jumped out of the way of a wayward swipe from one of the creature's claws and threw a hastily casted warp effect at it. The field hit its mark but wasn't strong enough to do lasting damage. The other biotics weren't having better luck with their powers either and he didn't want to resort to Quintus' unstable singularity. He tried another tact with Atreides who was positioned in the creature's blindspot, "Pretend its not a chimaeirus at all. Pretend it's someone you really hate and despise and who has it coming to them. This thing wants you dead, it wants everything you've ever cared about dead and nothing can stop it but you."

Three shattering bursts were unleashed into the creature from side-on. Feathers, scales, and purple-tinted blood sprung forth before its massive body toppled over in the most unceremonious fashion. Atreides' gun was still drawn but no longer shaking and she stared at her victim with a blank expression. The rest of the squad cheered for her triumph and went about examining the cave and divying up who got the best spots for their bedrolls. They saved the driest spot for Atreides, unanimously agreeing that she had earned it.

While they were busy setting up a fire and tearing off their armour, Magnus went over to clap Atreides on the shoulder.

"You did good, soldier. Most people don't live to tell a story like that."

"Yeah, I guess," she seemed distant, maybe ashamed of what she had done. It was an odd thing for a trained soldier to have to kill something that couldn't shoot back. Her first kill and it wasn't even sentient.

"What did you end up imagining it was? Krysae maybe?" he tried to get her to laugh to break her out of her daze.

"I pretended she was my mother," she said coolly. That wasn't the response he was angling for. She turned around to look at the other squad-mates who were busying themselves with the night's meal and dismissed herself from Magnus' presence. He let her go and tried to ponder what could make someone say that about their own family.

Magnus returned to the camp after refilling his canteen from a stream nearby and found everyone listening attentively to one of Krysae's famous tales. They seemed to have forgiven his earlier outburst in favour of some form of entertainment that could settle their nerves. The disembodied, primal noises in the middle of the night were enough to keep everyone on edge. They needed to calm their minds long enough to get some rest before another early start.
From what Magnus could gather from the snippets of the story that he caught, Krysae was talking about the exploits of his grandfather during the Shanxi occupation. It was a relatively controversial point in turian-human relations that had almost resulted in a full scale war to which many were disappointed. Krysae didn't go into the political side of the story and instead described the dangerous missions of a fighter squadron in its prime. He was certainly proud of his family's legacy and boasted about it to anyone who would indulge him. No wonder he had such a high opinion of himself. He still had a long way to go to fill the same boots as those before him.

The story encouraged others to open about their own families and their childhood mishaps. They were all in high spirits after surviving their first day in the jungle and open to bonding with one another. The stories started off as funny, embarrassing moments and gradually turned more serious in tone as the night wore on. It was a good time to ask personal questions that had been nibbling at them for sometime.

"I still can't figure out how I have two Marcells in my unit," Magnus began since the twins had neglected to go into much detail about their upbringing after both Quintus and Kasamir had been so open about theirs. "Family members usually need special permission to serve in the same legion and are usually denied the right to serve in the same squad. Factor in the rarity of twins and both being biotic, well, there's a lot of odds you two have defied to get here."

"Didn't you mention that your parents serve on the same ship?" Quintus recalled.

"Yes, but that's the navy. Their rules are a little different but they still got special permission," he reminded him.

The twins looked at each other to determine who would answer the question. Lucien spoke first, "It's rather complicated, actually. As you probably noticed, we enlisted when we were of age. Not my idea, by the way. Riona insisted we needed the fresh start. I'm still not sure if it was a great idea. You hear so many stories about the strict rules of the cabals and how controlling they are. I didn't want that kind of life but the life we had before coming here. let's just say it was a lot worse."

"We didn't know our parents," Riona added tentatively. "Basically, we were raised by what you might call a biotic extremist group that didn't believe in turning over biotics to the cabal or any similar entity. They were a multi-racial group, a bit of everything. They just wanted the best for biotics, or so we thought for many years but as we got older it became apparent they had a more sinister agenda."

"Granted, they had every reason to harbour their suspicions and hatred for non-biotics that wanted to oppress people for being different," Lucien said with the utmost honesty which surprised many of them given the radical view. "Not everything they did was noble but not all of it was bad either. If not for them, we'd have never figured out our mother's fate or which colony we had been born on."

"Our mother was Aerin Marcell and she was a victim of a terrible experiment. Scientists were always trying to find better ways to create biotics, most attempts being completely outlawed for their breach of ethical standards. Our mother was a biotic, we're not sure how she was exposed to eezo, hopefully it was more natural than what happened to her later. Our father, whoever he was, was also a biotic. We don't have all the details and frankly don't want to know what exactly happened. It was some sort of pedigree thing where they tried to control the genomes of fertilised cells with direct eezo exposure. She probably had a lot more children that never took their first breath.

Lucien and I are the only ones that made it through the process successfully and the group that
rescued us from that predicament took us in as their own. They taught us how to fight, to defend ourselves and swore we'd get revenge some day. But we never did, we were too busy hiding from the authorities on every world we hid on. We had to fight to eat, to have shelter, to survive. Until one day I had had enough of living in the shadows and convinced Lucien that we needed to do something else."

There was absolute silence as they shared their story, nobody had ever expected to hear something so tragic and wrong. No one deserved to be born of a test tube and to not know their parents at all. The only silver lining was that the twins had each other to rely on during all their hardships and were not completely alone.

"Spirits, I had no idea it was that complicated," Magnus managed to say when the silence became too awkward. The rest nodded in agreement and offered encouraging words about how the Hierarchy would never mistreat them and that they did the right thing to come to the cabal to be trained properly. Riona was grateful for being accepted but Lucien remained doubtful.

That was the cue for everyone to turn in for the night. They drew lots to see what order everyone would take their shift in watch duty. With seven of them, they only had to do an hour each. Magnus offered to go first and he spent much of the hour trying to make sense of what would convince people to disrespect their own kind for scientific gain. No amount of knowledge was worth those means to obtain it.

He turned to wake Atreides up for her turn and saw her staring absently at the cave's ceiling, leaning back on her arms crossed behind her. She looked more relaxed and passive then than he had seen her during the whole trip. He felt guilty for disturbing her.

"Can't sleep?" he inquired softly, trying to not wake the others with the echoes of his voice.

"Knew I'd have to get up soon, not much point in trying," she answered as she moved to get up. He put out a hand to help her up and half-expected her to refuse but she took it and allowed herself to regain proper balance before letting go, "Has it been raining out there? I've got a piercing headache."

"Yeah, a little. I'm not especially tired yet if you don't mind the company," he offered. She didn't mind at all and the two walked quietly to the entrance to keep watch together. They could hear their squad-mates moving in their sleep not too far away and the distant sound of thunder of a passing storm.

"How are you feeling now?"

"Better, thanks."

"You didn't seem too interested in sharing with everyone earlier. If I'm prying, you can tell me to stop but I like to know my squad and where they've come from. I can't quite figure out why you're so.."

"Aggressive?"

"Passionate."

She shrugged but didn't look over at him. There was little light aside from the dimming campfire and he wished he could make out her features better. He wanted to know what she was thinking, why she thought that way, and how he could help her control her temper. What he didn't know was why he had such a keen interest, the other squad-mates had their own weakness to fix as well.
Atreides had been a bit of a mystery from the start, something about her was broken and in need of devoted repair.

"I gave the short version, grew up in boarding schools and only had a father. Any more than that and they'd judge me."

"I won't judge you. Whatever you say to me can be kept between us."

"I appreciate that but I've never been open with anyone really. Maybe that's part of the problem. I let the little things build up over time and when they turn into a mountain, I lose myself. Like earlier today, not that Krysae had been wholly innocent. He's been pushing the wrong buttons since day one. But I snapped and I shouldn't have."

"I gave you both warnings and that was the end of that, don't worry about it any more. What about your family though?"

"It's really not worth talking about. Every family has its dark secrets, right?"

He thought about his brother sitting alone in a cell for the first time in weeks, "Yeah."

"As I said, I didn't grow up with a mother. She abandoned my father when I was too young to remember. Didn't want her name associated with someone who had been dishonourably discharged. I don't know exactly what happened, only that he killed one of the men in his squad when they got into a fight. If they hadn't been on duty, the penalty might not have been as harsh. He's never told me what that fight was about."

"Your file doesn't mention any of that, there's no black mark against you personally."

"No, I'm in the clear. It's up to me to regain what my father lost. That sort of pressure has been on me all my life. The pressure to do better, to be respected. I don't know what I want, Dad had a good idea of what he wanted for me and for our future before his depression took root."

He tried his hardest to do the right thing but he was an outcast that society didn't want to see the backside of. And that meant working long hours at jobs that paid very little to cover the cost to put me through school. I barely saw him and when I did, he was sick and barely holding on. But he'd smile when I was around and he'd get better for a little while. If he could afford to keep me at his side, I'm sure he would have. It would have been the best thing for us both. As it was, I had to get an education and prepare for my own future. They weren't the best schools, most of the other kids were unwanted or poor like me. We were at the very bottom with no chance of ever making it. I didn't get on with the other kids, they had dreams and goals and ambitions that I didn't have and maybe I was jealous of the hope they had despite their lot in life. We fought a lot over basically everything though usually it was pride that ruled us. I didn't care where I ended up or even if I would outlive my father.

You're the first person I've talked to about any of this."

"Then I am honoured to hear it," he met her eyes then as the rain started again.

She laughed for what sounded like the first time, "It's kind of surprising that the rest of the squad hasn't been on my case yet. This is the first time I feel like I might not be a big screw up after all. People are starting to depend on me and look up to me for answers. I don't have any answers but I'm really good at looking like I do. All talk and no walk, some might say. That's not too far from the truth. Trouble seems to find me wherever I go so I've gotten used to expecting it. There's no problem that a shotgun can't solve."
The rain got heavier and silence fell over the pair. Magnus wanted to comfort her but knew she'd bristle at such a gesture. Like him, Atreides preferred to deal with her own problems head on without the help of others. She looked so alone, her green-yellow eyes weren't determined like Viatrix's but afraid. Not afraid of failure by her own admission, afraid to succeed? He could empathise with that. He had a loving family to support him and was nearing the end of his career while she had not been so blessed and was at the beginning of hers. He wondered if he looked lonely to her eyes, leadership tended to have that effect.

"I can take it from here, Sarge. You should get some sleep," she assured him.

"Thanks, Atreides. If you ever.. well, you know, need to talk before things boil over next time..I'll listen to you," he found himself stumbling over his words, they didn't come out the way he wanted. His suspicions about her had proven correct and he felt like it was his duty to protect her. And if he ever needed someone to talk to, he was sure she'd listen to him too.

"I'll remember that, sir."

He didn't want to be her CO then, he wanted to be her friend. The idea was foreign and new but very appealing. The rain soothed him to sleep and he felt completely at ease.
Chapter 11

The next day they awoke at sunrise and quietly pressed on into the deeper jungle towards the comm tower that they had seen the day before. They continued in the same direction long enough for Magnus to be sure that his map of the area was up-to-date. He stopped occasionally to check the holographic interface on his omnitool, moving it back and forth with his other hand until he was sure it lined up perfectly with their current position.

The exercise was done to make sure that they were oriented properly, the map itself could never cover every detail since much of the area was uncharted. Beyond the tower’s range, they would be placed in a communication dead zone that could only be broken if the receiving satellite was orbiting nearby which wasn't going to be the case for the remainder of the journey.

As they pressed onwards, the familiar river and the stony outcroppings disappeared behind dense foliage, the trees were thicker and taller than the ones they had seen previously. Without the maps and Magnus’ instincts, the squad would have been doomed to being lost forever.

The feeling was sobering, they were fully committed to the training exercise and had to complete it from that point forward. There was no turning back and soon there would be no way to call for assistance. Their stamina and endurance be tested extensively as they pushed on, as would their mental health and ability to cope without everything they took for granted in their normal lives.

Krysae took point with Magnus close behind him until he was comfortable enough that they wouldn't be lead astray. When he was satisfied with his cartography, they took a short break and were allowed to send any last minute messages while still in range. Magnus' own inbox lit up with a high priority request that he suspected belonged to his mother given the clearance rating. But it was a request from the Invictus primarch, Caedus Drakar, for an immediate change of orders that he wished to convey in real-time as soon as possible.

Magnus didn't hesitate to take advantage of their final window for comm traffic and contacted high command directly on the only frequency available. The rest of the squad would have to hear the entire conversation on their visors, forcing them to hastily wrap up their personal business. There wasn't time to apologise for the inconvenience, a change of orders could mean anything and they were already over a day's hike away from the base.

After quick and overly formal introductions were made, the primarch cut straight to the chase:

"Here's what we know so far: about a month ago there was a group of scientists, mostly our guys but a few aliens including the head researcher, that wanted to go on some academic quest into the jungle. Something about uncovering the history of Invictus' colonisation. They had some good evidence that they were going to uncover something big. So we sent an escort with them and they did their thing. But we lost contact after the first week. The escort, the scientists, all of them went missing.

Normally this isn't something I'd involve myself in personally, except some of my guys at the garrison are getting jumpy about it. Lots of rumours about what might have happened out there. I need to keep morale up, we've got inspections coming up soon and I've got an election to win.

Your orders are to find the scientists and my men and bring them back to the garrison. This is to be your top priority. Your other orders, if you actually have any, can wait.

Nobody knows this jungle better than than the natives and from what I keep hearing, that's your
area of expertise, Sergeant. Your squad is the only squad available for this. I can't send any of my own guys in because they're too busy elsewhere. And I'm not about to call in specialists from offworld if I don't have to.

"Sir, I'm not even sure how you're aware that my squad is out here but our mission is classified. Additionally, we're not equipped to be out here longer than a week and even that is with the bare minimum of supplies."

"I didn't give you permission to ask questions, soldier. You don't think a primarch has the authority to know everything that goes on on his world?"

"I wasn't trying to be rude, it's just that the cabal has always stayed out of the garrison's affairs and vice-versa."

"And you're training a new squad designed to break that old tradition. A simple sergeant should be able to handle the receiving of orders without requiring additional credentials on where those orders came from. If you need to know more, you will be told so. No wonder you've been sitting at that rank for over a decade now."

"Can we at least have some coordinates on where to begin looking or is that too unorthodox of a request for you to manage?"

"Don't get coy with me, the coordinates are being transmitted now. And yes, I'm aware that you'll be out of comm contact soon, thank the spirits for that. Do your job and I won't have to ask for your demotion later."

"Yes, sir."

Magnus could feel his entire squad looking right at him as the transmission ended. He hadn't tried to offend a superior officer and yet managed to do so with flying colours. That would give Viatrix something to sort out before they returned, assuming she didn't agree with the primarch. He shuddered as he thought of them spending time together. She must have unintentionally raised Magnus' name in conversation to put the primarch on his trail. The man seemed as greedy and corruptable as Viatrix had made him out to be.

"What an ass," Atreides declared, flabbergasted with how their leader had been treated. Everyone else agreed as they added their own creative insults.

"That's not very respectful," he tried to chide them for their reaction. Though internally he appreciated their loyalty and support, he could not afford their discontent to grow. If the primarch caught wind of anything they said, if it spread to the cabal and beyond, demotion would be the least of his concerns.

"Respect is earned," Lucien said simply. "A man of that position shouldn't throw his weight around unless it's necessary. I'd lodge a complaint if I were you."

"That wouldn't achieve anything but to upset him further. Come on now, we've got new orders to make sense of. These coordinates are going to take two days to get to if we really go for it and we have no idea what we'll find, if anything, when we get there. Our week long survival mission could become a two week retrieve and recovery operation, or longer. We're not going to get any additional supplies and I doubt if we asked for them or an extraction, we'd be denied. The satellite is too far away for reliable communication and the jungle is impenetrable by air."

"So what are we supposed to do?" Riona asked, eyeing the remains of her ration bar like it was the
"Make the most of what we have and get the job done," Krysae said. "We're not in a desert, there's food all around us if we need it."

"Yes, I can show you how to hunt as we make our way to the coordinates but we really need to keep an eye on thermal clip supply and stick to rations where we can. This outpost that the scientists were supposed to be working at should have everything we need if we start to run low.

Hopefully it's as simple as go there, find them, return to the garrison, then back to the cabal base earlier than expected," Magnus said with more optimism than he felt. It was important to remain positive despite personal doubts.

"If it was simple, we wouldn't be reassigned to perform this task," Kasamir said quietly as she was cleaning some mud off her boots. "This primarch isn't a very efficient leader. He waited three weeks and yet can't be bothered to send his own men even when some of his men were responsible for the scientists' safety in the first place. Either all his men are incompetent or he is."

"It hardly matters who fault this is, we're the ones that have to deal with it now. Besides this sounds way more exciting then fending off starvation and dehydration in a jungle full of beasts ready to kill us. Not as fun as avoiding cleverly disguised krogan warlord waiting to ambush us but it'll do," Quintus added. No one laughed but he didn't seem to notice.

"Break time's over, time to get moving," Magnus ordered them and took the lead again.

---

The next two days were spent painfully backtracking and undoing what little progress they had made. Along the way, they learned how to track game as well as which animals were the prey of which predators that were worth hunting. When they had to wade through the river again, swollen from the rains, they tried their hand at fishing with makeshift rods from reeds on the bank. Their new orders felt a world away as the squad began to be eager for each of the new tricks that Magnus would teach them. The more time they spent with one another, the more it felt like a small family and the tension between Krysae and Atreides was an old memory.

On the third day, they reached the first clearing since they had left base. The grass was tall enough to make seeing the actual size of the meadow impossible. The closer they got to the coordinates, the shorter the grass became as the impact of modern technology revealed itself. It was dark by the time they found the scientific outpost and excavation site. Magnus had them make camp on a ridge nearby since it was obvious that the outpost was abandoned and would require a thorough investigation with the assistance of daylight.

They speculated over their campfire about what they might find in the morning but had no idea what to expect. Krysae had pointed out the presence of a road leading to the site and reminded them of his idea at the start to take a vehicle into the jungle. Magnus pointed out that they would have had to clear the path the entire way which might have been more doable for a full company as opposed to a single squad. He gussed the road might lead all the way back to the capital city of Shastinasio where Primarch Drakar's precious garrison was located. Quintus had made a joke about how well their sergeant got on with the primarch and Magnus realised that he was beginning to lose some of his usual stoicness around them.

"I don't have a good feeling about this.." Kasamir said as they got a closer view of the outpost's remains.
"Definitely been like this for awhile," Riona agreed. They all stood at the edge of one of the excavation pits, unsure of what they were supposed to do.

"We need to figure out where they went, no bodies means they might still be alive," Magnus was at a lost.

The place was entirely empty as if the structures had risen from the jungle of their own volition without any outside assistance. The outpost itself was constructed of temporary structures that could be reinforced and made into a more permanent building if the builders had chosen to do so. Either they had elected to not or they had ran out of time to finish construction. It had all the basic amenities, sleeping quarters, a kitchen and dining area, a lab, but the walls were nearly paper thin and there were large tarps connecting each section. There were three different excavation pits that were barely two metres in-depth, clearly they hadn't been finished either.

"No bodies and no supplies either," Lucien noticed. "What are those piles of ashes covering?"

"Looks like campfires, no, hang on.." Krysae walked up to one of them and kicked it with his boot. The wooden logs were not wood at all but random pieces of equipment from the outpost. Cooking pots, the remaining barrels of hunting rifles, a bottle opener, the shattered innards of a computer terminal, beakers from the lab. There was no logic to the type of items that had been burnt.

"Does this make any sense to anyone?" They all shook their heads. Magnus could feel a sense of unease. Not only were the scientists and soldiers gone, the clues they left behind were completely mysterious. Why had they left and why leave their vehicles behind? He ordered the squad to spread out in pairs to look for more clues, had he more troops he would have ordered a perimeter be maintained as well. Something was definitely not right.

What they found didn't add up. The vehicles had burnt piles of wood around them, probably cut from nearby palms but remained unscathed by the arson's efforts. Various supplies such as unopened crates and ammunition were left untouched. Anything that could be eaten or worn was missing with the original occupants. Tools were missing too, not a single shovel from the dig site could be found. There had been some sort of forced departure given the broken furniture and fragments of shattered glass. There was even the occasional blood trail that led them to suspect there had been a fight of some fashion.

"Look at this," Atreides exclaimed with excitement as she came out of the lab carrying a handwritten diary. "Who writes on paper any more?"

"What language is that?" Magnus asked curiously as he looked at the object over her shoulder. His translator could make out the words but his eyes could see an unfamiliar script.

"I think it's salarian in origin. Wasn't the lead scientist an alien? This looks like a record of what they were hoping to find out here, might be a personal log judging by the tone used. Last entry matches up with the time they stopped checking in with the garrison," she flicked carefully through the pages. "Hm, entries are about a week apart, the one before the last talks about setting up the outpost and marking the dig sites. Nothing really interesting. But this last one, what do you make of it, Sarge?"

She handed it to Magnus so he could see it properly and he read the entry aloud:

"There's something out there, in the jungles. I'm almost sure of it now. Something sentient and malicious. Supplies mysteriously vanish in the night, random things that aren't important for day-to-day operations. I have no evidence to support this suspicion so I have kept it to myself. There's enough out there to unsettle the most sound of minds. But every day it feels like we are being
I've casually asked our guards to increase their nightly patrols and to set up better defenses but they are over confident, boasting that they can kill a jungle beast long before it becomes an actual threat to anyone in the camp. I don't have luxury of confidence, not any more. Not after waking up in the middle of each night to what sounds like chanting and footsteps.

We wouldn't have known about this site if we weren't delving deep into the folklore and mythos of the region, mythos which are full of presumably baseless turian superstitions. According to them, if we're in the right spot then we might very well have disturbed these "spirits" as the guards refer to them.

Maybe it's just the weather and the humidity playing tricks on us. Maybe something is actually stalking us. Either way, can't wait for this dig to be over. If you chase ghosts long enough, you might actually find them."

"That's not ominous at all," Quintus said rather seriously.

"It's not what you'd expect to read from a man of science, that's for sure," Krysae said. "Especially a salarian, they're usually far more precise in their assessments."

"Something spooked him, I wonder if the others left similar journals behind?" Lucien asked but Atreides shook her head.

"Already checked every room, if they wrote anything down it would have been on their omnitools or in their personal terminals. And I haven't seen one of those that wasn't bashed in and lit on fire yet. Which reminds me, why would anyone do that? The materials are mostly fire-resistant," Atreides asked. Magnus handed the journal back to her and she put it in her pack, there were still lots of empty pages that she would like to use at some point.

"The only pattern I can make out is that the objects that were burnt are those of modern technology. The vehicles couldn't be set on fire but that didn't stop whoever did it from trying. And it's obvious that some sort of fight happened here, maybe the scientists were taken as prisoners?" Kasamir paced back and forth as she tried to work it all out.

"But with who? The garrison is over a week's trek to the south, the cabal is nearly two weeks to the west by vehicle. There's no native sentients on Invictus or at least none have been discovered since it's original colonisation. And of course, animals don't take prisoners. They could have been fighting amongst themselves, maybe but that doesn't explain the technophobia. So even if they were taken prisoner by "something" why not burn the whole place down?" Magnus asked as he rubbed his chin continously, perplexed by the task before them.

"Maybe they couldn't. These fires are basic, there's no fuel-like odor. They might have been created by simply rubbing two sticks together," Kasamir shrugged.

"Too bad they took all the useful stuff with them, not a whole lot left to salvage aside from thermal clips and whatever else that didn't get burned," Krysae grumbled as he looked through all of the cabinets in the kitchen.

"I saw a herd of herbivores moving into the meadow earlier, we could try to down one for lunch, save our rations for when they're really needed. Keep an eye out for anything that might show where everyone went. The rains may have muddied the ground enough to allow for footprints and vehicle tracks," Magnus suggested as he grabbed a handful of thermal clips. The rest of them grabbed a handful each before setting out. It was nice to get away from the eery place and focus on
They returned from their hunt with a small four-legged mammal and set about preparing it at their camp from the night before. Along the way, Krysae had spotted a group of indecipherable footprints leading north away from the meadow and back into the jungle. Nobody could tell how many sets of footprints there were since the rains had nearly washed them out but Magnus had identified one pair as belonging to a salarian, while the rest were obviously turian. They ate as much of the animal as they could in one sitting and wrapped the rest of the cuts in paper found in the outpost. No one was quite sure how much they were going to need until they found the scientists or if they would find the scientists at all.
Chapter 12

The next morning they continued northward, following what footprints and signs of movement they could discern in the tall grass back into the darkened jungle. They weren't sure of how many scientists they were looking for but estimating by the width of the trodden vegetation left in their wake, they were pursuing a relatively large group of at least 20 individuals. The number was higher than the outpost had implied leading them to suspect that they were indeed prisoners of another force of unknown description. The footprints didn't reveal anything new, they were all the same shape and size.

They passed trees on their way that had been manually cut down with crude tools judging by the number of cuts it had taken to fell them. The footprints began to disappear altogether as the damp soil was too loose to contain them. When they lost sight of them, they continued moving northward looking for other clues.

There were signs of hunting, leftover bones from kills of many animals at once, piled together and arranged in a deliberate fashion as well as bits of sharp stone lodged into the carcasses. There was no evidence of the tools or weapons used aside from the stone arrowheads that were too deep to be easily extracted from their victims. Bones of all sorts were scattered about the forest floor and created a new path for them to follow.

Between the darkness of the jungle and the unnatural death of its greatest and most dangerous creatures, the squad felt restless. It was like walking through a graveyard of open graves. A cool mist hung in the air and a spine-chilling breeze swept through the vines of the upper layers. They swore they could feel the presence of spirits watching their passing, warning them to turn away. Even the birds had gone silent and the river in the distance had slowed to a trickle as its path took it underground.

"What were those scientists looking for all the way out here?" Magnus nearly whispered when the silence became too much to bear.

"According to the journal, they were looking for the original settlers before the colony was properly founded. It's vague about what they hoped to find, like they weren't sure exactly but they knew it was something unconventional. There were plenty of colony worlds established long before Invictus, what would have motivated pioneers to find a new one?"

The scientists seem to think that the first colonists were running away from persecution because of some really weird ideas they had that the Hierarchy didn't approve of. But there aren't any details on what those ideas were," Atreides had gone over the entries countless times since leaving the outpost and was growing protective of the journal's contents.

The rest of the squad had little interest in such a relic but they listened with anticipation whenever Atreides referred to it. There wasn't much else to talk about and they all desperately wanted to think about something other than their surroundings and the secrets that might be looming in the shadows.

"Maybe they were a cult or something. You don't think they survived? I hope not," Quintus suggested quietly.

"Every bit of history on this place suggests that the world could not be developed until Primarch Emprus established the first city. Everyone before died out to disease or whatever else the jungle threw at them. Even now most of the cities are in the desert, far away from the jungle's grasp,"
Kasamir reminded them with her textbook knowledge.

"Another possibility is that because of our location in relation to contested trade routes, there could be all sorts of illegal denizens out here trying to hideout and ply their trade. We're not exactly close to other major colony worlds," Krysae suggested astutely. It wasn't an unfeasible concept, pirates and the like were always looking for garden worlds that weren't protected very well. But if the Hierarchy couldn't tame the jungle then it wasn't likely that cutthroat criminals could either.

"What we found in those corpses earlier, they looked like spearheads or arrowheads even," Lucien recalled. "I doubt Terminus pirates would use such ancient weaponry."

"Some of those animals looked like they had been torn from the inside out, as if by biotic attacks," Riona added helpfully.

"It's all very, very strange," Magnus agreed. "Does anyone else smell something like burning smoke in the air?"

"Yeah, wasn't sure if it was just me or not," Quintus affirmed and the squad stopped suddenly to see if they could spot the source through the fog that clung to the lower branches.

"There!" Atreides pointed in the direction of the smoke and the squad took off almost without her.

Magnus took the lead with a Phaeston drawn instead of his usual rifle and the rest of the squad bounded after him with newfound vigour. The smoke had been hanging in the air for quite some time, the fire that had caused it had been put out several hours before. They stopped as they approached a clearing of fallen trees, their trunks used to create a palisade in a circular shape around what had been a camp a day or so ago. Magnus signalled them to split up and cover both sides of the single entrance but they were already sure that there were no occupants inside. It didn't hurt to remain cautious especially when they knew nothing of their quarry.

Guns out and ready, they entered the camp and began to take stock of what remained. There were four small huts, made from leaves and branches gathered from the local area. A single campfire in the middle looked as if it had been used more recently than the rest of the camp. There were no tools, weapons, food or anything else useful left behind much like the outpost.

"This place is so..primitive..” Riona tried to find the right word for it as she tested how sturdy the huts were with the butt of her rifle. They were more resilient than she had expected but not the sort of dwellings she had ever seen outside of a museum. The interiors were dry and full of new clues to sift through.

"Is that paint or.. blood?" Quintus inquired from one of the huts. The squad crowded around him in the small building which featured a flat stone slab that might have been used as a table in the centre. On the "walls" were racks that had held tools or weapons. There was an unsettling amount of a darkened and dry blue liquid on the table's surface. A half-opened crate in the corner revealed some tools with sharp edges, knife-like in shape. There were broken chains and strips of leather twisted into the shape of ropes stacked atop the crates.

"I think I want to be sick," Kasamir announced as she ducked out for fresh air. Atreides joined her and the pair patrolled around the outside of the palisade while the rest continued to investigate.

"The hut over here has cages, designed for hunting maybe? But they're too big for anything that could be domesticated," Krysae discovered. "The other two look like they were used for sleeping. A camp this size probably only housed about four or five people, maybe more if they tried to cram them in."
"Too small to be where our scientists and their entourage would have gone, huh?" Magnus deduced. Krysae nodded in agreement. "So it's, what, a hunting camp? Where they would have brought their kills and butchered and prepared them to take elsewhere. Whoever they are. I wonder how many... did you hear that rustling noise?" he lowered his voice, "Don't move too quickly, let's see if we can catch one of these guys alive."

He waited a minute or so for Kasamir and Atreides to rejoin them. The squad split up to hide between the two sleeping huts while Magnus drew his Valiant and crept up to the entrance. He poked it around for a quick view in the scope but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. The sound of something moving in the grass came again.

"We know your out there," he called out in a stern voice. "There's more of us than there are of you so you may as well come out and surrender."

The rustling started again and this time he could see where it was coming from. He fired a warning shot in its general direction, hitting a tree nearby. Not the best shot but it served its purpose. The grass parted and a rather disheveled being emerged, wielding a makeshift spear over his head. But it wasn't a primitive creature at all, it was a boy, a turian male about age 10 guessing by his height. He looked worn and fatigued but clung to his spear defiantly even when Magnus threatened to let off another shot if he didn't cooperate.

"Put that down, he's just a kid," Atreides scolded him and Magnus lowered his weapon as she bid him to without a second thought.

Before he could say anything, Atreides walked straight towards the boy without any fear. He didn't lower his weapon or drop out of his battle-ready stance. When she got to him, she lowered her shotgun at his feet and motioned for him to do the same but he refused.

"Food? Got any?" was the first thing he said to her.

"Sure but it's rude to point a weapon at someone who wants to help you."

"Food first."

She relented and pulled the pack off her back to search for some leftover meat from the day before. The kid watched her every move. He wore a casual jumpsuit that had been torn in various places but mostly remained intact. On his wrists and ankles were cuffs joined by chains like the ones the had seen in the camp. The chains were long enough to allow for some movement which might have been how he had pieced together his handcrafted spear but not long enough to allow him to do much else. Atreides extended a bit of meat to the boy while dropping to a knee to be about the same height as he was. He took it greedily with one shaking hand and dropped the spear on the ground with the other.

"You got a name, kid?" she asked softly as he tried to stuff morsels of jerky in his mouth.

"Yeah. Orso..Tullius..this is so good," he said between bites.

"You're a brave boy, Orso. Is it just you out here?"

He nodded and kept looking over her shoulder towards Magnus and the others with suspicion. Atreides extended her hand, palm up at him. "Come on, we'll keep you safe. Promise. We were just about to sit down for lunch. You can get even more food if you stay with us."

Magnus took the cue and asked the others to rekindle the campfire and set their gear down. It was earlier than they would normally have taken a break but the circumstances were quite unusual. The
others weren't sure of what to make of their new guest. They kept their guns holstered since the kid was already quite frightened.

Orso refused to take Atreides' hand but agreed to follow her if it meant filling his belly. He looked as if he hadn't eaten properly in days. She gave him her canteen to drink out of as they rejoined the others. He looked frightened but declared he wasn't scared of anything in the most bold way he could when she asked him about it.

Magnus was anxious to ask the boy what sort of hell he had been through but Atreides had warned him to give Orso a chance to settle in and adjust to his new situation. The boy wasn't ready to talk and his voracious appetite had emptied what remained of their fresh food supply. Krysae suggested that the men go out and hunt and give Orso some time with the women to settle in. They could resume the mission later when they had information from a much more cooperative source of intel.

By the time they returned, Orso was bursting with energy and asked to help them carve their two kills. He didn't have a knife of his own or even an omnitool with blade attachment so he was content to watch the others work as he sat close to Atreides. She had been the only one that he'd allow to get close to him. He hadn't spoken to the ladies and even Atreides couldn't get him to talk about why he had the chains on. Kasamir offered to cut through the links with her omniblade until they could figure out a better solution to remove the thick cuffs that they were attached to. After making sure Atreides approved, he let her begin the work.

"The metal used to make these had to have come from offworld," Kasamir remarked casually as she tried to get through the first link.

"There's lots of stuff from other planets at the main village," Orso remarked as if it were common knowledge.

"What village? And what kind of stuff? Who were you the prisoner of?" Magnus bombarded him with several questions. Riona told him to ease up before Atreides could, reminding him that they were dealing with a child and not a soldier.

Atreides turned to face the boy at eye-level, "I know you don't want to talk about the bad things but we can't fix them unless you do. The sergeant might be abrasive but he's our CO and what he says goes. If you want us to help then you have to answer him and obey his orders. Ok?"

Orso nodded his head slowly and Atreides reassured him with a pat on his shoulder. He took a deep breath and directed his focus on Magnus as if he were the only one there.

"Where should I start, sir?"

"From the beginning. What are you doing all the way out here?"

"My parents ran a farm several weeks travel to the south. They knew it was rough country but there was lots of profit in it, as my dad liked to say. Our homestead was on the edge of the treeline, we were used to fending off animals but nothing like wild men brandishing spears and shouting in a language we didn't understand.

They took us by surprise during the day when I was tending one of the herds with my favourite varren. They got my mother first, wounded her in the leg so she couldn't warn Dad and me. But they didn't kill her outright. The only one who died on the first day was my pet. Brave old Bellum, may his spirit find rest."

"But who were they, you said they had spears?"
"I'm not sure what they call themselves, but they were all turians. Never seen anyone like them before. They barely wore anything, no armour. Showed their bare skin and talons with tattoos all over their bodies. They wore jewelry made of bones and scraps of leather covered their waists. There were only men that attacked us, didn't seen any of the women until we were brought to their holding camp with the rest of the beasts they had caught. They were just as ugly as the men.

The first camp they took us to was a lot like this one. There are camps like this throughout the jungle on the way to their village or whatever they call it. When I escaped, I went back to each camp on my way back south towards the cities. They were the only landmarks I could remember and I kept hoping to find food but the shelter was good too. The rains started earlier this year, or maybe it always rains in this place."

"How long ago did this all happen?"

"I'm not sure, it's hard to keep track of time when the sun is behind the trees. It might have been a month since we were taken captive. I escaped only a week ago, or maybe longer. Each day feels like any other, I tried to make my own spear to hunt but I'm just not fast enough. Makes me feel better in case I have to fight though.

Dad told me to keep going south, eventually I'd find someone or die trying. It was better than the fate that awaited him. All I have of him now is a compass. Wish I had a real omnitool, would have made things a lot easier.

What are your soldiers doing all the way out here anyway? Come to rescue us right?"

"We're on a rescue mission of sorts, yes. But we had no idea that there was anyone else out here. This certainly helps fill in the gaps regarding the scientists that were lost."

"Never saw anyone that looked like a scientist but the village is huge. There's lots of captives there. Some of them are aliens but most are like us. I was the youngest, they didn't know what to do with me because I wasn't big enough. The aliens were big enough but they were used to work."

"Big enough for.. what?"

"To be eaten."

They all stared at the boy the like he had sprung hair out of his skull.

"Surely you're joking?" Quintus asked hesitantly.

"I saw them do it. Many times. You don't forget something that awful," Orso stared into the burning wood in the fire, transfixed by the roaring flame.

Everyone else had lost their appetite for the rest of the afternoon. Magnus had lost his desire to ask questions and instead tried to keep everyone busy with gathering materials for fortifying their base camp. If there were feral, possibly cannibalistic, savages in the jungle then they weren't nearly as safe as he he'd like them to be. Orso for his part kept out of the way and took Riona's offered bedroll to a corner of one of the huts to get some much needed rest.

"Why is nothing ever simple?" Magnus asked nobody in particular.

"Because that would be boring," Atreides said with a smile, more cheerful than anyone else. "Going to need more wood to fill in these holes. I take it we're staying here for awhile?"

"Not by choice but we're going to have to change our entire approach. Probe the enemy's defenses,
see how many there are, figure out if the scientists are with them and if they're even alive. This job just got a lot bigger."

"I'm sure Orso will be eager to help. But you really need to be more, uh, gentle with him. He's not one of us, he hasn't gone through basic yet. And no matter what he says, he's scared. I can see it in his eyes."

"Yeah, I've not really been around kids. Well, not untrained, non-biotic ones anyway. At least you're here. He likes you and you seem to know what to do."

"I know what it's like to feel as if the whole world is after you," she seemed to be talking about something else entirely and didn't meet his questioning glance.

"I'm glad you're here, Atreides," he said with the utmost sincerity, re-emphasising the point he was trying to make.

"Thanks, Sarge. I think I'll go with Kasamir and Krysae back to the outpost, see what we can scrounge up. Orso should be asleep until we get back," she gave him a quick salute and left.

He watched the three of them as they departed from the top of the hill but he only focused his gaze on Atreides. Bold, bristling Atreides had a soft, tender heart that he never could have imagined. He might never uncover all the demons that haunted her but he was certainly going to try and fix the damage if she ever gave him the chance.
The next week was spent foraging, scouting, and assessing the land north of their repurposed camp. Orso's memory proved useful in locating other camps of varying function and design, some of which contained useful tools to use on their own camp. When the squad had asked the sergeant why he felt more comfortable using the enemy's camp and tools instead of the more modern materials of the outpost, he pointed out that using basic equipment was more efficient than trying to fix a modern construction without the right tools or enough men to cover it.

The other camps were always empty when they got to them, left to be used later when the enemy had need of them. The enemy felt like ghosts, leaving only markings of their passing but never revealing themselves. They knew they were out there, probably assessing the squad in the same way. The squad often found fresh footprints and heard unsettling chanting in the distance.

Magnus made the most of what he had, making sure to never send anyone on a task alone. He coordinated them so that one pair was tracking game, another investigating a location they had found the day before, the other noting fortifiable positions in the landscape. He hated sending them out into the unknown with barely any resources but there was no way to communication with the cabal or the garrison.

Orso helped mark positions on his holographic map and slowly warmed up to him, often asking to be sent into the field with the others. But Magnus wasn't willing to put the boy back into harm's way when he was still recovering his strength. Atreides came to a compromise, she showed Orso how to operate her Phaeston and marked some trees of varying distances outside the camp with string for him to practice on. The gun was lightweight and easy to aim and Orso's fingers were the right size to hold it. Everyone took turns practicing with him when they weren't busy elsewhere.

"Sir, we got one!" Krysae bellowed as he and Quintus returned from one of their reconnaissance missions.

"Alive?" Magnus asked excitedly as he watched the pair drag a body towards the camp.

"Not exactly," Quintus said as he shot a look at Krysae.

"Hey, not my fault he bled out on the way back, you said we had enough medigel," Krysae retorted.

"Medigel doesn't work so well when you shatter a major artery at point-blank range," Quintus grumbled.

"You're welcome by the way, he was about to cut your mandibles off," he laughed and so did Quintus. Despite their close shave with death, they were in high spirits. Magnus called the rest of the squad over to take a look at what they had brought.

Orso hid behind Magnus when he saw the savage up close but the others were keen to get a good look. The figure was rolled over onto its back and matched the description Orso had given them. He only wore what was basically a loincloth with a pouch slung over his shoulder that proved empty. His weapons were placed beside him for inspection, a quiver of javelins and a large spear. The only other remarkable features were his sharpened talons and a collection of teeth that he wore around his cowl.

"Orso wasn't kididng, they're uglier than batarians in swimsuits," Lucien remarked. "Was he alone?
Tell us what happened."

"We were scouting towards the next camp on the list, which is actually a lot further away than we thought and is going to take two days to get to. Quintus was keeping an eye on the game around us, in case we needed to track some down later. But we weren't the only ones hunting, there were at least three of these guys doing the same thing.

We kept noticing these traps that they had laid to catch the smaller animals, smart idea. We should totally be doing that. Anyway, we kept missing them and they kept missing us until the terrain opened up," Krysae explained then Quintus jumped in.

"Then I thought, what if we moved the traps and used them to catch one of the hunters? So we did. Except it didn't really work out that way, one noticed the traps were in the wrong spots and went to put them back. And then Krysae shot him in the leg, scared the others right off. It was a good shot considering the distance," Quintus complimented his squad-mate.

"Thanks but couldn't have got him with the second shot if you didn't pull him back when he tried to take off with his pals," Krysae returned the compliment.

"I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with engaging them yet but at least we know what they look like," Magnus walked slowly around the body, trying to learn as much as he could about their military prowess. They were deceptively barbaric in their approach to combat but a force of greater numbers was always one to be reckoned with regardless of its tools of war. "They're physically robust and know the land better than we do."

"I'm not too worried about guys that have to fight in close range when we've got guns," Krysae decided. "Plus we have biotics."

"We do?" Orso asked quietly.

"Yeah, four of them including the sergeant. I guess we assumed you knew. We're not from the garrison," Atreides clarified. This was not good news as far as Orso was concerned and he backed away from Magnus as if he had a contagious disease. "They're good guys, don't worry."

But Orso wasn't convinced. He tried to explain while hiding in Atreides' shadow. "The shamans are their leaders. They use biotics. Some of the others carry this dust stuff and can use it to do biotics too. The things they do... it's worse than when they cut up living people and eat them. Much worse. Dad says they're all witches using black magic for their rituals, powered by the blood of the animals they catch. It must be sacred because they don't eat the animals, only the people. But I've heard of biotics before and that's exactly what it is, Dad just thinks I need to hear the kid's version. He's probably dead by now."

"You don't know that for sure," Atreides whispered to him. She put an arm around him and assured him that he was still safe with them. "Not all biotics are evil. Let's get something to eat then do some target practice, alright?"

She escorted him away from the rest of the squad and gave Magnus an apologetic look over her shoulder. He had the boys remove the body from the camp and bury it down the hill in the usual fashion with its arms crossed over its weapons on its chest. Even if the cannibals had thrown away their modern culture for a more simple life, they were still turians. He half wondered what other phobias Orso was harbouring and if he could ever truly recover from the traumas he had experienced.

"That dust stuff sounds a lot like red sand," Lucien said when Magnus returned to the centre of the
camp. "We used to see a lot of it when we needed to make quick credits."

"Biotics selling biotic drugs, what a surprise," Krysae shook his head.

"We did what we had to," Riona defended her brother. "The bigger question is how they got a hold of such a substance so far from civilisation. That stuff isn't cheap or easy to come by."

"Something else to keep an eye on," Magnus sighed. "I really wish we had more troops out here."

"We're spread thinner than an asari's sense of dignity," Quintus stated the obvious in the only way he knew how.

"How long until we can make contact via satellite, another week? We could try and get that distress beacon at the outpost working," Kasamir thought out loud.

"Or even better, we could withdraw before things get out of control. We're already in deeper than our fringes. There's a road from the outpost to the garrison, if we start now we could be there in two weeks or less," Riona countered.

"We have orders to fulfill, we don't retreat unless we're forced to do so," Magnus said with finality. "Get some food and early rest if you want it. Krysae, you and the Marcells can move towards that camp tomorrow but turn back if the enemy engages, ok? No exceptions.

Kasamir, I need you to investigate that beacon again, see if we can get it going. Atreides and I will handle tomorrow's scouting, make sure the enemy hasn't discovered what we're up to."

"What about Orso?" Kasamir asked.

"Take him with you, he'll enjoy that and you should be safe."

"Yes, sir."

---

Several hours after everyone had had their morning meal and said their goodbyes as they went about their separate objectives, Magnus and Atreides were finally alone. Things were not going nearly as smoothly as they could have. They were tailing the trail of what they assumed was a hunting party through a rocky, mountainous region that hadn't been scouted thoroughly. Magnus wasn't sure if there was more than one group of them or if they had simply misjudged how many there were in the first place. He and Atreides were forced to duck and weave through tangled roots and loose stones to avoid drawing attention to themselves. A day ago they had never seen one of the cannibals and now they couldn't swing a rifle without giving away their position.

"This really isn't what I had in mind," Magnus said as they were forced to take cover once more. They hadn't been spotted but the cannibals were definitely alert and looking for them and not anything else. There were no hunting traps and the cannibals wore some pieces of armour. The most notable were scraps of metal on their shoulders with foreboding spikes protruding from them to show that they were not mere hunters but warirors.

"You wanted to see if they were probing our defenses as well. I daresay you have your answer," Atreides said as she checked her shotgun's thermal clip. "At some point we're going to have to fight some of them. Might scare them off like Krsyae and Quintus did yesterday."

"There's at least five in this group but we don't know if they have more nearby. Given the numbers, they probably have another camp near here. And a camp might have weapons we haven't seen
"yet," he had to fight back the urge to agree with Atreides as his fingers were itching to shoot something and be done with the silly game of hide-and-seek. He constantly had to remind himself of how small and inexperienced his team was and they didn't deserve to put in an impossible situation. Once they knew all the variables, he could design and execute a fullproof plan of attack but not before then.

"What, like an even bigger slingshot that shoots bigger rocks?" Atreides laughed. It was hard to take their primitive enemy seriously. They had overwhelmed countless victims that knew how to defend themselves with guns so their tactics and intelligence must have made up the difference.

"We need to get out of this maze, too easy to be cornered here," Magnus ignored her humorous jest. "Backtrack towards the trees then approach from another angle."

They waited for the cannibals to pass by their hiding place, long enough to hear their unsettling war-chanting decrease in volume. At least it wouldn't be difficult to know where they were next, the element of surprise still favoured Magnus and his squad. He waved for Atreides to follow him and the pair climbed out of the rocks and back into the tentative safety of the jungle. The trees embraced them but they were more interested in getting a better view of where they had just been.

"There was a ridge overlooking the river back that way. We could get up there and follow it around to the other side and see if they've cleared any trees for a camp," Atreides suggested as they ambled through the underbrush sluggishly after their recent climb.

"More climbing?" Magnus tried to make light of the situation to keep his brain focused on anything but the pain in his legs.

"Is the old man getting tired already?" she teased him in a way only she could get away with.

"Not a chance. Let's get a move on," he said proudly and they did as she suggested.

The view beyond the ridge was not what they wanted to see. There wasn't just one camp but several. They hid behind the trees that hugged the craggy outcrop as best they could as they surveyed the sight below.

"I haven't seen any females yet, have you?" Magnus looked over at Atreides and she shook her head. "Bet they're all at home making new loincloths and putting the kettle on."

"You wish it worked like that," she gave him a sly smile. "Hang on just a minute. You made a joke, is that even possible? I didn't think you knew how to smile much less tell politically-incorrect jokes."

"Maybe there's a lot you don't know about me yet," he teased back, still keeping his eyes on the enemy's movements.

They could hear the chanting from the squad that they had been following earlier again and they peered over the edge for a closer look. Another group chanted back at them with a different tempo. Magnus concluded that each group had their own unique sound. The jungle hid their true numbers but they made enough noise to warn potential interlopers that they were a sizeable force. He wasn't eager to get too close but Atreides didn't share his caution.

"What are you doing?" Magnus asked with alarm as Atreides inched her way closer to the edge for a better look.

"Can't see anything from back here, don't w..." she was cut off as the ground beneath her gave way, sending rocks and debris down the slope.
Magnus instinctively reached out and grabbed her by the forearm and for a second it seemed the danger had passed. They could hear the stone behind them cracking and shaking from the recent disturbance. The rocks held together by the trees came loose and created a small landslide near where the pair were standing. A rippling effect was created along the entire cliff face and they both lost their footing as they were swept up in it. Luckily they found some flatter stone halfway between their original position and the forest floor that gave them enough purchase to stop their fall. Along the way, Magnus had tried unsuccessfully to grab a handhold and pull them both back up to a ledge out of the landslide's path.

Atreides had landed first on her back without enough time to roll out of the way when Magnus reached her. They waited for the remaining rocks to fall harmlessly overhead before they tried to move or make sense of what had happened. Magnus coughed heavily as the dust cleared and sheepishly had to pick himself off of Atreides.

"If they didn't know our position before, they will now," he remarked.

"Sorry, sir," Atreides apologised as she got back to her feet. "Are you alright?"

"Think so. You?"

"Nothing broken. What's that blood on your suit from?"

The stinging pain in his hand told him that he wasn't nearly as unscathed as he had thought. Atreides noticed it immediately and was on him before he could get a good look. It felt like his whole arm was beginning to bruise over but he didn't mention that.

"Ouch, must have been one hell of a rock to cut through that material," she said as she examined the wound.

"It's nothing. We need to get moving before they see us," he tried to pull away but she wouldn't give up so easily.

"Ok but let me put some medigel on it first or it will get infected, won't take but a second," she reached for pack on her belt and produced a small tube of the spray on liquid. "Take that glove off so I can do this right. Hurry up."

They could hear the mad chanting noise again and it was unnerving that they had closed in on them so quickly. Magnus didn't argue and did as she asked, he winced as the medigel was applied. She finished by wiping what fresh blood she could off of the wound.

"That shit burns," he declared as he hastily put his newly torn glove back on.

"Harden up, I had to put a lot on since we don't have time for a proper dressing and bandage. Now come on, those guys are creeping me out," she grabbed her shotgun and took the lead down the slope. They didn't get far before they were met with a sheer cliff that dropped into a ravine. Across from the ravine they could make out the shapes of the buildings in the camps that they had been watching. A crowd of savages was gathering to see what was going on and they shook their spears at their cornered preyed. More and more joined them, some with javelins that could cross the ravine. Before they could test their throwing arms, Magnus leapt madly towards the grassy refuge of the ravine and managed to roll through his fall onto his feet. He beckoned Atreides to do the same but it was an intimidating jump that caused her to hesitate. A javelin hit the rockface centimetres beside her face and a few second later she joined him, This time he managed to catch her without falling.
"Now they have the high ground," she said while looking up at the enemy jeering them from above.

"This might work better than I thought, actually. We just need a good bottleneck, get them down here and let loose. They've got javelins but we've got bullets and lots of them," he said as they surveyed their surroundings for cover. "This way."

"Sarge, I don't think a shotgun is going to cut it against that many. Can I borrow your Phaeston?" she inquired. He unslung the weapon and tossed it to her in response as he drew the Valiant for his own use.

They squeezed their way through a rocky crevice that was only wide enough for two people side by side. He couldn't have asked for a better bottleneck than that. They set up on the other side, each taking one side of the entry and waited for the enemy to follow.

"Trying using your biotics on them, if Orso is right then that might really freak them out," Atreides suggested as the first group came into firing range.

Magnus was too busy lining up a headshot on one of the cannibals in the back when she said it. When the shot was ready, he let it go and his target went reeling back with the force. Atreides picked off the targets that were closest, aiming for their exposed necks to conserve ammo. A stream of enemies poured into the ravine, more than either had time to count. Even with the bottleneck, they were going to be pressured too hard. As reinforcements came in, Magnus decided to take Atreides' suggestion on board and threw a warp field at what he guessed was the middle of their ranks. That distracted them long enough to take some easy shots. It was also the encouragement the shamans needed to use their own biotic attacks.

"We can't sit here, need to keep moving," Magnus yelled as he put up a barrier bubble around them to absorb the opposing field effects. He collapsed the barrier on a singularity that was growing in the gap of stone and the two forces shattered the rock, slowing down the progress of their pursuers but forcing them to abandon their defensive position. They moved backwards as they kept firing on their helpless foes, competitively keeping track of how many headshots each got as they went.

The pair continued down the ravine, back towards camp. It wasn't exactly what Magnus wanted to do, to lure the enemy to their base but it was the most reliable defensive position should they have need of it. They found their way back up out of the ravine before they had to worry about that and by then the enemy had grown silent.

"Did we get them all?" Atreides asked hopefully as they caught their breath.

"Two of us against nearly a whole legion? We should get medals if we did," he said. She laughed which made him laugh, they couldn't believe what they had just done together. They went back to check the results of the carnage and didn't find a living soul among the bodies.

"Well, you sure know how to show a girl a good time. Next time we should skip the falling off a cliff bit," she said as they made their way back to camp, both feeling physically exhausted but mentally still buzzing from the adrenaline rush of a victorious battle.

Their excitement doubled when Kasamir and Orso returned to camp with news that the beacon was repaired and sending out their signal on the top priority frequency. It wasn't a guarantee that either the cabal or garrison would be able to send troops their way but it meant they wouldn't have an excuse to not assist the squad. They were obligated to help them extract if they could figure out how to reach their location.
Magnus and Atreides got to relive the thrill of their day by retelling the events to Orso who was easily impressed. Kasamir was more quiet but glad that they had seen some action. Things were boding well. When they knew the location of the main village, they might have a real chance at a direct assault to release the prisoners. Whether the scientists were there or not didn't seem to matter as much as wiping out the cruel people who had captured them.

Before they turned in for the night, Atreides managed to get Magnus to let her dress his wound properly. She thanked him profusely for looking after her and he deflected the praise with his usual line about duty and taking care of one's squad. What had been one of many battles for him had been her first and he had forgotten what it felt like to face an enemy trying to kill you for the first time. Besides, she had looked out for him too and they had made a great team.
"Ease up, you can't hold it like an AR. There you go, your stance is good but your aim is completely off. Why are you so tense, Orso?" Magnus was standing behind the boy, keeping a close eye on how he held the sniper rifle.

"Because I don't want to get it wrong," he said without turning to look at his instructor. Instead he raised the scope to eye level and tried to line up one of the stationary targets.

Magnus remembered saying the same thing when his mother had shown him how to fire an SR for the first time. The scope had thrown him off at first and the lack of spatial awareness was disorienting. His father had been showing him the basics on how to carry and hold it, how to keep it clean and how to change the clips, how to best conserve ammo and generally be efficient with his weapon. But his mother had shown him precision, accuracy, the importance of patience and how to get the most out of each shot.

"Relax, you can't shoot straight if you aren't focused. Try to keep both eyes open, it won't feel natural for awhile but it'll help put things in the right perspective," he continued to advise him. "Take your time, shoot whenever you're ready."

Orso lacked discipline but he made up for it with an overeagerness to keep trying. They had been using the Phaeston for the first hour but Magnus saw how Orso kept eyeing the Valiant. It wasn't a bad rifle to start a beginner on, considering how easily it could be reloaded. But Orso was already used to the larger clip on the AR and didn't know how to accommodate a clip that left no room for error. His accuracy wasn't that great to begin with but would get better once he was fully grown and more sure of himself.

He let go of the trigger and grazed the first tree, throwing bark on the ground which showed that it had actually hit something. The lack of recoil caused him to stumble forward as he had been bracing himself for it after the shot was fired.

"You'll get used to that, it's not like Mantis or a Viper," Magnus said as he came over to steady the boy and help him hold the trigger properly for the next shot.

"I've never used one of those either," Orso said while Magnus repositioned his hand.

"You will soon, I started when I was about your age. Now, show me how you look down the scope and keep your shoulders back," when he was satisfied he let him fire again, still holding his hands in the right place to keep the barrel steady. "Does that feel different?"

"A little," Orso conceded. "She's too light at the back, hard to keep her level."

"That's what makes her great for quick-scoping and shooting on the run. I know it's a bit odd, it's a human gun after all. Ok, I'm going to let go this time, see how you go with a full round, that's three shots per reload," Magnus moved back to Orso's blindspot to watch. The first two shots hit the same tree, the third hit the furthest target that they had marked. "Good but try to get all three to hit the same one, reload and try again."

They kept at it until Orso got bored. He enjoyed the louder, faster shots of the Phaeston far more. When he handed the gun back to Magnus, he was nearly shaking from the training.

"You should tell me when it's too much," Magnus said with concern.
"But I have to get better if we're going to rescue Dad and the others so it doesn't seem right to complain," the kid said as he stretched his arms.

Magnus wasn't sure how to explain to him that he couldn't rely on Orso the way he could on the rest of his squad and knew they'd have to figure out a safe place for him when the time for fighting arrived. He wasn't going to like missing the action but a kid couldn't understand that war wasn't a game without consequences. Not even a turian child could appreciate that, they still had their innocence to enjoy.

Orso changed to a new topic, "Are you really a biotic? You don't look like it."

"And what do you think a biotic is supposed to look like?"

"I don't know, maybe pretty like the asari, all blue and stuff," Orso said with the complete seriousness that only a child could muster.

"Sorry to disappoint but we look the same as everyone else. You can't really see the actual biotics either, only the results and effects each power creates."

"Show me something, I bet I can see it."

"Ok, see the Phaeston leaning by the pile of wood there?" Magnus pointed and Orso nodded. He then created a biotic pull field around the object and flicked his wrist to send the object flying towards Orso who leapt up to grab it from thin air. He looked around for a wire or some other mechanism to prove it was a trick but came up empty handed.

"What about something bigger, could you pick me up?" he said daringly.

"Hm, you're probably too big for a pull effect. It's really hard to show biotics in a vaccuum, maybe when the others get back we can show you some things. Riona's really good with her barrier and Lucien can teleport. Quintus does a nasty singularity, it's basically a miniature blackhole that creates a vortex and does all sorts of damage," Magnus tried to explain something he took for granted to someone who probably thought he was some kind of sorcerer. Orso's eyes lit up with wonder as he tried to make sense of something that he couldn't actively see.

"And Sarge has a mean warp field that tears cannibals inside out, you should have seen it the other day," Atreides contributed as she she joined the pair of them.

"When did you guys get back?" Magnus asked.

"Just now. Kasamir's preparing lunch, if you want first pick, Orso," he didn't need to be told twice and went back to camp leaving Atreides and Magnus alone again. She gave her report once he was gone, "We definitely got them all but the camp has been taken down. All that was left was the clearing across the ravine. Kasamir couldn't believe how many dead bodies there were. Whoever came back to take the camps down didn't seem to care about their dead. So we buried them properly. Felt like the right thing to do, which is why we're a bit later than expected. Any word from Krysae and the twins yet?"

"Not yet, which I'm hoping is a good thing. Shouldn't see them for another two days at least. The sooner they get back here the sooner we can go on the offensive. I'm getting damn tired of this detail, too complicated for my tastes," he enjoyed being able to speak his mind in front of her.

"Looks like you and Orso are getting on a bit better," she noted.

"Oh yeah, now that he knows space magic isn't going to kill him, he can't get enough of it," he
responded casually.

"I bet you could have picked him up," she said slyly.

"Didn't want to show off," he said coyly which caused her to laugh. He was starting to really appreciate her smile.

"The kid is starting to really looking up to you but I'm sure you're used to that," she went on in a more serious tone.

"I guess so since I have a younger brother," he went quiet as he tried to think of a way to avoid going into more detail on that subject. "Care to join me for a patrol around the base?"

"We've been walking for hours today but ok, since you asked so nicely," she agreed and let him help her up.

"You don't have to," he said in what he hoped was a neutral, professional sounding tone.

"It's nice having someone to talk to on a regular basis, keeps me sane out here."

"Yeah."

"So what is it like, having a normal family?"

"It's normal. And relatively boring. But there's never any surprises to worry about, well, not often anyway. We look out for each other, during the good and the bad times. Family first, duty second."

"There must have been a lot of pressure though to live up to your parents' standards. What did you used to dream about as a kid, when you were under the illusion that anything was possible?"

"Oh there was pressure alright, from my mom mostly. She's still not satisfied that I'm happy with where I am in life. She always wants more from her troops. Nothing less than the best.

Hm, as for your second question.. I don't think I was ever under such illusions. From a young age, I was pampered more than I ought to have been. My parents had been told that I had an active gene for some sort of cancer that was hard to treat unless caught early. Mom was suspected of developing it too because of the eezo. There's a romantic story in there about how she met Dad, I'll have to tell you that sometime.

Anyway, when it became clear that I was developing biotics, things calmed down. That all happened during basic training. I think my brother might have resented me during much of our childhood but I didn't notice until much later. Once I was sent to the cabal, I didn't really care much about what happened in the future as long as I was doing my duty. And here we are today, nothing has changed."

"It's a lot easier to let the Hierarchy tell us what to do than it is to think for ourselves," she didn't seem as upset about it as the words hinted at. He couldn't decide if he wanted to agree or argue that it wasn't quite that simple. He was starting to realise that they weren't as different as he had first thought. Despite their upbringings, neither of them knew what to do with themselves.

Their conversation was interrupted by static on their squad comm frequency. The radio only worked at short range so it was likely Krysae and the others trying to announce their return but were too far away to get the message through. Kasamir poked her head around the corner to ask if they could make any sense of it but they shook their heads.
"Please..tell..me.. you're receiving," was Krysae's frantic voice between the static. "Might be..bringing unwanted company.."

"They should be approaching from the northwest within a couple of minutes if they can transmit. Grab your guns and be prepared for anything," Magnus ordered the half of the squad that was at camp.

"Negative, I think we lost them," Riona clarified in a much clearer but equally frantic voice. "Be there in fifteen, get a med kit ready. Lucien's been hit bad, not sure what. Maybe poison, some sort of dart to the neck. We're carrying him over as fast as we can."

Kasamir and Atreides were waiting by the entrance when they arrived to relieve them of carrying their comrade. Lucien's body was half limp from whatever had struck him. Neither Krysae or Riona were gravely injured, they only had a few cuts and bruises from the jungle's thornier shrubbery.

"He hasn't spoken since yesterday and his pulse keeps dropping," Riona tried to explain. She was frantically pacing back and forth waiting for Kasamir to take a blood sample with the kit and deliver a diagnosis.

"Calm down, Riona, we're going to need more details than that," Magnus tried to take charge of the situation.

"Calm down! I told you we should get out of here while we have the chance. These orders aren't meant for us," she was beyond agitated or annoyed, she was angry and hysterical.

"Pull yourself together, Marcell," Magnus was becoming equally irate with her attitude and had to shout to be heard over her.

Atreides came out of no where and pulled Riona away from him. In the most calm and serene voice, she reassured her comrade, "Riona, please. This way, I'll help clean you up. You don't have to tell me anything, just relax. Everything will be alright, Lucien's in good hands."

Riona nodded and let Atreides lead her away from the others without any more fight left in her.

"That woman has the patience of a saint," Kasamir remarked when they were out of earshot. "Tarina's going to make a great mother some day. Don't..don't tell her I said that."

"I won't but I agree," he wished their conversation hadn't been interrupted, there lots of other things he wanted to tell Atreides. Kasamir's casual comment got him to see her in a new light altogether. "How's Lucien?"

"Stabilising, he's going to need a lot of water and rest while this diagnostic test runs. I sure hope it isn't poison, that's not something we really went over in basic first aid."

"Orso, go with Quintus and refill the canteens at the river. Kasamir, make sure you don't bother Riona until that test is done. Krysae, I'm still waiting to hear what the hell happened out there," he gave the orders and everyone jumped to.

"We got to the camp without incident but the way back was trickier. I don't know why there's so many of them now, we had to elude several patrols. When we were going through the river, Lucien complained that something had stung him but we didn't think much of it until he collapsed suddenly. They couldn't have been close enough at the time to reach us.

Riona's been freaking out the whole time, she keeps pointing out bad omens and warding off evil spirits. Or so she says. Sounded kind of crazy to me. Even Lucien was worried about her. We didn't
fight any of them on the way back, just kept running as fast as we could but it felt like they were always nearby."

"I didn't realise how bad she was getting," Magnus thought out loud.

"She's more superstitious than the rest of us and very protective of her brother," Krysae tried to rationalise.

"What of the camp, find anything interesting?"

"Yes, sir," Krysae pulled a pouch out of his pack full of computer chips that had once been used to display omnitools on the arms of their users. "Most of them aren't functional any more but Lucien managed to activate one of them. These were cut from their victims recently. And they all carried serial tags associated with scientists. We could get basic data like the names of the users and their last coordinates. The one Lucien cracked had some interesting recordings. We'll have to wait for him to be awake again to get it to work.

Paraphrasing, one of the scientists had determined via DNA testing that the cannibals were direct descendants from the first settlers on Invictus. They were thought to have contracted incurable diseases and were actually abandoned by their peers, left to die. But they survived, somehow. They didn't adapt to the jungle very well and resorted to killing each other to fend of starvation until more settlers came. Over time they gradually de-evolved yet still developed their own culture and language.

It doesn't make a lot of sense and I'm no scientist but if these guys are still alive, they could probably explain it way better than some recording. And we might know where to find them. We could see the main village that Orso talked about in the distance, it was massive and some of the buildings were built from old ships and parts that are definitely not from the area. That's about all we could tell though, glad we left that camp when we did."

"You did good, I think it's about time we gathered our strength and prepare to move out as a full squad soon. We may be able to use that camp closer to the village as a new base of operations. But for now, let's try to take it easy. Can't do much until Lucien is feeling better anyway," Magnus decided. Everyone agreed that they were ready for whatever was to come next.

Several hours later, Kasamir let Riona see to her brother and delivered her analysis to the rest of the squad over dinner, "He'll be ok in a few days. The toxin is a well-known sedative used by batarian slavers when they're, uh, trying to subdue more unruly victims. It's technically a poison but not in the traditional sense, a combination of pheromones and synthetic compounds that usually comes in the form a powder. I imagine the dart they recovered was coated in it.

Normally the effect would wear off after an hour or two but the concentration in Lucien's blood indicates it was a very high dosage. Moreover, it was designed for levo-based organisms so part of his reaction to it makes sense because we don't have the right proteins to respond to something like that. With lots of liquids, it will pass through his system on its own. We just have to wait."

"That's good news, I don't think Riona would have stayed sane if it had been a more fatal diagnosis," Atreides said with relief.

"I'm really not getting the sense that these cannibals are de-evolving when they can adapt so quickly to things that ought to be quite foreign to them," Krysae said.

"Must be another wonderful gift from more unwanted offworlders," Magnus tried to figure out where they were getting all these materials. He wasn't the biggest fan of aliens in the first place and
seeing their influence firsthand disrupting the natural order of things on his beloved homworld was not helping him to change his mind.

"Seems likely," Kasamir agreed. "No telling what we'll find in that village, best to be ready for anything."

"Yeah, I'm going to check on the Marcells then turn in early. We can start taking the camp apart tomorrow, see what can be carried with us and do another hunt. Once Lucien is awake, we can go over the recordings and see if there's anything useful there.

All I really need now is a good look at our target before drawing up the final battle plans. It's unlikely that we'll be able to get in and out without being forced to fight a legion's worth of these bastards. And we'll be in their territory.

This won't be like anything you guys have ever been through before and it wasn't supposed to be something you had to deal with until legion assignment in another year. But orders are orders and I'll do everything in my power to make sure we make it through this unscathed. Remember your training and rely on your instincts and we'll be back at the barracks in no time," he outlined what was to be expected over the next day or so and started to remind them that they needed their heads to be in the right place before the battle to come. Hopefully he wouldn't have to give any grand speeches later.

---

"How are you feeling?" Magnus asked Lucien the next morning after Riona had excitedly awoken them all with the news that he was conscious.

"Like shit, sir," Lucien said honestly. His sister was doting over him and keeping his forehead cool with a damp cloth. She barely let anyone else get near him and he kept trying to brush her away.

"You'll be right. Take it easy, there won't be any more missions until you're fit for duty," he promised him.

"Thank the spirits for that," Riona whispered.

"If you're looking for something to do until then, see if you can get anything out of those omnitool chips. I'm getting tired of running into surprises," Magnus handed Krysae's pouch to Riona. "You'll take good care of him right?"

"Yes, sir," she said proudly.

"Please make her leave me alone," Lucien pleaded.

"Too bad the only girl that gives you any affection is your sister," Quintus joked.

"You're just jealous," Riona responded with the first smile she had given since leaving the base.

"No way, I've seen Kasamir giving me that look. She's totally into funny guys," Quintus pushed on as Kasamir, completely oblivious to the conversation, brought more water to the hut where Lucien was recovering. Orso made a gagging noise some where behind them all since he was still of the age where girls were considered to be gross.

Magnus was glad to see them all getting along, especially Riona who he wasn't sure would be ready for the mental punishment that came after prolonged combat engagements. He put them through training drills while they waited, pitting the biotics against the non-biotics, the biotics
against each other, and testing their marksmanship. Orso watched in awe as they prepared themselves and often asked to join their spars. Krysae eventually came up with a solution on how to keep Orso out of the fighting.

---

Luckily Orso found learning how to drive an all-terrain vehicle as exhilarating as inacting revenge against the barbarians responsible for his parents' murders. Magnus didn't think it was the wisest decision but there was no alternative way to keep the kid safe. They still hadn't received word that their distress signal had gone through and even if things went smoothly there would still be need of extra troops to clean up whatever mess the squad managed to produce. The cannibals had numbers on their side, they had had over 200 years to learn the secrets of the jungle and to spread their influence. A squad of seven individuals could only do so much against those odds.

The day before they were set to move out, they said their goodbyes to Orso and made sure he had everything necessary for his journey south. It would take them two days to get into position and at least five for Orso to reach his destination. Assuming he got their on time and the garrison mobilised immediately, they still were going to have to hold out for a week at best for reinforcements.

Ideally, they would try to engage small groups of the enemy outside of the village and work there way slowly towards it. But nothing had gone to plan since they had left the cabal and there was no reason to suspect they would start to. The cannibals were too unpredictable with their mixture of ancient and modern technology, their use of biotics, and their blind fanaticism that drove them into frenzies. And nobody knew if the scientists were still alive.

Magnus was reluctantly forced to develop a strategy for taking and controlling the village instead of discretely extracting prisoners. He couldn't rely on his previous field work and tactical planning with the cabal for inspiration. If he could have called anyone on the comm to assist, it would have been his parents, not for reassurance but for ideas on how to engage a much larger force without taking unnecessary risks. They were the type of people that should have been sent on a complicated rescue mission, not his experimental training squad.

He kept going over what little information they had available. It should have been easy, guns versus spears was a no brainer. But he didn't have a team of specialists that could operate on their own discretion. Their week long survival training had turned into two weeks of reconnaissance and over the course of those two weeks he had watched his biotics gain better control of their powers and his non-biotics knew how to fight against them. He had watched his squad of rookies turn into something much greater, they cared about one another and he would be damned if he would let any of them be hurt on his watch. In all his time as a sergeant, he had never grown so attached to his squad-mates.

When everything was said and done, he couldn't wait to tell them how proud he was. And if his mother ever gave him a hard time about his lack of career ambition, he would point to his squad and boast of their achievements. A promotion wasn't necessary, he was already in the right position. He was a damn good teacher and he knew it. Part of him regretted that the squad would disband in the coming months and he'd have to start again with new green soldiers.

As the thought crossed his mind, he watched the sun begin to set on the horizon, casting the village across the field into darkness. He could make out fires being lit around it's border to light the paths of its occupants. Sometimes he couldn't remember what year it was, the scene before him was so archaic. Instinctively he turned on his omnitool to see its familiar, orange glow, the holographic interface hovering with maps and notes that he had written during their journey. He was so ready to
return to civilisation.

"It's almost peaceful, isn't it? The calm before the storm, as it were," Atreides said as she climbed the rocky slope to the spot he had selected to keep watch from.

He had a good view of the squad's camp tucked into the hillside several metres away as well as the village on the other side of a large open meadow. That particular night he had chosen to keep watch alone, to give himself enough time reflect and gather his thoughts. They didn't have to go on the offensive right away but he was itching to get the job done and over with. He had a small fire of his own and a bedroll, comforts that he wasn't ready to indulge in. The fire was nearly out by the time Atreides reached him.

He didn't let her presence distract him, still looking for movement before the daylight was completely lost. She added a fresh bunch of branches to the fire and stoked it, not wishing to disturb him but clearly angling to have a chat when he was ready. Once the stars were out, he turned to acknowledge her.

"You really should get some rest, Atreides. Tomorrow is a big day, possibly the biggest you'll ever have," he said the words as he picked a spot near the fire to sit. He thought he might meditate when she left, he missed his daily routines.

She didn't take the hint, "That's why I'm here. I figure you're the best person to talk about.. well, I don't know how to put it exactly. I keep thinking about what might happen and it just feels all "this is it". When I fought the chimearuius, I knew what I was up against. I didn't like it, but I knew what to do. This assault in the middle of the jungle, this isn't the same as fighting a wild animal. It's war, it's what we spend our whole lives planning for. And we're not fighting some alien invaders, we're fighting turians like us. Well, not like us, but you know what I mean. It's all so surreal."

"It's not your first battle, we fought lots of them the other day together. Just you and me and we did pretty well," he reminded her.

"Yeah, but that was different too and we got lucky. I don't want to make a habit of relying on luck, it's never really worked well for me," she stared into the fire and shivered as some old memory crossed her mind.

"You're nervous, that's ok," he said softly, trying not to offend her. It was hard to remind troops that fear was an acceptable emotion, many had to learn it for themselves over time.

"I just don't want to be the girl who died to a spear wound, you know? That's not very dignified," she tried to laugh but he saw the fear in her eyes.

"I'm not going to let that happen, promise," he said seriously and put out his hand to pat her reassuringly on the shoulder. She leaned toward him as he did so, causing him to touch her hand instead. She didn't jerk it away so he didn't either.

"Nothing scares you, does it?" she said quietly, staring intently at him. What was she hoping to see in his eyes?

"Plenty of things scare me. Letting people down, especially my family. Not doing my job well enough. Taking on the responsibility that comes with a higher rank. The list goes on, but dying due to a spear wound is not one of them," he tried to smile but her eyes captivated him and he wasn't sure what to do. He hadn't listed his number one fear.

Her hand gripped his and he squeezed back without a second thought. Her free hand touched his
cheek and reflexively he pulled away, never having been comfortable with personal contact. He wished he hadn't moved.

"Only one thing really scares me," she whispered. "But I know what I want. And I know what you want, though you won't ever admit it."

"Atreides..Tarina, I'm not sure if this is a good idea.." he didn't mean the words, he only felt obligated to give her an out before she committed herself to an irreversible course of action.

She responded by putting a finger to his mouth to signal him to be quiet then proceeded to lightly touch his mandibles, her touch was like a whisper on the wind and he leaned in closer. His heart was pounding, his mind screaming to pull away. But his hands weren't listening and she was so close. Close enough to be held and comforted, to be embraced. She let go of his hand and began to search for the buckles on his chestplate. He noted that she was already out of armour, wearing her casual tunic and pants, maybe this had been her plan from the start.

He was glad at that moment that she was such a bold woman because he had little idea of what to do when someone less than half his age was determined to get him out of his gear. It had been so long since he had even thought about sleeping with someone, not even when Viatrix had tried to entice him did the thoughts enter his mind. He fumbled helplessly as she pushed against him and eventually settled on holding her as she went about the process of undressing them both. There was just enough light to make out her red markings against her tan, uncracked carapace, her wild green-yellow eyes locked onto his dark brown.

He half expected her to push him to the ground but instead she pulled him onto her. Their mandibles touched as they nuzzled one another intensely. He knew the bedroll would provide no comfort against the hard ground but she didn't complain. Her legs wrapped around his, spurs occasionally scratching his legs and he hoped his weren't doing as much damage as hers. They went slowly, for he had to remind himself of how to treat a woman's body and she was in no hurry to see it over.

When it was over, he fell asleep from exhaustion and confusion. He half expected to awake as if it were all a fantastical dream. But she was still there beside him, laying naked on the bedroll in his arms as he had opted for the bare ground. He was freezing, even in the tropical air of summer and reached out to pull his tunic on. She handed it to him and said nothing until he laid back down on his back. She rolled onto her side and let him put an arm around her for warmth.

"Well, wasn't expecting that," he said mildly. "I'm sure you could have found someone younger and more fit if you just wanted a good time."

"You weren't that bad," she smiled. "I wasn't looking for a 'good time' as you call it."

"So what was your number one fear?" he tried to make conversation since they were both still wide awake.

"Falling in love," she said simply. It was the same for him but he didn't want to say so.

"Ah."

"But don't worry, this was a one-time thing. We both know it can't lead to much else."

"Right, of course."

"That's a large scar on your back, care to share the story?"
"Only if you promise we'll go to sleep afterwards and make the most of this point in time before it's over."

"Yes, sir."

"I was once a very young and reckless boy, if you can believe it. When I was about Orso's age, I had a friend from school who wasn't quite as popular and well-liked as he wanted to be. I'm not sure what he hoped to gain from spending time with me but maybe I was less quiet back in those days. Maybe he saw my family's rise in status as something that could give him a boost, who knows. Anyway, we had been friends for awhile, always getting into mischief together.

One day, he boasted that his father had returned from active duty with a treasure trove of relics compensated from various pirates or whatever else he had fought. Most were decorative trinkets with little value but there was a sword with a slightly curved edge that had absolutely fascinated him. It wasn't quite the same shape as the practice ones we used during melee training but the size was close.

And as any turian child would do when they found a new weapon, we didn't see the harm in testing it. So after school one afternoon when his parents were away, that's what we set out to do. I'm sure there was some game involved, maybe a dare and a bet too. We duelled several times, taking turns using the real blade against a metal practice one. You can guess what happened eventually. The practice sword wasn't very good against the real thing and I wasn't as quick on my feet as I am now.

He got me with a horizontal slash when I was trying to pivot around to parry. It happened too quickly, and I hadn't failed to block his advances before that point. I would have bled out had my brother not been secretly following us that day. My so-called friend panicked and refused to talk to me after that, never heard from him again. But little Andronicus, only five years old, he called for help immediately and helped stopped the bleeding with his shirt. He saved my bloody life and was so proud of himself.

Of course, I got berated with a lecture about not setting the right example. I'll never forget it. Now the scar serves a reminder to always be cautious, to never let pride get in the way. I'll never rush into something unless I'm sure of the outcome now," he looked over to make sure Tarina was still awake when he finished. She was and leaned over without a word to press her forehead gently against his, kissing him goodnight. All their worries regarding the impending battle had drained away.
Chapter 15

"You all know the plan, we're as prepared as we're going to be for this. We'll split up, 3 and 4, each group approaching from opposite sides of the encampment. If we're clever enough, they'll think there's a lot more of us and will be torn between where to fight. The chaos will be our best defense in the beginning. When we're inside, don't stop for anything until we've taken the hill in the centre. If anyone is wounded, carry them. Hit hard and fast, we'll have time to recuperate once the first objective has been reached. Stick to your groups until I give new orders.

I'm trying to keep things as balanced as possible so here's who is with who:

Alpha squad will comprise of both Marcells, Krysae, and Atreides will serve as squad leader. Beta squad will be Quintus, Kasamir, and myself.

Lucien, Riona, I'm putting you guys together because of your biotics not because of your relation and if we had more people, you wouldn't be fighting together. There's no room for sentimentality out here, you're brothers and sisters-in-arms and nothing more. Got it? Good.

No more fancy speeches, we've got a job to do. May the spirits guide your path," and with that they gave their sergeant a formal salute, fists clinched against their hearts and a low bowing of the neck that he returned graciously. They drew their guns and went on their separate paths, ready to push towards the rendezvous point. Whoever got their first was promised extra rations, which served to inspire their innate competitive nature.

Magnus tried not to watch the other squad as they disappeared over the horizon, he had purposely segregated Atreides away from him so that he would not be inclined to lose his focus. Besides, he knew she had a leader's instinct and would keep Riona in check. She was getting along better with Krysae as well and the engagement might strengthen their comradrie further. Depending on how things unfolded, he might still get to fight alongside her when the city was more secured.

A small contingent of savages began to form a line outside their entry point into the city. They must have been alerted by the other squad if they were already expecting to find more invaders on their flank. Magnus preferred fighting them when they were ready, it was more honourable than sneaking around to catch them unaware and it revealed how many were defending a specific position.

There were no barriers or chokepoints set up, no mortars or other surprises from the city's walls. No wild beasts ready to be unleashed, no guns and very little armour, no men hiding in holes or digging tunnels. Only half-naked men with spears, shields, javelins, and a row of archers. He would have laughed if it wasn't such a depressing sight, there would be no glory in killing them.

"Quintus, when we're close enough, I want you to unleash the biggest singularity you've ever created on them. That'll keep them busy while Kasamir and I cut them down. But keep moving, can't stress that enough. I'll put up a barrier as we go through the entrance, no telling what might be waiting once we're inside," they nodded in acknowledgement then he turned his comm on and relayed reminders to the other squad, "Riona, remember you don't have to keep your barrier up the whole time. Take turns with Lucien. Krysae, start firing at long range and cover Atreides until she is in range. You and Atreides will be doing most of the work with the Marcells backing you up if needed. Go fast but don't burn yourselves out, the day is still early."

He was getting anxious with the enemy in sight. The squad was a whole was as ready as it could be but he couldn't resist the temptation to give them extra reminders and advice. They'd probably get
sick of it if he kept bothering them like a fussy a parent.

He lined up the first shot on a spearmen with his rifle and took its head clean off, the second shot impaled the man behind him in the chest, the third missed altogether. Inwardly he laughed as he had made the same mistake Orso had against the trees but there would be greater consequences if he made a habit of it and he could almost hear his mother's voice scolding him. Kasamir beside him was hitting at about the same ratio per shot with her Phaeston. The men were tumbling over their fallen comrades, the archers hastily retreated back through the entrance to take up higher perches on the wall. They were the only true challenge on the field and their ammo wasn't nearly infinite as what Magnus had. So far, so good.

By the time they reached the wall, the singularity had whipped up enough havoc to disperse any meaningful resistance. The archers were more accurate than expected and Magnus' barrier was useless against physical projectiles. They were difficult to hit from the ground, eventually Quintus had to create another singularity to scatter them long enough for the squad to get through the main gateway. It hadn't kept them busy for long as they had watched the first one and knew how to avoid getting within the field's reach.

Magnus looked over at Quintus when they were inside to make sure he wasn't overexerting himself but he was beginning to shake with the first signs of exhaustion. His hand was extended and preparing another field.

"Shoot the archers, you've already cleared most of the path," Magnus told him. "Our kinetic barriers can handle a few hits if need be."

Quintus nodded tiredly and drew his gun. Even if he wasn't as good a shot as Kasamir, more shots would detract the cannibals from closing in. If they stayed pinned to the wall while the three moved up the hill, that would be just as good as killing them outright. Kasamir for her part was making quick work of the slippery archers that had evaded the seconded singularity.

They didn't have time to take in the view of the city, that would have to come later when they were ready to find the prisoners. What they did notice was how crude the buildings were and that the females were not fighting alongside their male counterparts. Instead, they were moving supplies and treating the wounded. They hadn't seen a single biotic attack that wasn't one of their own which worried Magnus slightly.

---

"What I would give for a handful of grenades about now.." Atreides said under her breath as her squad breeched a much more defended entry gate.

All four had to waste their fire on a barricade of wood and metal before they could get inside. Riona's barrier bubble went up the second they were through but they weren't confident in its protection as several different projectile weapons were hurled at them in close range. Lucien tried his best to push the enemy back with his biotics, sending an invisible force out that knocked them off their feet long enough for the squad to gain some needed ground.

Their path to the rendezvous point was blocked by rows of enemies and more makeshift barricades. Arrows and javelins came from the top of the hill and the wall that was behind them, creating a lethal crossfire. Atreides couldn't do much about them since she only had her shotgun, having given her Phaeston permanently away to Orso, and didn't want to waste rounds on targets out of range. She didn't hesitate to use her omniblade on anything that got close to her though, saving the shotgun for when it was needed most. She preferred taking the enemy on close where she had the advantage of dirty brawling tactics that she had learned as a kid.
"Get behind that building over there," she shouted at her squad as their need for cover became dire. They moved quickly around piles of enemy supplies and around the corner of a medium sized building made of scrap metal. It didn't look particularly sturdy but it was better than the grass huts that were adjacent to it.

Krysae and Lucien continued to alternate fire around the corner to discourage pursuit while Atreides planned their next move. Riona's bubble faded away as she grew too tired to maintain it.

"The archers are moving away, something else must have got their attention," Riona reported after poking her head around the side that the others weren't firing from.

"There's not a lot of reliable cover around here, we'll take whatever break we can get," Atreides was thinking out loud as she reloaded her shotgun for reassurance. Keeping her hands busy meant her mind could be freed up to consider changing variables more quickly. "We need to distract them, keep them occupied somehow."

"I can handle that," Lucien said confidently. Riona looked at him worriedly but he ignored her. "Get ready to move."

He cast a barrier field around himself and disappeared quite literally into thin air.

"Where'd he go?" Krysae asked bewildered.

"Teleported," Riona stated obviously.

"Of course, maybe he'll start throwing fireballs next, that'd be helpful," Atreides said sardonically and Krysae laughed.

"Over there, behind the first barricade," Riona pointed and there Lucien was, wielding a spear he had stolen from a dead victim. He was rather proficient with the ancient weapon, knowing when to parry, block, and where to drive it home for maximum effect. He ducked and jabbed at a circle of enemies that had converged on him, more than he was likely able to handle on his own. One warrior was throwing himself at him from behind and was greeted with an omniblade to the throat while Lucien's weapon arm was busy blocking an incoming attack in front of him.

"Cover fire would be nice," he said between blows, his voice shaking. When enough of the cannibals were close, he unleashed a nova effect forcing them backwards but leaving himself quite exposed in the process.

Riona threw out her hand and created a pull field, dragging some of the enemy further away. Atreides and Krysae ran out with their guns to clean them up before they could get back to their feet. Lucien began to move slowly up the hill, continuing to engage the enemy in melee range and occasionally teleporting back to the rest of his squad when he was overextended. He was tiring out far more quickly than his comrades and Atreides took the lead to give him respite. Riona's barrier flickered into existence again and rippled against the air above them as the shamans came into the fray.

"Watch out," Lucien called out as biotic fields began to crackle above them, creating miniature explosions and threatening to slow their progress.

"Create a second barrier within the first, you can do that right?" Atreides said as she shot another spearmen in the face, unable to take her eyes off of the enemy rushing at her. "Figure out where those biotic attacks are coming from, got enough to worry about here."

"On your flank, Atreides," Krysae yelled at her but he was in the back of the group and couldn't
stop the arrow that had impaled itself in Atreides' shinguard. She stared at the shaft with disbelief that it hadn't bounced off the plates of her armour like the others.

"The tips are made of metal, not stone," Riona observed, still too busy holding up the barrier effect to do much else.

"Other flank!" Krysae called out again after he shot the first archer in the shoulder. This time Atreides could react, she let off two shots which caught the would be assailant in the stomach. Blue blood began to decorate her armour in eerie patterns, each new victim contributing to the mess.

"Thanks, Krysae," she said with surprise, never expecting to be in his debt. He pushed his way past the biotics and took up a position by her side, his Phaeston cutting down all resistance ahead of them.

"Maybe I can buy you a drink after all this?" he said with a smirk.

"Keep dreaming," she said as she pulled her omniblade out of a spearman that was attempting to thrust its weapon into Krysae's back.

"Shamans behind us," Lucien called out. "Need to take them out, two barriers won't be enough."

"Trying to surround us, damn it," Atreides looked up the hill to see how much further they had to go. It was only a couple of metres. "Keep those barriers up, get to the top and we'll hold them at bay until the Sarge's squad meets us."

---

There was no celebration when they reached the rendezvous point. Magnus and his squad were met with intense, close-quarters fighting and more enemies than they had seen all day. They were clawing their way towards Atreides and her squad, fighting with more stubbornness and fervour than before with the women picking up the weapons of the fallen and joining in. Javelins were being thrown from seemingly every direction as were the spears of an increasingly desperate enemy. Biotic attacks mixed with the projectiles, sending everyone whether friend or foe into absolute chaos. There were at least five shamans closing in on them with possibly more out of sight.

One of them blinked out of existence as Magnus was preparing a warp field. Seconds later it reappeared in the middle of the fray, right behind Atreides. She had been targetting the same shaman and was looking around for him, unaware of his new position. There was no time to call out a warning, Magnus let go of the half-charged field but the shaman brushed it aside with its renewed barrier. The shaman extended it's talons, overly sharpened and dripping in what looked like blood and cast a warp field of its own which Atreides had no chance of evading.

She fell forward in agony, first to her knees then collapsing altogether on her stomach, dropping her gun. It happened in what felt like slow motion, Magnus cast another warp and could feel the sensation of another field flying past him as he did so. Quintus picked the shaman up and threw him into the air then left gravity and the warp to do the rest. The resulting slam effect left a pile of broken body parts on the ground nearby but Magnus was too busy rushing to Atreides' aide to appreciate the shaman's demise.

"It burns, everything burns," she said between clenched teeth as he held her close. There was nothing he could do to negate a warp field but wait for the effect to end on its own. All he could do was try to calm her down and make sure no enemies got close enough for a second strike.
"You'll be alright, it'll pass soon," he tried to say calmly but wasn't sure if his confidence was showing or not.

"Is the bastard dead?"

"Yeah, Quintus got him."

"Good, hand me my gun. I'm going to tear these guys apart."

"Easy now, your muscles will take awhile to go back to normal."

"All I need is my trigger finger."

It was hard to not admire her fighting spirit. He handed her gun back to her but before she could back to her feet Riona was running back towards them, her arms raised as she prepared a biotic sphere to encompass the entire squad. Lucien came in beside her, helping her stand firm as her arms shook from the effort and she fell to one knee. He was looking battered and worn with cuts and chips in his armour, a bleeding wound in his shoulder was revealing itself through his khaki undersuit.

"Incoming warp ball," Riona exclaimed and the barrier shuddered from the impact of a biotic attack so powerful that it was visible to all of them. Instinctively, Magnus pulled Atreides back down even with the bubble protecting them overhead. He hoped no one had taken notice of how much effort he was putting into defending her. She didn't seem to mind but hadn't thanked him either, not that he needed her to.

There was too much else for the squad to be focused on. The shamans were proving a worthy challenge for both the biotics and the non-biotics and there was still a healthy supply of javelin throwers behind them, taking pot shots whenever they saw an opportunity. The enemy biotics coordinated their attacks so the squad had no window of opportunity to attack back. Too deadly in a close fight, Magnus urged his squad to fall back down the hill and put some distance between them. He knew his biotics needed a break to recharge their abilities, the fight had to be won quickly or they'd have to pull out and try again later.

"Keep pressure on them with your weapons, forget the barriers. Once the shamans are down we can push back and reclaim the hill. Then it's clean up and time for lunch. Almost there," Magnus put the Valiant back in its holster and grabbed his Phaeston. He checked the heatsink then turned around to rally his squad-mates for one great push. They were tired and aching but seeing their old CO willing to go on without them was the inspiration they needed to muster up their hidden reserves of energy.

The shamans were no match for six assault rifles firing simultaneously and the occasional armouroshattering rounds from Atreides' shotgun. They nearly melted away as if they had been nothing more than spirits seperated from their bodies, reinforcing Magnus' suspicion that they were more of a threat in close range than at long. The remaining cannibals behind them dropped their weapons and began to flee, as if the shamans were their only chance of victory. He couldn't be sure if they were regrouping or not but that was a concern for later, they had won their first objective without any casualties and bought some breathing room. The rest of the conquest would be a fight of attrition until troops from the garrison could reach them.

The rest of the day was spent trying to turn the hill into something more comfortable and defendable. The structures around it seemed benign, as if it were a place rarely visited by the locals. The north end was decorated with a pyramid-shaped structure that resembled some sort of altar or holy sight with stairs that led up to its summit. Before the pyramid lay a grassy courtyard
that was empty of any decoration, and if not for the recent battle would have been absolutely clean and devoid of any blemishes. Around the courtyard was a building unlike the rest in the village. It was made of wood and had perfect, straight dimensions, a square in shape around the courtyard minus the fourth portion where the pyramid stood. The building was separated into sections via thin walls, a veranda joined the rooms together into one structure. They had done most of their fighting in the courtyard with enemies carefully going around the barriers around the rooms instead of charging through them. Something was important about the sight, like it were some sort of sacred temple.

They fought very few skirmishes for the rest of the day, the fight having ended much sooner than any had expected it to. The body count had been high and it had taken much of the afternoon to remove the dead from the hill. There were too many to rationalise burying, maybe if they still had time to kill after they had safely taken the entire town they could see to them. The hill didn't give them a good view of their surroundings, the building had been designed as a wall to block out such distractions for its occupants. Once they each had had food, water, and a bit of fresh medigel, they felt inclined to assess their immediate surroundings for supplies and fortifications. Everyone except Riona was curious, she stayed in the courtyard and warned them to not provoke the spirits of the dead.

"Could this place get any creepier," Quintus said quietly as they investigated the first room.

Each room contained more and more unwanted secrets about their enemy's religious practices. They found bodies in various states, from those being prepared to be dissected to ones fully disemboweled to others wrapped in various materials. Most were adults but the occasional child had been seen anointed and carefully turned into a shell with its smaller parts cut away for trophies. The sickly, horrendous sights would haunt their nightmares for a long time to come. It was clear that the cannibals thought people were mere animals and that animals were to be treated as people. They had little respect for their own kind, some of the bodies weren't captives at all but looked like willing volunteers from the tribe, giving their bodies and souls to whatever god they worshipped. Sacrifice and blood was a heavy theme that lingered in the air as much as in the trinkets and other ritual findings they uncovered. They even found the quarters of the shamans and a pile of red sand kept in an urn to distribute to those they deemed worthy. There were no weapons or any kind of armaments in any of the room, the building was only used for disgusting rituals and rites.

The squad rejoined Riona wishing they hadn't been so curious after all. She was murmuring something to herself that sounded like an incantation and pointed upwards at the top of the pyramid. They could barely make out the form of a body atop what might have been a throne. Whatever it was, it was significant to the shamans and others that came to the grounds to revel in its presence. A dark ichor cascaded down the steps, warning them away.

"That colour.. it looks like salarian blood," Krysae observed in a whisper. No one felt inclined to use their normal voices with some strange abomination looming over them.

"The lead scientist maybe?" Magnus hoped it wasn't, he wasn't sure he wanted to know what fate had befallen such a man, even if he were alien.

Nobody else was willing to take a closer look, they stood safely behind Riona as she waved her arms to ward off the restless spirits that only she could see. A chill ran down Magnus spine, there would be no rest until the body above was removed. He had slaughtered countless men that day and superstition rooted him to the spot. There could be no showing of fear in front of the squad, it was his responsibility to rise above such trivial emotions and show them that anything was possible if one had enough will to make it so.
A couple of minutes later he descended the steps with the salarian's concave body draped over his arms in the only way he could comfortably carry it. He laid it gently on the ground before him and Kasamir produced a blanket from one of the rooms to cover it. The rest of the squad watched quietly with respect as Kasamir closed the alien's bulbous eyes and hid the body from view. No one said anything, none of them were familiar with the proper way to deal with the death of a civilian.

"There were no cuts or abrasions on the body," Magnus said later when they were huddled around the fire, trying to keep their minds awake. "The blood must have came from something else. He wasn't nearly as skinny as most salarians either."

"I suspect they were feeding him well, it was probably their only time seeing one of his species and they thought he was some sort of god come to deliver them from their sins," Kasamir guessed. "Unfortunately they couldn't make the distinction between levo and dextro. The food would have killed him slowly over time."

"What a terrible way to die," Lucien shivered. "Poisoned by the very people that worship you."

"Well, that certainly helps put me in a happier mood," Quintus said sarcastically. "Anyone have any other traumatic theories or stories to share? I'm not going to go to sleep for weeks so may as well be entertained."

"The spirits here will never find rest. They'd like to hear something too," Riona said innocently enough. The rest of the squad didn't quite know how to accommodate her beliefs without offending her so they let her continue, "They've only known fear and war. Perhaps the opposite, a tale of love and peace, would be best."

"I might have one of those," Magnus said to everyone's surprise, especially Atreides who looked startled for a moment until he clarified, "It might not be as grand as what Riona wants to hear but I can share how my parents met and how I came to be a biotic."

There was no objection so he continued:

"After basic, my mother went straight into officer training. The first ship she was assigned to was a frigate called the Erebus. As a junior officer, she still had a long way to go to prove that she was capable of holding a higher rank. She competed with the other officers on exams to prove herself and always came out on top. As a result, she wasn't well liked for being too smart for her own good and didn't have many friends. They made it difficult for her when she wanted to study so she had to get creative and find new hideouts on the ship where she could get a moment's peace with her books.

One day she was studying near the engine room, it was loud but empty. Unknowing to her, one of the technicians had fallen asleep behind the same crates that she had tucked herself away in. He awoke suddenly and forgot where he was. That was my father, a lowly engineer technician who had grown bored with running algorithms that were too basic to hold his attention. He agreed to not reveal her hiding place and they grew to like each other.

As time went on, they continued to visit him when she was off-duty and their relationship grew into something beyond friends. They both wore the markings of Invictus and were unwanted by the rest of the crew. The common ground broke the ice for them and made it easier to take solace in each other's company.

Eventually my mother had to start sneaking around to meet with my father because if anyone found out about them, they might tell the captain that they were being less than cordial. They were of completely different ranks and it wasn't acceptable for them to mix unless they were assigned the
same task.

One day when she was using the maintenance tunnels between decks to get to him, there was a small leak of element zero from the engine. She didn't know it then but later it was revealed that she had been exposed. They threatened to move her to another ship after her medical discharge but when it was revealed that she was with child they put her on indefinite leave. It was terrible timing with her upcoming exams and father felt it was all his fault. He met with her parents and proposed to marry her and take responsibility for his actions.

And that's what they did, they bought a house on the outskirts of one of the smaller towns on Invictus and set about having an unplanned family. That's where I came into the picture. Luckily neither my mother or I developed any harsh side-effects from the eezo. Several years later my brother was born and for awhile everyone lived happily ever after. Mom got to continue her career and rose to admiral, Andronicus joined the infantry, I joined the cabal, and father became a head engineer. A typical family that went in four different directions.”

That appeased the squad and some were able to fall asleep afterwards. They would have to continue the unpleasant task of searching for the prisoners the next day and after their recent discoveries they weren't too eager to do the job. But at least some took comfort in the storytelling, their nerves temporarily settled. Atreides said nothing afterwards and Magnus made no effort to talk to her, he was just as tired as everyone else.
Chapter 16

The rest of the city was less remarkable than the place they had chosen to setup camp. Animals roamed the cities without restriction, there were no pens or stables or anything of the sort to contain them. Aside from the buildings and other structures, the jungle still held the village firmly within its grip. It was unlike any city any of the squad had ever been in, there was no order or practicality to the layout. They were glad for success of their last hunt as there was nothing edible to be found within the walls.

There were countless huts full of cages and locked up prisoners but they hadn't been fortunate to find any that resembled scientists or soldiers. Plenty of mercenaries, pirates, slavers, the occasional civilian that had escaped capture from the former, a few homestead owners that had tried their luck against the harsh environment, a lost adventurer here or there, but no turian scientists. They did note the absence of any other salarians among the imprisoned victims. All begged for their freedom or to be put out of the misery, some offering tempting bribes upfront and others promising riches later but Magnus and his squad didn't respond to their requests.

They asked for the whereabouts of the scientists and moved on, making no promises in return for the information. The squad kept quiet as they had no jurisdiction to do otherwise, they were sure Magnus would see to the rest once their mission was complete. Not all of the unfortunate captives were deserving of such a fate, especially the civilians and the locals. There simply wasn't enough manpower to hold the village and see to the needs of others. It was a matter of duty first, conscience last, something Magnus was indirectly trying to teach his young soldiers so that they would be prepared in the future for similar situations.

"I know where you can find some civvie scientists," one prisoner whispered. Many had made the claim before but when called out on it revealed they knew nothing.

"They're not civilians, they're turians," Magnus said as he tried to assess whether the prisoner was another wasting his time. The prisoner was a turian too but he had no face markings and wore a suit of armour that was barely holding together with all the holes in it. There was a Blue Suns logo on one of the shoulders, a typical mercenary trying to sweet talk his way out of a situation that he had most likely brought on himself.

"Whatever, anyone that gets caught by these guys may as well be a civvie. Can't protect themselves, end up on the dinner table. So much for all that fancy military training," the prisoner said casually, missing the irony of his own situation entirely. "You let me out of here and I'll show you where they're being held."

"And why should I? We don't need your help," Magnus began to move away from the wall where the man was chained, he needed to feel fresh air again after digging through all the rubbish.

"Sure you do, you'll never find the entrance to them. It's a secret place, where them shamans go. Special prisoners only. Look if you're scared, you can keep the chains. I won't bite ya, not like them cannibals," the man gave a low, creepy laugh. He looked half insane.

"If it's so secret, how come you know about it?"

"Because I've escaped many times, was getting pretty good at it too. Never could make it all the way out, just far enough to get an idea of where things were. Thought I'd spring my buddies out too but they keep moving people around, that and eating them. You never can be sure if anyone in particular is still alive. I guess they liked chasing me around, gave them some practice to hunt"
down other victims. But sounds like they won't have to worry about that any more so what good can I do sitting around on my ass all day."

Magnus didn't trust him as far as he could throw him with his biotics but he was getting impatient and if the man proved to be a problem he wouldn't last long in a fight. He looked over Atreides with her shotgun cradled in her arms, "Keep an eye on this one." She nodded and he cut through the prisoner's bonds so that he was free of the wall but not of the chains between his wrists.

"Got a faulty memory or are you just dumb?" Magnus was reaching the end of his patience after they had been led to various buildings without any hint of their quarry.

"No, they all look the same in daylight. Looking for a cellar underneath one of these, that might be it over there," they followed him closely so that he could not make a run for it if he was trying to trick them into complacency.

An empty building stood beside a steep, stony staircase that was cut into the ground. There was nothing conspicuous about and the path was too narrow to be widely used. It was hard to make out how far down it went.

"Lucien, Quintus, stay in the back with the prisoner. I'm going to make sure the way is safe, then you come down. Everyone else follow me and stay close," he gave orders as he slowly made his way down the stairs with an illuminating omnitool.

When he reached the bottom, he saw a tunnel that diverged into three paths, the cavern was low and forced him to stand in an awkward fashion. His squad-mates behind also took their time, the steps were broken and wet from the rains. Magnus chose the middle path first, sending two squad-mates down each of the others. The prisoner saw an opportunity when he was left with only two young men, one in front and one behind.

The mercenary headbutted Quintus from behind, catching him completely unaware and sending him sprawling down the remainder of the stairs. By the time Magnus returned to see what had cause the loud, echoing scream, Lucien had crumpled to the ground as well. He was clutching at his side where he had impacted the wall, having been elbowed in the stomach then kicked and made to lose his footing. The others came to investigate as well but Magnus was already halfway up the steps, chasing after the culprit. The mercenary was making his bid for freedom and almost out of range, his battered, white armour giving his location away in the sunlight.

Magnus brought his rifle to bear and took a hasty shot which was barely dodged by his victim. The second shot created a fresh hole in the back collar of the merc's armour, the third met no resistance as it followed the second's trajectory. He hoped that it hadn't quite been a quick and clean shot, traitorous men were not to be given any such luxury. The man fell over face first with an audible thud and that was that, the rifle placed back in its holster and business as usual was resumed. There was little point in checking if the body was still alive.

The squad had carried Lucien and Quintus to the top of the stairs to watch the display, none of them questioned the execution but they did see a more ruthless side to their CO. They gave him a wide berth as he went back down the stairs to finish what they had started. Despite his order, none wanted to stick too close except Atreides who seemed unphased by what had just occurred.

The underground tunnels converged together into a single chamber where the bodies of the dead tribal members were laid to rest. It was peculiar that the cannibals had enough sentience left in them to understand the concept. Unlike the religious building atop the hill which stood over the tunnels, there was a sense of peace in the crypt-like room. Magnus didn't need to hear warnings from Riona to know that they were potentially disturbing something sacred. He was anxious to be
above ground again where he felt less trapped.

His anxiety did not end there, however. He couldn't help but feel guilty for the injuries that Lucien and Quintus had suffered. The boys were sure it was their own fault but he knew better. Their prisoner had wasted all their time and revealed how desperate Magnus was getting. He wasn't accustomed to failure and the job so far has proved to be a monumental task with no promise of success.

If the scientists were dead or if they could not uncover their fate, he would never forgive himself for complying with the orders to abandon his original mission. His squad deserved better, he deserved better. Again he felt completely lost as he had on Omega, like a fish out of water though no one else was being nearly as critical of his efforts.

He tried to recall what he should have done differently. Perhaps not taken the prisoner at all or forced him to lead them down to the caverns. Maybe he should have called the cabal when they were back at the comm tower and gotten clearance to override the primarch's orders. What ifs wouldn't get him any where and all he could do was get the squad through their current, unsavory mess. The hard part was already over. Once everything was all said and done, then he would have his chance to speak his mind if the thoughts still lingered.

The squad continued their search for the scientists, undeterred by recent events. He was sure he saw them whispering to one another about how a man could shoot another in the back without knowing his crimes. Atreides had shut that line of talk down real fast reminding them that the man had broken his word to help them and was by no means a patriot. If he had not been eavesdropping, he might have thanked her for coming to his defence on the matter. She was much smarter than she gave herself credit for.

He wasn't accustomed to dealing with prisoners, in his fieldwork as a young operative they rarely were called in for missions that dealt with them. If anything, they were often sent in to silence prisoners that knew more than they ought to. Or they were trying to extract one of their own that had become a prisoner. But never did they come across several captives all begging to be let go. That wasn't for him to decide, his orders were to find specific people and get them out if possible. Nothing more, nothing less.

Luckily, before the day was over, Atreides found them. Or what was left of the missing scientists anyway, a handful remained in a single cell. They were not keen to speak to her and nominated one of their own to speak for the rest. His name was Claudio Menes and he wasn't thrilled with the prospect of being rescued.

"So let me get this straight.. you've been taken against your will, watched them capture, kill, and even eat others like yourselves, and you think you're their guests?" Atreides scratched the back of her neck as she paced before the cell, trying to figure out the nonsense that the scientists had been fed.

"I wouldn't quite put it in those terms or in that tone, but that's essentially it, yes," their newly elected leader surmised.

"Are you freaking insane? They took an innocent child, killed his parents and his beloved pet. Ate them. Let me say it again: ate his parents. And that's ok with you? How long have you been stuck in a lab to forget about basic dignity?" she was losing her temper and the rest of the squad knew it but they couldn't disagree with her emotional response. They watched silently as she interrogated the prisoners' spokesman, glad that there were bars between them.

"What you fail to realise, perhaps because you're not an intellectual but a soldier, a tool to be used
and discarded by the whim of you masters, is that we've discovered not only a lost civilisation but the possibility that societies can actually de-evolve given the right environmental parameters. These people may seem strange to you but do we not live in an age where new alien species are discovered on a regular basis? Their behaviour makes sense to them and as scientists it is our duty to understand things through different perspectives," the man droned on, putting all of them save Atreides to sleep with his pompous voice.

"Maybe we should just leave you in there," she interrupted him. "You clearly don't need saving."

"On the contrary, given that you've nearly annihilated all of our research subjects, we no longer have any reason to stay here. It would be in everyone's best interests if we were released to tell our story to the rest of the galaxy."

"I'm pretty sure you're the research subjects here, not the other way around. Why have they kept you alive and what happened to your escort?"

"They were of no use to us once the tribe found our outpost and took us into their care. The tribe made them more useful while the rest of us were allowed to continue our observations from the safety of this cell. You wouldn't understand."

"Those men and women that guarded you... they had families! They're people like you and me."

"They're gone now. Does it matter that much? We're simply archaeologists wishing to understand the people of the past. The Hierarchy doesn't understand us, neither did the STG on Sur'Kesh. That's where the rest of our contingent are, if you were curious, which you probably aren't. We couldn't get the STG's support for a dangerous dig but the Hierarchy served us well for a time. The primarch was easily persuaded by promises of riches that we were sure to acquire out here. And now we are met with toy soldiers that threaten to leave us here where our minds will go to waste. It's a wonder why we continue our endeavours."

"We risked our lives to come here and rescue your sorry backsides. The least you could be is grateful!"

"Sergeant, how long must we play this game? Tell your servant to heel and fulfill your obligation to let us go," the leader of the scientists waved his hand dismissively like Atreides was no more than a small animal harassing him for attention. That riled her up even more and Magnus was not keen to involve himself when her anger was running as hot as his own. The only difference was that had learned through experience to hold his peace.

"And what of the salarian scientist that was poisoned to death, any remorse for him?" she continued her tirade without acknowledging the insult.

"An unfortunate misunderstanding but it could not be helped. We all must make sacrifices for knowledge," he continued his pretentious act as he had done since the beginning of the questioning. Atreides wasn't satisfied with that, she summoned the omniblade attachment on her wrist and held it out steadily and aimed between the bars at the man's throat.

"You're worse than they are, at least these cannibals treat their own dead with respect. Why shouldn't we just wipe you out along with them?" her voice was a whisper, forcing the man to lean in close to hear it, her blade dangerously close to enacting justice as she saw fit.

That was enough, threatening prisoners that they had orders to assist went beyond protocol. Without a word, Magnus stood behind her and place a very stern hand on her shoulder. He didn't have to say anything, her muscles relaxed instantly under his grip and she lowered her blade. She
wanted to end the exchange with a scathing insult but came up empty handed.

The scientists stepped back and glowered at her, "We don't call them cannibals, how barbaric and simple of a term! We refer to them as Silvanatus, the "children of the woods". As that is much more descriptive."

"What a bunch of bull.." Atreides began but Magnus pushed himself between her and the cell door to cut her off.

"You've said your bit, now let me say mine," he was trying to keep the anger out of his voice for Atreides' benefit but every bit of him wanted to punch the ungrateful man in the face. "You're free to do as you see fit, I'll unlock this door and then whatever happens after that is up to you. Don't expect any more assistance from us. I make no promises regarding your safety from this point forward nor do I give a damn what happens to you. And if you're as smart as you say, then you'll stay far away from us."

He did as he promised then motioned for his squad to leave the room and return to camp. He didn't bother to look back to see if they left the cell or not. He was sure that he'd be reprimanded when giving his mission report later but for the first time he didn't really care.

"All I want right now is a warm shower and a cup of tea, is it so much to ask for?" he said to no one in particular.

---

One overcast morning as the squad was contemplating how low their supplies were getting, they were interrupted by the sound of two sets of thrusters in the distance. It was foggy by the time the shuttles reached the clearing outside the village. They had busied themselves by cleaning up much of the massacre that had occurred three days prior, having resorted to burning piles of the dead to conserve their strength in case they need to ward off any retaliation.

One shuttle contained double the amount of men that Magnus was in command of, the other was mostly full of supplies to set up a longterm base of operations in the area. He almost felt sorry for whichever officer got tasked with such a backwater job.

"Sergeant Magnus Thorn, I presume?" the leader of the detachment yelled as the engines began to die down. Magnus and his squad waited patiently to meet the new arrivals.

"Yes, sir. And you are?" Magnus shouted back, mildly curious as to why the engines hadn't been turned off altogether. He half hoped it meant they were extracting immediately.

"Captain Deus Tacitus of the Invictus Legion, first garrison," the young officer saluted rather proudly and didn't seem too upset by his new assignment. "My orders are to extract you and your team and relieve you of your duties in the field, per the request of Primarch Drakar. Actually, if you don't mind my frankness, it was more of the lieutenant's request than his. She really twisted his arm over it."

"Viatrix? Ah, yeah, she tends to have that effect on people," Magnus laughed. He was not, however, amused by the primarch's reluctance to extract a team that he had personally ordered to do his bidding in the first place. He would have to have some carefully crafted words with him if they ever met face to face.

"Spirits, this place is not what I was expecting," the captain said as he looked around. "That kid, Orso Tullius, told us some tall tales or so I thought. Couldn't believe any of it but there's something
"Not quite right about this place."

"There's definitely a few surprises left to find, I don't envy your orders."

"Ah well, if it gets me into the good graces of the primarch, I'll do anything," the younger man said
and mentally Magnus was telling him to be careful what he wished for. But some people had to
learn things the hard way and he kept his opinions to himself. "Right, well that shuttle over there is
for you guys, we'll be bringing in more men once you get back to the garrison so no sense of
wasting time. I'd like a copy of your mission report if you don't mind, would like to know what
we're really up against out here."

"Of course. I don't suspect you'll have much trouble, we didn't see any patrols or raiding parties
once we took the village. And we're ready to leave this sorry place at your earliest convenience."

The captain gave him another formal salute and departed his company to organise his men. They
were beginning the first stages of constructing a communication buoy that would connect them to
the garrison. Magnus and his squad were on their way back to civilisation at last.

---

When the squad landed in the city of Shastinasio, they were met with much more fanfaire than any
of them were expecting. There were more locals than Magnus have ever seen in one place before as
well plenty of tourists and various media outlets looking to get the first scoop on their story. The
attention within the garrison was just as charged, soldiers came up to his squad and saluted them
like they were war heroes, some even asked for autographs.

It was hardly a surprise when the truth emerged. The primarch had exaggerated their exploits a
great deal to the masses, no doubt trying to garner some positive publicity for his upcoming
campaign for the Citadel council seat. He had gone so far as to lie about his initial orders and tried
to paint himself as a big hero, rescuing some poor unfortunate men in the jungle who lost their
way.

Magnus was forced to endure it all as there was no break in the pomp and ceremony that followed
their return. His entire squad was lauded for their bravery in discovering the whereabouts of a
cunning, elusive enemy right on the Hierarchy's doorstep. They were given medals and told to
expect redeployment sooner rather than later. The experiment to encourage biotics and non-biotics
to work in tandem was a wild success despite the first squad never finishing the entire training
regime that Magnus had planned for them. He hadn't even submitted his mission report on their
jungle excursion, not that he was permitted much free time to sit down and write the truth of what
had happened. A promotion to major was openly available to Magnus and he was actually
beginning to consider the offer.

As quickly as the squad had been formed, it seemed ready to dismantle with each squad-mate
contemplating their future prospects. Magnus was disappointed that he wouldn't have them for the
full six months after all but wanted to get straight back to work to try his ideas on a new team. With
the new rank, he'd no doubt be asked to do a tour of duty with the other cabals and ensure their
training matched his standards. He'd have to leave his comfort zone at long last. The prospect of
teaching, regardless of location, thrilled him and whatever ideas he had had about retiring seemed
like a distant memory. His squad had worked well together and he knew part of it was because he
had been willing to let them think for themselves, only offering a guiding hand when necessary.

He looked up at the night sky full of familiar stars and wondrous things, a glass of half-melted ice
in his hands, and seriously thought about the future for the first time.
"I'm not interrupting you am I?" came Viatrix's soothing voice behind him.

"Not at all, just trying to get away from the stifling party atmosphere. Haven't had much time to sit and think since getting back," he turned to face her and she gave him a fresh glass with some sort of alcohol in it. He wasn't especially thirsty but it was her way of breaking the ice so he accepted it.

"I've noticed. Sorry I haven't been around for most of it, we're still working out the details on Orso's new living arrangements. He's staying with me in the city until foster parents can come and collect him. Poor guy, I know he's having nightmares but there's not a damn thing I can do to help."

"Didn't think you liked kids very much."

"I don't but.. Orso's not really a kid after what he's been through. Six more years and he'll be all grown up. And it gives me a perfect excuse to be in town without having to be fussed over by the primarch.

That man. I don't know how he'll surprise me next. Do you know that I've been worrying about your squad for the past three weeks? The damn primarch knew where you were the whole time and straight up lied to me. So help me but he better not win that election."

"He hardly stands a chance against Sparatus, but I'm sure you have a contingency plan just in case. You always do."

"Always. What's this I hear about you accepting a promotion? I never thought I'd hear such a thing."

"You and me both. But given everything that has happened recently, let's just say I'm more open to new possibilities than ever before. I'm sure my mother will be thrilled by the news."

"I'm thrilled for you, really. It's a tall order though, you'll be super busy. They're really anxious to try your techniques in the other cabals. It's all anyone is talking about any more. How quickly they forget the concerns of the past."

"I'll manage. You're right though, I will be really busy. Perhaps too busy to worry about, well, what we were trying to figure out before I left."

"Thought so. The door's not entirely closed if you ever change your mind. You'll know where to find me. Stay in touch, ok?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't get lost out there, Magnus," she bid him good night and left the balcony. Before he could get back to his thoughts, he heard her excuse herself after bumping into someone else who was looking for a late night chat. "He's all yours."

He turned around to watch as Tarina Atreides in full dress uniform approached. The outdoor lighting reflected off her carapace and he was stunned by her appearance, as if seeing her for the first time. It was easy to admire her figure when she wasn't covered in armour drenched in blood, grime, and dirt.

"Fancy meeting you here. My do you clean up nicely," she teased him.

"Speak for yourself," he couldn't think of what else to say. He wanted to say something more elegant, more meaningful but suddenly felt very shy around her.
"Feels good to be wearing clean clothes again. Mind you, I only dressed up because we were told there would be free drinks tonight. Turns out they ran out of the good stuff already," she seemed more relaxed that she had in the field despite her pristine attire. "You going to finish that before it gets watered down?"

"By all means," he offered the glass of whatever liquid Viatrix had procured for him to her and she took it greedily. After their adventurous romp through the jungle, he didn't blame her for relishing in creature comforts again.

"Thanks. What are you doing so far from the festivities?"

"Trying to stay as far from all of it as possible. I'm not really one for parties, especially when they're based around half-truths and political posturing. What about you, surely not looking for me?"

"Not intentionally but it's a rather happy coincidence since I won't get the chance tomorrow. Some of us are shipping out early to new posts, I've been given some brief leave and wanted to spend time with my dad before the next assignment comes along."

"You'd leave without saying goodbye?"

"I don't really do goodbyes, Sarge. Our lives are about to go in different directions now, there's not a whole lot to say."

There was certainly a lot Magnus wanted to say if the words would form themselves properly in his head. The one night with Tarina had changed his whole perspective on life and awoken newfound desires to do all the things he had once taken for granted. But there was no way to explain it to her, she was still too young to empathise with how he had let life slip him by. Maybe she would make the same mistake, maybe not. He wanted to be there to prevent her from falling for the false sense of security that he had. Without risk, there was no reward and contentment was an easy excuse to ignore what was most important.

He was no longer content, he was ready to take the world head on and he wanted the same for her but knew that she was absolutely right. Their lives were going in different directions and there was little any of them could do about it. They had both known and accepted that when they had spent the night together but now with her about to leave for good he couldn't let it slide.

"That may be but I'm about to be a major and who knows if our paths will cross again. The spirits work in mysterious ways, anything is possible. And please, call me Magnus."

"But sir that would hardly be proper, to refer to superior officer by first name."

"Then I give you permission to break the rules, just this once," he turned to face her then, leaning in close as he looked deeply into her face, trying to remember every detail in case they never did meet again. "Tarina, I can't ever thank you enough for what you've done, but no rules or protocols will stop me. As long as nobody is getting hurt, what does it matter? I've played it safe my entire life, some would say by-the-book. It's not enough. It will keep you happy for a short while and then one day you'll realise you could have been so much more. You could have had so much more. And maybe, you could have done so much more for somebody else."

She didn't say anything and put the glass down on a small table. She had been there to say goodbye without actually saying goodbye and had little notion of the effect their night had had on him. It had affected her as well, having allowed herself to care about someone else regardless if the feeling would be mutual. But it was just one night, it wasn't meant to be anything more. Now the man she
looked up to for teaching and guidance was telling her that she had taught him something new and her world seemed utterly confused. She remembered the scar on his back and the story of his reckless youth and wondered who would watch over him when she was gone.

He reached out to touch her face and she closed her eyes to remember the sensation for later when she was sure to need it most. Together they leaned their heads together for a brief, parting kiss. No words were said, no other touches given. That was all it could ever be, the future would be uncertain for them both. Neither would allow the moment to linger or the parting would be far too painful.

"Good night, Magnus," she said at last which sounded suspiciously like the goodbye that she was trying to avoid.

"Take care of yourself, Tarina. Spirits guide your path."
"I don't believe you."

"It's true, look it up yourself if you need to."

Sibyl Thorn stared hard at her son from her end of the galaxy behind a vid screen in her personal cabin aboard the Astrid. Her piercing eyes softened as she let the news soak in, "Computer, connect me to my, er, the chief engineer on duty right away."

A second later the vid screen split into two and displayed another familiar face.

"Yes, admiral? I already left some notes by your terminal regarding.. oh, hey son. How's it going?" Marcus looked slightly annoyed by the interruption from command but was immediately excited to see Magnus on the channel.

"Did you hear that he received and accepted a promotion to sergeant-major? Please don't tell me I am the last to hear of it," Sibyl spoke directly to her husband, cutting Magnus' reply off.

"It hasn't actually happened yet which is what I was trying to tell you.." Magnus tried to get in a word between the pair as they held their own conversation as if he wasn't present at all.

"Did you read those notes I left you this morning? I can't talk about it now, we're preparing the engine for a relay jump. One miscalculation and the hull will superheat and we wouldn't want that," Marcus tried to remind the admiral who knew very well what he was busy with. As an aside when it was clear that his wife was going to get his full attention whether he could spare it or not, "Can you believe that they designed a prototype a few years ago that allowed a cruiser-class drive core to power a frigate-class ship? I'd hate to be the engineer running the numbers on that vessel."

"What notes? And don't get distracted or I'll come down there and make a surprise inspection when you're least expecting it," she said it in a stern voice but the smile at the corners of her mouth gave her bluff away. The two were always bantering back and forth about business and pleasure in a way that still made little sense to Magnus.

"There were a few things, namely the debriefing after we go through the relay and secondly the bit about Andronicus re-enlisting on Taetrus. I did hear you, by the way. What's the special occasion, Magnus?"

"Nothing special, just felt like the right time to do something new," he had to take a second to realise he was being spoken to at last.

"You're not the only one to think that. These talks with the generals lately, well, you know I can't go into confidential discussions but suffice it to say there's a lot of new ideas floating around. Hang on, I'm going to delay the jump another hour or so. Family first," Sibyl turned off her screen to relay orders to the helmsman on the bridge. She returned minutes later to hear the end of Magnus telling his father the short version of the events on Invictus. "A major and a local hero, you really are moving up in the galaxy. I'm so proud of you."

"We're both proud of you," Marcus added to his wife's sentiment. Magnus couldn't think of a response, the words had been said to him many times as a child but very little as an adult. He knew he was ready for the next stage of his career and he wasn't doing it for pride's sake. But to hear it, especially from his mother, made him far more emotional than he could remember ever being. Another new experience to add to his growing pile of first times.
"Thank you. I was, uh, actually calling to let you both know that I'll be heading to Palaven in the next week to accept it officially and do all the paper work. Not staying long enough to see the sights or visit the memorials but if your ship was going to be in dry dock around that time, thought maybe we could meet up. It's been awhile since we all sat down together as a family."

"That'd be lovely but the timing is all wrong. We're leaving the system now to rendezvous with the fleet for some new assignment, probably something that won't be any where near the homeworld for quite some time," Sibyl said regrettably and Marcus looked over at her with a knowing look. They had been asking about Magnus' next shore leave for months and he hadn't had the heart to tell them what he had done with his last one. Their schedules rarely overlapped in a neat fashion.

"That's ok, maybe next time," Magnus gave a wry laugh, he wasn't likely to get another promotion within the year but the thought of continuing to rise in the ranks would keep his mother off his back. "What news have you heard about Ando?"

"It's not much and we didn't hear it from him directly," Marcus suddenly didn't seem so eager to talk about it but both Sibyl and Magnus waited patiently to hear more, "Months ago they listed him as MIA then changed his status to AWOL when they found out what happened to his squad. It's just a rumour but the reconstruction efforts after the civil war are running behind schedule and supposedly they'll take anyone, even the dishonoured. If the men work hard enough they can have black marks erased from their names. But again, it's not strictly official. Once they're back in the system and assigned to new legions, no one will question what they did in the past. Andronicus' name has shown up in the registry again so one can assume by connecting the dots how he got himself cleared. I really wish we knew more about what he's been up to."

No, you really don't want to know, Magnus thought privately to himself. While going through a shady repentence program on Taetrus seemed borderline acceptable to his parents, he didn't think for a moment that that was all there was to the story. It worried him a great deal to think that his brother would actively seek out one of the most controversial places in recent Hierarchial history to redeem himself, if indeed that was his actual intention at all. There was usually another hidden agenda to anything Andronicus involved himself in.

"That's better than hearing that he he got himself killed," Magnus attempted to see the silver lining in the news.

"At least one of our sons isn't making a complete fool himself," Sibyl said with a grin, she was still beaming from the good news that Magnus had brought.

"For all you know, Andronicus might need our help. I wouldn't make light of the situation, even if he has done something terrible. He's one of our own," Marcus tried to remind them, always being the voice of reason that held the family together.

"We won't know until or if he makes contact again. For now, let's do our duty so that we may give Magnus a proper celebration next time we see him," Sibyl decided with finality. They said their goodbyes and promised to speak again soon. Magnus couldn't wait to pin the new insignia to his uniform and show it off the next time they had a conference call or met together in person. He wasn't looking forward to spending that special moment in Ando's company if he had actually managed to dig out of the hole he had put himself in.

Cipritine was just as glorious in reality as the vids portrayed the capitol city. The streets and skylanes created a grid around tall structures held up against the sky by mass effect fields that shielded them from harmful radiation and any debris. The buildings sported sharp angles without any fussy shapes. Order and practicality ruled the architecture and what artful displays were shown were kept simple in their elegance. There was no traffic jams, everything and everyone operated...
with perfect precision and efficiency. Everything was clean, utilitarian, and practical, just as it should be. It was the polar opposite to the dystopia of Omega but lacked the diversity that was commonplace among the Citadel's wards.

Unlike Invictus, however, there was no imposing jungle threatening the outskirts of the metropolis, no unpredictable storms brewed on the horizon, and there was no end to the number of people going about their business. Veterans, green soldiers, and those that bordered on being actual civilians mingled among one another, their different face markings enhancing the appearance of a mixture of cultures. There were several aliens among them, most were other council races. They stood out in their special enviro-suits meant to protect their soft bodies from the radiation that all turians took for granted with their natural defences.

Magnus was overwhelmed by the amount of activity around him, he was not accustomed to city life with all its hustle and bustle. He wanted more time to take it all in, to appreciate the accomplishments of his people that were on constant display in their most prestigious settlement in the galaxy. Every bit of the city was defendable, on the ground, in the sky, and in orbit. He had passed the shipyards where new cruisers, fighters, and at least one dreadnought were being constructed above the atmosphere. Somewhere on Palaven was a cabal much larger than the one on Invictus but he couldn't imagine how it could fit in with the rest of the layout.

Once again he was forced to attend a ceremony to officially accept the promotion that he was owed. That was one part of a martial society that he wasn't in favour of, they always wanted to do a song and dance when honouring someone so that it might inspire and encourage the rest to rise up to meet a higher standard. Always moving upwards, pushing the limits on what was possible. Whether it was a medal ceremony or remembering the passing of those who had sacrificed themselves for the greater good, everything was designed to motivate the individual to be the most that he could be. All Magnus wanted to be doing was his job, he didn't need to be congratulated or made an example of.

But there was little work to do when he was on temporary leave. He could try and make the most of his short visit but was disappointed that he'd have to do so alone. He imagined his parents were up to some adventure or another, chasing down pirates or escorting element zero transports across some uncharted system. And his brother was probably up to no good at all, better to not think about him. No, it was just Magnus by himself in a hotel room looking out the window and wondering what new trouble he'd find himself in with the latest addition to his uniform.

The computer terminal on the desk beeped at him as it completed the search he had queried when he returned to the room. Out of boredom, his curiosity had gotten the better of him. He had looked up the locations and assignments of his former squad-mates to see where life would take them next. Most weren't very illuminating and the details were vague due to confidentiality restrictions. The vagueness probably meant they were going to be put in high risk or high danger situations on a need-to-know basis. He wasn't worried about anyone in particular except Atreides.

Her file came up blank in the search, stating that she hadn't been reassigned at all. He did another more specific search on her personnel file directly instead of a broad, legion-wide query. The results came back stating that she was on medical leave but didn't list the reason as to why. Caustically he scrolled through the file for anything else useful and found that her current place of residence was in one of the suburbs outside Cipritrine. He knew neither her or her father hailed from Palaven so it had to have been a recent move.

But hadn't she said she was being shipped out with the others when they spoke last? He wanted to know what had happened to interfere with those plans and more importantly, wanted to be sure that she was doing ok. There was plenty of time to kill, there was no harm in requesting to visit her on
that very afternoon. The worst she could say was no; her response to his e-mail was near-instant with the exact opposite.

He elected to drive a skycar rather than rely on public transport since it had been so long since had been in control of a vehicle. He wanted to see as much of the city as he could as he made his way to the residential high rises. The city didn't disappoint though he did get lost among the near identical lane ways many times over. As the buildings got shorter, he began to see the darker secrets that lay hidden within the shadows of the more famous landmarks.

It wasn't obvious at first but as the traffic began to thin out the buildings started to look identical and the materials used to build them were much cheaper in comparison to the gleaming buildings in the city centre. There were more cops on patrol and many of the shops favoured a more rugged clientele. The suburb containing the apartment block for the Atreides family was by no means a slum but it wasn't nearly as glamorous as the rest of the city.

He had no trouble finding the right building and wasn't entirely surprised by the sparsely furnished apartment when he was let inside. The layout was minimalistic, one basic room for the kitchen and living space with two rooms in one corner that he presumed were a bedroom and a bath. It wasn't even big enough for two people to live in comfortably but Tarina was the only one there when he showed up.

"Its my father's place," she explained as she prepared two cups of tea. He watched from the lounge as she did so, it was odd to see her in such a domestic setting after the battles they had fought together. "I thought it would be more comfortable than the usual holes he ended up in. Maybe it was for a time. He.. passed away recently, left the place to me."

"I'm sorry to hear that, you guys were really close right?" he accepted the tea and she sat beside him without meeting his eye, staring off into space instead, clearly still grieving for her father's death.

"Yeah. I think his last days were the best he ever had, I hope so anyway. That's part of why I came to Palaven in the first place. It's a mixed blessing though. It's hard staying here, with all those last memories flashing back," she flicked her gaze to the bedroom door that was closed nearby. "He took his own life in there. It was only a matter of time that he'd lose his battle with the depression. I..well, there was nothing I could do. I was out one day running errands, nothing special. Always made sure there weren't any weapons in the house but that didn't matter. He was probably waiting for me to not be around to do it. Damn it, maybe if I had tried harder to keep him happy."

"You can't blame yourself, Tarina," Magnus wanted to put an arm around her but she was out of his reach and seemed frozen to the spot. She appeared calm and relaxed on the outside but the death of a family member couldn't have been an easy thing to go through.

"I don't. Anyway, I'm still sort of getting used to it. But it won't break me. As close as we were, I was always a loner. I loved my father but he wasn't a big part of my life," she finally turned to look over at him. "You didn't come hear to hear about my grief."

"No, but I don't mind hearing about it if it helps to ease the pain," he said with sincerity.

"Why did you look me up?" she shifted the conversation which eased the tension for them both.

"I was in the area and curious about where everyone ended up. You're file mentioned medical leave but you don't look hurt. Are you sick?" he looked her over, noting her casual long tunic that hid the curves that her dress uniform had accentuated last time he saw her. For all he knew, robe-
like clothing was the sort of fashion that was common among women when they weren't on-duty. Other than what she wore, she looked tired and grief-stricken but that made sense given what she had just told him. There were signs of medical procedures, no casts or bandages. Maybe she had been diagnosed with something that could be easily treated and was getting needed bed rest at home.

"No, it's nothing like that. Nothing bad at all. The timing is all off though so they've got me on leave until I'm fit for reassignment again. Standard procedure, nothing to worry about," she eluded his question altogether. He gave her a concerned look, still not comprehending what was wrong with her. Psychologically she was doing better than he would be in her boots. Then without any preamble she got right to it, "I'm pregnant."

Silence fell over the room as Magnus tried to digest the news. Thousands of questions stirred within him but he wasn't sure which to ask first so instead he expressed his relief that she wasn't unwell after all, "That's good news! You're going to be a wonderful mother."

"Magnus, I didn't mean to keep quiet this long about it. It's just.. well, with my father's death I haven't been able to focus on much else. I hadn't quite figured out how to bring it up," she looked worried, almost frightened. He was still completely confused as to why she was so hesitant to talk about it.

"That's ok, it's not like we've been keeping in contact. Do you know who the father is?"

"Yeah," she was definitely avoiding eye contact. It finely occurred to him that there hadn't been much time for her to have slept with someone else despite how attractive she was. Only a month had gone by since she left Invictus and she had spent the time on Palaven taking care of her sick father. He knew the answer to his question before she said it but hearing it made it far more real, "This isn't how I wanted to go about telling you. But without a doubt its yours."

"Are you sure?" he asked it without even thinking. It had to have been dream, no way could he be receiving the news that he was an expecting parent. Maybe he had dozed off in the hotel room and never left to come see her. He ran his hand over his crest, he was most certainly awake and sitting on the lounge with Tarina.

"Yes," she said simply. Neither of them looked at the other as they tried to guess what the other was thinking. "Please say something. Anything."

"I...this wasn't supposed to be able to happen. No one in the cabal is permitted to have children," he tried to explain but the fear returned to her eyes as if he were rejecting the notion that she was telling the truth or somehow upset at her. "I'm not sure what to do. This is unprecedented. Tarina, I'm so sorry. This will affect your career and possibly mine."

"It won't hurt yours, I may have failed to mention to the medical board that I knew who the father was or the time of conception," she said matter-of-factly.

He could guess as to why she had done that, if anyone of authority discerned that they had been on a mission when it happened then they could both be punished for negligence. It didn't happen often, fraternisation was never a real concern within the Hierarchy, but it was possible if anyone had any reason to do enough digging around to bring it up. There was already the unsettling prospect of a cabalist having a child with a non-cabalist to contend with. Throw in the fact that they weren't married and their vast age difference, all of it combined to create a rather unusual situation where each element on its own wasn't a problem but together could be.

"Which is why I have been reluctant to mention it," she continued. "That and.. I've decided to bear
the full responsibility. I was really nervous when I heard the news at first but now it makes sense. I never knew what I wanted from my career and this is far more important. It's a shame my dad will never see his grandchild. You don't have to be involved if you don't want to be, in fact it might be better for you if you aren't."

"Don't have to.. don't be ridiculous, of course I want to be involved," Magnus said with more fervour than he intended. His raw emotions were threatening to dissolve his usual stoic reserved nature, he couldn't help it. He didn't care if she didn't want to be comforted, he put his arms around her and nuzzled her neck. The nuzzling turned into a kiss on the forehead that seemed to last forever. Though completely unexpected, the news was the happiest thing he had ever heard. She didn't say anything, just let him hold her without any resistance.

How could she think that he wouldn't care about her or the future of their child? Had her life been so unfulfilling that she thought she had to do everything on her own? With the death of her father and impending motherhood happening all at the same time, she needed support rather she recognised it or not. He was relieved to be in a position to give it to her then and could worry about how to keep giving it later.

"I want to be involved," he said again in whisper as she leaned her head against his chest, finally giving into the affection that he was offering. "I'll figure something out. With the promotion, I won't be on Invictus for awhile. But things should settle before the baby comes along. You're not alone."

"I wasn't sure how you'd react," she said quietly. "It's not like we're in a relationship or anything so it's all a bit weird, isn't it?"

"We'll work it out somehow, don't worry. Spirits, this is the happiest day of my life!" he laughed as he continued to caress her cheek and hold her tightly against him. The future was more uncertain than ever but he couldn't wait to see his son or daughter cradled in Tarina's arms.

---

Magnus sat alone in a terminal waiting for the shuttle to Digeris to whisk him away on a new adventure. He tried to recall every minute detail of the past week he had spent with Tarina. She had been reluctant to accept his offer but eventually he convinced her to stay with him in the hotel away from the apartment of bad memories. Their relationship was still quite platonic despite recent developments but that was alright. He got to see more of the city like he wanted and she got to see more of him.

It was a perfect week without any care in the world, they both needed to get the most out of each other's company before they were forced apart again. Magnus promised her that they'd have a normal life if she wanted it when his tour of the cabals was over and she promised to stay on Palaven even if the baby came early. What she did with herself in the mean time was none of his business and he wouldn't bother her with constant requests for updates. There was a mutual understanding that they were to be nothing more than parents together.

He was ok with that, maybe some day it would become more. The lack of strings attached to the relationship was probably for the best. His mind would probably change when he saw her again, whenever that might be and he would have to prepare himself for the emotional ride that would inevitably come. But for the moment, he preferred to focus on the present and the recent past, he had never felt more alive than ever before. All the dreams he didn't dare to dream were coming true, how much better could life be?

The terminal had been mostly empty for the afternoon, there was little travelling within turian
space. Most of the other passengers were looking to go to far more exotic locations. Of course he was destined to take the one delayed shuttle for the day though he was in no particular hurry. He watched the crowds as they passed by and noticed some high ranking individuals among them, nothing out of the ordinary.

As the afternoon progressed, he noticed the trend continue. More and more high ranked officers were congregating and whispering among each other with constant glances over their shoulders to make sure they weren't overheard. Some of them were recongizable veterans from the vids, the gear they carried was by no means the sort of luggage one took on vacation. The empty terminal quickly began to fill and Magnus had a much harder time focusing on the good memories that he wanted to cherish.

"Mind if I take that seat next to you?" a turian with a non-descript rank asked him. His uniform was barely visible under the shining suit of armour that he wore unlike the rest of crowd.

"Sure, go ahead," Magnus responded dismissively. He hadn't taken in the younger man's details, thinking nothing of him.

"If you don't mind me saying so, you look like a man with a story to tell. No one else is smiling nearly as much around here," the stranger said.

Normally Magnus wouldn't have been interested in indulging another soldier's curiosity but he was still riding on the emotional high from his time on Palaven. He must have been grinning like an idiot all afternoon. The other man seemed genuinely interested, his soft blue eyes dampened the tense atmosphere that had been escalating in the room. For a second, Magnus thought he should have recognised him but couldn't recall from which vid he would have seen the face. The only distinguishing characteristics were a nasty scar on the right mandible and cheek and a common visor on the other side of his face. The scar made him look a lot older than he was, he would have had his own stories to share if he was so inclined.

"It's not much of a story. I just found out I'm going to be a father soon," Magnus said the words and instantly filled with pride as he heard himself say them. It was still surreal, the notion of being a father, but he knew he wanted it to be real. He couldn't keep that amount of excitement to himself for long.

"Congratulations, major! Where's your lucky lady?"

"On Palaven. It's... well, it's complicated," he wish he could say that she was coming with him or that they were married or something else that would have made it far more easier to understand. The obvious question would be why an expecting father was leaving the expecting mother's side. He realised how cold his actions might look, though it wasn't his choice to leave.

"Orders elsewhere? That's unfortunate," the man didn't judge him, instead he seemed quite forgiving.

"Yeah, it is. But we go where we're needed, right? Like all of these men and women here, they probably all have families elsewhere that need their attention," Magnus waved his hand to indicate the soldiers around them.

"Orders be damned. If you care about someone, if someone is precious to you, you'll fight an entire army to be by their side. In this case, that might be exactly what you have to do," the other turian gave him a hard look, those softness gone from his eyes altogether. He lowered his voice and continued, "I don't know you major and you don't know me. But here's some free advice that you won't get any where else: if there's anything that you love on Palaven, you better get it off world
I don't know when it will happen exactly but there's going to be an invasion unlike any we've ever seen. War is coming to the galaxy, a war that will dwarf all other wars the Hierachy has ever fought. The enemy won't just capture our homeworld, they'll destroy it. Those soldiers over there with the rank bars? They're convening a war council and preparing the outposts on Menae.

I'm not supposed to talk about it, we don't have any details yet and the worst thing we could do is spread misinformation. But you look like a man sitting on top of the world right now and for your sake, for your child's sake, you need to come back down to reality because things are about to get very, very real around here."

"That's crazy talk, Palaven has never fallen to an invasion force and everybody knows Menae harbours no real secrets," Magnus tried to state logically but he was no longer so sure about the facts. The other turian was deadly serious and knew what he was talking about, he could see it in his eyes.

"Believe what you want but when the Citadel was attacked the Council refused to believe that the enemy was a threat and look what happened. Look how many of our ships we lost that day along with the Alliance. We can't make mistakes like that again," he leaned back as he reflected on events, he looked as if he had seen them firsthand. "Trust me, when you love someone, you can't take any unnecessary risks."

Magnus wasn't sure if he'd quite use the l-word to describe his feelings for Tarina but he certainly wouldn't hesitate to say it regarding his child that she would soon bear, "Do you have someone special?"

"Yeah, you could say that. But it's, well, complicated as you say. She's on Earth, it won't be any safer than Palaven when the time comes. I know she'll be where ever the action is thickest and that's where I'll find her again.

Anyway, I've taken up enough of your time, please think on it some. Don't mean to kill the mood but never been one for optimism. Good hunting to you, major."

"And to you," Magnus was utterly perplexed by the exchange and no amount of cynicism could ruin his mood.
Chapter 18

The only thing Magnus disliked more than being stationed on a warship was being forced to share quarters with men he didn't know and wasn't expecting to work with. The cruiser that went by the name Conviction had been hastily repurposed to accommodate every single cabalist officer in the Hierarchy as well as its own crew. The other cruisers in their fleet were carrying the junior ranked cabalists as well as a fighter escort. They were close enough to the Citadel that had the ship more viewports, its familiar arms could have been visible. The lack of windows or any other reminder that they were indeed in space made Magnus feel trapped like a caged animal, he longed for the sensation of a gentle wind against his skin and the smell of an incoming rainstorm.

There were no luxuries aboard Conviction and even those that he would be normally be entitled to weren't made available. Too many men and women were crowded onto one ship and not one of them knew why they were there. They kept their silence as they listened to the emergency broadcasts playing on the open channel, waiting for any some sort of news or orders to be passed along. Magnus lay uncomfortably on his back in the bunk he was sharing with a much younger officer, two more were positioned in the same room that was supposed to be big enough for one navy officer and his personal belongings. Their silence mirrored that of the rest of the ship. He barely knew the names of what he hoped were temporary room-mates but he could tell they were nervous without even looking at their faces.

Every fifteen minutes or so the broadcast repeated, it was a declaration of war and a warning of trying times ahead from Palaven's Primarch Fedorian. The enemy mentioned was completely unknown to all of them, even those in high command. By the description of what the Reaper ships looked like, one of the young officers had deduced it was the same as the one that had attacked the Citadel two years prior. The one that had nearly destroyed an entire fleet of turian and human vessels single-handedly.

The news repeated again, reminding them once more that their worlds were not the only ones under threat. The batarian homeworld of Khar'shan had gone dark days ago, the human homeworld of Earth had little more success in warning the rest of the galaxy of what was coming their way. One of the comm buoys in the Mactare system, home of Taeturs and the last known location for Magnus' little brother Andronicus Thorn, was malfunctioning. Enough ships to decimate any conventional force had been sent through the relay to defend and, if required, liberate the colony from the enemy in a swift manner but no one had reported back from the engagement so far.

Magnus and the other cabalists had been recalled to the marshalling grounds in the Serpent Nebula the second Earth's warnings were passed on. It had only been hours since the attack there began and already the enemy had opened up another front in a completely unconnected theatre. They had no idea what was going on or where they were needed but they were all sure given the warnings from the primarch that the Hierarchy was expecting the invasion to push into the Trebia system sooner rather than later. It couldn't be happening, nobody had ever been so bold since the Krogan Rebellions and they had had ample time to prepare for a counter-attack back then.

The tension in the small room couldn't possibly be more oppressive. The other officers were holding their breath as they checked their omnitools constantly for messages from friends and family. Many didn't have high enough clearance to get through the network when it wasn't bottlenecked by overwhelming use but they were determined to keep trying. When Magnus received a message from his mother, the beeping noise made them all jump.

"Sorry," he tried to calm their nerves. The younger men watched him like he was a supernatural
being manifesting before them. Magnus had no intention in sharing his private messages with them so they went back to their own business with bitter disappointment.

The e-mail had came from the dreadnought Intrepid, his mother's new command. They were patrolling the Trebia system, between Menae and Palaven and assisting with a global evacuation effort that hadn't yet hit the extranet news sources. His mother mentioned that they had received personal word from Andronicus that he was in the system but unsure of his exact whereabouts or what ship he was on. The word was that the forces sent to Taetrus had been obliterated, very few vessels had made it back in one piece. She assured Magnus that they were all alright and would give the Reapers one hell of a fight when they came through the relay. There was an additional note from his father that sounded a lot like a goodbye in case they were unable to communicate again.

That choked Magnus up a good bit, he didn't need to think of the upcoming battle as potentially the last one his family would fight in. He desperately wanted to get through the comm buoy to Palaven to make sure Tarina was safe, hopefully she was already offworld. He estimated that enough months had passed that she may have had the baby without him, they had had little contact since his last visit on Palaven between missions. He wasn't even sure if it was a boy or a girl yet or what its name was. The words of the stranger from several months back haunted him with their accuracy but he couldn't go back in time and change the circumstances. Whatever the Reapers were, he would find a way back to her side and get her out of harm's way. One way or another, he was going to protect that girl.

He rolled onto his side and tried to keep his stomach from twisting into more knots. Suddenly he felt so cut off from everyone he cared about. Even Viatrix wasn't around, her cruiser had departed several hours ago to deploy her squad on Menae. She had told him not to worry and given him command of the Invictus cabal in case she didn't return, it was a brief conversation that he was already beginning to forget the details of. There was no fear in her eyes, like a good leader she was determined to do her duty and would take on whatever challenge was thrown at her. He knew she wasn't expecting to come back, he would have to tell the rest of the cabal when they were all together again. Was he ready to fill her boots and take on such a command? Perhaps if they weren't faced with an all out galactic war against an impossible enemy, he'd be a lot more comfortable with the idea. His opinion would hardly matter if they were all shot down when they passed through the relay.

Everything felt like it was happening in slow motion, he hardly noticed when the message on the open channel changed.

The latest message contained more static and was of a lower level of quality that indicated a different source from the first. The tone had shifted from a bold rallying cry to a somber reminder of the realities of war. As his mother had indicated, the liberation of Taetrus had not been successful though the details of the defeat were not given. On the contrary, the primarch assured the masses that the fight was still ongoing. There was a clear warning that the enemy was expected to change system. Every fleet outside of Trebia was warned to not enter unless they were specifically called on to do so and to do all they could to assist the ships leaving for the Serpent Nebula.

A week after war was declared and already they were forced to fight on the homeworld without assistance from the rest of the galaxy. Suddenly everything was happening too quickly, there wasn't anything normal about their enemy's tactics. Magnus couldn't wrap his head around it and wanted to be where the fighting was if only to see it for himself.

He excused himself from the tight sleeping quarters and went for what he was sure would be a
short walk around the crew deck. Other officers had had the same idea, unfortunately, all of them prepared in their own unique ways. The most nervous ones wore their armour, ready to be called into action and accept their orders without a second thought. The rest wandered around aimlessly looking for answers to questions they hadn't yet asked. Some were even practicing their biotics, lifting small objects and putting them down again to reassure themselves of what they could do. There was no where for a man to sit quietly and meditate aside from the observation room which everyone else had opted to avoid.

Their wariness became more apparent when Magnus caught sight of the single occupant in the room with the large window that looked out onto the stars. An imposing man stood close to the display, his posture was calculated and conservative. The dress uniform that he wore had the colours and insignia of a general, on the left hip was a standard pistol and on the right an antiquated sword that had seen more action than it ought to have. Nobody wore swords any more, not even during formal occasions. The general was of an older, forgotten time and his recent achievements spoke volumes about his character. He was commonly referred to as the Hero of Taetrus, some even calling him a saviour, though his policies during the conflict that had earned him that distinction had polarised many.

Magnus knew he should move on and not interrupt the man but the general had caught sight of him before he could come up with a clever excuse to leave him in peace. Afraid to offend the legendary figure, he gave him the most formal salute possible, "General Partinax."

"At ease," the general returned the salute and beckoned Magnus into the room so that the doors closed behind him. "I don't think we've been introduced yet. What's your name, major?"

"Magnus Thorn, sir," he responded, feeling rather awkward to be in the presence of someone he admired so greatly. He sincerely hoped the nervousness didn't show. "I didn't mean to interrupt you but as you're well aware there's very little room for one to collect their thoughts at the moment."

"It's not an interruption if you're invited in," the sentiment was warm but the expression behind the words was less readable. "Tell me major, are you the one that has been organising the coordinated efforts between the cabals and the legions? I seem to recall hearing your name mentioned in such a regard. Such ingenuity might be what we need most right now."

"Yes, sir. Currently I am the CO for the Invictus cabal until Lieutenant Viatrix returns."

"Ah, I remember her. In fact, I was just in the war room berating the general who ordered her deployment. We can't be wasting our best resources so early in the fight. I know how you cabalist operate, you strike fear into your opponents by simply sharing the battlefield with them. Shameful that some are too impatient to win a war that cannot be won so easily. The tactical arguments between the primarchs will result in the loss of our most valuable assets. But there's little advice I can offer them in this conflict, not that many are keen to ask for it."

"They'd be wise to listen to what you have to say."

"I don't need a sycophant. What I need is to get in touch with Primarch Fedorian directly. He's a great leader but he lacks the backbone to make the tough choices, he'll be unwilling to make sacrifices when the time comes and it will come. These Reapers won't play by our rules, we can't use turian logic to pressure them to play into our talons. When our enemy wishes not to conquer us but to exterminate us, to deny our right to exist, everything we know about war becomes useless."

"I don't know anything about them yet, none of us do."

"It took them less than a week to undo a year's worth of rebuilding on Taetrus, spirits help us all."
"It will take them much longer than that to take Palaven, of that I am certain."

"We must be prepared to stop at nothing to make that sentiment come true. How far will you go, Major Thorn? Will you risk endangering the lives of loved ones to ensure the future of the Hierarchy or is your skin soft like the humans? Every one of us must face that question."

"If we fail to show compassion then we are no better than those AI ships threatening to destroy the galaxy. Tough choices can't be made in a vacuum but all of us will deal with them, one way or another."

"Family before duty, even during war time? The Reapers won't care about either and neither should you if you want to survive."

"Speaking of family, I've just received a high priority comm request and am afraid I must take it right away. Your opinions are noted, general, though I don't entirely agree," Magnus was relieved by his omnitool's illumination in the dark room, he was not looking forward to a philosophical debate with a man who lived by a creed that said the ends always justified the means.

---

"Thank the spirits you're available, I can only keep the connection open for a couple of minutes before they realise what I'm doing," Andronicus' familiar face filled the vid screen. He was more cleaned up than the last time Magnus had seen him with freshly painted markings on his face. It wasn't exactly the homecoming either of them wanted but the circumstances were quickly deteriorating.

"And what are you doing exactly? Where are you, how the hell did you know where to find me?" Magnus had too many questions to show his displeasure in seeing his brother again.

"It wasn't easy to track down the cabalist ships, that's for sure. Suffice it to say, I've been trying to find you for the past week, since Earth went dark. Finding Mom and Dad is always easy, follow where the highest priority signals go. But you guys are hidden deeper than most of our intelligent officers, which might explain why we have such terrible intel. As for where I am, can't say in case this gets traced.

Let's just say I've been working in the communications field since my re-enlistment. That'd be why you haven't been able to dig any dirt on me, not that I blame you for trying. I like to think you're looking out for me instead of trying to turn me in. That's what family is supposed to do, right?"

"Yeah."

"Now's not a good time to go digging up the past, not with our whole future as a species at stake. I want to make things up to you, really. By what I can tell from your outgoing comm requests, you've been trying to reach someone on Palaven. Most of the towers on the ground are out. I can get that call through for you. Who is this 27th tier private anyway? Name's Tarina Atreides."

"She's uh.. well, to be blunt, she's someone really important."

"A girlfriend?"

"Not exactly. More like the mother of my child. And I want to get them both offworld before things get heated."

"They're already heated, we just lost two carriers by the Trebia relay and at least 4 fleets have been entirely wiped out. Wait. Did I hear you correctly? Do Mom and Dad know about this? Boy or
girl? Holy hell, I drop off the grid for a few months and you start a family without even trying to tell me."

"It wasn't planned and no they don't know. I haven't even met the child yet, didn't want to bring it up until it had actually happened, you know?"

"You might not get a second chance to tell them. The Intrepid is fighting on the frontline, communication is a precious commodity right now. Can I tell them if you won't?"

"I'd prefer not to but if things are really as bad as you say then sure. Whatever. Now what's your plan?"

"I was waiting for you to ask, this one is my best plan yet."

---

The plan was far more radical than anything Magnus would have tried on his own and involved pulling rank to go through loopholes in a system that he had sworn to defend. It was the only option available to him, he couldn't rely on anyone else when so many lives were on the line. The war was in its early stages and already felt as if it had dragged on for months given the numbers. There was just enough chaos in the Trebia system that he decided as long as his actions weren't hurting anyone else then saving two lives was completely worth it.

The moment his fleet entered the system, they had been forced to take evasive action, relying heavily on the firepower from the dreadnoughts and fighters poised to cover their entry. In less than an hour, they were close enough to Palaven that they could see the planet smoldering beyond the viewport. Ships of all sorts, friendly and enemy alike, crawled around the empty space around the planet like small bugs feeding on one another. It was horrendous, one often read about the elegance of space combat but there were simply too many objects shooting at one another to appreciate it all at once.

The number of destroyed vessels and the amount of wreckage that obscured their path was obscenely high, he hadn't seen a single Reaper ship take any obvious damage. Their ships were massive and alien in shape, bigger than most buildings in Cipritine. The weapons could reach one of their ships long before they were in range to fire back. He wondered what little good they'd be against the enemy on the ground if their space superiority was so strong.

Soon he'd find out. He watched anxiously as they got closer and closer to Palaven, the fires glowed vehemently against the darkness of space and warned them to turn back. The cabals were being deployed to escalate the evacuation effort but it already looked too late. They'd likely be tasked with ensuring the resistance didn't collapse instead. If anyone was on the ground, they were likely going to be stuck there for quite some time with the Hierarchy's fleets running interference to keep the destroy-class Reaper ships from landing.

He couldn't tell whether he was scared or simply apprehensive, they all knew what war looked like. Never had it seemed like an impossible fight though. The words from the primarch's last speech kept repeating themselves in his mind, every turian was asked to hold the line in their home system while the rest of the galaxy rallied together. They were already losing, whether anyone would admit it openly or not, how could they keep the Reapers busy indefinitely?

He couldn't worry about that, orders weren't relevant at the moment. All that mattered was getting through the fires to Tarina and their child. If they were doomed to go down fighting then he would like to do it knowing what his child looked like.
Chapter 19

"You, new guy, got any flying experience?"

"Yeah, a bit. Been a few years since I hit the training sims and those were fighters, not transport shuttles."

"Good enough. Strap yourself in, I'm going to need a co-pilot for this run. If all hell breaks loose, just treat her like a fighter. The principles are basically the same. Oh, and I'd put on a helmet if I were you, going to be one bumpy ride."

That wasn't very reassuring to someone who already had a borderline phobia of space travel. Magnus wasn't entirely happy about the arrangements, the team on his shuttle was young and very much looking forward to the upcoming bloodshed. Whatever nerves they had were hidden behind their helmets and special armour, the sort that allowed for EV travel if needed. The suits on the guys in the other shuttle flying as their wingman were even more specialised, he had seen rocket boosters on the shoulders and boots of the men before they had climbed in. Suddenly he felt very old and traditional, much like the general on Conviction, in comparison to his fellow passengers.

The pilot busied himself with preparations then checked in with the other shuttle's pilot to make sure they were all loaded and ready to go. The object was to fly close together all the way down from the carrier called Hawkeye to the rooftops in Cipritine, hopefully the two targets would present the Reaper forces with a choice and keep them slightly off-balanced. If things really went to plan, the carrier and its fighter squadrons would be keeping things off of them and they wouldn't have to rely on the crude bait and switch tactic. The shuttle Magnus was now riding as co-pilot in contained valuable equipment for fixing comm towers and a small crew of engineers that worked in the same legion as Andronicus. The other shuttle contained a detachment of paratroopers meant to defend the repair crews before going about their respective mission objectives.

Neither shuttle pilot was obligated to continue helping their respective crews once they were deployed, their task was to provide an ongoing delivery service of goods and personnel. With any luck, Magnus would be able to convince his pilot to stay long enough to extract a few individuals offworld. That had been the kink in Andronicus' plan, getting Magnus on board the Hawkeye and then onto a shuttle had been the easy part. What happened once they broke through the atmosphere was completely up to him.

"So what's with the armour, never seen that before," the pilot tried to strike up a casual conversation while they lifted off from the hangar deck, as if they were going for a normal flight across the system and not into the maw of a war zone with an unquenchable appetite for death and destruction. Magnus tried to not watch the grisly scene of their fighters engaging ships that were infinitely larger and more powerful than they were. What tenacity those pilots must have had to follow such orders.

"It's been approved by regulation standards, if you're worried," he tried to engage with the pilot to keep himself distracted. The armour was the only thing of sentimental value that he had kept with him in his travels since receiving his promotion and it seemed approprate to wear it into what would be an epic battle if they survived to talk about it after the fact. "Just a little side project I was working on, it's good stuff. Very flexible but as tough as anything the krogan would wear. Been in my family for years, centuries actually."

"Looks sharp. You're obviously not with the comm crew, I'm not supposed to ask for details.." the overly chatty pilot was starting to get too familiar.
"Then don't. We've got incoming fighters on our flank," Magnus was hardly one for idle chatter when he wasn't staring death in the face. The fighters were on their side but they were engaged with the enemy and wouldn't see the shuttle in time to break away from their attack runs.

"That we do, hold on tight," the pilot jerked them hard in one direction before turning just as sharply in the opposite direction to avoid incoming fire. Everything became slightly dizzy after that maneuver.

The rest of the descent was a blur as they ducked and weaved between dogfights. They steered clear of the Reaper capital ships and their far-reaching lasers but there were still plenty of other obstacles to dodge. He couldn't tell if the good guys were winning or not, he saw far more wreckage than he wanted to. Some where out there was the Intrepid, covering shuttles like his with its massive accelerator gun. Officially the evacuation had ended and everyone was to find their own way back to the fleets. There were certainly a smaller number of ships approaching the planet than there were leaving.

The nighttime of space gave way to broad daylight as they entered the planet's atmosphere. The other shuttle was ahead of them, its hull literally on fire as they proceeded at a much faster acceleration than what was optimal for re-entry. The blue hue of Trebia was reflecting white hot against the surface of the other vessel, momentarily blinding them and forcing them to rely on their ship's instruments. A few more seconds and they passed through clouds that didn't provide any relief, the glowing beams of ships and debris filled the sky as far as they could see. The nightmare in the air and on the surface was infinitely worse than what they had seen in the vacuum of space which distorted their perception of distance.

Artillery shells were firing from the tops of buildings, ships were trading blows with each other, a damaged Reaper destroyer was toppling over on one of its three legs with its deadly laser still firing off its last bursts before complete defeat rendered it useless. There was fighting everywhere, destruction everywhere. The shining jewel of the Hierarchy was in ruins and yet signs of stubborn resistance persisted.

The pilot seemed to know where he was going despite the torn landscape. The other shuttle before them was opening its doors to unload its cargo. Four paratroopers in full armour dropped down from their shuttle the second the doors were clear. They dropped suddenly in the general direction of both shuttles then engaged the boosters on their gear to stabilise their trajectories when they could no longer glide on the momentum. Magnus nearly lost his stomach trying to imagine what it felt like to fall from such a height but the men were specially trained in their task and took great pride in their ability to sabotage the enemy from within their own lines.

Those in the Armiger Legion were often referred to as flying eagles, they had one of the best mission success rates in the entire Hierarchy. Each of them was a celebrated hero and given the privilege to decorate their armour as they saw fit so long as they maintained the usual colour scheme for the legion. Only their undersuits designated their ranks and roles, useful for when they couldn't tell each other apart otherwise. From memory, Magnus recalled that the squad-leader had dark blue, engineers wore red, infiltrators wore green, and medics were grey or light blue. Their dress uniforms were all black and stylish, the envy of all the other legions.

The Armigers' weapons were already drawn and ready to shoot as soon as they made their landing, the gear on their backs hardly weighed them down or so it seemed with how effortlessly they controlled their velocity. The four paratroopers maintained a formation all the way down and once on the rooftops they didn't miss a beat as they cleared the way ahead of enemy ground units. Their comm chatter was fed to both shuttles since their progress was relevant to their eventual landing. The boys were enjoying themselves as if they were playing a game instead of fighting horrendous
creatures that had once resembled humans and batarians. The husks, as they were referred to, fought as pressure units but were easy pickings at a distance.

Magnus couldn't make out enough details. He was glad that the other pilot had things under control and had managed to slow their speed in time for their descent into the city's upper levels. The landing was relatively smooth thanks to the efforts from the Armiger squad, the landing zone was atop a communication building that would be the sight of a temporary base for the repair crews. They immediately set about the task of re-aligning the comm tower on the roof when they disembarked, leaving Magnus to do as he needed to without any questions. He told the pilot to stay in range while he made his way to the lower levels. He was hoping to head towards Tarina's omnitool signature as Andronicus had instructed him to do. The pilot and his wingman were in no hurry to fly off with several enemy harvester ships in the area, all shooting at anything that moved.

He was on his own but there was no time to dwell on it as the building that had served as their landing zone was already gaining the enemy's attention. Lasers began to bombard it from kilometers away, forcing the two shuttles to relocate nearby. Magnus relied on instinct to pick his way between crates of cover as he timed the right moments to leap out of harm's way. He made it safely to the stairwell and used his adrenaline reserves to push him on without giving complacency a time to take root despite the momentary safety of his surroundings. Part of him wished he had brought the common Phaeston but he could fire just as rapidly with his Valiant if he needed to.

The building opened up onto an old street with piles of vehicles and abandoned barricades. There were no enemies or friendlies in his path. He kept up a barrier around his armour's shields just in case he rounded a corner into incoming shots. The husks on the ground were mostly human in their shape, they didn't have weapons like the batarians ones had infused to their bulky arms. He saw a few grenade casing as he went, most likely belonging to the enemy given that turians would never waste such firepower in small skirmishes. There were no turian bodies among the dead but it was hard to discern if that meant the locals were victorious or had had enough time to remove the corpses to be buried properly off the battlefield.

He continued to track the omnitool with his own, constantly looking over his shoulder for any unexpected pursuit. The way ahead had been cleared recently and he wasn't sure if Reaper units were smart enough to establish ambushes. The positions of the corpses he had passed implied they relied on mobbing their prey more than on out thinking them. He saw something move on a low rooftop to his left and fired his rifle, a single husk fell towards the ground with a hissing noise that his translator couldn't make sense of. Had to have been a leftover that got seperated from its pack, no others were in sight, but that didn't stop him from keeping an eye above for more.

Cautiously he rounded a corner of a parking garage designed to hold both ground cars and sky cars alike. The vehicles had been removed from the usual positions and piled up on the adjoining street to funnel the enemy into a crossfire that hadn't met the same success as the rest of the street fighting. The smell of death was recent, fires still burned among the bodies where thermal clips had expired on trace amounts of leaked fuel. A pile of collapsed pillars and the facade of an older building nearby looked as if they had been pulled apart by improvised demolitions, probably a last resort effort to stem the tide when the battle could not be won. His omnitool pointed him towards the building beyond and he wasn't so sure he wanted to know what lay behind the rubble.
"Don't move. Friendly or hostile?" came a voice from the direction of the damaged building.

"Friendly," Magnus responded immediately as he heard the click of a thermal clip being loaded.

"Keep your weapon holstered on the way in. And watch your footing, lots of loose debris in the main room," the voice said again, he thought it might have been female but found it difficult to tell given the rebreather that disguised her true voice. If there were survivors inside they would have been expecting reinforcements, his lone presence was going to be a huge disappointment for their already eroded morale. He was grateful for the invitation and warning that went with it, the building’s collapse had to have been recent with so much dust still trapped within its remaining walls.

The woman greeted him by removing her helmet when he entered the shadows of the destroyed foyer.

"There's more of you right?" she said hopefully.

"Afraid not. I came on my own, trying to find someone who is supposed to be at this address.."

"We just moved the last batch of refugees before the harvesters cut us off. Whoever you're looking for is long gone. This is an orphanage, or was. Been a temporary shelter since the fighting began. Don't know much about the enemy but they don't care about the usual articles of war. The first thing they did with their ground forces was smoke out all of our underground shelters, planting booby traps early on in places they knew were vulnerable. Lost a lot of civilians that way, mostly children and the retired so no fighting souls but horrendous story like that don't help inspire the troops, that's for sure. Who are you looking for exactly?"

"Tell them we haven't got enough resources to treat the wounded here," came another voice, definitely female as someone else approached the pair.

"He's not wounded," the first female yelled back.

"Then tell him to go away or he'll blow our cover. These kids need to be kept safe, if the enemy figures out we're here.. well, they can't figure it out. Unless he's got a ship to get them out of here.."

"I do, actually. Two shuttles about a block or two from here. But we'd have to hurry," Magnus answered the other woman. She made her presence known by illuminating the omnitool on her right arm. A pistol was held out at him as she approached despite the reassurance from the scout watching the entryway. "Is that anyway to greet an old friend?"

Tarina put the gun back in her hip holster and shifted her weight as she was balancing something else on her other side, "Took you long enough, didn't think you'd come back."

"It wasn't easy to get through but here I am," he was so happy to see her that he had nearly forgotten where they were. The other woman politely excused herself while they enjoyed their reunion.

Tarina couldn't think of what to say, she ran up to him and touched his cheek and he held her close as he had done the last time he had seen her. The war could wait, that moment was all that mattered. A small voice cried out as they pulled part, the source was the bundle strapped to Tarina's left side.
"Is that...?" Magnus didn't know how to complete the thought as he was still unaware of his child's gender or name. Tarina reoriented the harness so that it hung in front of her torso and pulled out the small baby who wasn't even a week old. He squirmed in her grip and wiped at his eyes as if he had just woken up.

"Meet Marius Atreides, your son," she offered the child to him and Magnus stared betwixted, unsure of what to do or how to hold him. Carefully she positioned his arms in the appropriate way and reassured him when she was confident that he was doing it right.

"He has your eyes," was all he could say as he tried to calm the newborn. He was almost certain that Marius was smiling up at him though his teeth were still too small to do the expression properly.

"That's about all he got from me, the rest is all you. Even his personality. But come inside, this building is hardly safe. We've set up in the underground levels for the time being,"

Magnus awkwardly carried his son for the first time down a series of stairs that Tarina led him down, at the bottom of each flight she stopped to make sure he was alright. She was fussing over him in a way she never had or maybe it was more for the baby's sake. Any mother with a newborn in a warzone was likely to be somewhat paranoid about its well-being. He felt absolutely lost on the matter of raising children and disappointed that he had missed the birth of the child he never expected to have. Tarina didn't say anything to imply that she was upset with him so he didn't offer any apologies for his absence.

The lighting was much better in the underground bunker that had been used for little more than storage until a day or so ago. He could make out more of Marius' details, his dark skin and soft carapace were the same colour as his own. His crest was barely long enough to cover the top of his head and Tarina kept pulling at the hood on his little outfit to keep him warm. What really amazed Magnus were the size of his hands with barely nails for talons, all three of Marius' fingers could grasp one of his own.

"He's on formula for the first week or two," Tarina said as she took the child back. "It's basically a soupy sort of mixture that's easier for him to digest until the first set of teeth are fully grown. Then he gets to have solids, provided the war hasn't exhausted all of our supplies by that time. Jerky is good when they're still teething, the first set should be replaced within a month. You'd be surprised at how quickly he's grown already."

"I can't get over how small he is."

"Yeah, but it won't last long. Three months from now and he'll be learning to walk."

"Too bad he won't grow fast enough to use a gun any time soon."

"Give him time, he's going to be one hell of a warrior some day. But only if we can recover from this attack."

"We will. The Hierarchy hasn't lost a war yet," Magnus said with his usual mock confidence. He looked around the new room they were in, "So this place is an orphanage? I can see why you might have gravitated here."

"I was training as a teacher assistant, actually. Marius sort of ruined that but I'm not upset, the teachers here said I could come back to work when I was ready. I think they like having someone young around."
"A teacher! Wonder where you got that idea from," Magnus said slyly though inwardly he was bursting with pride for her career choice. She smiled but didn't say anything, was she being shy or trying not to startle Marius?

"Ms. Atreides, you're back!" a young girl about age 8 said as she bounded towards them.

"Shouldn't you be with the others, Mira?" Tarina asked her student.

"You said you wouldn't take long. Did you kill any bad guys? The guy on the radio says there will be more of them coming this way soon," the girl seemed more excited than scared.

"It's safe, for now," Tarina said with actual confidence. "I need to talk with the others, don't get into trouble in the mean time."

"I won't. I've been very good today but that older boy, Gaius, keeps picking on me," Mira revealed her true intentions for getting Tarina's immediate attention.

"I've told you, stand up to him and he'll leave you alone. Now come on, this is important," Tarina redirected the young girl back towards the lounge room where the other children were gathered. She met Magnus' questioning glance and clarified, "She's always like this. Only likes to talk to me but won't tell me her real name. I'm fairly sure Mira is shorthand for something else. A lot of these kids have trust issues so it's good that she's opening up to someone a little."

Magnus was impressed with how well she dealt with children, he remembered how Orso had taken to her on Invictus despite his mental trauma. He knew Marius couldn't have asked for a better mother, he wanted him to have an equally good father too. The other teachers and support staff looked weary as if they hadn't slept through the night, none of them had Tarina's energy.

"Is this all we're getting?" one said exasperatedly, waving his hand at Magnus.

"You might be surprised," he defended himself before Tarina could explain who he was.

"Is it true that the harvesters have landed troops nearby?" Tarina said in a whisper so that the children who were most likely eavesdropping would not be frightened.

"Yes," someone else said. "We can't hold this position any longer, our window to leave is rapidly closing."

"Good thing I came when I did," Magnus said. "There are two shuttles that should be big enough to carry everyone in close proximity. If we're not carrying supplies then we can move quickly and get out of here in time. Maybe some of us can hang back and make sure the enemy doesn't catch up to us."

"We're too few for that and the children, they have no one else in the world," another teacher said.

"Then we move all at once. The sooner, the better," Magnus said with finality and there was no debate. The teachers sprung into action to gather the children and form them into orderly lines. In total it was about 20 individuals, enough to draw attention the second they emerged from the building. It wasn't exactly what Magnus had had in mind when he arrived on the surface but there was no way he couldn't do something to help when he was in a position to do so.

Tarina helped the other teachers give vital instructions to the children who ranged in age from 5 to 15, the older children were paired off with the younger ones to keep them motivated. Magnus took the time to call the pilots on his omnitool and make sure they actually had room for so many and was relieved that they did. The pilots both confirmed what the radio had said, fresh ground troops
were heading their way and they would have to move fast. All of the adults had armour and weapons but the children were vulnerable targets no matter what formation they chose to go with and Magnus was reluctant to use his biotics in front of them so a barrier would be out of the question.

"No matter what happens, follow the headmaster," one teacher was saying as the children nodded that they understood for the third time. They were getting bored of the instructions and anxious to prove that they could get to the extraction zone without any difficulty. Turian children were always eager to impress their elders, even forgotten orphans couldn't escape their cultural roots.

Tarina was feeding Marius earlier than she wanted to but wasn't sure how the rest of the afternoon would play out, he wasn't taking to the change in routine very well.

"Can I help?" Magnus offered but she shook her head.

"Just get us out of here, that's all you have to do. I.. didn't really think you'd come back. You didn't have to risk your life getting here for us and I know your taking on more now than you wanted to. I love working here and these kids.. I connect so well with them but..at the end of the day, this is war. Lives will be lost. If it comes down to them or us, the choice should be easy. I'm not ungrateful that you're here, no sense in wasting the chance to get out of here in one piece now that there's a hint of success. It's just, well, I'm not used to relying on others. You know?"

"Tari, some day you're going to have to trust me. Besides, I didn't come just for you. Marius is hardly old enough to take care of himself. I'm sure you're capable of doing all of this alone and being a good, protective mother but the situation as it is currently is so unlike anything we've ever seen. Anything could happen. I'd rather be in a position to do something for my son than thinking about what could have been. I don't know if we'll make it or not or what we'll do if we do get out of here. But I'm not here for the Hierarchy's benefit, I'm here for you and Marius. You're family now, rather you like it or not and that means you're the most important two people in this entire galaxy. So let me carry that pack for you, grab your gun, and let's get to those shuttles."

She wanted to argue but there was no time for it so she folllowed his lead, placing Marius back in the harness on her side and double-checking that her armour's kinetic barriers were wide enough to encompass his small body as well as her own. She elected for the pistol, a standard issue Carnifex and left the cumbersome shotgun on the back of her belt in case she ran out of ammo. Magnus handed her a few thermal clips and prepared his rifle for action, reloading it several times until he was happy that it was in working order. He hefted the pack she had been trying to put on which was full of mostly essential items for Marius such as the formula drink that was going to be hard to find anywhere else. Once he was ready, the three of them joined the back of the line. They braced themselves for incoming fire as they ran for every scrap of cover on the way to the designated building with the extraction point on its roof.

At first, the path ahead seemed clear and straightforward, minus the dead bodies that were beginning to smell of decay and neglect. The children didn't seem to notice, they were focused on their task, the younger ones huddled closely to the older ones, the teachers forming a perimetre around them with their armaments. Guns were out and a quick pace turned into a vigorous one as an explosion detonated close by. The shockwave was forceful enough to shatter what glass remained in the windows around them and caused them all to stumble. A screeching noise similar to the one made by the husk creature Magnus had seen earlier eminated from an adjoining street, another could be heard behind. The screeches became more frequent as more voices added to the volume.

"If it moves, shoot it," Magnus yelled at the group, not that they needed his advice. The children's
thrill of entering the war zone turned into panic as they realised that the situation was real and not
the imaginations of some game they played on their terminals. Tarina gave him a sideways glance
as if to tell him "way to go" for scaring them. But he knew the benefits that came with fear, that
would keep them alive longer than a false sense of security. "Hang back, if fighting starts then we
are free to do more than they are."

"Um, are you forgetting someone?" she pointed at Marius who was beginning to nod off at his
mother's side.

"Right, well, boy's got to be exposed to combat at some point in his life. May as well be today. And
I really don't want to use biotics around those kids, they're already scared enough. Watch my back
and I'll watch yours, ok?"

She nodded and thumbed the trigger on her Carnifex to indicate she was ready. The screeching
escalated and the kids screamed when they caught their first glimpse of the monsterous enemy.

The teachers tightened their formation and didn't fire until they had easy, middle range shots that
they couldn't possibly miss. It was a careful tactic, keeping the enemy at bay and controlling the
field while they continued to move to their objective.

The first group was mostly human-shaped husks, they fell quite easily to headshots, never making
it close enough to grapple their prey. Behind them came the ones later referred to as cannibals, the
batarian husks with their bulbous bodies, small heads, and an arm canon that shot rapidly at its
foes. They went down almost as easily but provided cover fire for more of the same to join the
fray. This tactic was meant to allow the other husks to close the gap but the group was moving too
fast fo their tiny legs to keep up with.

Tarina and Magnus took up a position at a crossroads of streets behind an overturned vehicle. The
children and the teachers had a clear path by then and the building with the shuttles was only a
couple of metres away. All they needed was time to get inside the stair well. Once they were out of
eyesight, Magnus threw out his hand and an invisible shockwave was generated. The husks all
scrambled to regain their footing, by the time they did so their exposed heads were easy targets for
Tarina's pistol. Two smaller squads replaced the intitial wave almost instantly and there were too
many targets to remain stationary.

Magnus cast a barrier around them which proved effective at absorbing the fire from the cannibals.
They could hear a Phaeston being loaded and for a moment thought the adults had come back to
help them defend. Instead they saw the ugly form of a new type of husk, one that had once been a
turian. The marauder, as they were referred to on the radio, used a gun unlike the cannibal's organic
firearm and he was faster than any turian. His armour was a mixture of synthetic tubes and organic
carapace that was thicker than the skin of a krogan.

And he was relentless. The Phaeston was only one of his weapons in his arsenal, he also had the
ability to control the other husks. They dramatically changed formation and strategy at the behest
of his indecipherable orders. Neither of their translators could make sense of the language the
Reaper forces used, they had to rely on watching their movements to predict what they would do.

"We can't stay out here, they keep replenishing their numbers," Tarina stated the obvious as she
tried to get another shot off on the marauder. The monstrous creation dodged the shot easily by
rolling backwards. Magnus fired his rifle and his shot met with the resistance of kinetic shields, the
force causing the creature to stagger back. Tarina reloaded and shot again, the second time clearing
its tentacle-like head from its body.

"They've got to be halfway up by now," Magnus agreed. "Stay close, we'll take as many of these
abominations out as we can. Don't stop moving."
"Did you see what that marauder's face looked like? Could it have been a real person before it was turned into that.. thing?"

"Worry about that later. How's Marius doing?"

"He's keeping calm but he'll be fussy in an hour for another meal. Keep that barrier up will you, I don't want to rely solely on kinetics."

They continued alternating fire as the moved back-to-back towards the building. The clip size for both their weapons synced up well enough that neither had to reload at the same time as the other. Tarina's aim had improved greatly since Magnus had fought with her last, probably a result of having too much free time due to the restrictions of medical leave. He didn't point it out but reminded himself to compliment her later. When the enemies were too close for his rifle, he used biotic abilities to stagger them for Tarina. Not many made it close enough for such attacks, for which he was glad. He knew she was running low on ammo and had to focus most of his attention on maintaining the barrier anyway.

He maintained the barrier even as they cleared the threshold through the broken front doors to what had once been an administrative building. The foyer between the entry and the stair well had no cover, only a few potted plants and art decor pieces that had been toppled over by the initial attack. Glass littered the floor.

"Keep going, I'll unleash the barrier then come to join you," Magnus said over his shoulder and Tarina didn't hesitate to make a break for the stairs. He wasn't sure if he was happy that she showed no fear or upset that she was eager to leave him to fight the remaining horde on his own. When he heard the door slam closed behind him, he mustered what reserves he had and pushed the field he had created outwards as far as it would reach.

He ran for the stairwell as the field collapsed, releasing its force and energy against the remaining enemies pushing their way through the front door's remains. Some were merely knocked off their feet while others went flying into the air, none were able to catch up with Magnus in time as he used his omnitool to lock the door behind him. Tarina was already several floors up and catching her breath. He offered to carry Marius the rest of the way but she refused and they quietly took their time for the last couple of floors.

When they emerged on the roof level, they were pleased to see both shuttles hovering a metre or two above. One was already full and in the process of shutting its doors, the other was still being loaded with the last passengers. There would be just enough room for the family of three.

They watched as another harvester shipped hovered nearby, its dragon fly body undulating and threatening to shoot at the vulnerable targets. The pilots shouted at them to hurry, the sound of the thrusters increased in intensity, there was a palpable panic in the air that their window of opportunity was rapidly closing in front of them. The first shuttle lifted off, not waiting for the other to finish its task.

The harvester shot at it with its lasers but was knocked off course by a friendly fighter that had broken off from an aerial battle much further up in the atmosphere to distract it. A dogfight of sorts ensued as the two ships circled each other, taking turns to shoot at one another. The second shuttle began to pull away, circling around to get out of their line of fire before coming back close enough for a pair of passengers to reach down to those remaining on the roof and pull them up. It wasn't ideal but the enemy was onto them and they had to prepare for the worst.

"We should help those teachers get on, if we don't make it we'll find an alternate route," Magnus suggested but Tarina was not enthused with his plan to give up their place.
"They wouldn't do the same for us right now," she pointed out.

The harvester's lasers hit the edge of the building they were on as it pursued its target. The fighter had a clipped wing and was leaking fuel but still trying to keep the enemy busy with its guns. Magnus instinctively pulled Tarina towards a crate of supplies left behind by the comm repair team that he had arrived with, evidently they hadn't decided to set up their base there after all. Marius cried out for the first time since leaving the orphanage, as if the lasers were the first noise he had heard since their departure. Tarina held him close as Magnus shielded them both from another pass from the aerial combatants, his kinetic shields overlapping with hers with Marius nestled between them.

An explosion was heard as the harvester struck its opponent's weapon barrels. It started off as sparks and quickly escalated into a fireball that engulfed both ships. The remains of the fighter came crashing down, large pieces of shrapnel struck the thrusters of the first shuttle which hadn't been able to gain enough altitude with the fighting so close to its flight path. The shuttle exploded the second its thrusters were unable to vent the excess heat. A domino effect followed, the harvester was caught up in the second explosion and pieces from all three ships began to rain down on the building. The two remaining teachers were struck instantly, the second shuttle was knocked out of the air. The momentum wasn't enough to knock it off the roof entirely, instead it skidded to the edge and caught fire. Of all the ships, the second shuttle had taken the least amount of damage but its passengers were unable to get out in time.

The loud noises were deafening and for a brief moment both parents worried for their young son's future ability to hear. They curled up tightly together with their kinetic shields and the crates of supplies as their only protection. There wasn't enough time for a full barrier but the one Magnus was able to cast was good enough for shielding them against the heat of the explosions. Tarina kept her eyes on Marius who was throwing his first tantrum at being denied his usual nap time. Magnus would have laughed at his trivial concerns if he wasn't so afraid that a small piece of debris might end any of their lives in an abrupt way. When the only sound was that of burning metal, he let go of Tarina and tried to take stock of what had happened.

"I can't believe it," Tarina whispered when she joined him.

"It's a bit morbid but if that shuttle over there could be repaired.. I might be able to still fly it," Magnus scratched his mandibles as he tried to find some sort of silver lining in the aftermath of all the destruction.

"No one made it out," she said with disbelief. "Not even the pilot who could have ejected."

"I didn't say it was the best plan in the world," he agreed. The idea of pulling out the dead bodies of children and their teachers wasn't exactly thrilling. The fighting had reinforced the severity of the situation and how unpredictable the enemy could be. They couldn't stay on the roof top for long. He tried to remember the sobering view of Palaven from space, all the burning cities were deathtraps, his experience on the ground thus far reinforced the point further.

"Would take too long to fix and the fire implies a fuel leak or similar," Tarina assessed the possibility. She didn't seem nearly as disturbed by the loss of so much life as Magnus was. It was one thing to watch soldiers die, it was another to watch it happen to civilians. They had had no chance. Magnus looked over at Marius squirming in his mother's arms, still alive but completely dependent on his parents for safety. The children from the orphanage had only a few teachers to look after them and it wasn't enough. Maybe she was too shocked to reveal her emotions, he was sure that a mother would feel more than she was letting on.

Magnus began to pick through the wreckage for anything that might be useful, they weren't going
to be come back for supplies if they ran low and he wasn't too sure what Tarina's pack already contained. He began filling a bag with rations and tools, digging through the crates that had remained undamaged by the fire. One of them had contained a strange device, a quantum entanglement communicator or QEC that wasn't overly common in an age when communication was sent through the relay network. He had no idea what the QEC paired with but it seemed important enough to take just in case the comm network became unreliable.

"We need to get out of the city, this is a nightmare," he said quietly as he finished what he was doing. "But we can't go back the way we came, there were more of those things climbing through the windows when I left. Old buildings like this usually have fire escapes on the exterior walls. We'll be exposed but can't help that. Here, let me take Marius for awhile."

"Alright, but only until we're back on the ground," she agreed. She gave him the baby and steadied herself with his free hand before descending down the steps.

Tarina knew the city better the Magnus and suggested they make for the naval base at the harbour instead of towards the city centre were fighting was likely to be more intense. He had no better ideas and figured they could at least find some sort of transport out of the city if the base couldn't help them. According to Tarina, that part of the city was where those with the most money owned property, if any evacuation efforts were still ongoing it'd be worth investigating there first.

Magnus pointed out that the global evacuation had adhered to the tier system, those of the higher tiers were given priority and didn't necessarily make the most money but Tarina disputed his concept as idealism. During war, the rules changed, power shifted to those who had more to lose, regardless of the command structure. He wanted to believe that wartime was when the Hierarchy functioned at its best though he still wanted figure out what had made her take a more cynical view.

The base lay in ruins like every other military structure in the city, some of its ships hadn't escaped in time and lay about the harbour like beached marine animals. Oil and fire ravaged the seascape, once a popular tourist destination for offworlders who had never seen sea vessels. What remained of the navy would be easy pickings on the open sea, not that they'd be of much use against space vessels over 2 kilometres in length. They wouldn't have to deal with the tenacious ground troops, however, and that gave Magnus some hope that a counterattack could occur on multiple fronts at some point in the future.

"This one will do," Tarina interrupted his thoughts as she dragged him over to some parked skycars that had remained untouched by the attacks.

"That's a fancy one, it will take a biometric key to get it operational," he warned her. She had expensive tastes, the vehicle she pointed to was a convertible in two senses of the word. It could work on the ground with retractable wheels as well as fly, plus it had a retractable roof for ground driving. The model was sporty and big enough to accommodate four adults comfortably.

"Yeah, about that, there's a trick to these ones. A design flaw if you will.." she approached the vehicle after handing Marius off to his father while she activated her omnitool.

"You're not stealing somebody's car.. that's illegal during peace time, it's considered looting in times of war," he hissed at her but she was not deterred.

"Relax, I remember the guy who owns this one. He's definitely off world by now driving something even more fancy without a care in the world. He has heaps of money, always used to get something good when picking his pockets. Hey don't look at me like that, I don't behave like that any more. I'm a responsible mother trying to get my son out of a warzone. There we go, let me just put these wires together and.. easy. You want to drive or not, probably won't get a second chance at
one of these bad boys."

"I'll drive," he insisted as she settled herself in the left-side passenger seat with Marius snoozing in her lap. He put the pack he had been carrying on the back seat and lifted the vehicle off the ground gently. They followed the road by the harbour until it led them out of the city. He kept his flightpath low and was relieved when they were under the canopy of a nearby nature reserve's tall, silver trees. They drove onwards as far from Cipritine as they could on a full tank in no particular direction as long as it kept them away from any other cities or residential areas.
Chapter 21

The forest around them took on an alien, near ethereal quality as the sun began to set. The silver-blue pines had been shimmering in the daylight, oblivious to the fires burning in the cities far away. They could still smell the smoke that would be trapped in the atmosphere for days and weeks to come. The car glided along without making a noise, the trees looked as though they were made of glass until the sunset was complete.

It was quiet, perhaps too quiet after everything they had seen and Magnus grew restless. He had already tried looking for some source of entertainment on the radio, maybe an old station had accidently left its automated broadcast on. But there was nothing, only static and the occasional emergency alert. None of the offworld stations could make it through with the satellite network down as well. Radio was starting to replace more modern methods of communication, he'd never believe they'd regress to ancient technology but the Reapers had cut them off from the rest of the galaxy in short order. He was thankful that he had found the QEC device even if he wasn't accustomed to how to use it.

Tarina woke up from a short nap with Marius still asleep in her arms. She had been leaning against Magnus' shoulder and he had taken comfort that at least subconsciously she appreciated him being there for her.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she let her eyes adjust to the dwindling light from outside the windows.

"Don't know. We've still got at least six hours left until we're out of fuel. Sleep alright?"

"Not really."

"Yeah, I don't think I've had a good night's sleep since news came from the Sol system. You know we were recalled almost immediately after that? I finally got to see the Citadel, though it was several kilometres away. It was beautiful, like a flower floating in a river of black velvet. We'll have to go back some day and see it together."

"Maybe," she didn't seem to hear him. She readjusted her position and checked on Marius who had been sound asleep since the beginning of their journey.

"You'd think with all this energy around him that he'd have a hard time sleeping like the rest of us."

"Babies can sleep through anything, he's saving his strength for later."

"I like the name you picked out. Any particular significance?"

"It was a lack of creativity on my part. I named him after my father."

"Oh, well, that's a good idea," Magnus wasn't entirely sure if she was over her father's death yet and if the name was a sign that she was having trouble moving forward. It was a good, strong name regardless so there was little point in pointing out the potential conflict, besides she wasn't likely to want to talk about her father unless she brought up the subject herself. "It's quite a coincidence. The firstborn male on my father's side is always given a name like that, sort of a tradition for us."

"A happy coincidence," she still seemed distracted.
"Tari, is something wrong? I thought you'd be a lot happier or at least relieved that we got out of there when we did."

"I am happy but...I never asked you to risk your life or your career to come back for us. I guess I feel guilty about it. And please, Tarina is fine. We're not really close enough for nicknames."

"We're friend aren't we? Friends give each other nicknames all the time. I call my baby brother Andronicus 'Ando' and so does everyone else that's close to him."

"This is going to sound a bit cruel but I don't want to give the wrong impression about our relationship," she finally looked over him but he couldn't make sense of her blank expression. "We had a baby together but that's all. It was an accident, a wonderful accident. But I don't need you getting protective or thinking there's more here than there is. I'm used to people letting me down so sometimes its best not to let people get close at all."

He wanted to dispute that idea very much. But past experience had told him that arguing with her wouldn't change her mind, she would have to see things for herself. Still, he was mildly upset that she wasn't nearly as interested in him as he was in her. The feeling began to cut at him so he chose to ignore it for the time being. If she wanted to be at arm's length, that was her choice and he'd respect it.

"Maybe we should talk about something else, there's not much else to do. And I'd rather it not get too quiet or I might doze off. What have you been up to these past couple of months?"

"Not as much as I'd like to have been. It wasn't exactly a vacation and I couldn't get much work with my rank."

"I'm so sorry, if you need a recommendation or something I probably could have talked to the right people and made arrangements."

"I don't need charity. It's not easy being 27th tier but the challenge isn't enough to stop me. I used to pass the orphanage on my hospital visits, it was only a matter of time before I got dragged into teaching. The place was a lot nicer than most of the boarding schools I ended up in as a kid which were really just orphanages in everything but name.

Most of the prospective parents are desperate to adopt so the kids are almost guaranteed homes. A lot of them are same-sex couples or interspecies couples that want a turian child. They often came back to visit the kids and spend time with them when the paper work is going through. Nothing at all like my childhood, I guess times change.

My generation was never satisfied with sitting still for very long. I mentioned that rich guy I used to pickpocket? Well, that used to be something I'd do when I'd runaway. I'd steal a little bit each time I got out and hoped to buy a new set of parents for myself or at least a mother that my father would approve of. Someone that would make us both happy. Such a dreamer, then I grew up and became a mom. Now it's my chance to give Marius a better life.

I can't decide if that night on Invictus was a mistake or not but Marius is a real blessing. I really shouldn't have taken advantage. You were always good to me, even when you weren't trying to be. I wasn't trying to get your hopes up."

"I think about that night all the time, it wasn't a mistake from my end. Look, I'm not exactly used to girls asking to spend the night with me, especially young ones who can barely shoot straight. You're getting better, by the way. But I'm glad that you view Marius as an opportunity rather than a consequence for our actions because that's what he is. Whatever happens between us, or doesn't
happen.. we're still his parents. He needs us."

"I'm glad you're here, Magnus. I might not be very good at showing it.."

"You're ok. I'll try not to get in your way."

She smiled and curled up against him again to finish the nap she had started before. Magnus was trying not to let her words get to him, he knew why she was so stubborn and the more she talked about herself the more it helped him understand. The last few months before the war would have been frightening for an expecting mother who had no one to look after her. She'd probably never admit it and would scoff at his desire to show any affection. He couldn't stop thinking that everything would have made more sense if they were actually in love.

---

Magnus emerged with nothing more than a bathrobe on. The shower had been invigorating but he enjoyed the sensation of water evaporating off of his skin, his carapace was still shining in the artificial light. He could tell without looking where Tarina was by the smells coming from the kitchen. She pretended not to notice him when he snuck up behind her to investigate what she was preparing on the stovetop.

He tried not to interrupt her as she went about her task. The vid screen on the countertop was displaying the daily news from around the galaxy. A human female was reading off a report about recent hostilities between the Hegemony and Alliance, with a new development involving a Hierarchy patrol ship breaking into the story. War was on the horizon and everyone was looking forward to it.

He was both relieved and anxious that the arm's race between the different races was finally reaching a head. Tarina didn't seem worried by the breaking news, she reached around him to grab the right knife to cut up the meat she had selected for the evening stew. The sunlight filtered in through the windows to remind them that it was still mid-afternoon. A welcoming breeze from the open doors circulated throughout the room, keeping the temperature just right and bringing the salty sea air inside where it could mix with an aroma of culinary delights.

He couldn't take his eyes off of her, she was wearing a stylish garment that had become popular on Illium in a fashion show put on by humans. A long kimono-top usually paired with baggy pants and a wide obi sash across the waist line managed to compliment the female figure of almost every species. Given that she was at home, Tarina had opted to go without the pants for that particular afternoon. Even so, her bare legs were barely exposed by the elegant fabric, only her spurs were readily obvious. It was a tantalising display, the woman he admired most was cooking a delicious meal in an outfit that didn't normally go with such a domestic job.

The news moved on from current events to sports so Magnus elected to turn off the boring bits of the broadcast by waving his omnitool at the screen. As he did so, he noticed a book turned upside down to an open page that Tarina had been reading on the counter top. He smiled and placed the bookmark next to it on the correct page, closing the archaic object gently as he did so. Only he would fall for a girl who still believed in reading physical books instead of their digital counterparts.

She turned around after placing everything into a pot of boiling water. He put an arm around her waist and pulled her close. Their mandibles touched as they kissed briefly.

"You might want to read that one when I'm done," she said when they broke apart. He still had one arm around her, caressing the fabric of the obi as he tried to work out how to undo the bow without
"Breaking the delicate knot.

"Only if it's better than that one about the drell and the hanar love affair that you've got on the nightstand by the bed," he said in a hushed tone which forced her to lean closer to hear him.

"You didn't! It's not as bad as you think but no, this current one is different. It's about this salarian woman who abandons her clan and all of her breeding obligations on Sur'Kesh to see the galaxy. Very enlightening. Much more character focused than the book you're thinking of," she laughed and he kissed her again on the forehead. He could never keep up with all the things that interested her but was glad he could buy her all the things she wanted to experience. Finding hardcover books in the year 2186 was no easy feat, especially when they came from other cultures with their obscure colony worlds.

"Give me a moment to finish what I'm doing here, it'll take several hours for the stew to simmer. We can open a bottle of wine and watch the sunset while it does," she pulled away from him to stir the contents of the stew, adding in herbs and spices as she went. The process reminded him of his childhood, when his brother was much younger and their mother used to slave over each meal she made for them. Tarina wouldn't have experienced the childhood pleasures of a family meal every day and yet she knew how to go through all the motions.

"Where's Marius?" Magnus inquired as he checked the terminal by the vid screen for any messages.

"Asleep," she assured him. "But that reminds me, I've been doing some research on the extranet lately. A lot of the old fashioned ideas on motherhood are just that, old fashioned. However, something did catch my eye."

"What?" he could tell she was being coy. A smile came onto her face as she got to the heart of her idea.

"Well, they say raising a pet alongside a child is a good way to encourage them to socialise when they're old enough to communicate. Most parents try to go with something easy to maintain, the kind of animals that can be kept in cages and don't live very long. There was a group of asari with human partners that found that one of the pets from Earth is a better candidate. Dogs are basically like much tamer varrens without all of the biotic complications. I thought we might try and get one for Marius."

"Wouldn't it be a bit challenging to raise a levo based organism out here?"

"It's not that hard, just make sure you get the right kind of food for them and they can do the rest. They're very easy to manage, well, most breeds anyway. There's so many to choose from. Some are more baby friendly than others. I'm still reading up on it but wanted to know your thoughts."

"Hm, it's an interesting concept. I'll think about it. In the mean time, let's have a glass of red before the clouds roll in," he reached into the cupboard and procured two glasses while she grabbed a bottle to go with them.

"Lead the way, Sarge," she used the term like a nickname and he couldn't stop grinning.

They walked through the sun room which opened up to a porch that overlooked the beach that was their backyard. The trees that marked the boundary between the glimmering sand and the grassy yard varied in their colours, some were silvery white palms from Palaven and some had dark green leaves with purple veins, transplants of Invictus. The porch was lightly furnished and designed to take in the tropical view. The ocean's waves beat against an unbroken field of golden sand.
several metres away, the sound of the outgoing tide was the only thing they could hear. A fiery sun was beginning to set on a horizon of blue, making it impossible to distinguish where the sea ended and the sky began, painting both with a full palette of colours.

Tarina watched the sight as if mesmerised, nearly forgetting about the wine altogether. Magnus sat beside her on the lounge with his eyes closed as he used his other senses to soak up the atmosphere. A warm breeze washed over them, the salty smell of the sea wafted by like perfume. The sound of a glass being placed down was enough to re-awaken him, Tarina was nuzzling against him and he enveloped her with one of his arms. Their heads pressed together as they sat in silence, enjoying the presence of the other.

"What will we do if war does happen?" she said quietly while the sun finished setting.

"Whatever you want to do. Neither of us has to worry about conscription. I want to be wherever you are," he said as he rubbed her arm. She leaned against him with the top of her head resting against his neck.

"Me too," she said with a whisper.

Their hands began to wander of their own volition, both seeking the touch of the other. She turned around to stroke his cheek, pinching he mandibles slightly as her hand brushed past. He began to tug at the back of her obi, still unable to work out the mechanism but knowing she'd be eager to assist if he made it look too difficult. She smiled and brushed his hand aside so that she could undo the bow herself. As she did, the kimono began to fall away from her torso, revealing her chest and waist.

His robe came off just as easily as she pushed him back. His hands rested on her waist, probably his favourite part of her body where he could get a decent grip. Her carapace reflected the colours of the setting sun and he loved the way it created patterns against her rough, tan skin. He continued to hold her, occasionally rubbing her sides and lower back as she positioned herself on his lap. It wasn't the position he wanted, instead he wanted her to relax while he attended to her desires.

But that's how she wanted him and he wasn't going to fight against it. She continued to touch his face and kiss him gently on the forehead with her own. He nuzzled her neck while her legs rubbed against his, occasionally their spurs coming into light contact with each other. He wanted a better look at her legs with their tight, shapely muscles which only a soldier could have. Slowly he began to lean her back, moving his hands across her back to hold her with all the care he felt for her. He knew her body was as tough as his but it still deserved to be treated with delicacy, the faintest whisper of touches was enough to arouse pleasure if one knew where to go.

And Magnus knew exactly where to go. She lay back on the lounge and allowed him enough room to lay on top of her. Her legs were draped over his and he had a perfect view. While they nuzzled one another, her talons began to lightly trace the outline of the scar on his back. One of his hands cradled the back of her head while the other firmly pressed against the middle of her back. They pushed against each other looking for the right angle to go further without having to use their eyes or hands.

Feeling adventurous, Magnus tried to kiss her in the way that was popular with the human and asari actors in the vids. There wasn't a hint of awkwardness in the motion as they began to feverishly devour one another. She began to breath heavily as her senses came alive all at once and he could hear himself doing the same.

"Try not wake the baby," she reminded him between gasps for air. Her breath was hot against his neck, it was the right kind of motivation he needed.
He eased into her with precision and gentleness. Within moments, they had developed a rhythm that suited both of their needs. Neither took more than they gave, the passion ran hotter than their first night together. Magnus tried to keep in time with the sound of the crashing waves of the ocean beyond, Tarina's breathing did the same.

As he was feeling the temptation to increase the pace, he could hear something in the distance like an echo. The echo became a loud cry as he continued. Tarina looked unconcerned, her green eyes locked onto his brown as if in a trance. The cry came again across the ocean, the cry of a baby waking up. It increased with intensity until Magnus was forced to wake up from the dream that had been too good to be true. The sound of the waves was gone, the scene faded away forever.

The real Tarina stood before him in her modest armour with an outstretched Marius who wasn't crying nearly as loudly as Magnus had thought.

"Magnus, time to wake up. Take the baby, ok?"

"Mm. How long was I asleep?"

"Not long but you looked liked you needed it. I'm going to gather some kindling and get a fire going. Need to fix up a meal for Marius. I've got enough rations to make you something too if you want."

"Alright, hand him here. Hey, Tarina.."

"What?"

"I, uh, can't remember what I was going to say. It'll come back to me later."

He wanted to tell her that she was beautiful and no longer had to be scared of the assistance offered by others. He wanted to be given a chance to prove himself as more than a friend. He wanted her to have already grown to learn the value of companionship. But he couldn't make her understand those concepts, the things he took for granted in his own life.

He looked down at the baby in his arms as Tarina left them alone, Marius was a clean slate for both of them. If not for the war, he might not have had the chance to see his son at all. Tarina would have secluded him away and kept as far away from Magnus as possible, not because she didn't care about him but because she didn't need him. On the contrary, Marius needed his father and was too young to push him away.

Magnus tried to push the dream from his mind, the more he had tried to focus on it the more the details had slipped through his talons like loose sand and there was little point in remembering something that could never happen. He sighed and the baby reached out to him with his little hands, he had never thought Marius was possible either. The swiftness of the invasion seemed like another impossibility that had defied centuries of military planning. Anything could happen, all he could do was take care of Tarina and Marius, whether she wanted him there or not. He couldn't change the past or go back to fleet. The only direction was forward, wherever that might lead.

Tarina returned and prepared a small campfire in silence while Magnus attended to their son. It was an awkward scene in the middle of a forest with nothing but a stolen car for shelter. They barely had enough supplies to survive for a week. Soon they'd have to set out on foot to go some where the enemy wasn't, which wasn't likely to be a short journey if they could even work out where to go next.

The horrors from the flight out of Cipritine still haunted both of them, the famous city had been
It was going to be a brutal contest to reclaim what was already lost, the primarch had called on them to keep the enemy busy to protect much more vulnerable worlds. But how could they possibly be asked to do such thing when already their forces were displaced, forced to retreat into the wilderness. The analytical side of Magnus wanted to have all the data that the fleets had so that he could plan the counter-offensive campaign that would save the day. He was sure other great minds were already working on it, probably from Menae where the refugees were being sent during the evacuation. Any day they'd see the fleets in the atmosphere storming the Reaper ships and taking back their home.

Of course, that day could be months or years away, maybe even longer. There was no use in mulling over the hypotheticals, they had to figure out how to survive each day as it came first. While Tarina prepared the powdered formula with water and other additions in a small pot over the lowly burning fire, Magnus told his son the stories he was told as a kid. They were common nursery rhymes that told the story of a warrior and his quest to stop a villain with the help of a woman he would eventually fall in love with. Each part of the story focused on an item or a quest that the warrior had to achieve to get to the next part of the story. When the female warrior saves him from certain doom, he is given the courage he needs to pursue the final quest.

The purpose of the rhyme was to teach children the tenets of civilisation that they'd be expected to follow when they were old enough to understand them. Such traits as valour, courage, honour, wisdom, determination, and the need to fulfill one's assigned duty were woven into the tale. Most children thought it was just another war story meant to inspire them to become good soldiers like their parents.

"I always wondered why the warrior wasn't referred to as a soldier," Tarina said as she continued preparing Marius' first meal of the day.

"Because he has his own code of ethics. A warrior follows his own path whereas a soldier follows his orders without question," Magnus answered her.

"A warrior sounds a lot more romantic," she mused. "Are you paying attention to how to do this? He won't eat it if it's not done right and he really needs these nutrients at this stage of development."

"I'm watching," he assured her with honesty. More to Marius than to Tarina he added, "Our little warrior has to grow up strong so that he can be the best."

"I'm worried," she said quietly. "This isn't exactly the world I had intended to bring him into."

"Don't let him hear that. We'll get through this...somehow. One set back won't be the end of the war. There will be a resistance forming, counter-offensives, rallying of forces from all of our colonies, maybe the aliens will jump in when they're threatened as well. Plenty has to happen still," he said more for his own benefit than hers. One of them had to put on a brave face.

"It's all happening too fast, a week ago I was having a baby and now... now I don't know what to expect. The message from the primarch was vague but it mentioned that the enemy could turn our own against us. How can we disrupt that? You saw how quickly they replenished their numbers when we were in the city. And they have no concious at all, no honour, and seemingly no actual
purpose besides destroying everything."

"It's early days, Tarina," he reminded her as he handed Marius back for his feeding. She sat beside him against the pack he had been using as a pillow for his brief nap. When had he fallen asleep? He had meant to stand watch over the car while she slept with Marius inside with the seats turned down. He couldn't afford to let anything happen to them, he would have to try harder to control his need for rest. He looked up at the sky between the trees and could see meteors crashing down, more ships entering the atmosphere though he couldn't tell whether they were friendlies or not. Maybe he was still asleep after all.

"I was really looking forward to a normal life," she said with a sigh as she spooned the warm mixture to Marius. Magnus was reminded of the domestic scene in his dream where they had owned a house and were discussing what seemed like trivial matters compared to what they faced in reality. A normal life was all anyone ever wanted.

"But isn't this more exciting?" he tried to laugh but she glared at him for attempting to make light of their situation. He took the hint and shifted to a more serious tone, "All I know is we have to regroup. If we're going to make it off world, and that's a big if now, we can't go into the cities. The Reapers know more about us than we know about them. They have to know a resistance force will mobilise against them eventually. We'll never have the advantage so...we have to get them to fight on our terms at some point. Disappear into the wilds, gather strength and numbers, fortify some new positions that they can't possibly know about. Then take the fight to them when we know enough about their tactics. For now, all we can do is keep a low profile. We need to find some where to go or keep moving, though I'd prefer the former. Had my fill of living off the land for the year."

"Take Marius for a second, I need to look through some files on my omnitool," she said as a brainstorm crossed her mind. She began to sift through summaries of digital publications she had read over the past couple of months, much of it relating to ancient civilisations. "I was curious after what happened on Invictus. Had a lot of free time to read so began to do some casual research on ancient groups of people originating from Palaven. There's so many interesting stories out there but some are hard to find, especially anything from before the Unification Wars. A lot of history people would rather forget. But we have to understand our roots to make sure we don't repeat the mistakes of the past. Anyway, as you know, there's lots of important sights on this planet that are still well preserved. Many of them old fortifications, outposts, places where weapons were made, that sort of stuff. The only problem is most have turned into tourist destinations, it's all very common knowledge."

"So is there anything slightly obscure that wouldn't draw the usual attention?" he inquired as he tried to keep Marius entertained.

"That's what I'm looking for. I had several books. You're going to laugh but.. I'm kind of upset that I had to leave so many physical books behind in my apartment, they'll be burnt to ash by now. Should just stick to digital prints like everyone else but can't pass up the feeling of a good book."

"That's not silly at all."

"There's a group of monasteries in the mountains to the west of Cipritine that were once fortresses several hundred years ago. I can't remember the exact location or what sort of monks inhabit them now but they definitely fit the bill of what you're looking for. Remote, defendable, might even have their own food supply."

"Sounds good, we can start moving in that direction at least and see if we can turn anything else up along the way."
"It's just you and me out here, we won't have a squad to back us up like before."

"We'll get one, let's make sure we have a place to recuperate first. Then we can figure out how to rally other survivors without the enemy catching on. One problem at a time. I guess you're not so mad that I showed up after all?"

"I was never mad, only surprised. Now let me cook something for us, might be our last warm meal for awhile."
Chapter 22

They had been wandering the woodlands for three days, sticking to their westerly trajectory as much as possible. It had been an eerily quiet journey, neither Tarina or Magnus had much to say to the other. They found no other survivors or signs of the enemy. Their supplies were dwindling and they were growing anxious.

"I'm going to scout ahead," Tarina said after they finished resting their legs for a couple of minutes.

"Sure, don't get too far ahead," Magnus said without voicing any arguments.

They had been taking turns carrying Marius but he knew she was much faster on her feet if she wasn't burdened. Quietly they readjusted the contents of their packs, Tarina drew her shotgun and took point while Magnus lumbered behind her with the heavier load. It didn't bother him much, he liked being useful. He'd prefer to keep a closer eye on his other half in case she found trouble but was confident she wouldn't overextend herself.

A storm was brewing behind them, the sky had turned a dark grey and there were fewer signs of ships in the stratosphere. The wind began to pick up and encouraged them to keep moving when their muscles tried to coax them into slowing down. A battle with the elements of nature was winnable, unlike the actual battlefield that the rest of their kind were facing. It was hard to take comfort that they were having an easier time when millions were struggling to keep their heads above the water line.

Magnus tried not to think about it, his concerns were more local. Tarina was already out of sight but he could reach her on the comm linked to her omnitool if he needed to. He couldn't help feeling like they had been in the same situation only months before but without the complications of a baby to protect along the way. Marius had proven to be a handful when he was woken up, aside from then he kept relatively calm.

"There's footprints up here and I think some tire tracks, looks like a tank actually," she whispered over the comm.

"You're not following them are you? We're supposed to be avoiding engagements right now," he tried to remind her but knew she was already letting curiosity take control. Three days of walking without firing a weapon had a way of making anything else look interesting.

"Maybe they've got an outpost out here or a supply line. We could use the help," she rationalised. "The Reapers haven't got tanks, right?"

"Not that we've seen so far but that doesn't mean you can relax your guard either," sometimes he felt like Tarina was more of a child than Marius, she constantly needed a firm hand to guide her away from spontaneous impulses.

He knew she was most comfortable when she was the one in control of a situation, even if she had to make up what she was doing as she went along. He wanted to blame her attitude on youth and inexperience because he wanted to believe she was smarter than her actions let on. Then again, he had often found the intelligence of others to be inferior or at least radically different from his own. Perhaps it was one more thing he had taken for granted in his life, not everyone could be a highly competent tactician.
"I'm tired of not knowing what we're supposed to be fighting," she said for what felt like the millionth time since they had left the city. That line of thinking led no where, Magnus had been trying to figure it out as well. How had the Reapers known everything about them and they still knew nothing in return?

"We're not supposed to be fighting anything yet," was his stern response.

"Do you hear gunfire up ahead? Sounds like something is going on, the trees are thinning out a bit, could be a small town or similar," she reported back and Magnus sighed, knowing that he should have taken point instead. "Not gunfire. Found that tank. Destroyed, barely fit for scrap metal. Damn it, no survivors. Its been burning for several hours now so no supplies either."

"Tarina, please, you're starting to make me nervous," he said at last.

"I'm only a kilometre ahead.." she said in her most reassuring voice, the one she used to persuade Marius to eat his food. Fortunately for her, the voice had a similar effect on Magnus.

"Ok, but no heroics. If you see anything move, fall back. Better to live and fight another day than risk exposing your position," he could hear static cutting into their open channel. Interference of that level had to have a close source. Tarina had noticed it too, she waited behind a cluster of uprooted trees for Magnus to catch up to her.

"Something's out here," she said quietly when he approached and he nodded his agreement.

"Keep our packs here, I'll hold onto Marius if you want to have a look around," he said as he shifted Marius's harness so that he was more to the side than in front of him, giving him room to pull his rifle off his back. He looked through the scope and checked the heatsink as he always did when drawing it.

"Thought I was making you nervous?" Tarina said with a grin.

"You haven't given me reason not to trust you so far," he tried to say dismissively. He was sure that they were being more paranoid than they needed to be. "Any idea what got that tank's crew?"

"It's so badly damaged that its hard to tell. No one made it out and the trees were only hit with shrapnel after it exploded. I'd say it was hit from an aerial assault, maybe orbital," she suggested.

"Let's hope they can't target a single tank on the ground from space," he said more for his benefit than hers. "Alright, standard perimeter sweep then we get back on the move."

"Yes, sir," she gave him a mock salute then moved from tree to tree with her shotgun at the ready.

Magnus let her get to the mid-range of his rifle's scope before he followed her path. He watched her flank for any sudden movements as they followed the hill away from the clearing created by the vehicle's destroyed chassis. It was dark, the sun had already set behind the clouds and there was a light mist in the air. The valley below them was shrouded in fog, hiding whatever lurked beyond.

The further they got away from the tank, the more obvious it became what its mission had been. They could make out the towering buildings of a manufacturing facility wedged between the hills, lightly defended by fences and artillery guns positioned on watchtowers at each corner. What they couldn't tell from their vantage point was if the facility was occupied by anyone, it was too dark to make out the details. Naturally Tarina was angling to get a closer look, it might be a defendable location if they were lucky enough to find it abandoned.

There was no natural road leading to the sight but tire marks could be seen on the ground leading to
and from its single entrance. A strong gust of wind roared past them. As it got closer, they could tell a ship was in low flight overhead.

"Get down," Magnus yelled at Tarina and the pair of them hid behind a tree together with baby Marius oblivious to all the commotion.

The ship was unlike any they had seen in the city but clearly of Reaper origin. The shape was almost organic, a lumpy cylinder with no obvious lights or synthetic parts on its surface. Magnus wasn't even sure which end was which and guessed the cylinder surrounded some sort of gun at the heart of the vessel. It was a massive vessel, not as big as the destroyers but certainly bigger than the harvester troop transports.

"What the hell is that? A bigger transport ship?" Tarina tried to guess as they watched it lower into the courtyard area of the facility. Lights went on around the watchtowers and the fog was dispersed.

"Well, that answers who owns the facility. Is this place on any local maps?"

"Checking.. it's listed as a weapons manufacturing plant. There's not a lot of information. Given the remote location, I'd guess that they do some experimental testing here. Do you see all the piles of machinery outside the gates? Looks like the Reapers have gutted the place. Don't they need to make weapons too, why rip the place apart when it could be used for their own purposes?"

"Maybe their technology isn't compatible with ours. Let's..get a closer look. I know, going to regret saying that. As long as we avoid the front entrance anyway. Not that I see any other from here."

They made their way quietly down the hill toward the fence that surrounded the complex of buildings, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. Without their packs, movement was faster though Magnus had to go slow to keep Marius from making much noise. The fence was remarkably sturdy, typical turian workmanship. There were no weak points to exploit.

They hid behind a corner by an empty building while they tried to work out where the enemy's units were positioned. None were patrolling that they could see and they didn't see any marauders aside from those unloading whatever was on the ship or guarding the entrance. There was an odd fuzziness to the area as if it were sending out a jamming signal which explained the static on their comms.

"Starting to get a headache, what about you?" Tarina said.

"Yeah, feels like something is whispering at the edges of my mind. Glad you said something, thought maybe I was hearing things," Magnus responded as he rubbed a hand over his crest, trying to physically push the sensation away.

"This place is unsettling. Not many guards. Can we get inside? I want to know what's on that ship."

"Walls like this aren't easily breached, you can't just cut your way in with an omniblade. Hm, what's the armour-piercing on that shotgun like? Never seen that one before."

"Wouldn't expect you to unless you've been hanging around with batarian slavers. The AT-12 Raider laughs in the face of armour, bet it can punch a good size hole in that fence. Will make a lot of noise though.."

Magnus looked around for inspiration. He noticed the comm relay on top of one of the buildings. If there was a jamming signal, it would have to be coming from there which meant there would be some sort of power source keeping the signal live. Ideally he could find the conduit and short it
out, causing a minor power failure that might work as a distraction. That would involve being inside and aware of the position of the wiring, a luxury they didn't yet have. He couldn't reach the tower with his omnitool but he could throw a biotic field at it.

"I've got an idea, never tried this before so be ready for anything," he told Tarina and she prepared the shotgun's heatsink to unload when the moment was right.

Carefully, Magnus began to form a ball of a mass effect field in his hands, similar to the early formation of a singularity. He timed the casting so that when he let go of the field at the tower above that his omnitool would send out an electrical shock along with it. The throw became a propelled overload effect, the first cast failed to hit the target proving that his idea was at least feasible if not refined. He tried again with a bigger field, Tarina watched him closely to make sure that she had her timing right as well. Three loud bangs rang out as she fired into the wall, the electrical ball having produced its desired effect.

Had the camp been in friendly hands, response teams would have been sent out immediately to see what the problem was but the Reapers hardly noticed the disruption. The lights and other devices that ran on electrical power were only out briefly. Magnus and Tarina made short work of their small hole with their omniblades. They hugged the back end of the building which had provided them with ample cover.

Magnus broke the lock on the door with a simple hacking program on his omnitool and the two of them rushed inside, barricading the door behind them with whatever they could find. The small building proved to be the barracks though most of the furnishing had been removed like the machinery from the other buildings. Nobody came to investigate their position so they caught their breath and watched out the window for whatever it was that had the Reapers' undivided attention.

"They're not off loading cargo, so much for replenishing supplies. Looks more like people, prisoners maybe. Spirits, there's children," Tarina gasped and looked frantically around the dark room. "Where's Marius?"

"Right here," Magnus said calmly as he handed their son to his worrisome mother. He took a moment to confirm what Tarina had seen before sitting on the floor next to her. He had seen two lines forming, one of adults and one of children being directed by the marauders in opposite directions towards the main building. Quietly, trying not to alarm her further, "I don't think we're going to like what we find here. You sure you want to keep looking?"

She clutched Marius to her chest so tightly that he began to express his displeasure with a low cry that only babies could do. "We have to know. Maybe we can do something."

"The two of us? We are already taking a huge risk being this close. We need to be careful, for Marius' sake if not our own," he put a hand on her shoulder and she closed her eyes, nodding in agreement.

"Those kids that blew up on the shuttle, they might have been the lucky ones," Tarina whispered. He could only guess at what horrible ideas her imagination had conjured up for the prisoners outside. It was hard to disagree with an instantaneous death over something more prolonged and likely painful. But children had no place in war, not even turian ones. He could feel himself getting angry and judging by the cross look on Tarina's face she was feeling it too.

"We'll wait until the ship leaves or powers down or whatever it is it does then sneak in around the manufacturing plant's backside. There has to be some sort of maintenance walkway that we can get a good look from. I haven't seen many of the other ground force types yet, might be some inside or patrolling about. But those marauders are smart, they might not be as easily fooled as the others."
Keep an eye out for anything useful and be prepared for anything."

"I don't need the warnings, I know how to keep quiet," she snapped at him as he went over his desired orders. "Sorry, you're trying to help. I might not be a veteran like you but you can't just give me orders either. I'm not a kid."

"It's a bad habit, used to being in charge," he admitted. He then got up and helped her to her feet while making sure Marius was secured on her waist. Placing both hands on her shoulders before they made their move he said, "Brace yourself. If it gets too risky, we pull out right away and head for the hills to the north. You're not on your own here."

She handed him her Carnifex since it was likely to gain less attention than the rifle and touched his hand gingerly when he took it. For Tarina, that was the closest she could get to saying she appreciated someone being there for her. Magnus didn't dwell on it, they had to be quick on their feet if they were to scout the place and live to tell about it.

The courtyard was quiet, the ship had departed when it was no longer needed. There were the occasional squads of marauders walking about, checking that the fence was secure. They didn't seem too worried about drawing attention to their schemes, the remote location was their main defense. That and the possibility that they could call in more, deadlier ships at any time they felt threatened.

Magnus was curious as to how they communicated, there were no obvious mechanical devices such as omnitools or visors, no terminals, nothing but the radio tower that had no way of utilising advanced Reaper technology. Even curioser, there were no supplies around the camp, nothing to feed the prisoners or the enemy with, no munitions either. On the outside, the complex looked fairly normal but it was missing a lot of the things any functionable facility would need to operate.

He led Tarina up a ladder that connected with a catwalk that surrounded the edge of the main building's second story. The building was three stories tall, big enough to house the devices needed to mass produce assault weaponry. The windows they were able to reach allowed them a view of multiple levels. Without the machinery in place, there was a lot of open space for the Reapers to repurpose. They could see the lines of the children and adults diverging away from each other, funneled down separate hallways.

Parents were crying out to their children, the children were struggling and frightened. Whenever anyone broke ranks, the marauders incapacitated them with the blunt end of their guns, occasionally using their sharp talons or other parts of their body to bludgeon their victims into obedience. They showed no remorse or concern for whether their victim could defend themselves or not, there was no distinction made between the young and the old. The children were eventually sent upstairs while the adults were separated into new lines. All of them resisted their captors, all of them were forced back into line. None of them were killed outright, not even to be made examples of. Whatever the marauders wanted from them, it required them to be alive.

Magnus and Tarina watched in horror as they learned of how the Reapers repurposed their captives to be used against their enemies, just as the primarch had warned them they would do. To see it for themselves was completely different. The adults were forced into two rooms though they couldn't tell what determined which each was assigned to.

One room contained disc-like platforms that looked vaguely familiar from footage of the Battle of the Citadel, devices presumably of geth origin. The victims unfortunate enough to be selected for that fate were turned instantly into monstrous creations when their bodies were impaled on large spikes. It was abhorrent, though they had suspected the marauders had once been normal people they all looked the same when the process was complete. Male, female, tall, short... every turian
came out looking like a nightmare. Once complete, the new marauders helped do the same to the rest of the prisoners.

The screams that came from the first room were brief, unlike those from the other one. The second room contained pod-like structures with translucent lids that encapsulated the occupants in a tight space. There were a series of tubes that ran along the wall to a series of large vats at the back of the building where several marauders stood guard. It was the most heavily defended portion of the entire area.

They couldn't make out visually what happened when people were placed into the pods but they knew nothing came back out of them. The horrible truth was that they were the ascended few that would be liquified and preserved in another Reaper vessel. The marauders that managed the room revered the individuals as if they were of a greater importance. However, their reverence didn't stop them from destroying them in the most cruellest way imaginable.

Tarina couldn't stomach it, she began to shake as she turned away from the window. Magnus wasn't sure if it was the cold of being outdoors on an autumn night in the foothills or the chills one got when they saw something they shouldn't. He found himself praying for the first time in his life to long forgotten gods to ease the suffering of his people, it was all he could think of doing. While Tarina had seen enough, he had to know that the children fared better than their adult counterparts, a case of morbid curiosity.

There was a blue glow emanating from the second story where the children were gathered. He had to find another window to glimpse inside and was appalled by the stark contrast of their fate. The children sat in a circle on their knees before some strange device with a blue globe of pure energy at its centre. At first he thought it was a drive core from its shape. The view was relaxing and as he stared at it he could feel nothing, as if his senses had all turned off at once.

The whispers at the back of his mind intensified, someone was watching him. He turned around to look but no one was there, the spell was temporarily broken. Cautiously he focused his attention on the occupants of the room instead of the device. They were transfixed by it. Some were looking up at it in awe, as if it were a divine being granting them wisdom. The children were of various ages, they looked to be at peace while their parents suffered untold traumas below them.

Magnus could feel Tarina's hand slip into his as she rejoined him. Her shaking had subsided but he could tell she wasn't well, he couldn't blame her for wanting to revel in ignorance. The truth was terrible and neither of them knew how to express their thoughts.

"Don't look at the light," he warned her and she heeded his advice without question.

"What are they doing to them? They're not in chains or anything, just sitting there."

"I don't know. As far as I can tell, they're not even gathering information. No torture or anything like that. The Reapers already know everything they need to know. They convert sentient beings into some sort of hybrid synthetic-organic zombie creature that's basically mindless. You can almost see the resemblance between the different types of husks and what they used to be.

The children are probably being brainwashed or similar. Being primed to infiltrate our ranks from within. Who would shoot or distrust a child? It's the most insidious tactic. But with all their firepower why would they even need to resort to mind games or psychological warfare? So much doesn't add up."

"I remember where I've seen the devices from the first floor. They were in some of the images
from the wreckage on the Citadel two years ago, humans call them Dragon's Teeth or something. A lot of what we've seen makes me think of that incident."

"That might be how they know so much about us. Damn it, why would the Council hold information like this back? We could have prepared for this."

"Nothing could prepare us for an unconventional war," Tarina said astutely which surprised Magnus. He often forgot how smart she was. "The device looks almost prothean in origin, I did some reading on them too. They used to rely on telepathy to transfer information. Your guess about brainwashing doesn't seem so far-fetched after all."

"I don't like being right all the time," Magnus turned his glance away from the window. He had seen more than enough. "We should think about getting out of here."

"Magnus, I need you to promise me something," she looked incredibly serious and her grip on his hand had became painfully tight. "Swear to me that you won't let these things capture me alive. I'd rather be dead. Please, swear it."

He stared unblinkingly at her, what she was asking was no small request and her emotions were running unusually high. He knew she meant it, she needed to hear the words before she could move on. As he spoke the words, he knew he needed it too, "I swear to you, Tarina Atreides, that as long as I live, you will not be taken by the enemy alive. Will you do the same for me?"

"Yes, of course," her grip began to loosen as the pact was sealed without ceremony. "Thank you."

"I keep saying this but you never seem to hear it: you're not alone, Tarina. I'm going to get us through this fight. Those bastards won't get their talons on either of us."

"If one of us dies, the other has to protect Marius," she said it as if saying it out loud was necessary to calm her nerves.

"We'll worry about that if and when it happens. Don't get yourself worked up, ok?"

"Did you hear that?" she said, ignoring him.

A loud crash could be heard from the back of the room, the peeked inside once more but couldn't see what was happening. Judging by the noise, a fight was ensuing between some of the children and their guards. It was a brawl, punches and shouts could be heard while the rest of the room seemed not to care about what was going on. By the time they could see who was involved, the two kids were picking themselves off the ground and running madly for the windows toward another section of the catwalks. They both had acquired weapons from their captors, the glass was easily shattered by a quick burst from one of the Phaestons.

Tarina moved to grab her gun but Magnus sternly grabbed her wrist, "There's nothing we can do. Get ready to run."

The boys were already on the ground, their agility served them well in dodging fire from the alerted marauders running to intercept them. The distraction was enough to keep the enemy busy, they didn't see the two adults watching them from above.

One of the boys tripped and was shot in the back of the leg. He screamed out, causing the other boy to stop suddenly though he had gained a fair amount of ground. Magnus couldn't tell exactly
how old they were but was sure they were no more than two or three years younger than Tarina.

"Don't let them get you, Theseus!" the wounded one yelled at his comrade.

"I'm not leaving you behind, this was your idea," the other shouted back.

"One of us has to make it out, damn it. Shoot me, I'm not going back in there. What are you waiting for!"

The one called Theseus hesitated, his gun was aimed shakily at the other boy. The marauders had caught up to him and were beginning to drag him away. While the commotion kept them busy, Magnus and Tarina began to move towards the other end of the compound. They could still hear everything as it transpired.

"I can't, Darco. I'm not a good shot. And I think I love you," Theseus was losing his nerve and his opportunity to escape.

"Take the damn shot!" Darco shrieked.

Several shots were fired and Darco went silent. Theseus turned to run but he was too distraught to gain the momentum he needed. The fence proved an effective barrier and he was cornered easily. He took his own life when he was left with no other choice.

"We could have helped them!" Tarina yelled at Magnus but he wasn't listening, he was practically dragging her behind him as they ran for the trees that covered the hills overlooking the facility.

He was running harder than he had ever done in his life, anxious to put distance between them and the nightmares they had witnessed. The distraction had been welcomed but the voices of the two boys had threatened to weaken his resolve. They were barely adults, they couldn't have known what love was and they'd never be given the chance to find out. It was all grossly unfair. The cold night air began to chill his bones but inwardly he was already frozen. Hesitation could get one killed, as Theseus had learned the hard way.

They ran for hours and were only slowed down by the steepness of the hillside. Magnus' muscles were beginning to give out on him, the exertion had proven too much. Tarina was ahead of him when he collapsed. She came running back as soon as she noticed that he wasn't keeping up.

"A bit further, come on," she urged him but he was too busy trying to keep his breathing under control.

"Sorry, we've been doing this for hours now. I can't remember the last time I ate anything," he said. His mind was beginning to go fuzzy from exhaustion. He couldn't quite pinpoint the source of why he was so low on energy, it could have been a combination of factors. Then suddenly he realised he hadn't been surviving on his own rations but the basic ones Tarina had used to prepare their meals. He hadn't thought much about it since he hadn't tried using his biotics for days and he had enjoyed watching her cook and tend to him.

"A little further and we can make camp, I'll help you," she offered him a hand and he slowly got back to his feet. Marius was asleep on her leftside so he leaned against her right. She put an arm around him and they made their way to the summit of hill.

"What's wrong?" she asked him, knowing full well that he was too fit to have collapsed in such a
fashion without warning.

"You know how biotics need to eat more than non-biotics? Well, it's not just so we can use our abilities. Even for basic function we need to consume more nutrients. I don't know all the science involved but never really had to deal with not having the right amount before. I should have planned for this, there's some emergency rations in my armoured compartments. Was saving them. And we left our packs back by that tank, by the way."

"I know, ok, tell me what to do," she said with worry in her voice.

They sat against an overturned tree while Magnus tried to make sense of what had just happened. He began to loosen the buckles of his armour to ease the process and to look for the hidden compartments he had spoken of. Tarina wanted to make a fire but they were still too close to the facility and couldn't risk giving away their location. After two ration bars, he was beginning to shake less and able to relax some what.

"I don't expect to get much sleep after all this," Tarina said.

"If I didn't need the rest right now, I'd be inclined to agree," Magnus responded with a grunt as he repositioned himself.

Without thinking about it, he leaned his head against her chest. He was cold and shaken from what he had seen, all he wanted was to curl up like a kid and forget it all. She moved so that he could rest against her lap, placing Marius in his arms as she did so. Marius lay on his stomach and tried to grab at his father's mandibles with his little fists. Magnus hardly noticed, pleasantly distracted by Tarina's soft touches against his forehead. She gently began to rub his frustrations away, lightly stroking his crest and occasionally the back of his head which was the most sensitive spot for a male.

His mind was buzzing with questions after seeing what the Reapers were willing to do. So was Tarina's and she was much more awake than him. Much to his dismay, she wasn't willing to let it go for the night.

"The Reapers aren't interested in resources or conquering. They just want to eliminate us completely. Total annihilation," she stated.

"Not just us, they want the entire galaxy to suffer," he reminded her.

"But why? What's the point?"

"Do they need a reason? It is what it is. I'd rather not talk about it now, maybe tomorrow or some other time."

"I need a reason."

"All we need to understand is how to stop them."

"If we knew their purpose we might able to find a weakness to exploit."

"Let me know when you find the answer to that. Greater minds than ours have contemplated the meaning of existence, the need for life and death, the reason for conflict and so forth. We're fighting because we have to, that's our purpose. I'd rather not figure out what theirs is," he turned to
face the opposite way so that she could continue to touch the back of his neck. Marius kicked out at him for the shift in movement but was quickly enticed back to sleep as Magnus held him.

"After everything we've just seen, that's probably for the best," she agreed and dropped the matter.

They'd have to search in earnest soon for new supplies and get the word out about what happened to those that were captured. Magnus and Marius drifted off to sleep together as she watched over them. There had been enough excitement for one day and Tarina was relieved that they were momentarily safe.
Chapter 23

Magnus awoke suddenly with a sharp pain in his chest. For a few fleeting seconds, he couldn't breathe and thought he may have been wounded in the night. He couldn't remember where he was or what day it was, his mind was still addled from the over exertion from the day before. Something soft patted his face, a small hand gripped his mandibles. He opened his eyes and Marius stared back at him, his green orbs big and full of worry.

He wasn't sure if he had made any noise when he came to but Tarina came bounding toward him the moment his mind began to make sense of his surroundings. She looked wild with bits of leaves and branches still stuck in the cowl of her armour, his Valiant was slung over her shoulder as she crouched beside him. Immediately she put the back of her hand to his forehead, something mothers did when children cried out in the middle of the night to check for fever. The soft fabric of her glove calmed him down, he hadn't even noticed that he had begun to show signs of panic. His muscles relaxed and she gingerly pulled Marius off of his father as if his weight had been the source of whatever troubled him.

"Magnus, are you alright?" she asked as she crouched over him, still touching his brow lightly. Marius began to cry, not convinced that he wanted to be in his mother's grasp again.

"Sorry for waking you, Marius," Magnus apologised and patted him on the head lightly which was enough to soothe him. "I'm fine, I think..still feeling sore from yesterday. Mentally and physically. That and was having a really bad dream. You left Marius with me?"

"He was safest here, I've been keeping watch all morning from that tree over there. I could see both of you and the facility that we left behind. They sent out patrols but none came up the hills, none so far anyway. Hope you don't mind that I borrowed your rifle, the scope was rather useful," she explained. He kind of liked the look of the gun on her, some day he'd have to show how her to aim it properly.

"It's no trouble," he said as he lifted his head and tried to stretch his arms and legs.

He was still wearing the lower half of his armour, the chest piece, bracers, and shoulder guards had been piled up neatly under his head. Not the most comfortable of beds but they had little else to use. Bushes and small trees kept them camouflaged and safe. There was no fire and no packs of supplies to worry about.

"Are you going to tell me what you dreamt about?" she inquired.

"I've given you enough reasons to worry about me for one day," he responded.

"Nonsense. The best way to get over a bad dream is to talk about it. Trust me, I've had my fair share of them. Never really had anyone to talk though."

"It's not very clear now but I'll try to remember.

I was with my family at our old house on Invictus, the one Andronicus and I grew up in. We were fighting off the Reapers, mostly cannibals and husks. A destroyer was nearby creating havoc. As the dream progressed, more and more forces joined the fight. One by one, my family and everyone I've ever known would disappear. Marauders began to attack, soon it was only marauders and I knew somehow that everyone had been converted. Eventually, I was the last one alive, completely on my own."
I fought wave after wave and then my gun ran out of ammo and I was forced to resort to biotics. The house was in ruins, there was fire everywhere but still more of those abominations came at me. They had biotics too. Or rather, all the marauders disappeared to be replaced by a single one with biotics. He looked familiar, I think now that I recognise the face as that of the Spectre that attacked the Citadel. That barefaced one with the geth implants. He charged his biotics and I charged mine.. we ran at each other, ready to unleash our attacks and then.. I woke up.

The dream wasn't the most disturbing part. There was this insatiable emptiness left in my mind when I woke up, I don't know how to describe it. Like being abandoned, felt completely cut off from everyone. Not just from people I know but society as a whole. Loneliness is probably the right word but it was more intense than that. It's gone now, all I have is a terrible headache instead."

Tarina squeezed his hand, "You're fine now."

"I know. Thanks for looking after me," he said with absolute sincerity. She stared hard at him as if she didn't believe the words.

"It's my pleasure," she tried to force a smile.

"What time is it anyway?"

"A little before midday. Storms rolled through in the night, it's going to be a cold day."

"You let me sleep in that late?"

"I was surprised you could sleep at all after what we saw yesterday. Anyway, now that you are up and about, we should take stock of what we have and get moving again. I want to be as far away from that processing plant of whatever they call it as possible."

They both took off the remainder of their armour and assessed what sort of things were tucked into their pockets. There wasn't much to go through. Marius kept grabbing pieces and trying them on, it amused Magnus that his son was already starting to think like a soldier.

"I've got.. enough ration bars for 4 days, two tubes of medigel, this QEC adapter that I found which contains all the useful information for a bigger device if we can ever figure out what to do with it. And that's all. What about you?"

"About the same, minus the QEC. Though it's really 2 days worth of rations since I'll give half to Marius. It won't be the best thing for him but will have to do. Should be able to crush them up into smaller pieces. Got some formula powder but nothing to prepare it in so that's useless. Wish we had a proper medkit and some more thermal clips."

"That'd be nice," Magnus agreed as he brought up his omnitool, "Searching the local area.. one good thing about being on the homeworld is that there are maps for everything. Looks like a small farming community about 5 kilometres northwest of here. Even if it's abandoned, should find something of use. The Reapers don't seem to need food like we do, they're not going to be interested in any targets that don't provide them with more troops."

"That's the grim truth of it. We have supply lines and they don't. Everything about them is so unnatural. The Reapers are unequivocally wrong," Tarina surmised.

She shuddered as she remembered the way the prisoners were treated like a commodity. Magnus reached out to hold her and for a brief moment they enjoyed the warmth of being close to another soul. Without a fire it was the best they could do, the easterly winds were beginning to sweep in
and reminded them that they had to start moving again.

"We better get moving soon," Magnus could hear himself say it but he didn't want to be on his feet again so quickly.

Despite the terror they faced with the Reapers at their heels, he was starting to enjoy spending time with Tarina. He wasn't sure if she was aware that he rarely let people get physically close to him. He was finding it difficult to honour the unspoken agreement they had made to not get involved in a close relationship with one another. Each time she touched him or spoke about things she would never tell anyone else, he wanted it to mean something more. She was still so young and despite being a mother showed no signs of wanting to settle down. He would just have to make the most of their time together. If they lived long enough to see the end of the war, things could always change.

"Magnus?" she said and he broke out of his daze. She was waiting rather patiently for him to catch up to her and Marius.

"Sorry, still not feeling a hundred per cent better. Mind if we go at a slower pace for awhile?" normally he'd avoid showing his vulnerable state to others but he knew she wasn't judging him.

"Sure, until we reach the flatter terrain anyway. I don't think we're equipped to live off the land like we did on Invictus so we can't dawdle too long," she reminded him and he smiled. She was beginning to lecture him and he didn't mind at all.

She was right, hunting was hardly a viable option when it was just the two of them. There was very little game in the forest, most had been frightened off by the fighting. Either that or they had migrated to warmer climates for the season. They stuck close together as they journeyed north, neither overly eager to get separated from the other in case something went wrong.

Most of the walk had been uneventful but occasionally Tarina got bored enough to strike up conversation to which Magnus was grateful. Normally he didn't feel like he had a lot to say. She asked lots of questions and he was glad that she was taking some interest in his life. He could hardly remember the last time anyone else cared to know more about him.

"If you hadn't came to rescue me, what would you be doing now with the cabals?" she asked.

"Well, I'd probably be stuck on a ship some where talking strategy and tactics with generals that think they know better. Our first couple of squads never reported back. No surprise, cabalists aren't supposed to fight on the frontlines. Some idiots sent them in anyway.

I'd probably be spending a lot of time arguing with superior officers about how to efficiently use our forces. Convincing them that we work best in smaller engagements with the element of surprise on our side. And they'd probably say that's a bunch of bullshit because they don't understand how useful biotics can be. Then I'd probably feel guilty for sending troops out to fights they couldn't possibly win and it'd be terrible to watch the reports come in. Eventually I'd get desperate to join the fight on the ground, to get my own talons dirty as they say instead of commanding from afar.

I guess in some ways I'm doing that now. We weren't supposed to be stuck here this long, we should be with the fleet by now. My mother would be fussing over us, wanting to see the baby and making sure we were on her ship. Instead, here we are on the ground. Looking at a longterm survival plan that will probably involve gathering similar individuals together and fighting the enemy on our terms. All I've done is skipped the senseless buecracy and gotten straight to the heart of the war. " 
"How did you convince them to let you come here with the evacuation was cancelled?"

"I bent a few rules with my brother's help. As I said, our first couple of squads didn't make it back. One of them had the CO for my cabal and I was named as her replacement according to the rules of succession. So my brother helped me dig deep into some war time protocols and I found that a CO could basically design a mission with them at the head of it in certain circumstances.

That's what I did, I was supposed to be coming down to the surface to investigate what had happened to our lost squads and to evaluate points of weakness where the cabals could be deployed effectively. With no eyes on the ground, it made sense to send out a scout.

In theory, no one from my cabal can be deployed to Palaven or Menae until I've authorised that it's safe for them to land. In hindsight, I might be doing them a service with this mocked up mission. They'll put someone else in charge in my absence but they won't be able to make the same mistakes that were made at the start of the war.

Biotics are a precious commodity, we always have been. This is going to be one hell of a long fight and we can't afford to waste anyone. And anyway, nobody's going to question a man who has gone to retrieve his family. It's not like I'm a deserter or committed an act of dishonour."

"So you did have an alternative motive for coming to Palaven after all."

"You were always my top priority, Tarina. You and Marius. Family first, duty second. It's a saying I've heard a million times before. Maybe you're less familiar with the idea but you are family now."

"I'm nothing special. We would have found a way offworld eventually, with or without your help."

"You can't know that for sure."

"I'm sorry you got stuck here with us. You could be doing much more with the fleet now."

"I don't really see it that way. I want to be here. With you.

Before I met you, I was thinking about retiring. Not many cabalists live long enough to get that chance. That assignment to train you and the others was supposed to have been my last. I thought I had done everything there was to do.

Then you came along and changed everything. Don't tell me you're not special, because you are. You've had a greater impact on my life than anyone else has in all my 43 years. Nothing has made me happier than the moment I saw Marius in your arms for the first time, alive and safe with his loving mother.

The war was unexpected but we'll get through it. I don't know how to make you understand that you're the most important woman in the entire galaxy. The fleets can take care of themselves but there's only one of you.

We would never have had a normal life during peace time due to me being in the cabal. I have a chance to do things now that I never would have had otherwise. So I'm going to take advantage of what time we have together because who knows what the future holds."

"I don't.. I don't really know what to say to that. You're starting to be rather persistent and stubborn on this subject. It's not that I don't like having you around, quite the contrary. But I need time to get used to the idea of having someone in my life that gives a damn about me."

"Take your time, there's no hurry. In the mean time, why don't I carry Marius for a bit. You've had
him all day and I can tell you're itching for a reason to scout ahead." He knew she was growing uncomfortable with the conversation and he couldn't tell if he had overstepped any bounds. There would be better times to have such talks in the future.

He couldn't figure out what had allowed him to express his thoughts so openly, many of them hadn't been properly formulated in his head before he had spoken them out loud. Whenever he closed his eyes, he could feel her touch against his skin like a whisper and he knew it was right. Everything they had seen of the Reapers was abhorrent, disgusting, alien. But Tarina made him feel the opposite despite her lack of effort. Every time he looked at Marius he saw a miracle, someone that shouldn't have been possible. Whether Tarina came to grips with herself or not, he was already convinced that she was someone that deserved protection and affection, perhaps even love if she would ever be open to such an emotion.

The more he saw her mothering either Marius or himself, the more he wanted to hold her tight and never let go. If he were more of a free spirit like his brother he might entertain the idea of running away from the war with her at his side. But he was duty-bound, as was she, and if they didn't win the war there would be no chance to experience the bounties that came with peace.

They continued moving towards their new objective with Tarina several metres ahead. The land was flat with the occasional skinny tree dotting the landscape. The grasses were waist-high and of a grey-ish colour with a metallic sheen that changed from blue to purple based on the viewer's perspective and the amount of light. Though it was his people's homeworld, it couldn't look any more different than the world Magnus had grown up on with its lush green plants and diverse wildlife. He took note of whatever footprints they passed and tried to determine how recently animals had passed through the area in case they were forced to live off the land again.

The clouds got darker as the day wore on, a constant drizzle kept them wet and uncomfortable. Magnus resorted to carrying Marius in his arms so that he could easily monitor how dry he was within his blankets. His armour deflected much of the water away from his son but that didn't help his mood. He constantly had to find new ways to keep him amused, sometimes continuing the nursery rhyme that he had started several days ago.

He wasn't watching Tarina when a series of gun shots were fired nearby. She had had her shotgun out, ready to warn Magnus if there were enemies ahead. It wasn't enough, whoever fired the shots could see further than she could. Instinctively she dropped to a prone position to better determine where the shots were coming from. Her reaction time was too slow, she screamed out as something sharp pierced into her shoulder. All Magnus saw was her entire body falling immediately to the ground, from his vantage point it looked as if she had been wounded in a vital area. No more shots were fired after the first two, in the distance it sounded like someone had barked "Cease fire!" but he couldn't tell if his mind had made it up or not.

"Tarina!" he yelled and wanted to run immediately to her side. Instinct told him to take cover, to protect Marius first then evaluate whether it was safe to get to her. He had learned to rely on instinct when it was at odds with his better judgment.

"What the fuck just hit me!" she cried. A few more colourful expletives followed. Magnus was quite impressed with her vocabulary.

"Where were you hit?" he tried to keep fear out of his voice but he was beginning to prepare for the worst.

"Arm, side, shoulder. Nothing important. Damn it," she grunted, trying to not let the pain overwhelm her. She was a tough woman but he didn't need her to put on act for his benefit.
Carefully he crawled over to where she lay with Marius clumsily holding onto his chest. He sat him down beside her as he tried to make sense of what was happening. Tarina was bleeding profusely from her upper right arm, the shoulder guard was dented in where the bullet had pierced through. Some of the metal had been melted, he undid the buckle to get a better look at the damage. The blood began to drip down her arm, dark blue and smelling of burnt carapace.

"I'm here, it's ok, you can roll over. Keep an eye on Marius while I tend to this. Going to need all of our medigel to keep the infection out," he tried to control himself by focusing on the medical task instead of his emotions at having seen the woman he cared for most in agony.

She wasn't fatally wounded, he reminded himself. But infection could be just as dangerous as a shot to a vital organ. And they lacked the items needed to extract the bullet and stitch up the wound. The best he could do was stop the bleeding and dress it to be seen to by someone who actually knew what they were doing, provided they were any where near such an individual. One problem at a time, he told himself.

Tarina did as he said and focused her attention on the baby. Marius was grabbing her other hand and showing his own concern. Much of her coarse language had died down when she realised that they weren't under attack.

"I'd recognise a shot from a Mantis any where," he said when he could see what was under her armour. The under armour suit and the uniform she wore underneath it had been burned away. Blood had soaked into both layers and made it difficult to see where the actual wound was. Magnus undid the rest of the armour that was buckled to her injured arm and put pressure on the bleeding as best he could. He was going to need something to tie around it after applying the medigel.

"Do we have any sort of bandages at all?" he asked her.

"No, nothing for a wound this big. Take half of Marius' blanket," she suggested.

"That's all he has to keep warm for now. I'll use the arm of my undersuit. Hang on a second," he said.

He then removed his own armour and used his omniblade to cut the hem where the arm met the shoulder. His uniform remained untouched underneath but he immediately felt the cool air seep through the single layer of fabric. They were going to have to find a doctor to stitch Tarina up anyway, he could tough out a day or so without proper gear on. He did another cut along the length of fabric so that it was as large as it was going to get. Tarina procured her supply of medigel from a pouch on her belt and he delicately covered her entire shoulder in the gel liquid. It wouldn't numb the pain but it was better than nothing. When he was satisfied with that, he continued by wrapping the fabric from his undersuit tightly around her shoulder, tieing it in place with a knot.

"I wish I had something to give you to take the pain away," he said honestly.

"I'll make do. Glad I moved when I did, could have been a lot worse."

"Yes, the shot was aimed at your neck. Your shoulder took the brunt of it, good instincts."

"It was luck really. I was already dropping to the ground when it hit. I could hear it being fired but couldn't tell which direction or how far. Thank you for mending it."

"You're not in the clear yet, the bullet is in deep. We need to get you to a real medic fast. And someone's going to answer for this, no Reaper would have such precision with a gun like that."

"I think the bone is broken, sounded like something shattered," Tarina added.
"Can you move your fingers?" he held her hand palm up to watch her try. She struggled to do it but all three were in working order.

"Barely, hurts like hell," her voice shook from the effort.

"Better to break the bones than ligaments. Those take much longer to heal."

"I'm feeling better already just hearing that," her sarcasm was back in full. Slowly he helped her back to her feet. At her request, he placed Marius back in her arms since she wouldn't be able to use either of her guns for quite some time.

"Let's find out who's responsible for this. My biotics are itching to repay them." With the immediate crisis averted, his emotions were bubbling back to the surface. Only moments ago he had exposed his feelings to a woman who wasn't ready to return them. Any attack on her was an attack on him. She didn't try to calm him down or talk sense into him, he wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

When they came to the end of the meadow they had been in for most of the day, the grasses became much shorter and revealed a freshly dug bunker not too far away. Magnus was torn between staying at Tarina's side or marching ahead of her to deal with the incompetent soldiers who had dared to take a shot at one of their own people. She kept Marius close to her chest with her good arm, worrying more for his safety than ever before. Somehow he could tell she was hurt and tried to lighten the burden by shifting his weight as far from her injured side as possible.

The bunker was small, not even big enough for a full platoon to stand shoulder to shoulder in. There was no banner or insignia to mark which legion resided within. A shallow crater had been dug around the makeshift walls of hastily laid concrete with shovels still sticking into the earthen walls, waiting to be used further. It was a sorry excuse for a defensive position. One of the occupants was carrying a Mantis over her shoulder and practically grovelling for forgiveness when Magnus was close enough to be seen. He must have looked as angry as he felt because the green soldier was frightened of his presence.

"I'm so sorry, sir, it was a genuine accident. I'll do whatever you want, take my medigel and rations. Anything, let me help, please," she was nearly on her knees by the time he reached her. She offered him a formal salute but he refused to return it.

"Who's in charge here?" he barked at her, having no interest in what she offered. She may have been the unfortunate soul that had pulled the trigger but a commanding officer was always responsible for the actions of his troops.

"We're not organised, as such," she hastily tried to explain. Someone cut her off before she could clarify further.

"I am," a burly lad in his early twenties said from behind Magnus. He was the biggest turian he had ever seen, nearly the size of a krogan. He had no scars or dents in his armour. A green soldier just like the woman who had shot Tarina. None of them had any business in the wilds away from discipline and reason. His armour was still shiny and new, the man wore it proudly but Magnus knew only a fool would think he was safe in such gear. "Who are you? Are you with the military police?"

"What? No. I'm Captain Magnus Thorn and this trooper of yours just shot my.." Magnus had quite nearly said 'wife' to keep the lie simple and had to think for a moment of the right rank to attribute to her, "My XO, Lieutenant Tarina Atreides. Who the hell are you and what are your orders?"
"Name's Triton Argus but the troops just call me 'Boss'," the younger man said as he boastfully stuck out his chest for emphasis. "We have no place for ranks or titles here. No place for orders neither. Seeing as you do, we might have to rectify that."

"If that's a threat, soldier, you better be ready to back it up," Magnus growled at him, his face only centimetres away from Argus who physically stepped backwards to get away from him.

"I don't have to explain myself to you. Wasn't me who shot her. Not my problem," he said dismissively. Magnus looked over at the young woman with the sniper rifle. She looked absolutely terrified but not of him, she kept eyeing Argus warily.

"That's not how thing work and you know it. What legion are you with, tell me or I'll be the one to rectify matters," Magnus summoned the omniblade on his arm to show that he was serious. Tarina watched carefully in case she had to intervene somehow.

"Ain't got none, already told you. We're what you might call.. free men and women," he laughed but nobody laughed with him. The rest of his troops circled around to watch what their commander would do.

"Deserter," Tarina spat the word as if saying it was poisonous.

"You're not going to tell on us are you?" Argus goaded.

"And risk sending stronger fighting men and women out here to put you in chains and teach you how to behave? No, I'd rather just kill you myself like the animals you are. Why bother sending away from the real battlefields when there are easier ways to cut a cancer out?"

"We outnumber you, Captain," Argus pointed out. "If you're such good little soldiers, why are you here instead of fighting your war?"

Magnus had little interest in answering the man's questions but what he had said about numbers was true. While he had experience and bioitcs at his disposal, Tarina was wounded and carrying their infant child. If he could avoid bloodshed then talking might not be such a bad idea.

"Our platoon was wiped out not too far from here, we're the only survivors," he continued his made up story. "We were helping out of the way towns evacuate to fortified positions. Things went badly. When we were leaving, we could hear this child crying in the rubble so we took him with us. Now we're looking for an outpost to await reassignment. Or we were, the priority has changed to seeking medical attention. If you have anything useful, we could compensate with credits but little else."

"Keep your money," Argus snarled. He thought for a moment as he tried to decide if the story was believable or not. His tone softened as he looked to Tarina with what might have been genuine pity. "We don't have anything for a wound that deep. You said she's a lieutenant? Looks a bit young to be that high up."

"I graduated with honours from the officer academy," she offered helpfully. "It's amazing how quickly you can rise in the ranks if you aren't busy shooting your own people."

Argus laughed, "She's got some wit in her."

"We should probably keep moving, if you can't help then we're wasting time here," Magnus was not amused and starting to get anxious.

"Not so fast. How do we know you won't send the MPs out here? We've got a nice setup with this
position. Maybe we should get rid of you while we have the chance," Argus said with a sinister sneer though he didn't get close enough to show how serious he was. The crowd around them began to close in expecting things to escalate. Marius cried while his mother soothed him, she looked worriedly over at Magnus for his next move.

"Go ahead and try," Magnus bluffed, waving his arms palms out to show that he was unarmed. Argus scoffed at the gesture and reached for his sidearm. As he did so, Magnus began to create a mass effect field behind his back, ready to unleash a shockwave with one hand and a barrier with the other. Only Tarina standing directly behind him could see what he was doing.

Argus raised his gun but his aim was shaky. He didn't have what it took to shoot a man in cold blood, even if he lacked a sense of duty and honour. Nobody else bothered trying.

"Once a coward, always a coward," Magnus said over his shoulder to Tarina. She nodded but wasn't happy with his attempt to manipulate his foe with words alone.

"Get out of here before we change our minds," the leader of the deserters yelled, waving his pistol in the direction that they should go in.

"Thought you'd never ask," was Magnus' tart response. He put an arm around Tarina and steered her away from the tense crowd. Blood was already beginning to soak through the makeshift bandage. Their camp hadn't been well-organised or he might have tried to find something better to wrap the wound in. Even if he had had to fight to get such material, he would have been willing to do so.

The crowd parted to get out of their way. Before they could get to the edge of the bunker's hastily laid walls, the leader of the deserters yelled back at them. "Hey you, the pretty one. Lieutenant wasn't it? You don't have to go with this used up fossil with his ridiculous set of armour. One man can't protect you from the horrors out there. You're not much different than us, we could help find the medical supplies you need, patch you up, give you a new life. Nobody's coming out of this war without scars, now's the chance to get out. Could use someone with fiery spirit around here."

Tarina paused though Magnus tried to encourage her to keep moving. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath and he couldn't believe she was actually listening to what the other man had to say. He could see her contemplating Argus' offer as she looked down at Marius, wiping his cheek. A war zone was no place for a child to be raised, he would only learn of fear and death. Magnus wasn't entirely sure he could offer her a better deal but she could take the easier path if she wanted it. If she actually meant to do it, he would have to stop her some how or risk never seeing his son again. He didn’t want it to come down to that choice.

She took another breath, a look of resolution crossed her face and she handed Marius to his father. He was horrified, not only was she going to do it, she was entrusting Marius' future with him instead. Everything began to happen in slow motion as Magnus tried to make sense of her decision.

Slowly she turned around and began walking back to where Argus stood with arms wide to greet her, "Good choice, sweetheart."

When she was close enough, she raised her uninjured arm high and clocked him with all her might against his right jaw.

"How fucking dare you," she said in an icy voice as he clutched at his face. "If you want to turn tail and run, fine. But don't for a moment think we are equals. That old fossil over there? He's mine. He's saved my life more times than you have fingers. And he'll do it countless more times because he has a sense of honour that you can't even fathom. Most of us sentient beings have that. You're
hardly more than an animal, I hope you die like one."

With that, she sauntered off back to Magnus and Argus was left licking his wounded pride. The green sniper that had shot Tarina came up to her just before they left, "There's a medical outpost to the east. It's a fair hike, couldn't say exactly how far but it's your best chance."

"Thanks," Tarina said to her in a warmer tone, she wasn't even mad at the other woman. "Good luck surviving with this lot."

"I appreciate that, really, but all of us have already made our choice. For better or for worse. There's no going back now. Stay safe out there, ok?" there was regret in her young voice and for a brief moment Magnus took pity on the poor choice she had made for herself.

"We will," Magnus responded. When they were finally out of earshot of the makeshift camp, he tried to thank Tarina for what she had done. He was relieved beyond words. She brushed it off saying he would have done the same for her. Jokingly he had said, "Thanks for defending my honour, m'lady."

"Always a pleasure, now let's get out of here," she had laughed despite the pain that was beginning to run up her arm. He tried to walk close to her but she didn't want any comfort. Despite her humour, she was still quite livid over what Argus had suggested to her, "You're carrying Marius, that's enough. Besides, it's my arm that's broken not my legs."

He didn't think it was possible to admire her any more than he already did and yet she continued to amaze him. Not only was she brave, witty, smarter than she let on, and a nurturing mother figure, she was also incredibly loyal. In his experience, all of those traits were rare qualities in a single individual. He hadn't seen most since he was forced to leave his family for the cabalist life nor had he realised their value. Tarina had a way of opening his eyes when he was unaware that he had closed them. Carefully he kept an eye on her as they made their way towards proper medical treatment, he wasn't about to let anyone or anything take her away from him.
Panic encouraged him onwards, instinct took over when there wasn't enough energy to think straight. Magnus ran as fast as he could towards the artificial lights on a hill, the first sign of life they had seen for hours. He couldn't be sure of the time but was certain it was closer to morning than night time. It was dark and colder than any night they had experienced since beginning their journey, mist came out in thick plumes as he breathed heavily. He could feel Tarina's icy cold breath against his neck. Knowing that she was still alive was his only comfort.

He had been carrying her for what seemed like days, her heavy body draped over his arms in the only way he could manage both her and Marius. Marius' harness was turned around so that he was on Magnus' back, it wasn't the ideal position but there had been no other option. Her arms and legs barely moved, whenever she was conscious she pressed her face against his shoulder and wrapped her good arm around him to ease the burden. But she was no burden to him, he had put a barrier around her to reduce the weight so that he could move without being hindered. He wouldn't have minded otherwise but they were critically running out of time to do things in the usual manner.

Movement and speed were essential, they had had no idea of their destination's location relative to their starting point and Tarina's condition was growing worse as time went on. He was afraid that she had lost too much blood and might have been suffering from an infection in her wound but tried to play off his worry as concern that she had been overdoing it the last few days. She had accepted that, even if she might have suspected the truth was more complicated.

Magnus was shivering from the cold and sure that Marius was doing similar but he couldn't do anything about it. He kept moving towards the lights, or what he thought were lights ahead. His mind could have been playing tricks on him. Whenever his muscles began to cramp up, he pushed with his biotics to keep himself going beyond his limits. He was down to his last ration bar and hoped that there would be relief in the next hour, not only for his sake but for Tarina's. She was beginning to fade in and out of consciousness, frequently laying quiet and limp in his arms. The periods where she was awake and alert were becoming less common.

The lights were strange, clearly artificial but blurred behind fog and whatever else was meant to conceal them. As he got closer, he could make out the silhouette of a tent. He assumed the fabric was camouflaged print and that was what had made it difficult to see the outpost in daylight. They were close enough to make out the shapes of two vehicles, a couple of smaller tents, and the hurried voices of people working feverishly in the middle of the night. A fire was glowing brightly by the edge of the ridge which the rest of the camp overlooked. There were no guards or patrols, nobody noticed their presence at all.

With a grunt of effort and using up his final reserves of energy, Magnus was able to make his way up the rocky hillside after a couple of well-timed pauses. Tarina was awake and tried to scramble out of his grasp to make it easy on him but he wouldn't have it. The light showed how much fresh blood was pouring through her wound, her arm was nearly all blue. At the top of the hill, he was down on his knees trying to balance her with nothing left to give from his own body.

"Hang on, Tari, we made it. Just a little bit more.." he whispered to her as he tried to keep her awake. The fire at their backs would have been warm had he not been so desperately worried. She began to shake, though he wasn't sure if it was the cold or the first signs of fever. He tried to raise his voice but he could hear how rasped it was after prolonged running in the dead of night, "Somebody help, please. Somebody has to fix her, make her better. I'll do anything."

A human approached, casting a long shadow over the family of three. Magnus couldn't quite make
out her gender until he figured out where her hair was: it was sculpted into a long, woven braid against the back of her head. He hadn't quite figured out how differentiate members of her species based on anything but the length and shape of their hair since that was usually the first feature he focused on. The human wore an open lab coat over an officer's uniform.

The colours and regalia weren't the trademark blue and gold of the System Alliance but rather of a generic, legion-specific pattern that he hadn't seen before. The collar sported insignia with rank bars, denoting her status as not only an honourary Hierarchy citizen but as a lieutenant in the medical corp. The alien woman with grey eyes and brown hair outranked him by at least two tiers. Under normal circumstances, he may have been greatly agitated by her presence.

She didn't even ask what was wrong with Tarina, after one quick glance at the would-be patient she ordered two nurses, also humans, to help carry her to a bed to be examined for treatment. Before either of them could get close, Magnus made his protests known as clearly as he could manage given his level of exhaustion, "She needs a turian doctor."

"We're all your getting out here, Major," she said in a voice that left no room for argument. He was too tired to push the nurses away and they were only trying to help. The woman didn't follow them immediately back into the surgical tent. She offered Magnus a hand to get back to his feet but he refused the offer. "I can tell you don't trust me and no amount of me saying 'don't worry' isn't going to alleviate your concerns. However, you can rest assured that I earned my stripes, so to speak. I need as much information as you can give. If you're still not comfortable after answering a few questions then fine, we don't have to be friends or anything. I'm here to do a job, to patch up injured soldiers and get them back into the field. So what if I look a bit different."

Magnus was beginning to get a headache, the last thing he wanted to do was to argue why he was reluctant to trust someone who hadn't grown up among his people. She might have textbook knowledge of xenobiology but it wasn't the same as having a full cultural understanding of how the Hierarchy functioned. "Fine, what sort of questions do you have?"

"The basics. Name, age, rank, legion, family medical history, any pre-existing conditions. That sort of stuff. How long have you been travelling, what sort of wound are we dealing with here?"

"Um," Magnus scratched his mandibles as he tried to think about how much he knew regarding Tarina's personal medical history. There wasn't much though he was certain the doctors could look up her exact details if they needed to. Standard procedure would result in blood tests and the like so they wouldn't be completely in the dark. "Her name is Tarina Atreides, age 18, 27th tier, private, no legion. Not sure if it's relevant but she gave birth recently, maybe two weeks ago? That's why she doesn't have a unit assignment. I couldn't tell you much more than that, we're not really that close."

"Oh? I assumed she was your wife, the baby looks just like you," her tone softened as Magnus checked on his son.

"He is mine but we're not. no, nothing like that," he floundered, not sure how to explain it to someone foreign. "I mean, that's not to say she isn't important to me because she absolutely is. We were attacked by deserters earlier in the day, been on the move for about ten to twelve hours since. I tried confronting them, hoping to find a proper medical kit with bandages and the like but there wasn't anything like that available. I tried my best to keep infection to a minimum, to staunch the blood flow. Given how long it took us to find this outpost, it probably wasn't good enough."

"Right, I'll have my team make sure she's not suffering from hyperthermia, we've been getting a lot of such cases from travellers in the middle of the night," she began to pace as she tried to think of more questions. "She's lost way too much blood and fever has set in. How long ago did you start carrying her?"
"About an hour or so ago, though she was complaining of weariness about two hours before that. She never complains, it had to have been bad. I tried taking short breaks but eventually she was unable to keep up. It was easier to carry her without having to stop constantly, with the cool air the muscle movement was necessary."

"Good thinking. I don't know many people that would have the endurance to do what you just did. You're dedication is admirable."

"We might not be married or a couple as such but she is the mother of my child. There's nothing I wouldn't do for her."

"We'll take good care of her. I need to get back and check the blood tests, see how bad the infection has gotten. If I think of anything else, I'll come get you. For now, try to get your strength back."

Magnus sat by the fire with others waiting on patients to recover. The camp was small and already showing signs of going over capacity. The layout of tents seemed to be waiting for more supplies to come in. A small gap in the cliffside showed a cavern that was being prepared for demolitions, a much more fortifiable position than the field hospital's current vulnerable state. There was just enough shrubbery and trees that the camouflage was able to work at long distance, anyone who got too close would easily see through the disguise.

Marius sat on his father's knee, making his usual noise that indicated he wanted to be fed. A woman sitting nearby with her two sons offered him some travelling jerky from her pack and Magnus thanked her for her kind gesture. They got to talking about how they had ended up at the camp. The woman was waiting on her husband to recover from serious burns and a savage leg injury. She pointed to which bed contained him, the human doctor that had taken Tarina away was tending to him. They were close enough that Magnus could make out snippets of their conversation.

"How does your leg feel now?" the human asked him gently as she mopped his forehead with a wet towel. The male turian closed his eyes as he spoke, a sign that he felt comfortable around her.

"The pain meds are doing their job, doc," he responded though he was obviously holding back some reservations. The human didn't pry further on the matter and continued to remove his old bandages on the left side of his body.

"Poor Tiber," his wife said to Magnus as she watched beside him. "He was saving our youngest. The whole place was ablaze but that didn't stop him. He'll have scars for the rest of his life if he pulls through this. Spirits, he better pull through this."

"Do you trust a human doctor?" Magnus asked casually.

"Not really. But she knows what she's doing and she expects nothing in return," the woman assured him.

"I'm doing everything I can to preserve your leg," the human spoke as she finished adding new bandages to Tiber's charred skin. "The burns will heal over time, though it will take years for the carapace to regrow. If it comes back at all."

"That's ok, the leg's more important. I just want to get back into the fight now that my family is safe," Tiber said.

"It's hard to make you soldiers realise when it's time to take a rest," the human smiled, she was trying to make a joke instead of insulting a species that prided itself on its martial prowess. Tiber
gave a half-hearted response, fully understanding her intention to keep the atmosphere relaxed. Magnus was moved by how easily the human got along with him, even turian doctors struggled to win respect from their patients. No soldier wanted to be in a hospital when he could be doing much more. The human stayed with Tiber until he went back to sleep, watching over him like a protective parent. Maybe he had been presumptuous about her competency.

The human came over to the campfire when she was satisfied with the lull in her workload. She directed Tiber's wife, Cessia, and her children to a tent with bedrolls that was supposed to house patients that were in the final stages of recovery. There weren't enough beds for them to sleep in, every available bed was used for surgery or similar. Cessia bid Magnus good night and set off, leaving him alone with the human.

"I'm sorry, things were hectic earlier. We didn't get to properly introduce ourselves," the human put out a hand, a gesture Magnus had seen in vids before but never actually been invited to partake in. "I'm Doctor Sera Tomas. And you are?"

Hesitantly he took her hand in his own, noting how awkward her five fingers collapsed over his three, "Sergeant-major Magnus Thorn." She shook his hand firmly and let go.

"Of what legion? I'm used to everyone proudly rattling of the famous names of their unit as if I should know them all," she was smiling.

"Not that it truly matters but I'm from the garrison on Invictus. It's not as big as a whole legion but as you can imagine, we keep to ourselves," he tried to say with honestly, which surprised him slightly. Her grey eyes seemed so inviting and friendly that he saw no reason to hide from her. He wasn't accustomed to telling people that he was a cabalist, a human probably wouldn't make a big deal about it. Trying to keep the conversation moving so that he didn't have to mull over his dishonesty, he decided to indulge his mild curiosity, "Are you from Earth?"

"No, I grew up on Eden Prime, actually. Went to medical school there and everything. Came out here when I decided to pursue xenomedicine, with a specific focus on dextro organisms as you can guess."

"Ah," he realised that humans probably thought all turians came from Palaven the same way all turians assumed all humans were from Earth. He must have looked rather naive to her. "So you were already here when the fighting started?"

"Yeah, but don't worry. I'm fully qualified, I've been teaching a team of human doctors so they will be as effective in the field as me. Good thing too, doctors are going to be in high demand. This hospital doesn't look like much yet but we've already put the word out to get some fresh troops out here to reinforce and protect it. We're going to keep a safe distance from each of the major cities, patch up their wounded, then move on to the next as quickly as possible. Right now we're close to the town of Tyris, it's not as big as Cipritine but we're expecting it to get crowded real fast. I'm glad you found us when you did, otherwise Tarina wouldn't have had much of a chance."

"How is she doing?"

"She's fierce, her body is reacting well to antibiotics. The infection is almost gone already, what she needs now is lots of rest which I imagine she's going to hate very much."

Magnus grinned, he was going to have to find a way to keep Tarina calm, "That certainly sounds like her."

"I'm going to have her moved to the recovery tent soon. She won't be awake for awhile but you
should stay with her. Whenever she was conscious, she would ask for you. Rest is the best cure for her fever at this stage and it's not good to keep a baby away from their mother for too long."

"Thank you for looking after her," Magnus said with absolute sincerity.

"That's my job," Doctor Tomas said casually. "We can talk some more later if you want."

"I might have to take you up on that," he responded with more warmth that he expected. His bristly nature towards aliens was beginning to soften up significantly.

The particular tent where Tarina had been put up was mostly empty save for Cessia and her two boys curled up in a corner. The atmosphere was dramatically colder after sitting by the fireside. Tarina didn't acknowledge his presence when he sat beside her, it could be several hours before she woke up. While his body urged him to retreat for warmth, his spirit yearned to be by her side. Physical discomfort was one thing he could live with.

Marius struggled to get comfortable in his arms but he didn't know what else to do with him. Tarina's injured arm was wrapped in a sling across her chest and he wasn't too sure how much pain she was in. Her breathing was deep and he was glad that she found rest so easy. The real trick would be how long she could keep at it, as the doctor had said, she was a fiery woman that would not be content with laying in bed all day.

He must have nodded off after awhile with Marius sleeping in his arms. He felt something touch his hand and assumed it was the baby. When he opened his eyes, Tarina was staring up at him the way a needy child looks up to a parent. He had longed to see that look in her eye since he had arrived to rescue her, not that he was happy about what it had taken to achieve it. Maybe her recent injury had opened her to new possibilities, a not-so-subtle reminder of mortality had a way of changing one's perspective.

She squeezed his hand again and he squeezed back. When she let go, she motioned for him to put Marius in her good arm. Awkwardly he helped her hold him against her chest. Marius made no fuss about the movement and was relieved to be close to her again. Magnus made sure the solitary blanket that Tarina possessed was tucked snuggly around them both.

"How are you feeling?" he asked the main question on his mind.

"A bit blurry," she said quietly. "There's a lot of meds in my system right now. Apparently the infection in my arm was only one of the issues. Ever since I was pregnant, my immune system has been a bit weakened. Part of being back on Palaven, I guess. Never did climatise too well. With my body so vulnerable, a cold I've been fighting off for awhile tried to take advantage. Ironic that my entire body is a warzone of its own while we try to avoid the much more obvious battles."

"But you'll be ok, right? What has the doctor said?" Magnus once again felt guilty for not being around during her pregnancy. He picked the wrong moment in his life to suddenly care about his career, she shouldn't have had to deal with the loss of her father and a complication of health issues all on her own.

He tried to half sit, half lay on his side so that they were at eye-level, instinctively offering her an arm to lean against. The cold and his aching muscles could wait their turn, Tarina well-being was of greater importance. She accepted the gesture and continued with the conversation.

"Yeah, I'll get through it. Always do. Doc confirmed that the bone was struck, it's sprained but not broken entirely. She gave me some technical explanation about the medicine, something about training the medigel to respond to cells in the bone that would essentially help fill in the damaged
bits. The sling is supposed to train me not to use my arm for a week. Probably can't use it much after that either. I really don't want to be sitting on my ass while everyone else fights this war."

"Don't worry about that, get better then we can get you shooting at the enemy again. Besides, it might take time to rally enough people together to create a resistance cell. If we're still going to make for that monastery that you were talking about."

"I'd like to but this injury does complicate matters. We can stay with the field hospital until the doc says I can travel. Maybe grab some recruits that come here, well, once they've recovered. Not too crazy about leading a bunch of injured people into treacherous terrain."

"I'm just grateful this is something you can recover from. If the wound had been more fatal..I don't want to think about losing you," Magnus said what had been on his mind for far too long.

It wasn't that he was scared of saying it aloud or worried that she might not share in the sentiment. He had never grown so attached to anyone before, the thought of losing her was too painful to bear and he wasn't sure if that was a form of weakness that he ought to turn away. He suspected she had been hurt many times and that was why she was reluctant to engage with him in a similar way. They were both too scared of the the thing they wanted most. If they waited too long, they might lose any opportunity to conquer such fear.

"Sometimes I worry about things, especially when I have a lot of free time to sit and think," she said as she avoided looking right at him. "If you hadn't came for me, I probably would have bled out when I was shot. That or been forced to rely on the deserters for survival. If I had even made it this far on my own. And who would have looked after Marius if something had happened to me? Some of the things I’ve said to you in recent days.. they were foolish. I absolutely need you right now. I guess the main worry is that I'll do something stupid to ruin this, to push you away. As you can probably tell, I'm not very good with inter-personal relationships. People get hurt. I let them down, I let myself down. I just.. I don't think I could forgive myself for ever disappointing you."

Magnus was taken aback, he wasn't expecting her to express herself so candidly. There was a rawness to her words. He rubbed her side reassuringly, "There's nothing you could ever do to disappoint me. I need you just as much as you need me."

"Thanks, Sarge," she finally looked him in the eye. They were back to nicknames, that was a start. She leaned in close to him, actively seeking affection for the first time since the night they had spent together on Invictus. The injury had shaken her up more than she let on verbally, Magnus was prepared to make her feel safe and whole again.

Their foehheads touched for several minutes, their eyes closed as they enjoyed the intimate moment. Magnus continued to hold her against his chest, occassionally cradling the back of her head. Before they broke the embrace, he lightly brushed the underside of her mandibles and gently pinched them between his fingers, a very sensitive action that usually accompanied a deep, meaningful forehead kiss. He had never had the opportunity to share in a sensitive action of the kind before. Tarina was rather receptive, though her hands were not free to do the same to him.

An unspoken understanding passed between them. They were still alive, they still had much to learn about one another. The time of subtle courtship, if one could even call it that, was over. The war was far too real, at any moment one of them could lose their life. The safety of the hospital was a mere illusion.

"Really glad you were here when I woke up, don't want to be alone in a strange place. If you’re going to stick around, will you lay with me?" she lifted the blanket invitingly.
"Alright, but keep the blanket for yourself. You need it more than me. One moment.." he noticed that she was out of armour. In an effort to keep as comfortable as possible, he removed his own, making a neat pile next to hers beside the bedroll. There wasn't really enough room for two of them but that didn't stop him. She lay on her good side with Marius snuggled against her chest, Magnus lay similarly against her back with his arm draped over her atop the single blanket.

He had forgotten how much he enjoyed being physically close to her, their bodies complimented each other so well. He reached over to kiss the back of her neck with a light brush of his mandibles, revelling in her distinct scent. The heat of her fever radiated from her head, reminding him that she wasn't entirely well. She had already drifted off to sleep by the time he had laid down. He would continue to watch over her, as long as was necessary.
The first splattering of morning sunlight rays crept their way into the tent, reminding Magnus that he hadn't gotten much sleep through what had remained of the previous night. The light promised warmth and respite from the oncoming winter, he couldn't remember a cloudless day since landing on the surface. The warmth around him was more than that he had laid down with, apparently he had slept long enough for someone to add an extra blanket. The fur-lined material threatened to keep him hostage despite his stomach’s yearning for nourishment.

Tarina was still asleep in his arms, he had no idea how he had managed to actually lay in such a position for a prolonged period. His arms were numb but he was in no hurry to unravel them. He looked over her shoulder to see Marius curled up in a ball between her neck and chest, he was starting to get too big to make that trick work for long. A soft snore came from the content child, he was utterly oblivious to the world around him.

Magnus wish he could have stayed like that forever, with his loving family safe from harm. Some day they could have that life, but there was much work to be done before then. With that dose of reality sinking in, he pushed the fogginess of sleep from his mind and made to get up off of the hard ground. He muscles moaned at the effort, he wasn't sure how many more years he could tolerate sleeping outside of a proper bed. He looked over at the pile of armour, thinking that it might provide an extra layer of warmth. He wasn't eager to leave the ancient family relics unattended where anyone could attempt to steal them.

Tarina rolled over to take the spot he had vacated. Armour would take time to put on and could possibly create enough noise to disturb her. He resigned himself to take her pistol and its holster instead, buckling them on quietly. No need to be entirely vulnerable if he could help it, besides he wasn't likely to be up for long. All he wanted to do was find a quick bite to eat and bring some back to Tarina, maybe get a better feel for their current location, and possibly learn more about the mountains that they were planning to travel into.

Before he left her side, he made sure the extra blanket was secured around her. Lightly he touched her forehead, part of him wishing she was awake enough to tell him that she was feeling better. She didn't acknowledge the gesture, too deep in sleep to notice anything. He was confident her fever had subsided a great deal since the last time he had checked.

The campfire from the previous night was barely glowing, waiting for fresh wood to keep it going. No one was sitting beside it, the entire camp was still and silent. The back of his neck prickled as he sensed someone standing in his blind spot.

"Good morning, Major," Doctor Tomas greeted him with a yawn. She was carrying a small stack of fresh kindling.

"Need a hand?" he offered in a hushed voice, not wishing to wake anyone.

"Got it covered, but thanks. Was about to boil the kettle for some tea. Interested in a cup?" she said as she walked past him. Delicately she lowered her load and began stoking the new fire.

"I've never heard a finer offer since I left home," Magnus meant it. Just hearing the word "tea" brought him a sense of inner peace and comfort that no fire could ever compete with.

"Well, you've never had this kind, that I'm sure of. That's one thing about coming from an English background, we always have time for a cup of tea, no matter where we are," she smiled as she
continued about her task. "You know, a lot of that stuff they say about mixing levo and dextro food is absolute rubbish. Drinks are almost always a safe thing to share. You can't really be poisoned for eating the wrong stuff anyway, you might get a bit sick or suffer from malnutrition but the symptoms are generally no worse than any food allergy. It's too bad there's so much misinformation out there, we should be sharing our culinary techniques just as often as our blueprints for prototype warships."

The kettle finished boiling, allowing the doctor to pour the contents into the prepared mugs resting precariously on her knees. She put the teabags in and let them soak, occasionally seeping the liquid until it was the right colour. Magnus watched in fascination as the process was almost identical to what he was accustomed to. There was something very soothing about preparing the tea, the ritual could be more rewarding than actually drinking the hot liquid.

"Do you ever get homesick?" she asked while waiting for the temperature to reach an appropriate level for consumption.

"All the time," Magnus said, surprised by the personal question. "Invictus is a beautiful world, lush and full of life. The environment is a constant reminder that no matter how advanced our technology gets, nature can always kick our ass. Very humbling, sometimes we need that. What about you?"

"It sounds nice, I'd love to visit some day," she said in a dreamy voice as she tried to imagine it. "I don't really miss home that much. Well, I used to when I was still new on Palaven. Being the only human for thousands of kilometres has that effect. But I got used to it. Every day was something new, seeing something new, tasting something new, learning something.. you get the idea. There are somethings I'll never get used to, like the soldiering lifestyle. When people address me as lieutenant instead of doctor, I get a bit irritated. Not because they're incorrect, it's just, I don't think of myself as an officer. It's my duty to heal people, not to take lives. Shouldn't have gotten so carried away during the officer training. Guess it's in my genes to overachieve, family's always been guilty of that."

Which reminds me, is it correct to address you as a major or as a sergeant? I hope you'll pardon my ignorance."

"It's an unusual rank, so not a ridiculous question to ask. Most people skip it altogether, I kind of got stuck at sergeant for too long. My own fault really, didn't want to get any weird assignments. Major is the correct term most of the time unless there's a real major present then it would be rather rude to address me as one. Since sergeants are much more common, it makes sense to distinguish a sergeant-major from the rest."

"Makes sense, thanks for clarifying that," she picked up one of the tea mugs and handed it to him. "Should be ready now, if we wait any longer it'll turn into iced tea and nobody wants that."

"It smells..different," Magnus couldn't think of a better way to describe it. Of course it was different, it was of human origin. The black colour was also unusual but he had heard of dark teas being commonplace in colder locales.

"It's called Earl Grey. We often drink it with milk and sometimes with sugar, neither of which are available today," she explained in a sorrowful tone as she took a tentative sip of her mug, confirming that it wasn't too scolding.

"Milk and sugar, that's blasphemous. Tea is meant to be simple, pure in its integrity," he said with mock fervour.
"To each their own," she didn't see the point in debating a difference in personal preference for which he admired. He would have to remember that not all humans were quick to push their ideas on others.

The conversation lulled as they partook of their beverages. Magnus couldn't decide if he liked the flavour or not, the subtle aroma was pleasing albeit too foreign for him to take much pleasure in. He missed the earthy tones of his usual brew and the morning meditation ritual that followed it. Never in a thousand years would he have expected to be sitting in the Palaven wilderness during a war against an unknown enemy with a human female as his only source of company.

He looked up at the blue-beige sky. The morning light was deceptively bright, little warmth came with Trebia's glow. As the morning progressed, he could make out more signs of their surroundings. The mountains to the east blocked most of the view though he could still make out the telltale flaming streaks of falling debris from an ongoing orbital conflict. The sight of meteors was once a rare occurrence, now it was far too common. He wondered if there'd ever be a day without the falling stars reminding them of far away battles, of far away brothers and sisters-in-arms defending their home to their last breath. In the other direction, towards what he suspected was the remains of the city of Tyris, a large cloud of smoke and ash rose high into the atmosphere.

He used to enjoy the serene calmness of the early morning hours, when everything was still and undisturbed. The surrounding view made him feel guilty that he was safe, unscathed, and relatively protected. He glanced over at the tent that contained Tarina and Marius, knowing that they could sleep in without fear of enemy attacks. Again, he looked to the sky for inspiration, this time seeing a flock of native birds riding the air currents above with their dazzling, chromatic wings powering them along like the starfighters that were modelled on their body shape. Life always found a way, every day of it was precious, he couldn't forget that.

Once he reached the end of his cup, he decided he had had enough time reflecting. Time to focus on the present, to get down to business. The first order was to understand more about the doctor, she was the de facto leader of the camp even if she didn't think of herself as more than a civilian. He couldn't sit idly by while someone wasted their potential, regardless of their species.

"What's it like being a civilian"? he enquired when it became obvious that nobody else was going to interrupt them any time soon.

"It's kind of boring really, there's no sense of direction or purpose beyond one's personal goals," the human had to take a moment to think of an answer, still holding the mug in her bare hands to keep them warm.

He couldn't get over how delicate her skin was, how bare her fingers looked without talons. There were no obvious natural defences in her anatomy, no spurs or piercing teeth or hard carapace to keep her safe. He would have to ask about how her species had survived long enough to become spacefaring some other time when he could think of a polite way to broach the subject.

A sharp wind picked up before she could pick her next words, tossing her unbound hair above her shoulders. It relaxed back into cascading waves of brown down her back as soon as the wind died down. He'd have to ask about that too, how did they endure the pain of moulding their hair into different shapes? She was so alien in her appearance that he couldn't imagine ever being entirely comfortable around her.

"I always thought it would be quite liberating to have the freedom to do whatever you want," he continued, forcing himself to stay focused.

"I guess. One thing I've really appreciated about joining the Hierarchy is that everyone has a
greater purpose. Everyone has a role, everything works with great efficiency. You have more personal freedoms than we do, basically anything is allowed as long as duty doesn't suffer.

Humans don't like being told what to do, everyone thinks they're special and unique. And maybe that’s true but the common good often suffers for it."

"I take it you didn't like having to go through the special training to become a citizen then?"

"No, I didn't mind it," she tried picking her words carefully again, trying to think of the best way to explain her views. Maybe she wasn't accustomed to people asking her too many questions that didn't relate to her job, the average turian probably wouldn't care about her personal history if she proved herself capable and reliable. Magnus wasn't sure why he cared so much, he was mostly looking for a distraction to pass the time. That and he couldn’t resist a chance to offer some mentoring advice if it was asked for.

"Soldiering has been in my family for a long time, some of my ancestors fought in the world wars over two hundred years ago. Not because they wanted to but because they had to. Everything we held dear was under threat, much like the war we now face. Conscription has seldomly been used since those days. Hell, back then women couldn't fight, they were mostly cooks and nurses, occasionally holding roles as spies or passing on messages. Very few could fire a weapon.

So much has changed since then but the Alliance is still no where near the higher standards of the Hierarchy. We're still making sense of who we are on the galactic stage. It's no surprise that Earth fell as quickly as it did though I'd wager the survivors are putting up one hell of a fight. Part of me wishes I could be there but I know that things will be just as hard out here, if not worse. The things I've seen so far, well, I actually look forward to treating the injured because it's better than burying the dead.

It shouldn't be that much of a surprise though. When I was finishing med school on Eden Prime, we had to examine the remnants of bodies leftover from the attack in 2183. I still have nightmares about those things, those half-human, half-geth looking things. Now it's obvious that they were Reaper husks, not that that is any comfort. No person, whether human or otherwise, should be transformed against their will into some synthetic creation. We couldn't tell if they kept their memories or how they managed to communicate. They obviously responded to stimuli such as pain.

That's part of what encouraged me to look into dextro medicine, I wanted to understand what could motivate a former Spectre to invade a peaceful, farming colony. Did he really hate humans that much and, if so, why? A case of morbid curiosity basically. Turns out I actually get along quite well with turians, probably moreso than with other humans.”

That surprised Magnus, his first instinct had some alien tried to destroy his home would have been to seek revenge not understanding of their motivation for doing so. He felt the need to separate himself and the rest of his people from the actions of a single individual all the same, “Saren Arterius was more Spectre than he was turian. He fought in the First Contact War so you could say his views on your species were slightly biased. Not that he was alone with such views.”

“I know that now,” the doctor assured him. “What about you? Did you fight in the war?”

“I wasn’t quite old enough at the time,” Magnus reflected on the period of his childhood when he was rapidly approaching the age of adulthood. “I remember looking forward to the war, everyone was at the time. Nobody expected it to be so brief. All we knew was that some unknown invaders were threatening us and it had been so long since our last major conflict, the Krogan Rebellions were a distant memory by that time. We thought joining the council was going to be a good move,
they managed to turn our armies into a peacekeeping, police force instead.

You could say we were growing restless, itching for a fight to prove that we were still powerful. I remember how bitterly disappointed everyone was when the armistice was signed, our chance for a glorious contest had evaporated. You might not understand, it wasn’t that we hated the humans so much as we saw an opportunity reclaim our past glory, to challenge ourselves against a new foe. Every one of us a soldier, we spend our lives learning how to fight but rarely exercising our prowess to its full potential.

I was almost old enough to be shipped out for basic so I had expected the war to be my big chance to make a good impression, to rise in the ranks like the rest of my family has done for generations. My mother was so angry about the rise in taxes to cover the reparations owed to your Alliance. I grew up thinking of humans as a bully race, not necessarily an enemy or worthy of outright hatred but perhaps justifiable suspicion.

The atmosphere in turian space was tense for awhile after the war, that’s part of why there was so much outcry when your councillor was throwing his weight around on the Citadel. If only he knew what joining the council really meant, the asari and the salarians want us all to hold hands and get along, to conform to their cowardly agendas. The galaxy doesn’t work that cleanly, as any soldier knows. And now we all face a common enemy that will force us to get along as they always wanted.”

“Peace is a nice idea but I can see how it might be detrimental. The sad reality is that war and conflict causes us to change, to evolve and better ourselves. That’s what the Hierarchy has proven to me many times over,” the human didn’t begrudge him for his prejudice against her kind. “I had an uncle who was on Shanxi during the occupation, he was a prisoner for much of it. Met his future wife in a camp. They joined up with the Alliance afterwards. Not everything about war has to be bad,” she glanced down at her omnitool, probably checking the time. The camp around them was beginning to awaken as people went about their individual chores and routines.

“Wow, I've really managed to ramble on. Looks like people are starting to wake up, I should really check in on patients. Thanks for listening to me go on like this. How did Tarina's fever fair in the night?”

"It's no trouble and I think she's doing better though she was sleeping so soundly that I didn't want to interrupt her with any questions."

"I'm more worried about the illness she's been warding off, she's probably going to be taking a lot of meds for the next week. Appetite won't be very high but you should try to encourage her to have something."

"I'll do my best," Magnus wasn't looking forward to it. He enjoyed spending time with Tarina, especially if it involved looking after her but making her do anything she didn't already want to do was not going to go over well. At least he'd have someone else to talk to while she recovered.

The doctor took her leave of his company for the afternoon while Magnus took the opportunity to check on Tarina's condition. The tent was once again empty save for her and Marius. The two blankets that had been so carefully wrapped around her when he left were piled up in a messy heap beside her. She lay on her back in a deep sleep, her breathing relatively normal but showing all the other signs of fever. Her skin was pale and balmy, the carapace had lost its metallic sheen. Marius slept calmly in a nest of blankets he had arranged for himself after his mother had pushed them away.

Carefully Magnus dug him out of his hidey hole and picked him up, he didn't even need to touch
Tarina's cheek to see that she was getting worse. He wondered if he ought to be concerned though the doctor had warned him that she would go through many stages until she had fought off her illness entirely. He decided he'd mention it to the doctor in passing if he ran into her again.

Marius was glad for the intrusion, he was growing restless with his sick mother unable to keep him busy. He preferred the way his father held him, in a half upright position as opposed to cradling him on his back. He didn't care that his father had no idea of what to do with him, any chance to get out and see the greater world was worth it.

They walked in silence around the camp as Magnus took stock of how defendable their position was. More and more people were trickling into the camp at periodic intervals, each bringing only their personal armour, weapons, and whatever food they had managed to pack. There were no obvious supply chains coming in or going out. Turian medics began to fill out the rest of the staff as they joined their human counterparts, much to the relief of the head surgeon. The injuries they saw ranged from minor bruises and abrasions to serious trauma, no one in a life-threatening position was likely to make it to such an out of the way hospital.

There was a general mood of business as usual in the air, they could see the camp develop before their eyes as patients were attended to, recovered, and sent back out to patrol the perimetre or build accommodations to continue the cycle for the next group. Magnus was impressed with the efficiency that everyone used to get their individual jobs done, no one was stepping on anyone else's talons. The war itself felt forever away, all that he could witness of it were the casualties.

Stories and gossip began to circulate about what the combatants had seen in their travels. None of it was particularly good news. There was little information from beyond the system, comm relays were still struggling to be maintained on Palaven itself. The buoys by the relay were used only by the military in a limited capacity, it was clear that there was a fear that the enemy could easily eavesdrop on critical messages.

All Magnus was sure about was that there was a heavy diversion taking place on Menae with all of the fleets taking turns to lure the biggest threats away. He knew colonies like Invictus were going to run at a lower priority in a galactic conflict, only the most vital positions were going to be reinforced. There was little sense in wasting resources, the colonies were going to be on their own. In hindsight, he was quite glad he left when he did.

As they continued their walk, Magnus began to explain the world around them to his son. He told him how to distinguish someone by rank, colony of origin, legion, age, gender, and everything else he could think of to categorise individuals from first glance. It was a useful way of making sure one was on equal footing when having a conversation with a stranger, not that Marius would be speaking his first words for quite some time. He wasn't sure what he was so supposed to teach him in what order so he tried to keep the lesson relevant to their surroundings.

Marius was wide-eyed as he saw a wide variety of people around him for the first time, he shyly clung to his father whenever someone would approach and try to give him some form of compliment. Magnus could sympathise, he didn't like strangers approaching him either but babies had a way of bending the usual social rules. Everyone wanted to express an encouraging word, to tell him how brave he was, that he'd get to see a glorious victory at such a young age. Those were the more optimistic ones, Magnus was sure the cynics were keeping their views of the future to themselves.

When they reached the communal campfire, the sun was high in the sky and the smell of roasting meat met them. Cessia and a few others were preparing an evening meal for the whole camp. The steaks and other meats had came from one of the freezers in one of the vehicles, they were told that
they had to eat them soon to make way for more. The living conditions were quite comfortable for being so cut off from the rest of civilisation. Cessia insisted that properly cooked meals were an integral part of the recovery process and nobody voiced a complaint save the humans who were reduced to their own levo-specific ration bars.

"Here, eat up and share some with your little one there," Cessia said warmly as she handed a bowl to Magnus.

He couldn't remember what the name of the dish was but he knew it had been one of his mother's favourites to prepare. A very tender cut of meat was placed at the bottom of the bowl with a brothy mixture poured over top. It almost looked like a soup but he knew better, the juices of the broth were meant to soak into the meat, allow the tender pieces to flake off into bite-size morsels. The smell was invigorating, most turian children had grown up on such hearty meals. The only component missing was the bed of rice that often accompanied the crumbling steak at the bottom which had never been his favourite part anyway.

"Thank you, that's very kind," he said as he accepted it.

"I know it smells better than it tastes, my husband always makes it better. He's still bedridden, unfortunately, and may be so for quite awhile. My cooking will have to suffice for now. Shall I prepare one for your lady as well?"

"She's been asleep all day, I doubt she'd like to wake up to a cold meal," he said, trying not to remind her that Tarina and he were not an actual couple. He knew that it was going to be tricky to explain their relationship status to most people so it was best to avoid the subject altogether.

"Too bad, there won't be any leftover with how many new people we seem to be attracting lately," Cessia said as she went back to serving dishes for others.

By the time they reached the tent again, Magnus was up to the bit in the ongoing nursery rhyme about the female warrior who joins the protagonist on his quest. Marius was too young to appreciate the underlying romance portion of the story, he'd probably hear the whole tale many times over before he noticed that part. Tarina was sitting up on her bedroll, reading something on her omnitool but looked up to greet them once they were close enough.

"You two have been busy," she remarked, sounding somewhat jealous that they had had a more interesting day than her. "How's our little warrior today?"

"He's quite popular, everyone loves him," Magnus said with pride. "How have you been faring? Read anything interesting?"

"Dr. Tomas came by a few hours ago and helped get my fever under control. I've only woken up again quite recently. Been reading some of my old writing, mostly poetry. Used to get me through all the hard times. Much of it is quite terrible but its interesting to see how the quality has progressed over the years. Never realised how much of it was about my dad. I don't think he ever knew how important he was to me," she sounded quite remorseful as old memories came flooding back to her.

"I'm sorry," was all Magnus could think of saying. He sat close beside her, still holding Marius who was beginning to yawn and stretch his little arms.

"Yeah, didn't mean to bring the mood down," she said quietly as she flicked the omnitool off. She reached for Marius with her good arm and patted his cheek. "I'm going to do so much better for you, don't worry."
"You're not hungry, by chance? There might still be some left if you want me to grab you something," Magnus tried to move the conversation to something else.

"No, not really. Still quite tired. Feel useless laying around here doing nothing but it's all I can do for now. Thanks for taking care of Marius today, you'll probably have to do it more often. It's ok though, it's good that you guys get the chance to bond. Just wish I could join you."

"No trouble at all. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Stay here for a bit? I know you're probably itching to help with keeping the camp going, probably eager to get your talons dirty because that's the kind of guy you are. Always wanting to help somebody, to do your duty. But I'm a bit lonely and wouldn't mind some companionship. If you've got the time..
"

"Of course I have, I'll stay right here and make sure you don't throw off the blankets when it's just above freezing again. Let Marius sleep between us so he doesn't wander off creating blanket forts again," he laughed softly.

Tarina was being far more needy than usual, he hoped she wasn't still thinking about her father's death. He wasn't especially tired but he had promised to be there for her when she asked. Quietly he curled up next to her, touching the back of her and neck gingerly as she drifted back to sleep.

As Magnus himself was about to fall asleep, he could sense that Tarina wasn't quite right. She shivered despite the blankets, shaking in her sleep as something in her subconscious began to unnerve her. He tried to awaken her, to tell her everything was ok. Stubbornly she resisted his efforts, whimpering unintelligible words between heavy breaths. Eventually she broke through the spell, opening her eyes suddenly to stare right into his. Concern gripped him as he held her tight, he had never seen someone move so erratically in their sleep before.

"He's dead, I killed him, it was my fault," she whispered as her nightmare began to fade away.

"You're ok, you're safe with me," Magnus said in a stern voice, trying to keep her alert but calm.

She looked at him, confused, touched his mandibles with her good hand, "Daddy? No, he's dead. You're not him."

"No, I'm not," he agreed though wasn't quite sure how awake she was to be rationalised with.

She blinked her eyes for a moment, "How embarrassing."

"Better now?" he inquired, still holding her close. She nodded and closed her eyes, he lightly kissed her forehead for reassurance. "It's not your fault, Tari. There's nothing you could have done in that situation."

"I know," she said, sounding more sure of herself. "It's a reoccurring dream. We start out arguing over something stupid and then either he kills himself or I pull the trigger. Then I wake up feeling like an idiot. Damn it, I don't ever want to let Marius down, not like I was let down. No kid should have to grow up wondering if they were the reason their father killed himself."

"You're not the reason, you're a vibrant and brave woman full of potential. You may have had a hard life, harder than most, but it's not because you're a bad person. There's much to love about you, Marius couldn't ask for better," he wasn't sure if the words would sink in or not. He rubbed her back, rocking her gently in his arms to emphasise his point. If words couldn't get the message across, then maybe actions could. They had plenty of other current things to have nightmares about, the past had to remain where it was.
"Don't leave me alone, Sarge. No one has given a damn about me like you," she leaned against him, eager for his touch.

"Never," he said adamantly. "You have to get better then we'll move on and figure out what to do next. We're going to have a future. You, me, Marius. Together. I don't care what it takes, if it means going underground or retiring or whatever. First thing to do is to win this war, then we'll take care of the rest. You're never alone."
Over the next couple of days Tarina's condition continued to fluctuate. Some days were good, others bad, but slowly she began to recover her energy. The one constant that marked each day was her desire to be close to Magnus whenever she was awake. At first he was ecstatic about their increased amount time together but as she became more dependant on him he started to feel restricted, worrying that she was becoming too clingy. He couldn't help wondering if her behaviour was merely a direct result of her vulnerable state and not her genuine state of mind at all. Rather cynically, he knew he would have to be ready for things to go back to normal when she was well again. With that in mind, he kept his opinions about her level of dependency to himself.

He tried to take advantage of the periods when she slept to make himself more productive and useful, to get to know the people in the camp, to learn more about what the journey ahead would entail, and generally have time to himself to do as he pleased. He had a handful of people that he was ready to recruit, he encouraged them to put out the word that he was looking to create a proper resistance in the area. The doctor declined his offer to join the detachment as she knew they would be moving on from Tyris as soon as their platoon of guards arrived. Magnus could only guess what was holding them up, he wasn't willing to leave until Tarina was more capable of moving around on her own anyway.

On one of her better days, Magnus brought a meal back to the tent for Tarina while she was teaching Marius something with her omnitool. They were going over the basics he would need later when he was able to communicate vocally. Magnus was getting tired of running errands for her when she had the strength to get up for short walks if she felt inclined to do so. But he didn't want to upset her in front of Marius so once again he kept his complaints to himself. He sat the bowl of spiced meat beside her and quietly sat down to watch the lesson without interrupting their overly energetic son.

She used an omnitool program to simulate colours and shapes, tasking Marius to learn which was which. He was more fascinated with what he considered play time than listening to her. Marius kept touching the omnitool screen to see how it would react, not realising that it only responded to his mother's biometric signature. Tarina sighed, realising they were getting no where, and traded Marius' presence for the food. Unable to stand or crawl effectively, the baby looked helplessly at his father for assistance.

"Alright," Magnus relented and picked him up. At least he didn't have to fight with Tarina about eating on a regular basis, her lack of appetite hadn't proven to be a problem after all. Marius touched his father's arm, trying to get him to activate his omnitool instead, "Maybe later. But only if you start paying attention to your mother first. Deal?" The boy nodded in response.

The afternoon was turning out to be a typical one with little to no excitement. Magnus was growing restless and knew Tarina was beginning to feel the same. They didn't have enough willing recruits to venture onwards effectively. Their knowledge on the monastery was also limited. All they could discern was that it had changed hands in recent years to a small cult that followed an asari religion. They had no way of knowing if the monks would be open to allowing them to establish a stronghold or cooperative in any way. There was a high risk that they could be travelling far out of their way for nothing. Their first batch of recruits would know that and there was little reason to bring too many on such a mission. Too few was equally dangerous, the mountain climb alone would prove quite difficult and they were going to need enough bodies to scout, hunt, defend, and navigate what most considered inhospitable terrain.
Magnus was also uneasy about leaving the hospital behind with all of its most fit and hearty combatants. They were due for reinforcements but it had been a week since they were requested. He was growing fond of the human surgeon, she was stepping up to the challenges before her with great vigour. He was almost disappointed that she didn't need any help in keeping order. What she needed most was relief, she was trying too hard to be involved in every task in an attempt to keep morale up. They had luckily avoided enemy engagements but keeping the camp running was a huge job in itself. He didn't want to think about how quickly the results of that hard work would unravel if their position was discovered.

Tarina continued tucking into her supper even when a loud clamouring of footsteps began shuffling about outside their tent. Magnus was more curious about what had suddenly gotten everyone's attention than she was. There was a sense of excitement in the air, as if good news was about to be delivered. He excused himself from Tarina's side, still holding onto little Marius, and went to join the rest of the camp around the communications tent which contained their vital radio transmitter. The crowd gathered around in anticipation, he could only just make out Doctor Tomas' side of the conversation with the engineer inside.

She emerged with the biggest smile he had ever seen, her hands clapped together as she passed the message onto those around her, "We just made contact with our reinforcements. At least one platoon will be here within the hour. The timing couldn't be better, they've reported that the Reaper forces in Tyris are moving outward and will be looking for outposts like this one. I want my staff, in between their usual shifts, to start bringing the camp down and preparing for mobilisation. Everyone else can go about what they were already doing but I wouldn't say no to extra help."

When the crowd dispersed, the doctor waved him over. "Is there anything in particular I can help with?" Magnus offered.

"You look like your hands are busy already," she gently squeezed Marius' outstretched hand.

The young turian had become quite enamoured with her during the brief encounters, always trying to grab strands of her hair when she wasn't looking. Magnus had tried to deter him from it but the doctor didn't mind, she said it was good for babies to be curious and adventurous.

"Tarina's fully capable of looking after him," he said, still eager to do something other than sitting idle.

"I'd like you to be here when I meet the captain. Over the course of our many short chats I've gathered that you have a knack for strategy and tactics. This is a type of knowledge that I lack. I would rather not look entirely foolish to the leader of the team sent to protect us, many turians are distrustful of me as it is," she said more seriously. He didn't feel it was prudent to point out that he was one of those who didn't fully trust her though he could respect that she recognised her own shortcomings. Arrogance coupled with an overly exaggerated sense of self-worth could easily hamper the best of leaders and he had seen both far too many times.

Two hours passed before the platoon of soldiers reached their camp. Magnus stood next to the doctor as they filed into the camp, there was a mixture of cheer and worry in the air. One platoon was hardly enough given the size the camp was likely to reach as it continued its operation. To his relief, the captain wasn't a young upstart like he was used to running into, instead he appeared quite seasoned and confident. His men weren't green recruits either, their armoured was splattered with gashes and blood stains from recent fighting, they carried their weapons with an alertness that only veterans possessed.

The captain and the doctor made formal introductions as they defined clearly who was in charge of what. Captain Kallium Osirian kept insisting that she be referred to by her rank and she argued that
it wasn't necessary. They came to a quick resolution to call each other by their first names in private and surnames otherwise. When the official business was concluded, the human introduced Magnus as her tactical advisor, an exaggeration that he was willing to play along with.

"You look like you've fought a few of these things already," the captain said as he saluted Magnus. The captain's crimson markings looked very similar to the ones Tarina wore.

"I have but probably not as many as you, sir," he returned the salute and the small group were ushered back within the barricades to an open tent that served as a type of office.

The three of them sat around a small table. The captain appeared unable to relax, choosing to sit with the best view of the entrance, his sidearm clearly visible. The doctor attempted to break the ice first but Osirian put his hand up to silence her before she could get a word out.

"I wanted to bring more men, truly. This was all I could rustle up. Given the argument I had with my CO, I'm lucky to still hold this rank. And nobody else was leaping at the request to come away from the frontlines, so that makes you lucky too," he looked at each of them sternly, his dark eyes hiding his emotions. His expression softened as he continued, "Sorry, didn't mean to pounce so abruptly. Things got tense on the way out here. You can be sure that the men I brought are the best the Hierarchy has to offer. They're loyal and they know how to follow orders. They're everything all of us are supposed to be. Unfortunately the enemy and this war are not. There's nothing conventional about what we face."

"We're aware of that now, though to what extent.. well, we've not heard a whole lot since my original team left the city," Doctor Tomas said quietly, patiently waiting for the captain to give her an opportunity to speak. "I'm afraid to ask of the details but sure we'll need to know everything that might be relevant to keeping our camp safe. You're aware of our plan to stay on the move?"

"Yes, and it's a great idea in theory. It will require more men than I've brought with me to be successful but there's not enough such hospitals up in operation now. People need to be treated and sent back out immediately. There is constant pressure to keep pushing back or risk losing everything the moment we stop to take a breath. Our numbers will never rival those of our enemy, not with their method of replenishing them. I don't know much about how they do it, have a few suspicions on the matter."

"I know how they do it," Magnus spoke up. They both looked up at him as if he had just interrupted a private conversation, unaware that he had anything vital to contribute. "What Primarch Fedoran said about them converting people into more Reapers was true."

"Fedoran's dead," the captain said quietly. "They won't release the specifics as to what happened but a successor has already been named. The new primarch is Adrian Victus from the Taetrus war, the one with all those unconventional ideas. Not sure where he is now, supposedly organising an alliance of some kind with the other races."

"That's potentially good news. That's the sort of thinking we're going to need," Magnus tried to let the news settle in, he had always respected Fedoran. Much like General Partinax, Victus had a mixed reputation that he wasn't sure about. Thinking outside the box was a sign that one could adapt rapidly to changing scenarios in any case. The moral implications that came with the Taetrus conflict would hardly be a problem when facing an enemy that could not be reasoned with by any typical means.

"That's what I thought as well. Doesn't sound like you've been getting much intel at all out here," the captain said.
"Not a whole lot, no. Only what the refugees bring with them," the doctor said. She looked over at Magnus, unsure if she was looking too incompetent in front of the higher ranked officer. He may not have trusted her much but she was already looking up to him for guidance.

"Maybe you can help rectify that for us," he offered in her stead.

"I'll tell you what we've seen if you tell me what you know about this conversion process. Both are horrifying tales to be told, apologies in advance," Captain Osirian said for the doctor's benefit. She didn't let the warning visibly frighten her. Instead she poured three cups of tea and sat quietly while the two turians exchanged grisly stories of what they had experienced in the field.

"So there's the explanation for the lack of dead bodies in the streets," the captain said in response to Magnus' story about the processing plant. "We knew they were trying to take prisoners whenever possible. Most skirmishes resulted in injuries only, very few fatal casualties. I wonder how smart those husks really are, do they steal memories from their victims? Is that how they know so much about us or have we been studied before the invasion? Now there's an uncomfortable thought.

I'll tell you one thing though, those marauders aren't like the other husks. They're almost.. brave, either that or they have no sense of fear. Seen them do all sorts of things, leading ambushes, evading patrols, taking and utilising artillery, routing us by destroying specific points of infrastructure. Bastards are fast too, can reload a Phaeston much faster than our guys can. Seen them using other guns when they can find them.

All of the Reaper ground units are relentless, they push and push, doesn't matter how many they lose because they're always getting more troops. The only weakness I can see, if you'd even call them one, are the destroyer ships. They're massive and powerful but not indestructable. They go to great lengths to protect them when they land, if they land at all. Can't imagine how many are up there fighting the fleets.

If I were an admiral, I'd be pushing to leave the system to regroup later with the other races. That's probably what Victus will do eventually. It's going to cripple our only incoming source of supplies though. Hope we get some fair warning before that happens. Best I can tell, this is going to be a long war of attrition.

Sounds painful, and it will be, but it also means the Reapers recognise that we're a real contender or they wouldn't be throwing so much at us this early. And that might work to our advantage, provided we survive long enough to turn things around. They're already spreading themselves thin among other systems, fighting on multiple fronts at once. They can't keep that up forever, right?"

The conversation between the two veterans continued in the same way for quite some time as they discussed their individual experiences with the enemy. They covered an array of related topics, ranging from broad speculations to more specific, grisly tales like what fates awaited escaped prisoners and what great lengths families were willing to go through to protect their own. The captain did most of the talking, with each story growing more horrific than the last. Magnus wasn't surprised by anything the captain mentioned, being quite accustomed to what the battlefield could entail. The human in their company, however, grew more noticeably uncomfortable as the realities of war were described in great detail from firsthand witnesses.

Magnus was eager for any information regarding the conflict and continued to ask probing questions despite her unease. It would later occur to him that she had not been trained as a combat medic but rather a surgeon that only had to deal with the aftermath of the pain and suffering sustained by combatants in need of medical care. She wouldn't be used to being in the thick of a firefight, with all the chaos and uncertainty that came with it, nor would she have witnessed someone being grossly wounded while trying to carry out their duty. If the war continued to
progress at its current rate, it wouldn't be long before she had as many tragic stories as Captain Osirian to share. Magnus was torn between admiring her innocence when it came to bloodshed and seeing her as weak for her lack of vital military experience.

The doctor continued to look helplessly into the dark liquid within her travelling mug, as if staring at it long enough would erase what she had heard. By then, she was on her third mug of tea, clearly looking for any reason to not be there. The meeting was intended to cover the more mundane task of sorting out administrative matters, organising the hospital's logistics, deciding how best to proceed in its mission now that they had a complement of fresh troops to defend their position and so forth. On the subject of fighting the actual Reapers, she knew nothing worth contributing to the conversation and was growing quite bored.

But Captain Osirian continued to go on, having seen too many terrible things during his patrols within the warzone that had once been a bustling city. Only a few weeks had passed since the first destroyer vessel invaded the system but it felt so much longer. The decimation of each major city's infrastructure took days to be reduced to rubble as opposed to weeks and months that would have given the Hierarchy time to respond with its infamous discipline and tested strategies. Vital points of strategic importance were lost too easily, very few were being reclaimed due to the communication blackout that was playing havoc with the scattered legions. The legions were cut off from one another, forcing individuals to decide for themselves what to do.

 Magnus was certain that any other race without a strict military doctrine instilled into the very fabric of its society would readily collapse under the intense pressure from the start. Even with most of the comms out, every turian knew how to defend him or herself from any generic enemy. While the Reapers were anything but generic, they could still be fought against. The real difficulty with the invasion had been in how quickly it had occurred, the element of surprise was in the enemy's favour. The relentless attack was meant to confuse and intimidate just as much as it was supposed to cause mass destruction which meant the Reapers knew that giving the turians time to rally could prove disastrous in a longterm campaign. This was something Magnus very much wanted to exploit if given the chance.

From what Magnus could gather, Osirian was both competent and stubborn. Like most long-serving veterans, he was loyal and cared very much about his duty. What seperated him from the rest, however, was ability to think for himself, adjusting quickly to ever changing circumstances. The captain knew from the start that were was little to be gained from prolonged skirmishes in enemy-controlled territory. The cities had once been thought to be invulnerable to ground as well as aerial attacks, when it had evidently become otherwise old habits were hard to shake off. He recognised the value in regrouping to dictate the terms of the battles to be waged in the future, provided they survived long enough to turn the tables later.

It took a great deal of humility to admit that the Reapers had won the first round of the conflict. Unless the Hierarchy could rally and reorganise its troops into functioning legions again, there wouldn't be a second round to fight. Captain Osirian explained that he tried to make this point to his proud superiors who only saw war as a path to glory, an easy road to the top of the meritocracy if they were successful. There was no glory to be had when their entire species was facing extinction along with the rest of the sentient species of the galaxy. He was utterly convinced that his CO agreed to send his platoon to the field hospital as a means of shutting him up. Magnus was grateful that they had sent someone of such intelligence instead of an overly ambitious junior officer looking to make a name for himself rather than focusing on what had to be done.

Seeing the captain as a bit of a kindred spirit allowed Magnus to relax some nerves that he hadn't realised were present. It also gave him the right opportunity to segue into his own plans about the resistance cell in the mountains that he was committed to establishing. As he began to outline the
plan to the captain, the idea began to sound more and more plausible and he knew it was the right course of action to take. He had had been tentative to go into detail about it with the sparse amount of information available on the monastery, lest it appear too foolhardy. There were many reasons why turians hadn't built towns and outposts in remote, cold locations, the challenges would be nearly insurmountable. He knew he had to try, somebody had to see if it could work. They couldn't use conventional tactics much longer.

The doctor spoke up when he got to the subject of recruits, mentioning that that very few patients were receiving reassignment orders from their various legions. She suggested that Magnus consider taking more of them than he originally intended to, that doing so would alleviate stress on the camp as they reached capacity. The captain agreed with her though he recognised why Magnus was reluctant to take so many on the maiden journey through a region that little was known about. He acknowledged that it was wise to gather as much intel as possible with a secondary objective being to ensure that a safe route could be created for future refugees to follow. The human doctor went back to staring intensely at her tea before announcing that the kettle was empty and needed to be refilled. She excused herself before anyone could object, finally leaving the pair of turians alone for a short awhile.

Magnus was anxious to keep talking about the war, he wanted to know how things were progressing offworld as well as in orbit. Quietly he prepared himself for a lack of news regarding the fleets though he was desperate to hear of how the Intrepid fair. He still didn't have a good idea of where his brother was amid the action, eager to thank him for the assistance he had lend in getting Magnus onto the surface when he did. He cared little for the greater galaxy's troubles but knew that large scale wars were not fought in any one system alone. What the other species were or were not doing cold affect things closer to home.

But the tired captain had said all he wanted to say on that subject for the time being. He stretched his limbs and looked ready to collapse at any moment. Despite his low energy, something had grabbed his attention. Or rather, someone.

"I've never met a human in person before. The vids do not do them justice. They look a lot a nice up close, or at least that particular one does. Her skin is so delicate, her body looks like it could easily break without armour on. And yet, as a race, they are as strong as we are. If history is anything to judge by," Captain Osirian said as his eyes lingered on the gap in the tent where Doctor Tomas had disappeared through. There was a hint of awe in his voice, as if seeing an exotic animal for the first time, completely mesmerised by the way it moved and behaved.

"She's very brave to be doing all of this, that's for sure," Magnus agreed tentatively, unsure of what else to say on the matter. He respected the doctor as a fellow officer but they weren't exactly colleagues or close acquaintances. "I'm sure she's relieved to have your support."

"Support, indeed! The shape of those hips, the size of that waistline. Damn, I don't think there's a finer, more beautiful creature in all the universe. What's she like? Is she always so quiet? Not that it matters much, I'm not too talkative either. It would be nice to know of any strange quirks or cultural differences that might make, uh, working together difficult," the captain turned to look at Magnus, his dark blue eyes bright with wonder. Magnus was completely taken aback, the man who had fought tooth and talon against countless terrors for the past fortnight within the ruins of urban jungles was absolutely smitten by a soft-skinned, nervous and (as far as Magnus was concerned) unremarkable human being.

"Uh, sorry, not really an expert on her or any other human for that matter. Maybe we could go back to what you were saying about the rumours regarding the fleet's reconfigured priority system."

Magnus tried desperately to move to a subject that was less peculiar. Talking about humans was
hard enough, talking about females of any species was definitely outside his realm of comfort.

"What, you're not one of those xenophobes are you?" Osirian's eyes narrowed as he tried to work out why Magnus wasn't as impressed by the doctor's very existence as he was.

"No, not at all," Magnus lied rather flatly. It wasn't a really accurate term anyway, his stance on the other species was one of indifference not fear. He had little interest in engaging on a discussion about exopolitics and multiculturalism in the Milky Way. Better to stick to much more simple topics wherever possible. "Until the Reapers showed up, I would have said the universe is big enough for everyone. They're the exception, of course. Anyway, I'd rather focus my energy on the enemy than on my allies."

"Fair enough," Osirian laughed softly, much to Magnus' relief. The captain waved his hand to visually dismiss the current conversation and move on to something else. "I really like the sound of your plan, wish I could send my troops with you. It's more viable than the doctor's concept of a mobile outpost full of vulnerable personnel. On one hand, staying on the move keeps the enemy guessing but on the other, it does the same thing to our own people. She's fairly dedicated to the cause of healing everyone she possibly can, it would be hard to explain why pursuing such a noble ambition could be inefficient and possibly harmful to the longterm war effort. I certainly don't want to be the one to discourage her.

Maybe if your first expedition proves successful...well, then we could coordinate our respective missions together. That could make everyone happy. There's about a week of prep time before we start pulling out of our current location, can't wait to be move to a less exposed position quite honestly. That ought to give you enough time to gather and supply your people for the journey ahead. If there's anything I can to expediate that process, even if it means going back into the ruins of Tyris to get specialised provisions, I'd be happy to do so."

"I appreciate your confidence in our venture," Magnus said humbly. "Supplies would be a big help but we're not in dire need. There's already a few local salvage teams working on it, well, I say that but...they're actually kids with an overabundance of enthusiasm that have grown tired of being told to stay put while their parents or other family members recover from the battlefield. I've not been trying to deliberately encourage their behaviour but they need something to do. Giving them specific items to look for keeps them focused and reminds them to avoid actual danger. They're eager to assist, as is everyone around here.

The only real shortage is able-bodied men and women willing to risk their lives on little more than a hunch. None of us know what will happen if we actually make it. And if we do, that's the easiest of much harder challenges to come.

As for the doctor, she's not experienced in the field like us, she'll need a lot of help out there. I'm not too close to her but I know a good heart when I see one, she's trying to make a difference during a terrible crisis on a world that is not her own. You can't help but admire her for it. I'm not sure what the future holds but things can go badly at any moment. Please look after her, and whatever you do.. don't let her down."

Before Captain Osirian could respond, the doctor they had been talking about reappeared with a kettle and fresh tea bags draped over her arm. Unaware of what she had interrupted, she set the items down on the table and began to prepare a cup for herself. Once situated, she jumped right into a conversation regarding the daily operation of the camp and its various needs. Her usual upbeat personality had returned as she took charge. The captain actively engaged with her by asking appropriate questions and letting her know that he was genuinely interested in what she had to say.
There was little room left for Magnus to voice any thoughts, eventually he excused himself from the pair to make some headway on his own project. He shot Osirian a side ways glance as he left which the captain responded to with a slight smile. Osirian was completely captivated by the the human and likely grateful to be left alone with her at last.

Magnus made his way back towards the tent where he expected to find the only woman that could capture all of his undivided attention if she so desired. He found Tarina among the newly arrived military vehicles. She was trying to find a simple task that would alleviate her boredom and make her feel useful again but no one was taking her up on the offer. The sling was gone from her injured arm, she was delicately balancing Marius in its place. Unable to lift effectively with both her arms, she was still finding simple movements difficult. The young mother hadn't noticed Magnus' presence, she walked over to a pile of freshly unloaded bags of food and tried to figure out a better way to carry her child.

"It's good to see you walking around again," Magnus greeted her softly as he leaned down to pick Marius up. He held his son high above his head, causing the infant to giggle with excitement. Tarina looked relieved to see him. She shifted over so there was enough room for Magnus to sit beside her.

"It feels great to be moving again. Trying to make sure my legs will be strong enough for the journey, to make up for the difference of how much weight I'll be able to carry," she said. Magnus leaned his head against her good shoulder with Marius nestled under his chin against his chest. Despite how clingy she had become in recent weeks, he still enjoyed being physically close to her, knowing she was safe and well brought him as much joy as trying to get her to smile once in awhile. It wasn't her fault that she had at times taken advantage of his hospitality, he hoped one day she'd accept being looked after by another as normal. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her if she asked. "How soon until we set out?"

"No more than a week from now," he answered.

"Good. Well, not that I am looking forward to the freezing conditions but you know."

"Better to be some where other than here doing nothing," he agreed. "Are you sure you'll be up to it?"

"Yeah, I've been doing some target practice as well. Aim is still really shaky but I'll have my hands full with Marius most of the time anyway. I know it's a longterm arrangement, if it even works out, but I see it as our first real opportunity to hit the enemy back at some point. The sooner we can go on the offensive, the better. Sitting around isn't doing anybody any favours."

"It will work out," Magnus said with renewed optimism. He was still going over the recent conversation with Osirian in his head, the captain's confidence was all the motivation he needed. "I'm going to gather what volunteers we have and start going over the maps of the area we recovered before the network went down. We have to start sometime, may as well be now. If you could go around and put the word out.. that'd be great. We'll take everyone who is willing to go."

"Even families with children?" she inquired and he nodded.

"If we can do it, so can they. We'll hold an interest meeting right after tonight's evening meal so nobody has to go far. Maybe we'll pick up a few more volunteers there as well. In the mean time, I've got a rousing inspirational speech to plan. Things are about to get interesting again."
The day they set out on the expedition was clearer and warmer than any they had spent at the field hospital. Their newly acquired arctic undersuits smothered them as the sun bore its radiation down on the back of their necks. Magnus led the group with Tarina and Marius at his side. Their company was roughly 20 adults strong with a handful of children old enough to keep up, most walked in a single, orderly line out of habit. They could see their destination in the distance as they began their march, a towering block of snow and ice on the horizon with two distinct peaks. No one was in a hurry to reach the plummeting temperatures.

Despite their reluctance to reach their target, the atmosphere was full of energy and excitement. No one had wanted to be stuck behind waiting for the go ahead to rejoin the ongoing conflict. A change of scenery and the opportunity to stretch one's legs was a good start. The hard decisions and challenges fell to Magnus to work out, all anyone else had to do was follow his lead. He hoped he hadn't given them the false impression that he had any clue about what he was doing but nobody else had been willing to step up.

Magnus kept his eyes on the objective as they continued their trek through the open plains that would turn into the foothills by the end of the day if they were making good time. His omnitool was constantly turned on, every five minutes he'd glance down at the maps and chronometre in an effort to look busy. Truthfully all there was to do was the actual walking, there was little chatter along the way.

He offered multiple times to carry Tarina's pack but she insisted he had already given her the lighter materials. She wore her shotgun in a holster strapped to her left thigh to make room for the bulky pack, a Carnifex rested on her right hip. Marius was nestled in her arms, wrapped tightly in a fur-lined blanket. Magnus also had a Carnifex after losing an argument with Tarina about the impractical nature of carrying a single long-range weapon. He had tried to make the point that they were unlikely to be indoors for quite sometime and couldn't imagine needing something fit for close-quarters. Tarina's maternal instincts made her aggressively overprotective of both him and Marius, a characteristic that he was still growing used to.

The day progressed so normally that Magnus was growing quite suspicious about how easy the journey was turning out to be. They were ahead of schedule, the mountain climb itself was only two days off instead of three. The skies revealed no firefights, no smoke came from recent battles in nearby towns, the warm weather completely disarmed everyone of their initial reservations. Tarina told him not to worry about it, that it was ok to be dealt a good hand by the spirits once in awhile. Complacency was likely to be their biggest enemy so Magnus resigned himself to remaining vigilant, he would not be fooled. While other commanders yearned for good conditions, he almost craved hairy situations that demanded he put his tactical expertise to good use. He hadn't seen a single mission in his lifetime go smoothly from start to finish and saw no good reason to let his guard down.

During a short break in the middle of the afternoon, Magnus tried to learn the names of his fellow displaced soldiers. He was surprised at how disciplined the children were, some were carrying weapons for the first time. Cessia and her two boys were among them, she had been hesitant to leave her husband behind as were many others in the company that had to make similar choices. She kept close to Tarina, offering her motherly advice whether she wanted it or not.

It hadn't occurred to Magnus how different the current operation was until it was set into motion. He was leading a platoon's worth of refugees to a safe place, not a squad of young biotics trying to
impress him on a survival course. The company was made up of families, children, men and women who had been cut off from their usual chains of command. The Reapers had taken their homes and loved ones in the most brutal way imaginable. The refugees were aching for revenge, a yearning that could not be fulfilled any time soon. They were by no means civilians but that didn't make their plight any less important. Magnus would have to keep his biotics secret if he was to retain their trust.

"Sir, think you should take a look before we get moving. A ship went down recently about five kilometres west of our position. Couldn't get a good look given all the foliage in the area but it looked roughly big enough to be a troop transport. One of ours. We should check for survivors if we're moving that way," a young scout approached Magnus as he was about to give the order to move out. He couldn't recall the man's first name, something Tiresius, his markings were vaguely familiar. He was one of the few in the company who actually knew how to use the climbing equipment they had brought along just in case. Tiresius was accustomed to using it in his usual job as a repair technician.

"Show me, but we really need to get moving before we lose daylight. We can't go out of our way for possibilities, there is only one objective to complete here," he reminded the younger soldier, reinforcing his authority in case anyone else was listening in. The last thing he needed to do at such an early stage was to allow other, non-officers to dictate the mission's parameters to better suit their consciences. If the transport was close enough and full of survivors that weren't likely to become liabilities, he'd be happy to assist. Otherwise he would risk setting a precedent that put morality ahead of practicality, a dangerous line for any commander to cross.

Tiresius was right, Magnus was sure it was a recent crash landing based on the amount of smoke pouring through the thick trees. He could see glimpses of the hull, enough to know that it was indeed a turian craft and not that of the enemy. Unfortunately for him, the westerly direction was in line with where he was planning to lead the company next.

"Alright, we'll have a look. You familiar with reconnaissance protocols, Tiresius?" he looked over at the other man and he nodded an affirmation. "Good, take point then. It pays to remain cautious, I wouldn't put it past the enemy to lay traps for us. If there are survivors, they'll still be at risk from enemy pursuit," he lowered his voice to not cause alarm with the next comment, reflecting on what he had seen at the processing facility with Tarina, "The Reapers.. they prefer their victims alive rather than dead."

By the time they go to the wreckage, they knew they were too late to save anyone. Much of the interior had exploded on impact, leaving behind charred remains of metal and chunks of armour. Ordnance and weapons lay strewn over the forest floor, a sure sign that no one had made it out. No self-respecting soldier would leave gear behind, even a lone survivor would have had the decency of destroying tools that could be used by the wrong hands.

"At least their deaths were quick and merciful," Magnus grimaced as he located the squad's commanding officer among the few identifiable corpses. He and the pilot were still strapped in with their helmets on covered in fragments of glass which hid most of the carnage. "There's nothing we can do, our best defense is to keep moving."

Less than a kilometre down the road again, they were met by the presence of three soldiers with weapons drawn, heading in the direction of the transport they had left behind. All three looked shaken, ready to fire at anything that moved. Magnus halted his company's march to approach the leader of the small squad on his own, insisting that they lower their weapons if any dialogue was to proceed. He could feel everyone watching him impatiently, the day had been relatively boring until then.
"Sorry for startling you, we didn't know anyone was in this region," Magnus broke the ice. The two
subordinates flanked their leader, their weapons lowered but their trigger fingers still poised for
action. "I'm Major Thorn, and you are?"

"Sergeant Romus," the leader spoke up, he shifted uncomfortably in his armour as if he were
unsure of himself. "Were you looking for the transport as well? We were sent in to escort and
relieve them but as you can see they took heavy fire. So did my guys, this is all that's left of our
unit. Don't tell me they didn't survive, I've been risking my neck to get here in time."

"You're too late, Sergeant. I cannot divulge my company's orders, sorry to say. We're just passing
through to another objective. Do you have a base nearby?"

"We do, though it's not what you'd expect all the way out here. We've discovered a downed enemy
ship and are covering a team of engineers that are investigating it. Something about reverse
engineering components for our own use. The transport was supposed to deliver us more men to
continue patrolling while the scientists do their thing, you know?" the other officer was far too
casual, he kept looking over at his men to make sure they were still there. Whatever combat they
had escaped from must have been harrowing to strike so much fear and paranoia into them. It was
all too convenient though Magnus couldn't see any glaring issues with Romus' version of local
events, he couldn't quite figure out what seemed strange about it. "By the time we get back, it'll be
dark and that's no time to be left out in the open. Whatever hit that ship is likely to come back for
the rest of us. Your troops look tired, maybe you should stay with us for the night, safety in
numbers right? Weather's going to get bad tonight, so they say."

"I.. can't fault your logic, very well," Magnus agreed. He looked over at Tarina and the rest of his
company but their mood was hard to read. No one voiced any complaints as they continued on,
following Romus and his two men. When they saw the enemy ship, they all noticeably tensed,
gripping their weapons despite knowing what to expect. It was the same type of ship that had
carried prisoners to the processing facility, Tarina clutched Magnus' arm tightly when she
recognised its shape. For all they knew, it was a different ship altogether but given their previous
experience, neither of the pair was anxious to get too close. The rest of the company, however, saw
no reason to be alarmed as the ship was guarded by men and women in Hierarchy garb. Lights
illuminated the grounds, showing tents and all the usual trappings of a military base.

Even so, Magnus couldn't shake the cool, prickly feeling at the back of his neck. Something wasn't
right. How close had the skirmish with the enemy taken place? Why was everyone so calm, where
were the scientists, were they equipped to deal with any sort of self-defense mechanisms within the
ship, and so on. Almost immediately upon their arrival, the CO of the entire operation materialised
to introduce himself, as if he knew they would be coming. Magnus couldn't recall watching Romus
radio ahead.

"Commander Lacerus, at your service. Please, make yourselves comfortable. You're safe here,
there haven't been any nearby enemy patrols for days. Would you like a tour of our project? She's a
much prettier ship on the inside, I assure you," the CO said. He sounded friendly enough and
certainly more professional than his field sergeant. Romus didn't seem to notice that his CO's story
didn't add up with his own. It was none of Magnus' business to mention it as it was quite rude to
intrude on another unit's business. If the commander and sergeant were having an internal dispute
or a power struggle, that was for them to work out.

"I'll admit that I'm not too anxious to see what's on the inside but we may as well have a peek while
we're here. Is there room for all of us to go in?"

"Absolutely, the main chamber is quite large since we've stripped it back. If you notice any
damage inside, that's the result of the fight that brought her down. Be careful not to trip over anything, we wouldn't want to inflict any accidental casualties to your team. Right this way then.”

They approached what could only be described as the main entrance of the ship, a modest construction site had been erected around it to facilitate the movement of materials in and out. The materials of the surrounding structure were metallic and normal whereas whatever material comprised the majority of the outer hull was completely strange, nearing on organic in its composition. The ship's overall shape resembled a disorderly, bulbous rock-like structure with no definitive edges. As they got closer, they could make out the uneven texture and the brown to grey colour gradient that marked its surface. It was hard to see where one segment of the bulkhead ended and another began, indeed one could be forgiven for suggesting that the hull was one complete structure, like a shell around a sea dwelling organism, hollowed out inside to make room for the creature's other necessary biological processes.

Staring at it too long gave one the impression that there were veins of another structure laced through the tissue, possibly supplying power or some other type of energy that would have caused the outside to pulse like a beating organ if the ship were still alive. There were no obvious mechanisms for propulsion or weapon batteries, no sharp angles designed to give it any sort of aerodynamic resilience, and on top of that there was the distinct impression that the ship had been mortally wounded as opposed to destroyed in whatever battle that had brought it down. Frankly, it gave Magnus and everyone around him the creeps to be going inside it.

His first impression of the vessel was that it was too alien to be understood by current technology, the idea of actually using the knowledge to create something new was far too ambitious. Not a single scientist or engineer was seen until they were deep inside the first major chamber, all that was obvious of their presence was what equipment they left behind such as chords, wiring, and artificial lighting. Except for the few lights that had been brought it, much of the light was subdued. The ship had its own native form of bioluminescence, the distance between each orb was long enough to create disorientating shadows. The walls themselves seemed oily, like they could shift their shape at any moment.

The first chamber, and that's exactly what it was in terms of design, was as large as the commander had promised. Vaulted ceilings reached higher than anyone expected given what they had seen from the outside. Of course, they could not be certain if indeed they were standing on the floor and looking up at the ceiling or vice-versa, the overall cylindrical curve of the room didn't seem to discriminate between the two. Despite the vast amount of empty space above their heads, there was something very confining about the space. Hexagonal shapes prevailed throughout every nook and cranny, giving everything a distinctive, hive-like look. An occasional pod structure with its ominous opaque lid jutted out from the ceiling or floor. It was hard not to feel as if a huge insect would climb down to greet them.

All of Magnus reservations about getting too close were beginning to look justified. The more he saw, the more he wanted to get out and never look back. Curiosity had grabbed the attention of his team, even Tarina seemed intrigued by it all. They were allowed to walk freely around the central room at their own pace. For the most part, the ship's natural lighting hid the finer details, which was the only comfort Magnus could take from it. He could hear the familiar noises of whirring machines and equipment coming from further within the bowels of the vessel. He deduced that the workers were busy elsewhere making sense of the ship's equivalent versions of flight systems, the sound of their tools was a refreshing contrast to the current, quiet surroundings.

"Eager to see how it functions, are you?" Commander Lacerus said from behind him, reading his thoughts with an uncanny level of accuracy. The man had a very smooth, deep voice that had a way of relaxing some of Magnus' apprehensions. He was confident that Lacerus was someone who not
only knew what they were doing but the value of being in control. While confined on an enemy ship that had once been responsible for transporting innocent prisoners to their untimely demise, any sort of reassurance that the ship was safe enough to be boarded was useful.

"I'm trying to make sense of how it might fly, yes," Magnus replied. The question gave him an opportunity to think out loud about what was really off about the ship, something he couldn't quite put his talons on, "The organic aesthetic is really throwing me off, surely it has normal systems that allow it to operate in the vacuum of space. It can't actually be a living thing, right? If it were, the ship would rupture at changing air pressures or under the stress of any other extreme hazard. Where and how big is the drive core for this thing? What of the original crew, did your team recover anything of them? I'm no engineer but it doesn't add up with what I know about spacefaring ships."

"I can show you more of what we've discovered. Come this way," the commander urged him with an infectious amount of enthusiasm. The pair of them were already cut off from the rest of the group, ambling down a dark tunnel of a corridor. Lacerus pointed out items of interest as he led him further away from his peers, the pathways were tight and maze-like. Despite the commander's explanations, everything looked the same as they went on.

They passed more of what Magnus considered to be normal hardware, panels full of electronics were embedded into organic structures on the walls. There was more energy in the air, a buzzing of noise that had been absent from the first room. They walked through smaller rooms that fed into others of a similar size, each with their own function and purpose. The workers ignored them as they tended to their tasks, pulling at wires or fitting pieces of consoles back together. The artificial lighting apparatuses were gone, replaced instead by an omnipresent grey light that hung in the air. Eventually they arrived at a completely symmetrical, circular room that Lacerus described as the enemy's version of a CIC.

Again the engineers ignored their presence though they didn't seem to be distracted with any specific tasks. They hovered over their respective workstations with their heads bowed, awaiting new instructions. Their silence was palpable, the dark edges of the room hid the shadowy spectres from closer inspection. The wires from previous rooms hung from the ceiling in a large clump around a hole that had been the result of the warhead that had pierced the hull during its last voyage. Magnus couldn't be certain but it looked as if the intended workload mostly involved repairing the damage as opposed to studying how the ship worked. With that thought, the cool feeling at the back of his neck returned.

"You asked about the crew and how it all works. Here is your answer," Lacerus said simply, waving his hands dramatically in front of him.

Lacerus approached a console that connected to the dais in the middle of the room and pushed a few buttons. Doors began to open in the floor in front of him, revealing a device shaped like an outstretched claw. The claw was raised onto the dais and more buttons were pushed resulting in the emission of a bright, celestial light at the centre of the structure. The light pulsed and lowered in intensity until it settled on an all too familiar blue glow. A shiver went down Magnus' spine as he recognised it and he tried to look away. Immediately he could hear gentle whispers within his mind, mere fragments that he could not make out with any clarity. He fought the urge to focus on the distant echoes.

"This doesn't answer any of my questions.." Magnus said with mock confidence as he tried to dismiss the feeling in his gut, the one that told him to get out of there fast. Slowly he turned to face Lacerus directly, noticing as he did so that the workers around them were beginning to awaken.
"If you are willing to open yourself, you can know everything. Join us and never experience suffering again, there is only power and understanding. Why fight a war that cannot be won? Become more than you are, ascend to a greater existence," the commander's comforting voice beckoned, like a concerned parent reassuring a frightened child.

Part of Magnus wanted to believe him, he stared at the device long enough for the whispers to grow loud enough to form comprehensible words and ideas. He knew that Lacerus wasn't lying though any halfway rational person would instantly question his motivation or sanity. He would have to play along while he figured out what to do. The mob of workers were positioning themselves in such a way that escape would not be a viable option. He could still feel Lacerus standing behind him in his blindspot, encouraging him to surrender peacefully.

The trap was rapidly closing around him, his head was beginning to ache from the effort of resisting the voices. The enemy was trying to erode his psychological defenses, attempting to soften him to their manipulative agenda. If he gave in, he'd become an instrument of their will just like Lacerus and his followers. He could break the spell by resorting to combat but he would be grossly outnumbered. Even if he did survive the onslaught long enough for his own troops to come to his aide, he risked exposing his biotic abilities to them. Instead he began to look for a quick way to incapacitate the majority of his would-be opponents.

Remembering all the wiring and energy pouring into the room, he noticed a spark coming off of one of the back panels. If he could get close enough with his omnitool, he might be able to exploit the electrical damage to his advantage. Without a second thought, he reached for the pistol on his hip as he attempted to make the first move. He was not expecting the sharp blow to the side of the head, the pain causing him to assume a defensive crouch. His hand dropped before he could draw the weapon from its holster. Neither the kinetic barrier of his armour or the subsequently established biotic barrier enveloping his body could absorb the impact of the blows Lacerus was determined to land on him.

Desperately he threw out a weakly charged mass effect field in an attempt to push Lacerus out of the way. It was only meant to by him time as he closed the gap to the nearest exposed node of wires, most people would have been flung backwards by such an attack. Most people would have been confused by an invisible force knocking them off their feet, but Lacerus resisted it as if the field were no more than a splash of water thrown against him. He merely flinched and staggered a step back. By then, Magnus was already moving towards his goal.

His omnitool was already on, programming the sequence needed to execute an overloading of its own systems. He wasn't as close as he would have preferred but the amount of energy he was able to launch was high enough to short out the room's entire network of electronics. Blue-white electricity crackled into the air from his outstretched arm, delivering its surge of power into the weakened wires. A jolt passed through each device, sending sparks flying, the current gaining in potential energy as the electrons continued to cascade down the gradient of each component they touched. Small fires began to break out, burning for brief periods, marking the progress of the overload's reach.

Enough energy was in the system to shock anyone who stood near the wires, which included everyone except for Magnus and Lacerus who were both pinned to the dais waiting for the danger to pass. Without enough time to react properly, the workers collapsed with panic shrieks, their bodies toppling over one another. The brainwashing device at the centre had been removed, indicating it was too precious to be exposed to the electrical hazard that tormented its minions.

Lacerus howled like a wounded animal, shouting a battle-cry in a language that Magnus could not decipher. He charged at Magnus with agility that he should not have possessed, hitting him so hard
that his kinetic barriers shattered entirely. The biotic barrier rippled from the attack, also weakened. Instinctively Magnus broke the barrier, allowing the field to collapse altogether, the effect blinding his attacker momentarily as the dark energy was released. Lacerus lept back to reorient himself, giving Magnus a chance to bring his Carnifex to bear at last.

Lacerus had a weapon of his own but made no effort to use it, instead relying heavily on keeping his victim stuck in melee range. He moved so quickly that Magnus couldn't predict where he'd be fast enough to get a shot off, the last thing he wanted to do was to waste his only clip. Used to dictating the battle from medium to long range, Magnus was growing increasingly anxious to end the fight before it could get out of hand. The anxiety gnawed at him, he had been in plenty of tough close-quarter scraps when he was younger, usually relying on biotic pushes and pulls to do their job. His biotics were hardly a match for Lacerus who seemed to anticipate them, dodging at the last possible moment. Nobody should have been that quick on their feet, certainly not the average infantryman.

The commander knew what he was doing, constantly moving and frustrating his opponent, trying to wear him down through attrition. Magnus felt completely out of his element, he knew he was being taunted and toyed with. All the while, the voices began to chant in his head, even with the device removed from the room. He wasn't sure if it was Lacerus' voice or something else, his headaches began to worsen as it went on. Occasionally Lacerus went on the offensive, trying to strike at Magnus' limbs, sneaking up from behind all too often. He never tried to deliver a fatal blow, each of his punches and kicks was designed to break Magnus' will to continue. The mixture of a psychological and brutally antagonistic approach began to take their toll.

Magnus moved just as quickly as his opponent, pivoting on his feet to soak up damage when he could not avoid it outright. He managed to use his gun as blunt object, hitting Lacerus against his cheek. Lacerus swung around with his fist, knocking the gun away. His other fist followed and Magnus was on the ground before he could process where he was. Vulnerable on his back, he recast his biotic barrier, the field met another of Lacerus' punches and exploded in both their faces. It finally occurred to Magnus that his opponent was also a biotic, using similar fields to enhance his movement speed. The brawl took on a new level of difficulty as Magnus realised that not only was Lacerus a biotic, but his overall level of skill was much higher than his own. Adrenaline and fear kept Magnus going though he didn't think he could take much more punishment.

His enemy was not distracted by such trivialities, he knew Magnus was severely disadvantaged. The melee turned into a struggling wrestling match of wits on the ground, each of them fighting for survival. The time to test each other's strengths and weaknesses had passed. Lacerus had him where he wanted, his bare talons outstretched trying to get around Magnus' neck. Every biotic field he summoned collapsed immediately against an opposing barrier, he couldn't shake the commander off. In the distance, just outside of his reach he saw his pistol. It was tantalisingly close but his energy reserves were too low to pull it closer. He was too preoccupied keeping the commander at bay, losing ground as each second passed.

Recently sharpened talons dug at the skin of Magnus' throat, no normal soldier would have resorted to such a barbaric tactic to kill his victim. There was no way to dislodge him, the other man was far stronger and far too determined to end the fight. He tried desperately to scratch at the other man's face but Lacerus only laughed at the attempt. As the stranglehold intensified, whatever adrenaline was remaining in Magnus' system disappeared altogether. There was nothing he could do, he had been beaten in every possible way.

Fuzzy, colourful spots hovered at the edges of his vision. He could fill the first symptoms of blacking out, his muscles relaxed, his mind grew blurry, pain shot through the back of his head where his biotic amp was conserving its power. Images flashed through his mind as he reflected on
what he could only guess were his last moments.

In no particular order, memories of the people who had touched his life flooded to the surface of his mind. He remembered the first time he had held Tarina in his arms on the eve of an uncertain battle, the moment he had decided he wanted to fix all the damage that had haunted her, dare he think it, but the moment he may have fallen in love for the first time. The feeling of his son laying against his chest, the first time his father had put a rifle in his hands, the highly anticipated milestone of promotion that had resulted in his mother telling him she was proud of him, the time he nearly gave up on his brother and the deteriorating relationship that followed, knowing that he'd never get the chance to make it up to him. He thought of the first mission he had ran with Liana Viatrix and the friendship that had developed afterwards, he hadn't even had time to mourn her passing.

The memories began to lose their focus as the breath left his lungs. He couldn't remember the last man he killed or why. The failure of letting down his company by placing them in mortal danger, the risk he had taken to protect his family was inexcusable. How would he be remembered, if at all? He closed his heavy eyes and waited for the spirits to take him away.

A gunshot rang out, the sound of a Carnifex, possibly his own. Hot liquid splashed against his face, the sound of splattering blood pulled him back to consciousness. Had Lacerus been merciful in the end? Slowly he opened his eyes and saw Lacerus' corpse draped over him. Repulsed, he pushed the body away, the dark blue ichor pouring out of the wound at the back of his neck threatening to permanently stain Magnus' armour. His vision was still foggy as he felt the rush of fresh air refilling his deprived lungs. It felt so good that it hurt, the pain reaffirming that he was alive. Panting for more air, he rolled onto all fours as he tried get his bearings back.

Once on his feet again, still shaken by the whole experience, he watched in awe as Tarina stood still in the doorway. She looked like some sort of angel, her gun still drawn, pointing downwards at her victim in case another round was needed. Her other arm held Marius against her chest, the young turian clinging to her in his normal way, completely unphased by what had just happened. She didn't say anything, her face was neutral, devoid of any emotion as she waited patiently for Magnus to fully recover his senses.

"Are you ok?" she asked once Magnus had retrieved and secured his weapon.

"I will be," he tried to smile. He wanted to praise her, to kiss her, to let her know how truly grateful he was. There was no time for such grandiose displays of emotions, more gunshots were heard in the distance. His inherit leadership instincts took over though his body was ready to give up for the day, "Let's go, they're going to need us."

Tarina didn't argue, didn't try to tell him to slow down, just followed on heels and gave him covering fire whenever they ran into trouble. Backtracking through the tunnels of the ship was made easier with all the explosive noises directing them. Magnus' omnitool lit up as their comrades contacted him with whatever intel they could provide. There wasn't enough cover in the ship and someone suggested that snipers were cutting anyone off who tried to leave it. No casualties had been taken on their side but the fight was still fresh. Cessia's message was particularly alarming as she had lost track of her youngest son.

The chamber where the fighting had broken out was a wreck by the time Magnus and Tarina got to it. Pods were being used as makeshift cover, bottlenecks to adjoining tunnels were being held by one or two guards, children were shoulder to shoulder with their adult counterparts, weapons were firing in all directions. To a casual observer the scene would have appeared chaotic and yet Magnus saw a definitive perimetre being established and everyone working harmoniously together.
A quick headcount revealed that only a handful were missing.

The awakened workers were terrible shots, their military escort was missing entirely. Magnus wondered if all of them were brainwashed or capable of biotic attacks, there'd be no easy way to determine which were the most threatening. He ordered his troops to form up and eliminate all resistance, better to not leave any loose ends that might make the rest of their journey harder than it needed to be. All of their opponents were other turians, not a single husk or marauder joined the fray. In some respects, it was quite unusual and everyone had to be extra careful about which uniforms they were aiming at.

Cessia and her elder son Callen were less than enthusiastic, both worrying for the safety of young Marron who had disappeared at the start. Tarina assured the older woman that they would find him before it was too late. Moments later, Magnus caught sight of the 11 year old running backwards out of one of the maintenance ducts, blasting his Phaeston at full throttle. A body fell out of the vent he had been shooting at, displaying the boy's handiwork for all to see. His mother held onto him tightly when he rejoined her, relieved that he was safe. Callen look less than pleased that Marron had gotten his first kill before him.

After that, they began to work their way back to the entrance. The sniper fire and open layout of the camp made things even less inviting, there wasn't enough light to make out where decent cover could be found. Magnus split the group into two, asking for all medium and long range rifle owners to go outside with him while the rest swept the ship thoroughly. Tarina was supposed to stay inside but she wasn't about to let him out of her sight for a second time that night.

The atmosphere outdoors was especially cold and damp, most of the enemies gave their locations away with their chattering breath. A snowstorm dropped the first white flakes of the season, some of it mixed with icy rain which created shallow puddles around their feet. The conditions were miserable for playing cat and mouse, but Magnus wasn't willing to let their enemy escape. For several long hours they hunted their quarry, never certain what surprises might await them in the darkness. Once midnight broke, Magnus called off the hunt, he could no longer keep up with his men, having already entrusted his rifle to Tarina while he carried a sleeping Marius.

Everyone reported in while they made camp a couple of kilometres away, much to his relief. As tired as they were, none were ready to sleep after such an alarming event. Magnus couldn't keep his eyes open, he collapsed onto his bedroll with his back to a freshly prepared fire as soon as he could. Too much had happened that wasn't supposed, he would need to be rested and refreshed if he were to ensure the expedition wasn't fooled so easily again.

The sound of seagulls and crashing waves greeted Magnus. He was wearing a full suit of armour minus his boots, the better to feel the sensation of sand eroding below his feet as the water ebbed and flowed. The reflection in the water was that of his 8 year old self, freshly painted Invictus markings and all. He turned around to look at the beach, the same beach that had been home to the house in his last dream about Tarina. The house was still there though empty. His mother and brother were building a sandcastle not too far away, Andronicus was only three years old and ignored all of Sibyl's advice about reinforcing the castle walls against the incoming tide.

His father stood at his side in the shallow water, it was the first time Magnus was able to have a rather personal conversation with him.

"I'm tired of being treated special, Dad. I'm not sick yet but everyone expects me to drop dead any day. Mom's not sick either and nobody bothers her about it. I want to be like everyone else, given the same chances and expectations. Why do I always have to prove myself more than anyone else?"
"You are special but not in the way you think," his father said calmly, resting a hand on his shoulder. "You're my firstborn, Magnus, there's a lot for you to look forward to. Whether you end up sick or not, our family has a legacy to uphold. It's not always an easy weight to bear. Nothing worth doing is easy. The only person you have to prove yourself to is you."

"Yeah but that's not what Mom thinks. She's so hard on me, I don't think she'll ever be happy with what I do."

"She's like that with everyone, even me."

The young Magnus considered that for a moment. He hadn't gotten to the point he really wanted to make. When he was a kid, everything had been handed to him on a silver platter. He was expected to live an agonising life of constant illness and treatment, nobody thought he'd end up developing biotics instead. He hated having such an easy time of things, he didn't want people to pity him. He saw Andronicus as his replacement if something went wrong earlier than anticipated.

Instead of resenting his brother, he tried to make things easier for him. There was little point in being bitter. At times he was depressed for no reason at all, despite having everything a boy could ever want. Sometimes, especially in his younger years, he thought it would be better for everyone if he eliminated the negative expectations altogether by disappearing from their lives before the inevitable came to claim him. Why make them suffer for his existence? He never did figure out how to explain this to his father without giving the wrong impression.

"When I grow up, I want to be a soldier like you and Mom. I want to see the galaxy and save lives. Maybe then people will take me seriously."

"I take you seriously, Magnus. Always have, always will. Please don't be afraid to talk to me about anything, especially if you're upset. Now, didn't you want to learn how to swim while we're on holiday this year?"

"Thanks and yes!"

The real Magnus woke up then, feeling incredibly homesick. It had been weeks since he had heard from anyone in his immediate family. He never did enjoy swimming, equating the water to feeling of being trapped in space with only a ship's hull for protection. His relationship with his father had always been close, he missed the small pieces of advice and encouragement that he gave. Slowly the events of the fight on the alien ship came back to him and he remembered how frightened he had been. What would his father have told him? Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger, most likely.

But Magnus felt like he should have suffered more for failing to recognise the trap earlier, how could he have been so blind? The expedition could have been over before it truly began, all because of his mistake. He had to remind himself that he wasn't young any more, that he couldn't take unnecessary chances when others depended on him. The fight with Lacerus had proven that he wasn't tough enough, had Tarina not intervened he would have died then and there. Suddenly he was aware of just how much danger they were in at all times, the enemy's tactics could be subversive when it suited them.

He knew Tarina was watching over him, sitting upright in the bedroll beside his with Marius cradled in her arms.

"Haven't you been to sleep yet?" he asked her.

"Not tired," was her brief reply. "Are you sure you're ok? You've been shaking in your sleep, could
be the cold but you're so close to the fire that I thought maybe it was something else."

He stared at her, again not knowing how to express his personal thoughts without alarming someone that cared about him. "Tarina, I shouldn't be here right now. I had no business winning that fight. He was stronger, faster, more clever...and all I did today was endanger everyone. I've been in a lot of fights over the years, a lot of them were ones I shouldn't have won but that one...I've never come so close to death. Who am I to lead anyone if I can't even protect my own skin?"

"But you didn't die, did you? There's no one else better suited to lead this company and you know it. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself."

"I...I'm just glad you were there, really. I can't do any of this without you."

"You wouldn't be here at all if not for me," she reminded him coldly, trying to take all the blame. In his attempt to thank her he had managed to offend her instead. Her expression softened as he tried to think of a response, "Stop worrying yourself to death. We've still got a long way to go, one set back isn't going to ruin the future."

That was all the reassurance he needed to hear. There were other challenges ahead to worry about. Tarina was worth staying alive for.
Chapter 28

Another gust of arctic air and another face full of snow conspired to prevent Magnus from taking in the view from their cliffside camp up the mountain. The wind threatened to break through the many layers of his armour. He wiped absently at the ice crystals beginning to hang from the various straps that held his gear together. A layer of ice had began to accumulate along the buckles and other bits made of metal, thickening every time he remembered to check them. Since the beginning of their ascent, he had seen the carapace of his comrades begin to acquire a new, glacial sheen. Each blast of wind felt colder than the last, he couldn’t help but wondered if the same effect had began to occur on his own face.

He took another careful step and finally got a glimpse of the progress they had made in the past week. It was one thing to read the instruments on his omnitool but another to see firsthand how high up they were. The trees below were thin and tall, covered so heavily in snow that he could barely make out their branches. The snow drifts had shifted their positions, leaving no trace of their former campsites or footpaths behind. It was hard to believe that they had thought the climb would be easy given how much tree cover they had for those first few days. The mountain had started off peaceful enough, abundant with life and everything the company needed to survive. How quickly things had changed as they were forced to go out of there way to circumvent an unscalable, rock laden peak.

The environment was harsh and unforgiving, much like the attack from the Reapers that had prompted them to leave their fortified cities in the first place. How embarrassing it was to resort to living in the wilds on the homeworld, retreating at the first sign of trouble. Magnus was accustomed to living far from civilisation when it was his choice, he was not sold on having to do so out of necessity.

The wind refused to let up, he could no longer tell the difference between the level of cold when the wind was still and when it was in motion. Despite all of his training, he felt completely out of his depth. Not one to usually complain out loud, he privately couldn't help but long for the warm jungles of home, with their humidity and constant rainstorms. Instead, everything around him was white, bleak, and utterly alien. He was not alone, however, as the rest of the company was in a similar position.

All but one of them had any climbing experience and even that had not been performed under such unusual circumstances. The cold was wearing everyone down quickly, even the children had to keep themselves busy with menial chores such as gathering what very little kindling they could find. Everyone crowded around the small, temporary fires, shivering constantly as they attempted to retain some of their body heat. The occasional scout emerged with whatever he could forage from the land, sometimes with more useless information about how lost they actually were. Nobody had slept properly for days, with the howl of the wind gnawing at their bodies. Extra layers of clothing were no match for the elements and none of them know how to cope with the drastically low temperatures. Though morale was low, there was no turning back with their current supply of food reserves. While the Reapers destroyed the remnants of their civilisation, they could do nothing but put their hope in Magnus and his radical plan to bunker down in an inhospitable climate.

It was a plan even he wasn't sure about either, there hadn't been any signs that the monastery in the records actually existed. The alternative was to keep running, a very unsustainable approach that led nowhere. Magnus was tired of staying on the move. His recent brush with death had shaken him up briefly, leaving him with a reinvigorated desire to make the most of each day so that maybe
eventually he could get revenge for the destruction that had befallen his people. But that wasn't the primary motivating factor driving him to continue on. What was important was ensuring the safety of Tarina and Marius, even if that meant sacrificing his own means for survival.

He looked back at the camp and saw Tarina sitting with her knees towards her chest, trying to entice a small Marius to lay still against her legs while she tried to tighten his blankets. The impossible son and his beautifully broken mother, the sight was enough to thaw Magnus from his reverie. All he could see of his son was his face, his crest had been hidden within a fur-lined hood which Tarina was insistent that he should wear at all times. He sometimes wished that she'd fuss over him in the same manner. On the contrary, she had been unnervingly silent and distant since saving his life.

"We're lost, aren't we?" she said as she sensed his approach.

"Not lost, simply not where we're supposed to be," he reminded her. Once comfortably situated by the fire, he tried to take advantage of the rare opportunity to talk with her again, "That's the first thing you've said to me in awhile. Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm simply conserving my strength for Marius. Starting to think about what might happen if we don't get to where we are going soon."

"Leave all the worrying to me."

"I'm sure you can handle that, you've had more energy than all the rest of us put together. What's put such a bounce in your step?"

"I've got everything I could possibly want right here. We're going to find this place and finally be able to catch our breath. It'll be like returning home, except we've never been there before and we won't be alone. Not exactly what I would have had in mind to settle down with a family but a place we can call home nonetheless. We need a place to relax and recover, a chance for a normal life, or as close to it as we can get. And we will get there. What's not to be excited about?"

"The monastery, if it's even out there, is only a temporary solution. While we cower away here, the enemy gains more ground elsewhere. Soon they'll have a foothold that we won't be able to dislodge without some serious help. We're delaying the inevitable by hiding. I'd be happy if I knew we were on the right track, you know? If we win this war, and that's a big if, what's next?"

"I haven't really been thinking that far ahead but now that you mention it..." Magnus paused to focus on some lingering thoughts that had been at the back of his mind since he had come to rescue Tarina and their son. The rescue hadn't worked out so well. Originally he had thought she'd be more accepting of his presence in her life and maybe she'd come to admire him in the same way that he admired her. It could still happen though he had no idea how much longer he should wait.

His thoughts drifted to the recent past, he remembered the struggle with the indoctrinated soldier on the alien ship, how he had been nearly defeated. He was so grateful that Tarina had been there, convinced that it meant some tiny bit of her cared deeply for him. But any soldier would have rescued a comrade, he was reading far too much into that. They'd been through a lot already and their bond was obviously growing, even if he wasn't sure what that actually meant. Eventually he was going to have to be more explicit about what he wanted from her, the timing was never going to be perfect for such a statement. He chose his words carefully, guarding himself against what was likely going to be rejection or a complete dismissal. Better to be let down gently if he could help it.

"I always figured that after it was said and done that I'd actually retire, for real this time. As I've said before, it's not something the cabals are used to but the rules are fairly clear. I am no longer
obliged to fulfill any duties for the Hierarchy and in turn I will be compensated for my service. That most likely means no more promotion or advancement unless something bizarre happens. Theoretically I could live happily anywhere in the galaxy and be free of previous restrictions. That is, I could start and maintain a family if I wanted to and generally mix with normal society so long as my biotics aren't exposed. It would be a comfortable life. A good, stable life.

And I could share it with you, if that's what you wanted. Not that you have to accept that but the offer is there. If you were to marry someone of a higher tier, you'd inherit their benefits and honours as your own. I know you're worried about getting a late start on things, the timing has never really been on your side, but this could be a really helpful boost to your career. Again, you don't have to make up your mind right away, something to consider if we make it out of all this.

But you did ask what my future plans were so.. there it is..and it's ok if you don't want the same thing. Maybe for Marius' sake..I mean, it'd probably be helpful if I took care of him while you did whatever it is you want to do," he kept grabbing at logical reasons for her to consider but truthfully wanted to lay out his emotional needs as well. He preferred making rational cases whenever possible. One of them had to know what they wanted.

"I'll consider it," she said without hesitation. Had she looked over at him then, she might have noticed the beaming smile that he gave her. Not deterred, Magnus tried his luck and put an arm around her, suggesting it was for warmth as the winds picked up again but she could see his intentions were to be as close to her as possible.

There wasn't much else to say and yet there had been a lot on Tarina's mind for the past week as they travelled into unfamiliar territory. She also kept remembering the skirmish that had nearly ended Magnus' life and was rattled by the experience in another way. In that moment, when she fired her gun at the back of her victim, she knew that she was becoming too dependent on his survival. Magnus no longer appeared to be invincible to her.

Tarina had spent most of her life being told that she couldn't make it on her own, that she'd never amount to anything. She had never had the chance to disprove that notion. While she was grateful for everything Magnus had done her, she couldn't risk relying heavily on his charity. At some point he would let her down. Or maybe she would let him down. Either way, she was frightened not for her welfare but for her son's.

It wasn't so much that she didn't want him around, she quite enjoyed his company. As they sat quietly together, shivering in the night air by a dwindling fire on a forgotten peak, she knew that he was trying his best to show her that anything was possible. One of his arms was draped around her shoulders while the other cradled Marius. He certainly had the adoration of their son, Marius always behaved himself around his father. Good with children and easy on the eyes with his dark features, there wasn't anything to not like about him.

Tarina was trying to find a neutral way to express this thought without arousing any hope within Magnus that she wanted to take their relationship more seriously. Before she could say anything, their mountaineer scout, Nauto Tiresius, approached and indicated that he wish to deliver his recent report. Magnus stirred from his comfortable position at Tarina's side, she was sure he had been about to fall asleep on her shoulder. She took the baby back as he got up to return to his duties.

Afterwards, when Magnus returned to lay beside her on the bedroll that she had laid for him, his face told her all she needed to know.

"I don't like that look," she said quietly, absently curling up next to him for warmth.

"Get a good night's rest, Tarina. Tomorrow's going to be a true test of endurance. I'll give everyone
a debriefing at first light but they're not going to like it. Tiresius has been up and down this mountain all week, there's only one way to keep going up. Either we keep going in endless circles or we take a more treacherous path. From his description, it sounds like it's basically a straight, vertical cliff with a few jagged bits for handholds along the way. He's been up it once already so it can absolutely be done but.. it's going to require each of us to go one at a time. Not everyone here is as strong as you and me. It's going to be one hell of a climb. With the current level of supplies, we're running out of options. Then again, he may have made it sound worse than it is. We won't know until we get there."

Tarina tucked their son in between them and did as she was told. She was not looking forward to what came next but was glad that Magnus would be there to help her through it. Some day she was going to have to tell him that.

---

"So who wants to go first?"

The entire company gathered around Magnus and Tiresius at the base of their next obstacle. Nobody said a word as they took in the terrain. A large crack had been carved out of solid stone by flowing water that had since turned to ice. All that remained of the original waterfall was a bunch of boulder sized stones and ledges, dotted by long, dangerous looking icicles. The slope was not exactly a sheer 90 degree angle but it might as well have been. The top section of the climb was obscured by a fresh batch of snow brought in by a recent storm. The wall of white was too thick to make out what lay beyond a narrow ledge.

Tiresius verbally attempted to walk them through what to expect, indicating that there was a small cave behind the freshly laid snow. It wasn't big enough for a campsite but it did lead to a surface that was much easier to traverse. All they had to do was get there first. He pointed out the ropes between ledges that he had assembled, suggesting that they weren't actually needed but there in case anyone lost their footing during the storm. Magnus knew the conditions were less than optimal but couldn't afford to wait much longer. With their dwindling food count, they had to do the climb when they were at their most fit or they'd risk being stranded without provisions. Tiresius, an expert climber, had attempted to dissuade him to no avail.

"I will go up and re-test the strength of the ropes," Tiresius shouted over the gusting winds. "I'll need a few strong bodies to follow me up so we can set up checkpoints along the route. Some of those footholds are big enough for two people to stand side by side, good enough to take short breaks. I really don't know how long the climb will take everyone, it will probably vary a great deal so we need to be prepared to spend all day on this."

"Agreed," Magnus glanced over at Cessia and her two boys who were fighting over which of them would be first. "Select your first team, Tiresius. After your guys are clear, we'll send the children up first. That'll speed things up a bit, provided they are up to the task."

Both Callen and Marron gave their most formal salutes to their commander. Another child, this one female, stepped forward to be first in line and they gawked at her boldness. Teams based on age began to form at the base, a small fire was built to keep morale from being sapped entirely by the storm. Tarina kept quiet as usual and made no indication of when she wanted to make the ascent. She was the only one that had to worry about transporting an infant as well as her other gear.

Magnus remained at the bottom by the ropes, helping everyone secure themselves and begin their solo journeys upwards. He personally made sure every one of them was physically and mentally ready for the challenge. Once they were prepped, they began searching for the handholds left behind from previous climbers, their sharp boots left deep impressions in the ice that held the rocks
together. Communication was limited to shouting over the sound of cracking ice and howling winds. The only comfort anyone could take as they ascended was that the wind could not penetrate between the rocks, despite it's frightening sound.

Although the operation went painfully slow, the process functioned like clockwork. There were no major incidents as each climber made their way to the summit. Helpers at each of the three checkpoints along the way clung to their small, treacherous ledges to assist each climber across the more trickier sections. All anyone at the base could do was nervously watch their comrades while they attempted to psyche themselves up for their own turn. Eventually, late in the evening as the snowstorm began to die down, there were only two turians left to venture up.

"Get ready to go, Tarina, I'll be right behind you," Magnus said as he calmly put out what remained of the small fire. He was actually looking forward to the chance to test his physical prowess. Having been too busy helping everyone else get going, he hadn't been able to gauge Tarina's level of eagerness.

She shifted on her feet and looked to Marius for support, "Maybe we should try tomorrow instead, it's getting too late and cold to do this."

"We're the last ones left, we have to go," he said firmly, trying to shut down any attempt at an argument. He was slightly disappointed that she was so reluctant.

"I'm not ready yet," she insisted.

"Fine, I'll go first," he responded dismissively, still not taking in the depth of her hesitation. Even without the storm, the temperature was dropping too fast for him to want to remain idle.

"No, you don't understand," she paused and he looked over at her shivering body. He would have offered her a cloak or blanket if he had one to spare. Once she was satisfied that she had his attention, she clarified her meaning, "In basic, the one thing I could never do was the wall climb. I'd always get halfway up then freeze, forced to climb right back down. Every single time, never made it to the top. Not even on the easy ones. Got bad marks for it often enough but it didn't help me to improve. This is one huge wall climb with slippery bits and a biting cold that won't go away. And with all this extra weight..there's no way I am going up there."

Magnus stepped closer so that he could offer her what little warmth he could but also to make sure she heard him. He put his hands on her shoulders, gently to not disturb Marius who was cradled in her arms, but sturdy enough that she couldn't easily look away from him, "Some day you're going to have to believe in yourself, Tarina. Might as well be today. There were children less than half your age that made that climb today. I would never ask you to do something that I didn't think you could handle. If you're worried about Marius, let me carry him."

"I don't know.."

"You can trust me, Tari. He's my son too. I've done climbs like this before. Well, not exactly like this with these particular conditions but I also have the benefit of biotic abilities in case of trouble. You've seen how strong my powers are, there's nothing to worry about. If you go first, I'll be down here to catch you if you fall. Not that you will, don't look at me like that." he rubbed her shoulders with reassurance, trying not to frighten her more than she already was.

"Alright you can take Marius but I'm still not convinced about this."

"I know you can do this," he said with vigour, his voice was full of confidence that she couldn't ignore. "I wouldn't be here if you weren't worth saving."
"I don't believe that."

"Prove me wrong," he dared her. She wanted to argue more but she knew he was right. Her mandibles flared with the frustration as she was forced to accept that she'd have to do something that absolutely terrified her. She turned around to look up at the cliff of rocks and ice.

"What if there is no monastery? What if this is all a big waste of time?" she was reaching helplessly for straws and knew it.

"What if I had convinced the generals to not deploy the cabals so early in the war? What if I had never came to Palaven and had instead stayed on Invictus to defend my home?"

She took his point. With a heavy sigh, she closed her eyes. When she reopened them, she could feel his forehead against hers as well as a supportive hand at the back of her neck. His rich mahogany eyes stared into her peridot ones. They did not look through her as so many usually did but rather into her. Feeling a sense of inspiration, she pulled away from the embrace and kept herself busy by double checking that Marius was secured on his father's back.

"Do me a favour when you get up there, tell the lads at the checkpoints to head to base camp. They've been out in the freezing cold for hours, it's time they had a rest," he instructed her as he prepared to give her a leg up on the first handhold.

"Alright," she said as she focused all of her strength into her arms.

"You're doing fine," he said as she began pulling herself to the next one. He continued to offer encouragement and advice as she proceeded beyond his reach, "Remember to not look down, you'll warm up as you move, don't rush yourself."

Tarina heeded all of his words, her ascent was by far the slowest of anyone else in the company. As soon as she reached the first few ledges beyond his line of sight, Magnus began his own climb. He couldn't afford to wait for her to get too far ahead, in case she did need help. He was forced to go at a more delicate pace to make sure Marius didn't get jostled around too much. By the time he reached the summit with the small cave, it was the middle of the night and all of his muscles were burning from the intense effort. All of the checkpoints had been cleared as he had wanted. It had been too long since he had had to push himself to such limits and he was relieved to finally grab the lip of the last ledge. An arm reached down to assist him as he scrambled up, for a second he hoped it might have been Tarina but instead he was hauled up by a high-spirited Tiresius.

"What are you doing back here?" Magnus asked in between breaths as he tried not to collapse against the stone wall.

"Thought you might want a boost," Tiresius said as he handed one of his last remaining ration bars to his commander. "You did that the long and arduous way. No rope or equipment, minimal visibility. If you don't mind my saying so, didn't think you were that strong, sir."

Magnus laughed slightly, forgetting that most soldiers of his age weren't placed under the same physical standards as those in the cabals. He didn't realise how hungry he was until he tore into the offered food, "Thanks, this is a huge help. How was Tarina when she came through?"

"Shaken up," Tiresius said honestly. "She afraid of heights?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"She'll be ok, camps not too far from here. Everyone's taking it easy, resting up. Already had a good sleep myself. I must warn you this cave has a steep gradient that will sap whatever strength
you've got left. That said, you made the hardest part of the climb look incredibly easy so you shouldn't have much issue."

"Good to know. Is Marius still awake?"

"Your little one? Yeah, he's laughing at me, actually. Looks like he enjoyed the ride up."

"Glad one of us did. Ok, I'm good to go. Let's move out."

"Right behind you, sir."

Tiresius was right, the entire camp was quiet as they approached. It was the first time anyone had gotten some much needed rest. There were a few complaints of sore limbs but no noticeable injuries to deal with. Tarina was particularly difficult to rouse once Magnus found her. After complaining about every muscle ache she had, she excitedly took Marius, held him tight and then drifted back to sleep.

Though Magnus' body was begging for sleep as well, he knew he could not stop with the endorphins still running through his system. The climb had been rough but rewarding, the sense of personal accomplishment kept him too alert to settle down. He let the company get another hour's worth of sleep while he took in their new surroundings. Their position was too exposed outside of the narrow cave passage, he wanted them to be on the move soon.

Magnus had let his excitement get the better of him. He found exactly what he had hoped to find but in doing so managed to venture far beyond camp. In fact he was so far away that he could no longer make out which direction to go in. The night was pitch black and there were no landmarks among the snowdrifts, not even the pale moonlight of Menae could be relied upon. The only light source he had was the amber glow of his omnitool. The same omnitool had been used to scan for signs of civilisation and the results had been promising. Where the snow was thin enough, he could still make out the cobblestone path beneath his feet.

Unfortunately, he could not find the way back to camp, his previous footprints had been erased long before he had began backtracking. The snow was so deep that it took great effort to lift each of his weary legs out of it, one gradual step at a time. He was already beginning to lose feeling in his talons as the wet snow crunched under his boots, permanently lodging itself within. The extra layer of arctic clothing did nothing to protect him against the cold, he was sure their altitude was too high for the type of gear they had brought with them.

A dense fog made matters even worse, the ice crystals hung in the air like small, needles that could work their way the soft parts between his armour. His eyes stung from straining to see the glow of the device on his arm among the persistent fog. He was having an absolutely miserable time trying to figure out where he was going. For the upteenth time, he reminded himself why his species preferred much warmer locales and swore he'd never go into the cold again if he could help it.

Quite by luck he found his company again by listening to the sound of distant voices and a low, crackling fire. He couldn't imagine where they had managed to find firewood in their new, desolate location. Very few soldiers were awake by the time he got there, they immediately jumped to his aide once he was close enough. One put more wood on the fire and another lended Magnus a sleeping blanket, he was shaking too visibly to deny that he was in need of it.

"I found it. The way up to the monastery. Think I got a decent image of the building itself too, let me sift through them.." Magnus said with much excitement.

He brought up his omnitool to show them what he had seen, selected one clear image of a blocky
shape tucked between two rocky shapes, pinched the corner of the holographic image to enlarge it and pointed with his free hand, "There, that has to be it. That's some old stone work, same type that this mountain is made of. There's a path not far from here, made of similar material which leads to a bridge across a narrow chasm. Couldn't get a clear shot of that, wind was too high. Looked like it was made by hand or very simple tools so this place has to be it, it's too ancient to be anything else.

The path continues from there up to the building, a series of steps. I wanted to get closer but wasn't sure I could get back if I did. I'm not sure because the windows are so high and narrow, it looks like there might be some light coming from within. Probably old-fashioned torch light. This place is like something out of a storybook.

It's very real and it will protect us from this harsh wind. We can't stay here, I know you are all tired but if just go a little bit further we could relax with more peace of mind. We could make a fire that won't go out every five minutes. Let's get everyone up and ready to go, we're too close to stop out here where we are far too vulnerable."

There were several grumbling complaints thrown at him as each member of the company was woken up. They were still recovering from the climb earlier in the day, no one was eager to move again. Magnus thought he even heard someone grudgingly whisper about how he had nearly suffered dearly from the elements himself and was in no position to order anyone.

"If we stay here, we will have casualties to contend with on the way up to the monastery. Either victims of frostbite or far worse, we can't afford that now. We are not equipped to deal with sleeping in the open snow, this fire is hardly viable. There's also the risk of altitude sickness to worry about.

You've already come so far in this journey, now I ask you to go one step further. We will get much better rest in a building with walls and a ceiling than what we have here. Follow me and I won't let you down," he assured them, the last bit directed at those who questioned his own ability to contend with the elements. The complaints continued briefly but there was agreement that they couldn't risk staying in the open. Constant movement was their best bet to stay warm.

Magnus' willingness to continue leading them was in itself inspiration enough. He knew the value of setting an example and would not ask his followers to do anything he wasn't prepared to do himself. Every individual was free to go at their own pace so long as they didn't stop long enough for the cold to take root. It took them another full day to actually reach the monastery's summit, there was little point in trying to guess how many steps there were along the way.

"This place is creepy," Tarina whispered. Magnus was finding it difficult to disagree.

The pair were the first of the company to get a good look at the strange building built right into the stony peaks that surrounded it. There were no trees or any other signs of life nearby, just a rather blocky structure made of granite bricks that reached higher than they had expected it to. It looked both out of place with its surroundings as an artificial structure emerging from natural rock as well as completely inconspicuous due to the materials it was made of. The wall was thick and impenetrable, there was no obvious way of getting through.

The shapes of tall towers in the background implied they were looking at an outer wall and not the proper structure being guarded within. There had to be some sort of door or gateway on another side of the jarring foundation which greeted them. Perhaps there was an archaic mechanism that led to a passage under the wall as opposed to going through it directly. Magnus began to look for such a device while the rest of the company caught up to their position.

The rattling sound of metal clanking against metal came from the other side, echoing in a hollow
way against the thin air. The wall creaked as it resisted whatever force was attempting to open it. A section began to break away in the middle and move upwards, revealing spiky wooden bits underneath which had locked the partition into the ground. It was not readily apparent as to how such heavy stone could be moved easily. The moveable wall appeared to only be painted as stonework to match the real sections on either side of it. The gate that was being wrenched up was of a wooden material capable of folding in on itself at the top of the gateway.

The wall, then a gate, and now nothing more than a wide door frame, was nearly horizontal when the chain pulleys stopped. The entryway was wide enough for several bodies to pass through side by side. Magnus didn't know what lay on the other side so he, like most of his men, withdrew his sidearm and kept it in a readied stance. Two asari dressed in simple, dull robes with fur-lined cloaks emerged. Their bright blue, sculpted heads were a refreshing change of scenery after all the grey and white the turians had seen for the past week. Neither said anything or made any motion to approach the newcomers. They bowed their heads slightly and motioned the group inside. There was little reason to be afraid of two aliens so Magnus indicated that everyone should put their weapons away.

The group followed the asari in silence across the redoubt and up a short set of steps to the fortress's proper doorway. Again things weren't as they seemed and only a small portion of the actual door frame turned out to be a door. Magnus was astonished by the simplicity of the ancient building's architecture and layout. He couldn't determine exactly how old it was but it had to have been older than the invention of most terrestrial vehicles used for combat purposes, certainly long before turians had contemplated the possibility of spaceflight.

The square shape of the outer wall was designed to repel infantry, the redoubt would have been used to direct besiegers to a single entry point. Simple, yet effective for its day. The greatest mystery was the location, no invasion force in its proper mind would risk the resources to get to the fortress in the first place. It had to have been used as a secret headquarters by an overly paranoid warlord that wanted to establish his army far away from prying eyes.

It took several minutes for the company to adjust to the dim torchlight inside. Torches and braziers were spread out at regular intervals along the atrium and its adjoining corridor. Like the large door, the ceilings were high and the halls were wide enough for an armed force to march as an uninterrupted unit. Whoever had commissioned the building's construction had a taste for grand statements. The entry hall would have originally been decorated with suits of armour, battle standards, and war trophies. Instead, the current asari occupants had opted for more basic adornments, the two most elaborate being a pair of statues that marked the transition from the atrium into the main hall.

One statue was a male, turian soldier wearing a leather cuirass and skirt. His limbs were mostly bare aside from a thin pair of bracers and shinguards. The gear emphasised his natural defences. Opposite of him was a statue depicting an asari priestess or monk in similar garb to what the two monks who had escorted them wore. The two statues were bowing to one another with their palms turned outward in a gesture of peace. Something was slightly odd about both of them. Magnus realised it was the lack of a weapon on the turian despite his spearman apparel and the asari's drawn hood almost made her look like a female turian unless one looked closely enough. Both statues were well polished and finely detailed.

"Welcome travellers," a soft voice greeted them as they reached the main room. Another asari approached, "My name is Saidra. I am what you might consider to be the leader of this small cult of hospitality though we do not recognise rank or titles here. All of us are equal before the eyes of the Goddess. Come, sit by the fire and rest yourselves. If there is anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable, you need only to ask. It is our honour to serve others."
Magnus was surprised at how amenable the monks were to their presence, he had expected a more hostile encounter. Normally people who hid away in the mountains did not wish to run into outsiders, or so he assumed. Not all of the monks were asari, some were turians as well which may have helped explain the odd mixture of religious symbolism that was on display. Small hearths dotted the main room, together with the high ceilings there was more than enough natural light to make out the handwoven tapestries throughout the room as well as the altar at the back with what must have been an effigy of the goddess that was being worshipped in such isolation. There were so many new things to take in at once.

Blankets, food, and other civilised comforts were showered upon the newcomers in quick succession. None of the company knew how to politely decline the charity of their hosts. Many had forgotten what it was like to be protected from the harsh elements. The food offered to them was hearty and freshly prepared in front of them while they crowded around a large table that had been hastily brought out of storage. The rest of the room was sparsely furnished, the open layout gave the illusion of a much larger space. The monks were eager to help their guests relax and didn't seem to mind how much mud was tracked in by their armoured boots.

The asari in particular were eager to engage in casual conversation, there were no interrogations about why Magnus’ company had came to seek shelter. It was unclear if the monks were even aware that a war was being fought on every populated world in the galaxy. The monastery's atmosphere felt more like that of a hotel with the attendants more interested in serving than in understanding their patrons. They were so far removed from current affairs and were probably better off because of it.

"How come they are avoiding us?" Tarina boldly asked one of the asari sitting nearby, nodding her head towards one of the turian monks that was keeping themselves busy away from all of the activity.

"It's just their way," the asari whose name was Zana said, "We're all outcasts here, visitors aren't very common. I think they might be worried of being misjudged by their own kind. I know I would be apprehensive if there were asari strangers in my home. They wouldn't understand what we do here. Be patient, give them time to come around."

"How do you get supplies all the way out here?" Magnus inquired.

"We grow most of our own vegetables. The meat is trapped or hunted during summer when the snows have thawed then preserved for the rest of year. We try not to use it much, there's little need for a protein heavy diet when one spends most of the day in prayer. Other components are flown in by shuttle once or twice a year, that's about the only time we get any news from the outside world. As you can see, we try not to be distracted by modern technology. That said, there is a generator for emergencies and we do have fresh water available. Come to think of it, the shuttle is over a month late on our recent shipment or we would have had more meat for tonight's feast. I hope it is still somewhat satisfactory."

"It is thank you. I can probably confirm why you haven't been getting anything from the outside for awhile." Magnus lowered his voice, unsure of how to break recent events to the monks, "The Hierarchy is at war. All of Council space is at war. We came here to seek refuge while we try to figure out how to support the fight."

"At war? With whom?" Saidra, sitting across from them spoke up. The rest of the ambient conversations nearby fell silent as everyone tried to listen to their respective leaders.

"They're called the Reapers, some sort of synthetic-organic hybrid race from beyond our galaxy. As far as we can tell, their goal is to eradicate all sentient life. The attack came as a complete
surprise. Cities have been decimated, whole colonies have gone dark. The fighting started about a month ago and we're still reeling from the first blow. The legions are scattered, our allies are cut off, it's one big mess at the moment," Magnus explained.

"But why come here?" one of the turian monks had joined them at last, she sat beside Saidra. "We can get you back on your feet but we are not capable of fighting for you. This is a peaceful sanctuary. If they know you've come here, you're putting us all in danger."

"They do not know we are here, we are merely a bunch of soldiers without marching orders. We had to do something other than sitting on our spurs waiting for the fleets to organise a proper defense. The Reapers are interested in the cities, populated places where they can.. acquire more troops. Places as old as this will seem unimportant. It is my hope that we can fortify this place all the same, to be on the safe side.

I want to get more displaced men and women up here where they can gather their strength. This might be asking a lot of you to take in so many and I apologise for the intrusion greatly. But we have no where else to go. You can be assured that we will not make any trouble and will do all we can to protect you if needed. Assuming you'll let us stay, of course. I don't mean to take advantage of your kindness without repaying it somehow," he was worried about what might happen if the asari chose not to accept them after all. It would put them all in an awkward position if their goodwill was to remain temporary.

"Meekari, gather our sisterhood at the altar. We must convene and decide together as to what course we will continue to follow," Saidra turned to the female turian at her side and rose to leave the table, "You will have your answer soon, commander. In the mean time, perhaps your people can find rest in our hall. You may set up wherever is most convenient for you."

Saidra wandered off with her monks, leaving Magnus' company alone. Many of them were beginning to shed their armour, tired after a long day and full of more food than they could ever have asked for.

"What if they won't let us stay? They've been so kind so far but we're asking a lot," Tarina voiced Magnus' concerns out loud.

"I don't know, this place is certainly defensible though. It's the perfect location for our purposes. If we really can't work out an agreement that both sides are happy with, it might come down to something more messy. Let's see where diplomacy gets us first," he said quietly so nobody else could over hear it.

Tarina was stunned by his response, she had not contemplated the idea of committing violence to take the fortress from its current owners. It startled her that she still did not understand Magnus too well, he hardly seemed like the type of person capable of taking what he wanted without thinking thoroughly about the consequences first. She recalled how swiftly he had dealt with the pirate captive on Invictus as well as how he had threatened Argus the deserter. When it came to protecting those under his charge, he would not hesitate to do what was necessary. There was still much for her to learn regarding confidence and decisive action.

"We outnumber them by at least three to one. If it really came down to it, they would choose submission over resistance. With this hideaway secured, we can begin the process of turning it into a useful base. While we've been wandering the wilderness, we've been unable to make ourselves useful but that will turn around fast. There's the logistics of food and supplies to work out, we'll need to create some sort of comm relay, it'd be great if we could get a medic out here as well.." Magnus was speaking to himself more than to Tarina as he figured out what worked remained. He had been taught to never be satisfied with the present state of affairs, something always needed to
While he spoke, he paced slowly around the corner of the room, taking in the sights in more careful detail. The colourful tapestries had grabbed his eye, each one depicting a scene from common myths told to turian children to teach them valuable life lessons. The heroes, villains, gods, goddesses, and everything in between were familiar. They were the type of stories that children could appreciate because they were full of adventure and intrigue, often accompanied by impossible feats of magic that sparked their growing imaginations.

What was perplexing about the images was the way they were presented as truths rather than myths. Some even showed asari goddesses in place of their original, turian counterparts. One of the tapestries was still being worked on, the bottom layer was frayed and contained no dye. It would make sense for the monks to pass the time by keeping their hands busy. Magnus wasn't sure what to make of their strange interpretations, however. Too much time spent cut off from civilisation had a way of warping one's perspective.

"You still have that QEC adaptor, right?" Tarina offered helpfully, trying to make herself relevant in his presence.

"Yes, but no apparatus to make use of," he turned to her, almost surprised that she was still awake. "Add it to the list of things to worry about later. For now, we should probably rest," he approached her and lightly touched her cheek. She closed her eyes and let him stand close as he continued, "We're safe at last, things will get better from now on. Hold out here for a few more months and then we can get back to the frontlines where we're needed most. It will be a good chance to relax, save up our strength, watch Marius take his first steps and generally be normal for awhile. Certainly there will be other challenges ahead but as long as I am here with you, then they are of no consequence. We will get through it all together."

She leaned against him, fatigued from the day's events, "I want all of that too but..

The sound of muffled footsteps broke the mood. Both Saidra and Meekari had returned after their lengthy deliberation, "Oh, we didn't mean to intrude. Pardon my rudeness earlier, I did not formally introduce you to my partner, Meekari. And this must be yours."

"I'm not his partner," Tarina said instantly. "We're just friends."

It took several seconds for Magnus to work out a response, he was so far taken aback by her words. Seconds ago she had been excited about sharing a future with him and now she sounded as if she didn't want anything like that. The wind was knocked out of him as he tried to reconcile what he had heard her say to the strangers. He very much did mind their interruption, "A little bit more than friends..

"Meekari is it? I don't want to get in the way of any official talk here, would you be interested in walking with me for awhile?" Tarina asked the other turian, pretending not to hear what Magnus had said.

"Absolutely. I will show you where everything is if you'll let me hold your son for awhile," Meekari seemed quite excited by the proposition. Tarina agreed and the pair set off without so much as a backwards glance at either Saidra or Magnus.

"Well, this is awkward," Saidra understated. "Poor Meekari, she's still young and fertile. There's nothing about our order that prevents us from having children though you can imagine the hurdles that come with trying to raise one out here. Not that I could if I wanted to, I'm far too old to bear any more daughters. That's one of the most annoying things about living as long as we asari do.
Mother and child always outlive their partners and fathers. It's quite a tragedy."

Magnus barely heard her, the word that he caught most of was "tragedy". The asari remained patient with him, "I'm trying to understand what is your order does. This mixture of asari and turian art is very strange."

"It's not strange when you can see the parallels between our similar creation stories," she said. "But I won't bore you with all that, not now anyway. Suffice it to say, we've decided to continue servicing your company and whatever other refugees may come here. It is our duty, our Goddess calls us to tend to those who are in need of care. This is a great privilege for us."

"I'm glad that you will not be turning us away," Magnus said sincerely. He didn't want to add the unpleasant thoughts of forcing the monks to comply on top of his current, unwanted emotions. He could barely think straight as it was.

"This will sound strange to you but I believe the Goddess sent you to us. You've been touched by Her before, I can sense it. One of our pilgrims has met you elsewhere, the ripples in your aura show this clearly," she said in a mysterious tone.

"My what? If we are to work and live together then you will need to keep your religious thoughts to yourself," he warned her. He recalled the strange asari on Omega that had shown him a dream of his past, the dream that had convinced him to save his younger brother from a terrible fate. The asari were a people that could communicate with some level of telepathy, capable of reading minds and sharing thoughts, he didn't want another prying unbidden into the depths of his soul. Aliens had to learn that their ways were not the ways of others.

"Your aura, the one that also tells me that you are a biotic," Saidra said simply.

Magnus bristled, he had been very careful about keeping the secret of his powers away from his company. She could have been guessing but something in her eyes told him that wasn't the case. If the word got out, well, he couldn't let the word get out, "Tread carefully, asari."

"You would be wise to do the same, we are not as helpless as you might think" she countered. They stared hard at one another for a second more. She was the first to back down, "We will talk more later, if you wish it. Good night, Magnus Thorn."

Magnus wanted to focus on his thoughts, to meditate on all the confusion that had arisen out of nowhere but he could not settle his mind down with all the religious icons staring at him, judging him with their blank stares. He had removed his armour and stacked it neatly by his bedroll, taking small comfort in being free of the metal casing. Somehow he had managed to peel the arctic undersuit away and lay it out to dry, each chore keeping him momentarily distracted. His officer tunic remained half unbuttoned as he ran out of ideas. Frustrated, he sat with his legs bent towards his chest and stared at his bare hands, wondering how he was going to be able to sleep with Tarina's bedroll beside his. How much time had he wasted trying to prove himself to her?

As if summoned, Tarina arrived then, quietly going through the motions of tucking Marius into bed. Did she even mean to hurt him? He was so full of questions and yet wasn't sure if he wanted to know the answers or not He watched as Marius was nestled carefully into several clean blankets, oblivious to the turmoil that existed between his parents. Tarina herself had already removed her own armour and wore only her basic undersuit. If the circumstances had been better, Magnus would have been able to appreciate how beautiful she was.

He kept his eyes away from her and tried to be enthralled by the unlacing of his boots. They shouldn't have set their bedrolls together in that particular corner, it was like they wanted to be left
alone. It sent the wrong message to everyone else. The silence was growing to large too bear and Magnus had to break it, "You might as well have said we're complete strangers, that wouldn't have left as much room for misinterpretation."

Tarina knelt beside him and said nothing.

Magnus pressed on, he had to get it all out in the open, "I don't know what you want Tarina, I'm not sure you do either. I've gone far out of my way to help you but nothing seems to be enough. How can I make my intentions any more clear? What more do I need to do prove myself to you?

It doesn't sound like you want me around at all. Every day that I get closer, you get further away. Like you're expecting me to walk out at any moment. But I'm still here, look at how much we've be through already. When have I ever let you down? Has none of this mattered?

You don't care about me, you only care about your own self-preservation and you're not even really good at that. I should have stayed home where everything is the same. Now I'm stuck here, possibly jeopardize my career. All for what?"

She remained quiet, in response she touched his wrist and he very nearly jerked his arm away from her. It wasn't like her to seek out or offer affection. As he thought about it more, he seemed to recall that every moment that involved them touching had been initiated by him. Except for the one night on Invictus, the one night that he was no longer sure about. Things would have been a lot less complicated if they had never conceived Marius.

Cautiously she moved closer, her other hand touched his chest, just under the the half of his tunic that was unbuttoned. He wanted her to say something, anything. He was tired of guessing all the time.

"I care about you," she said with a whisper. He wanted to respond but she put a finger to his mouth to tell him that talking wasn't going to help. She sighed, wanting to say more herself but unable to find the words. The pair of them had been less than honest with their feelings. There had to be a better way to communicate.

Tarina continued fumbling for the remaining buttons, he could hardly believe it. They had been on the run for so long, often taken each other's company for granted. Marius was the only reminder that they had ever shared in anything remotely intimate. Magnus had been trying so hard to make her feel safe and wanted that he had completely forgotten about his more primal needs.

She leaned in close, her breath on his neck, one hand touched his mandibles softly. A shiver went down his spine as he tried to adjust to the dramatic shift in their confrontation. He was still sitting with his knees up, unsure of what she wanted. No more guessing, if words couldn't send the message then he had to take charge and show his feelings in another way. He wouldn't let her dictate how things were to be done, half the problem was her issue with not being in control. If he could just make her realise that he could take care of her, that there was nothing to be afraid of, then maybe the night could be salvaged.

As she pulled his tunic away from his shoulders, he wrapped one arm around her waist. He began to feel the shape of her back, looking for the softer spots between the carapace plates. His free hand found that her own clothing was easier to pull off, maybe she had anticipated spending the night with him and left it that way deliberately. She sat atop him so that they could face another at eye level, gently touching the back of his neck as she ran her hand up to the sensitive spot below the base of his crest.

It had been so long, he wanted to make every touch last in case she changed her mind once more.
Cradling her back, he refused to let her push him onto his back. He would resist her firmly, to show that they were equals and that neither had to control the other. Her arms draped over his shoulders and her eyes lit up as the friction increased. Magnus held her as tightly as was possible, pressing his face against her chest so that she had to lean down to kiss his forehead. They continued in tandem, slowly enjoying one until they were too exhausted to go on.

Neither worried about anyone that might have caught sight of them together. The tension between them eroded rapidly, no more words were exchanged. Not one of Magnus' questions was clearly answered and he was quite alright with that, at least for the moment.

The next morning he awoke with Tarina curled up beside him. He had fallen asleep with only a pair of pants on, it had been years since he had been able to rest like that with his bare skin exposed. Tarina wore his unbuttoned officer tunic as if it were a jacket, it suited her quite well. He had expected it to all have been a dream but there she was. Marius yawned in his nest between them. As Magnus had predicted, things were beginning to up after all.

"I want to finish the training we started on Invictus," Tarina said when she was fully awake.

"Ok."

"That soldier you fought on the ship was a biotic, right? If that's going to be more common with our enemies then I want to be prepared. Marius can't risk losing either one of us. If we're going to be stuck around these stuffy monks then we should find something useful to do," she explained.

"If that's what you want then I can do that," he was mildly surprised by the request but saw reason in it. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead with his. There was no need to rush such things.
"Come on, one more round then we can carve into that wonderful beast you took down yesterday," Magnus tried to urge Tarina on after a long, grueling session of close-quarter sparring.

Tarina was panting from the intense exertion, it had been her idea to start the session but it was turning out to be a lot more difficult than she had imagined. The musty air of the storage loft that they had chosen was getting to both of them. It was the best location they could find that was out of the way and they had spent days making up excuses to slip away to clear enough space away for them to use it on a regular basis.

"How about an old fashioned, non-biotic spar this time?" she asked.

"That's defeating the point. And you've almost figured this one out."

"I can't move that fast."

"Then close the gap, take the biotic out before they can take you out. It's not magic, Tarina, it doesn't make me invulnerable to bullets or anything else. Ready?"

She nodded and regained her defensive stance, resting lightly on her talons with her legs bent ready to hurl her forward. Neither of them wore armour or carried weapons. The exercise was intended to teach maneuverability, anticipating the movements of one's opponent, and precision strikes with the fists or feet. Magnus was starting her off easy by casting highly visible area of effect powers like a singularity that were supposed to inhibit careful footwork.

All Tarina had to do was avoid being caught by the mass effect fields before they could knock her off her feet. Each time he casted the singularity, it was shorter in duration than the previous one but she had not managed to avoid any of them despite their weakened effect. To not confuse her, he remained consistent in where he placed the field. At least she had caught onto the small distortion appearing behind her though her reaction time suggested she wasn’t sure of when it was coming.

He flicked his wrist and the unstable ball of dark energy manifested itself again. This time Tarina chose to dive forward, completing escaping its grasp. The mini black hole collapsed on itself and started to fade away. Tarina watched as it did so with a triumphant grin but Magnus wasn't convinced that she had learned the lesson that he wanted her to. He threw another biotic effect at the remains of the singularity, an invisible ball of a field that created a very noticeable blue explosion when it reached its target. The resulting shockwave charged at Tarina's position where she was in the middle of pulling herself back up. She was forced to rapidly drop onto her stomach while the energy dissipated harmlessly over her head.

Magnus didn't have time to savour the minor victory as she lunged straight for him. Not deterred by his surprise attack, she came at him with a ferocity he could not have anticipated. Perhaps she had been listening to his instructions all along, waiting for the right moment to enact her rage. He nearly missed getting punched in the face, her wild swings were too unpredictable for his training to keep up with.

When he thought she was giving up, she turned around at the last second and got him under the jaw with the sharp end of her elbow. The sound of cracking carapace worried him for a second. He wiped at the spot with the back of his hand but no blood came from the wound. The skin under the plating would bruise over in the days ahead but nobody else would be aware of it.
"Damn it, Tari, I said to hit me, not to break anything," he scolded her.

"You kind of deserved it after how many times you got me," she said without any hint of sympathy.

"Right, time for a break then. We don't want anyone to start asking about where we've gone off to. Though if they did, it's not hard to work out what they might think we're doing," he said with a grin as he held her by the waist. She laughed, holding him back with her arms wrapped around his shoulders. He wanted her to stop treating his lessons like a game. If they were to get serious about the training, they would have to find ways to keep their hands off each other no matter how great the temptation may be. Their training sessions were a good way to be physical without it having to mean anything substantial and Magnus still wasn’t sure about Tarina’s true intentions.

Several weeks had passed, the main hall was barely recognisable as the open plan room that it had been when they arrived. Sections of every room had been divided up with temporary, mobile partitions that were designed to separate the different functions of each area rather than providing any sense of privacy. The refugees were still living without most of the comforts they were used to. Much of the exterior of the building was in the process of being transformed for the implementation of defensive mechanisms as well as expanding space for living quarters and other necessary additions.

The only area that had not been touched was the garden and the courtyard surrounding it where the monks performed their daily meditations. When the space was available, combat training drills were carried out in the same area. The ramparts around the fortress were used as an extension of the courtyard, covering a distance that allowed for running and surveillance of their bleak surroundings. About a kilometre away, on another much higher peak, stood the crumbling remains of a lookout tower that had not been well maintained over the building’s long history.

There was a lot of noise throughout the structure as construction projects continued and everyone was given a job to do. Magnus made a point of keeping everyone busy. Though they weren't going to be fighting any time soon, it wouldn't do for anyone to forget the importance of discipline. The children were taught the basics of ranged combat instead of the usual academia, much to their delight.

The monks helped where they could but generally stayed out of everyone else's way. It was clear that they were unhappy about the change of pace, Saidra was not thrilled about having another more competent leader taking charge. To her grave disappointment, Meekari had taken to the newcomers quite well.

"Has Marius given you any trouble?" Tarina asked Meekari once they had returned to their cramped section of the living quarters.

"Not at all, I think he's getting used to me handling him," Meekari said as she handed the baby back to his mother. She turned her gaze onto Magnus, "One of Petra's team came by looking for you. He gave me a note and took off again." She produced a neatly folded piece of parchment from one of her pockets and handed it to him. He looked bewildered by the gesture, not accustomed to the old ways of passing on information.

"Thank you. Did you kindly inform him that Petra is supposed to be fixing that tower as opposed to studying... what was it? The strange metal alloys of armour dating back almost two thousand years and what their purpose might have been. Some nonsense like that," he frowned as he took the message.

"It's actually a fascinating discovery, that tower is one big treasure trove of lost history," Tarina
pointed out quietly.

"I didn't feel it was my place to tell Eris Petra how and where she is to conduct her research," Meekari said politely, always keen to stay on the commander's good side.

"She's not supposed to be doing research, this isn't a dig site. We need to make the most of everything we have here, in case the enemy should find us," Magnus sighed and held the note up to the nearest torch, trying to make sense of the script. "This handwriting is terrible, looks like a bunch of salarian scribbles.

Look at how far we've come. A month ago we could travel from the Trebia system to the Serpent Nebula in less than an hour if we really pushed it. Today we've regressed to delivering reports on scraps of paper. Sometimes it feels like we're still digging around for those lost scientists on Invictus."

"I'd say that pen and paper is a marked improvement over graffiti written in blood and guts.." Tarina said hauntingly, having tried to push the memories of the cannibal camp far away.

"Fair point," Magnus agreed. Meekari looked at them both like they were crazy.

"So, what does it say?" Tarina asked, shifting the conversation back to the present.

"Well, I'm not entirely certain, but I think it says that Petra spotted a large group of refugees heading our way. The exact figure isn't specified but it definitely seems like it's the biggest bunch we've received so far. How about that, the lookout post has served its purpose after all.

Ok, we should assemble some people together and clear away more of these storage rooms. We'll move all of the useless artefacts into the lower levels. Next time you see Petra, be sure to tell her that," Magnus said to Meekari before he left the room.

A buzz of energy hung in the air as weary travellers made their way through the atrium. The first to enter were the injured, either pulled in on stretchers or carried alongside their comrades. Behind them, a blanket of white showed a sudden blizzard blistering outside, making it impossible to tell how many more were waiting to come in. Much of the excitement came from the established refugees trying to spot familiar faces. The newcomers themselves were quiet and awestruck by the reception.

The monks helped direct the incoming foot traffic, encouraging anyone that would listen to remove their muddy gear by the door, sending the injured to a temporary infirmary, and offered warm blankets to those that couldn't stop shivering. The smell of a small feast was hard to ignore, the meat had been hastily butchered and prepared after the previous day's hunting expedition. The travellers looked beaten down, their uniforms were battered, dirty, and in severe need of repair but food and warmth were their top priorities.

Some of the uniforms were those of medical officers, one was fitted onto a very slim build which caught Magnus' attention. The human had messy brown hair, her uniform was in tatters. He didn't recognise her at first, her usual upbeat composure was nonexistent. Dr. Tomas clung to the shadows, hanging back from the rest of the group. The doctor looked like she'd been through hell, he couldn't tolerate someone being in distress even if she was a human. He wasn't entirely sure what drew him towards her aside from the fact that she was the only alien he had much respect for. She had saved Tarina's life once and that made her ok in his book.

"Trying not to be noticed?" he said quietly as he approached her.
"It's been a long day. Well, long couple of weeks really," she said tiredly, pushing the hair out of her face so she could get a better look at him. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you again, Magnus."

"Likewise, we could do with a medic around here," he tried to smile but there was a sadness in her movements that drained the positivity out of his voice.

"I'll be eager to get to work soon," she said. She watched the medics moving about nearby, catching the eye of Cessia who was propping up her injured husband, Tiber. He had come with a group of refugees a few days prior, still unable to walk properly without assistance. Magnus could tell Tomas was evaluating him from afar, trying to figure out how she could ease his pain further. Someone led Cessia and Tiber away, freeing the human of the momentary distraction.

"Pardon my bluntness, but you don't look very well, Doc. What happened out there?" Magnus tried to make conversation as best he could. There were several other different tasks he would have preferred to be attending to then.

"Trust you to ask that. It's a long story. The short of it is that Kallium didn't make it."

"Who?"

"Captain Osirian, sorry, I should know by now that surnames are used more commonly amongst you soldier types."

"If you want to talk about it, I'll listen. Let's get you warmed up first, there's a hearth over that way that isn't being used for tonight's meal. We could have some privacy, if that's what you want?"

"That.. that would be most welcomed, thank you."

The words were coming out of Magnus before he could think them, the doctor was in need of someone that could empathise with her. He found Tarina in the crowd and told her to look after the refugees while he dealt with Tomas, she was already too busy to acknowledge his departure.

"Here, you relax and I'll go grab you something to eat. Don't worry, the asari have plenty of levo based stuff around here. Much of it is grown locally, bunch of leafy green stuff. I will not be accepting 'no' for an answer. The climb up here is no small feat, you absolutely need the sustenance. I'll be right back," Magnus trotted off to fetch a bowl of soup before the human could discourage him.

When he returned, Dr. Tomas had removed her boots and socks. She was leaning back on her hands with her bare, pink feet facing the roaring fire. He had never seen a human's feet before, the lack of natural defences surprised him. There were no talons, toughs of fur, no plating of any kind. How had the humans evolved to become as advanced as the other Council races? They lacked the innate biotics and mind touching capabilities of the asari, they were not true amphibians like the salarians or drell, they definitely lacked the physical prowess of the krogan. All they had was soft, delicate skin and a bit of hair on their heads. The best word he could think of to describe them was 'fragile'.

Quietly he sat close enough that he could offer her the food without impeding her personal space. She took the soup gingerly at first, sniffed at it a few times then began to chow down. The soup was nothing but a bunch of herbs soaked in a broth, the taste was likely as boring as the smell. The human didn't mind, the hot liquid was what she needed to defrost after a long journey.

"I appreciate the charity," she said with sincerity after a long pause. "Didn't think you liked my
"You're an exception. You've proved yourself under fire, took Tarina and I in when we had no where else to go."

"If that bit about remaining cool under pressure were true.. well, I wouldn't have lost someone so important to me. Or maybe I would have not found my way here. " her eyes went dark as memories began to flood back to her. She answered his next unspoken question, "Got lucky when my omnitool picked up the radio static. That embed message on the emergency frequency, I knew it was your voice. Kal told me to follow the signal if I found it again."

"Whenever you're ready, start from the beginning," Magnus encouraged the doctor, he was already certain of how the story may end but thought it might be helpful for her to share it anyway.

"After you left, we began searching earnestly for survivors. We would go back to destroyed towns looking for anyone who might be in need of help. Sometimes we took salvage as we went, things for the camp and mementos of value that we hoped to return to their owners. Each city was a little bit different but the destruction was all the same. It wasn't often that we found anyone.

We saw a lot more husks than living people, it was like something out of a horror film. The sounds that they make.. you never forget that. Most of the cities were empty, Kal and his men always checked thoroughly for traps or ambushes. Most of the skirmishes were fought between cities with small patrols, nothing terribly exciting but enough of a concern to keep us on edge as we went about our mission.

Often we would set up camp within the cities themselves, much easier to defend that way. Not every city turned up survivors, most of our searches were in vain. That empty feeling of not being able to help people began to gnaw at us, I guess we grew desperate. Success was measured in how long we survived, not in how many were recovered.

I couldn't believe how clinical the destruction was, every single town regardless of its size was reduced to nothing. It really eats away at you, digging through the bodies. Every now and again you'd hear a child crying out or find a couple that had managed to take shelter underground. Didn't happen often enough but things were going relatively smooth for awhile.

The one good thing about the Reapers is how predictable they are. They destroy everything in their path and move on. There's no need for them stick around. Well, usually that's what happens. When we got to the town of Portia, little more than a manufacturing suburb of a much larger city elsewhere, everything went terribly wrong.

This time there were ambushes, hundreds of husks of varying types were waiting in the shadows. They were so patient, they waited until nightfall when we thought we were safe. They struck with rapid precision, most of our team was dead within the first couple of minutes. It happened too fast for me to recall the details. All I remember were the groaning screeches of dying men, the sounds of gnashing teeth and the shredding of armour. They didn't bother to take anyone alive, for that I am grateful.

Among the chaos, Kallium and I had managed to get separated from the rest of the platoon. I don't really know how, maybe it was luck. We climbed up the skeleton of a building that had once been a skyscraper and went unnoticed for several hours. When day broke, Kallium insisted that we find a way out of the city, that we would head towards the mountains and regroup at the monastery. It all seemed too easy, should have known that the Reapers would be patient once more.

We picked a complicated path of back alleys and narrow passages that would make it difficult for
the hoards to converge on us. But we knew they were out there, we could hear their footsteps around every corner. At one point, Kallium stopped dead in his tracks. He had this look in his eye, I can't explain it. A mixture of stupidity and bravery and maybe something more. The husks had us surrounded though we couldn't tell exactly how close they were. He turned around suddenly and pointed at the ground, a sewer grate was there.

So I went first, thinking maybe we still had a chance. When I got halfway down the ladder, I urged him to follow but he shooked his head. Instead he handed me his sidearm, the one he had cherished for much of his life. The one with the scratch marks and his initials carved into the stock. He said, 'I'm not coming, Sera. You have to go on without me. Keep running, don't stop for anything. Shoot whatever moves. I'll get their attention then you have to go. Now go.'

I wanted to beg him to reconsider. He was more than my friend, in all of those close battles we had grown close. We had never said as much to each other but there was no denying that it existed. I should have..should have told him right then what he meant to me. There wasn't time, the grate was closed and an army of screaming husks came bearing down on our location. I'm not sure how far Kallium got, I'll never know how it ended for him.

I did everything he said, I got out of the city through the sewer system and followed the radio signal. I don't know how I got as far as I did, I kept wanting to run back but it was a fool's notion. If I didn't get to safety, his sacrifice wouldn't have meant anything.

Eventually I ran into a group of refugees who were headed in the same direction, they were having a terrible time dealing with the cold. My genes are better suited for this sort of climate so I showed them how to keep moving. It gave my mind something else to focus on, later they treated me like some sort of saviour but I never felt I deserved that. I abandoned Kallium, the one person I loved most. Saving someone else doesn't make up for that. What's worse is I never said the words.

All I can do now is hope that his spirit finds peace because I don't think I ever will."

As she reached the end of her story, tears began to collect on her cheeks. Magnus didn't know too much about human behaviour but it wasn't hard to figure out that tears weren't a good sign, "You can't think like that. All of us have lost somebody in this war. None of us are coming out of this unscathed. What Osirian did for you.. it was the right thing to do. The smart thing. You might have done the same in his position. You lived to fight another day and that's important."

"But Magnus, I'm so alone now. What am I supposed to do?" she looked over at him.

"You keep on fighting in your own way," he said simply with a slight shrug of his shoulders. The answers were obvious to him. The human stared at him for a second then made a hiccup noise. She leaned over and rested her head against his shoulder. He hadn't been expecting her to get that close. Without thinking much, he put an arm around her to assist in calming her down.

"He was always brave, this is very typical of him," she tried to laugh but hiccuped again. "Charming and bold, he knew how to make a girl feel like she was the only one in the room. Didn't seem to matter that we were of different races. Things could have gotten really serious for us, not that I'll ever know now. If it weren't for this war, I'd have never met him. Probably would have met some other dashing turian though. Could have had quite the career out here. Wouldn't have been as exciting but stability would have made up for it. Everything is temporary except death. We can't possibly win this."

"That doesn't mean we can give up," he reminded her. "When you're feeling better, there will be lots to do around here. Take your time, Doc. I'll be around if you need me."
"So let me get this straight, women of your race are not required to serve in your military?" Tarina asked Dr. Tomas.

They were in the gardens, catching a break on a clear day. Marius was minding his own business on the ground, playing with whatever he could get his hands on. Meekari was nearby showing some refugees how to harvest plants in the vegetable patch, momentarily relieved of Tarina's service. Many weeks had gone by, more refugees had came and more food was needed to keep everyone going. Hunting parties went out weekly, there was talk of forming long-range salvage parties as well though there was much disagreement on who should do what and how best to go about it without revealing the location of their base. Magnus' time was filled with training and assessing officers that he could trust to divide up the daily workload. Free time was a precious commodity for everyone.

"Not just women, the System Alliance is a volunteer militia of sorts. Nobody is required to serve," the doctor clarified.

"But that's a lot of people for a volunteer organisation. It's hard to believe we might have lost that fight on Shanxi. How do you convince people to put their time in for the greater good? For us, the reward of service is citizenship. Very few would pass up the benefits that come with that," Tarina was bewildered by the cultural differences between them.

"Well, most humans still live on Earth. We don't have as many colonies as you do so there hasn't been as much need to expand our military. That and we have to adhere to Council regulations. No other race has a military as complex as yours."

"I guess that's true," Tarina took a moment to consider it further, "They say getting the asari to come together as one unified force is like asking a quarian to take off its helmet. The krogan get war a little bit better but their overall cultural structure is almost as fragmented. And the salarians rather avoid it whenever possible. It's been a long time since the galaxy has had any major conflicts, aside from the Battle of the Citadel which was quite small compared to what we are up against now. The way I see it, the humans are going to be the most reliable force, judging by fleet size."

"We lost a lot of our fleet early on, I hope the other races will make up the difference if this is to become a long term situation."

"But you didn't answer my earlier question. Why are there more men than women in the Alliance?"

"Ah, well, that's a bit harder to answer. For a lot of our history, there has been gender inequality with men usually running the show. Women often stayed at home, minding the children and keeping their house in order. Some explanation of this is related to biology, for example, a woman is not typically as strong as a man. She can be if she really dedicates herself to body training and the like but in general this is the major difference. There's also a bunch of psychological differences that are mostly debatable. It wasn't until about the second World War that women began to be seen as equals. That's when they were forced to take on jobs that normally wouldn't have been available to them because the war was so big and all the men were busy fighting it."

"How long ago was that? What sort of things couldn't they do before?"

"Roughly 250 years ago. Before then, in war, a woman was usually a nurse if she was allowed to
be around at all. Sometimes she'd be a cook. But after that particular war, women took on manufacturing jobs and some became pilots. The door was open. These days a human female can do anything without any restrictions, legislation was put in place to protect this freedom.

"That's really strange, the whole point of the Hierarchy is to measure every individual by their contributions to society, regardless of gender or any other differences. I can't believe it's taken the humans so long to evolve. No offense."

"Believe me, I wish our past was better but it is what it is. We learn from our mistakes and move on.

And speaking of strong women, you're doing a fantastic job taking care of Marius. I know it can't be easy at your age but you're making the most of it. We don't get much down time to chat with everything going on but I've wanted to tell you how much I admire your toughness.

I get the impression that you've not had an easy time, that a lot of your rigidness is a result of having to protect yourself. The walls are there, nobody gets through. But when you're holding Marius, there's a motherly glow about you. He's everything to you, a second chance to do things right. You're strong and durable, Tarina, no one is going to be able to tear you down. You have a warrior’s heart."

"I'm nothing special," she tried not to catch the human's eye then, her words were unlike anything she had heard before. It was almost embarrassing to be thought highly of when she had done nothing to earn that level of respect, "Besides, warriors fight wars. All I've done is run away from one."

"We've all done that, your time to shine will come eventually. Before then, you should make the most of your chance to be a mother. You don't have to fight battles to be anything special. Look at me, I was nothing back on Eden Prime and now I'm saving lives. You just have to find what you're best at and stick with it."

"I'd rather be shooting husks than cooped up here with a bunch of monks," Tarina sighed. She didn't actually dislike the current situation as much as she let on, she was more worried about the lack of opportunities to advance her career. She wasn't going to be making a name for herself any time soon and that meant relying heavily on others.

"I better get going soon, need to do some inventory. If you're looking for a pick-me-up, the comm relay is still in range. Never know who might have left you a message," Dr. Tomas smiled and gave Tarina a small hug.

"There won't be anything for me," Tarina whispered when the doctor was out of earshot. Marius looked up at he quizzically then. Out of boredom, she decided to check her omnitool anyway.

---

"Pay attention, Tarina," Magnus yelled angrily at his oblivious student.

There were two sure ways to rile up his typically stoic resolve. One was for his advice to be outright ignored and the other was when his time was being wasted. Whether intentionally or not, Tarina had managed to push the boundaries of his patience. She was making no effort to counter his parries and jabs even if he had relented to doing the occasional session without biotics. Her feet seemed far more fascinating to her than the attacks directed at her upper body. He knew she was better than that but couldn't figure out how to get her to focus that evening.
They had had to move their sessions back each day as their lives became busier which Magnus didn't mind. The cool air that seeped through the rafters was the incentive they needed to encourage constant movement during their late night exercise. A good bout before bed was helpful in getting a sound night of sleep, especially when one didn't have enough hours to dedicate to resting the body fully. The practice was also supposed to give the pair a sense of routine, a dedicated time to enjoy each other's company without any other distractions.

Additionally, Magnus hoped the rhythm of sparring would instill a sense of discipline and self-confidence in his pupil. He was worried about how her inability to make quick, on the fly decisions. In a real fight, adaptability was paramount for survival. She needed to learn when to think passively as well as when direction action was more appropriate. Officially, Tarina's training had been cut short by the war but not everything could be taught in basic.

Her enthusiasm at the start of their nightly sessions had been infectious. She was often bursting with an excessive amount of energy, even after a long day of working around the monastery. Her temper would flare when she wasn't successful, a characteristic that had been missing during their current session. She obviously had her mind on other matters.

Magnus kicked out at her lower legs which she blocked with her knee. Her form was all wrong, too slow to follow up with a counter attack. Her footwork still need improvement but she should have been able to capitalise on his deflected blow. The next kick was aimed higher, against her torso and good shoulder. He could have pulled back at the last second to lessen the impact but decided she could do with a good wake up.

"What the hell was that for?" she growled at him as she checked her shoulder for any damage.

"If you don't want to do this tonight, all you have to do is say so. I could do with the extra sleep," was Magnus' unapologetic response.

"I'm still wide awake, let's keep going," she said stubbornly.

"Well, I'm not. Been a long day, on top of having to remind everyone how to do their jobs, I have to settle disputes and think about long term issues like how the hell we're going to keep getting supplies up here. I spend all day on my feet, I wouldn't mind taking a break."

"Sounds more eventful than my day, puttering about the gardens pretending I know anything useful. We're soldiers, we should be out there killing things. I hate sitting still waiting for the enemy to come to us."

"Let's hope they don't find us, we're not ready yet. And even when we are, this place is going to have a very hard time protecting us against aerial or orbital bombardment. The terrain may help but... well, we need materials, experts, reliable communication. Why didn't you try to talk me out of coming up here?"

"Because there wasn't any other option at the time. Damn it, I can't be the only one that feels so constrained. Down time gives you too much to think about."

"And what are you thinking so intently about tonight?"

"Nothing.. absolutely nothing. So I lied, I'm actually very tired. Guess you'll get your extra rest this one time."

"You're not a very convincing liar, Tari. Whatever it is, I can handle it."

"You wouldn't understand.."
She waited for him to make a sign that he was going to leave the issue alone. After several long minutes, she knew she wasn't going to catch such a break. With a deep breath she tried to broach the subject, "You have a normal family. A mother, a father, a brother.. all who have made it clear that you're an important part of something bigger than yourself. I never had that, no siblings, a father that died of a broken heart, a non-existent mother.

I've grown used to being invisible, that's why I was looking forward to being in the army. It would have been so much easier to have someone else telling me what to do and then I might have had some actual purpose. None of this is a surprise, obviously. I was certain of my place until recently. Now everything is.. well, I don't know what to make of it.

Basically.. I got a message from my mother. The first time in eighteen years. She's waited until now to make any contact with me. Not only that but what she actually said..it's just a bunch of cliches, she didn't even try to put thought into it. I'm almost more offended that she tried to do it in the first place.

How dare she try to ask me if I am doing well when she can tell I am in the thick of a war zone. What a stupid thing to ask! Whoever gave her my personal details better hope I never find out who they are. I mean, most abandoned children might be more grateful to be reached out to after so long but me? I'm appalled. It'd be better to find out that she was dead than for her to find out that I might be. Actually, that'd serve her right. I wish she was, she might as well be."

"You don't really mean that do you? Even if she weren't your mother, wishing someone was dead is a bit harsh.." Magnus tried carefully to suggest that she re-evaluate her ethical concerns. Sometimes her ferocity and temper made him wonder if she might have much deeper issues to work through. If she had no concern for others, she could potentially become quite dangerous to those around her.

"I told you that you wouldn't understand, how could you? You didn't have to fend for yourself. You have no idea what I've been through," her voice was getting louder and anger was brimming to the surface. "You know what she said to me? She said to say safe. Safe! While she hides away on the Citadel, waiting for the Council to protect her sorry ass. No, I don't want in her my life, I've done fine without her. Thank the spirits that she isn't aware of Marius, imagine the lectures she'd try to pass on.

I can't explain how angry it makes me to be thought of at the last possible moment, to be known as a regret. When everything goes to hell, that's when she thinks of me? Don't give me that 'better late than never' crap, in this case never is much better. I never, ever want to let my son down the way I was.

What mother does that to their child, makes them think they are nothing then one day show up expecting to have a conversation? She's the reason I can't cope with hardly anything, she killed my father. Damn it, I just want to hit something," she was beginning to ramble, her words barely concise. Rage was burning in her eyes, her fists were pounding the ground beside her as she spoke. She could barely verbalise what she was feeling within. The amount of anger pouring off her was a frightening sight, "Marius is going to benefit from her mistakes, he's going to have everything I didn't or I will die trying to give it to him."

"Calm down, she can't reach you here. You don't even have to respond to the-"

"I am calm! Do you think me an idiot?! This spar isn't over, enough talk. Let's go. Now," she jumped to her feet from her sitting position in spectacular fashion. Her arms were put up against her face, her feet placed in an offensive stance ready to pounce with renewed purpose. Magnus didn't know what to do, he tried to reach out to her but she brushed his arm away.
He had no desire to fight her when she was in such an irrational state, not when all she wanted was to do was to hurt somebody. If he left her alone, she might resort to harming herself to make sense of the emotional trauma which had cut as deep as any physical blade. He didn't have to understand the pain to make it go away. He would have fought her demons for her if he could but since he could not, he braced himself for the fury she needed to unleash. The best way to put out a fire was to remove the oxygen around it.

Tarina immediately jumped out of the way as she anticipated his first movement. Her approach to combat was often direct like that of a blunt instrument. But she was learning to adapt at a rapid rate. It usually took time for her to utilise her newfound knowledge in an efficient capacity. Her current emotional state made her more refined and alert, the blunt hammer was now a tempered edge fueled by an unbreakable focus. No detail would escape her notice.

Magnus pinched the air in front of him, a sure tell that he was creating a biotic field. He summoned as much energy as he could into the palm of his hand then threw the invisible barrier over himself. Without proper body armour, he felt far too exposed without the extra layer of security. The barrier would also force him to direct all his biotic energy onto himself, allowing him to adopt a defensive posture free of the temptation to strike back. He was reluctant to engage Tarina's insurmountable wrath but would do what all that he could to minimise further damage.

She did not disappoint, not once did she hold back. He knew what she was capable of but it was still surprising to witness it in close proximity, to bear the brunt of it. By all accounts she was faster, stronger, and more durable than him. She had more energy and a reason to keep on going. No amount of biotic protection was going to stand in her way for long. Unfortunately for him, the only way to resist her flurry of limbs was to accept bodily punishment to himself.

The more she continued, the more frightening she became. The spar was nothing more than a lethal dance to her. Her focus was astounding, there was grace to each motion. There was no rhyme or reason to the chaotic energy that she deployed. Her actions were completely guided by long harboured angst and resentment.

One one hand, Magnus was immensely impressed by how tightly honed her style had become, every strike was fluid and agile. On the other hand, he was becoming less certain of his choice to allow her to relinquish her pent up rage against him in such an unrestricted manner. It was hardly fair and he wasn't sure he could withstand much more of it. His own training had emphasised making the most of a first strike then leaving the fight to come back again later, he was not equipped to tolerate a sustained onslaught.

He was tempted to call the spar off, it had gotten far too aggressive and personal to be an effective learning session. Not that Tarina was interested in looking at it that way, she merely wanted an outlet to release her frustration. Magnus was too busy blocking each blow to wonder about why she was so intent on breaking him apart. Her anger over her past was blinding her to the present. If she could not find her way to some sort of resolution then her future was not going to be any better. As long as he allowed her to walk all over him, there was no way for him to help her. Either she solved her problems on her own or he would suffer the physical consequences for something completely beyond his realm of control. There was no other language that she understood, everything was a fight to her.

Eventually she managed to wear herself out but not before mustering the strength to knock Magnus off his feet. With one mighty push, she was able to pin him against a rather sturdy stone wall. He had already collapsed the barrier beforehand in an attempt to gain some space but she had barely been toppled by its effects. Her immediate response after regaining her bearings was to hurl everything she had at him. This meant throwing her entire body in his direction when he was in his
most vulnerable state.

The stone behind him began to crumble from the sudden impact, there was a loud snapping noise as the plates along his back were crushed in an awkward position. He was certain that some of the scales had broken by the way they pinched at the muscle tissue which they were designed to protect. The soft carapace surrounding the scar in the middle of his back offered no support to his most sensitive area, instead it enhanced the pain coursing through his back. For several long seconds, he couldn't make sense of anything going on around him. Deep, sharp breaths were all that kept him from blacking out.

There was no apology or hint of sympathy from his opponent. He was hurting far too much to care about her lack of interest for his wellbeing. A potent mixture of freezing arctic air, a freshly aggravated wound, and old age were all conspiring together to undo him down in that single moment. He wanted to yell to make it all stop but could not find his voice. Inwardly he realised he had to put on a brave face despite what she had put him through, for her sake. If she could not rely on herself then nothing should stop her from relying on him.

Exhausted at long last, Tarina collapsed against him, her fists still balled as she let go of the last remnant of her will to fight. Finally he could hold her tight as she let go of the last remnant of her will to fight. He could hold her tight as he originally wanted to. Unable to remain standing, Magnus collapsed and slid down the wall with Tarina in a heap on top of him. The pain didn't go away, the sitting position made it much worse but he tried to ignore it. They had both had enough. He was relieved to hold her, to cradle her the way she often did with Marius. In complete silence he rubbed her back and traced the plating all the way up to her neck. There was nothing to talk about, so he continued to reassure her with light, gentle touches until she fell asleep.

Nothing more needed to be said. Slowly he tucked her into bed with an extra blanket from his own bedroll. The cold, drafty loft was the only privacy they could afford. He had no personal interest in sleeping, the soreness in his body would prevent him from getting adequate rest for quite some time. He remained by her side, watching over her as he tried to ponder why she held onto so much hatred. The pair of them weren't too dissimilar, he had had plenty of dark moments at her age though for completely different reasons. Whereas he had chosen to remain lonely and cut off from his peers, she had not been given the same privilege. He was always learning new things about her but each time felt more useless in his capacity to save her from herself.

He couldn't figure out exactly why he adored her so much, she was more interested in destroying whatever might bring her happiness than anything else. There was something under the surface, something worth loving if she would ever allow it. He just hoped he could survive her brutal nature long enough to get a closer glimpse.

In desperate need of fresh air, Magnus decided to take a walk around the inner wall. The temperature was balmy at slightly above freezing, and the night sky was devoid of any obstructions. Even the wind had died down, a tranquil contrast to what he had just experienced. It was the first time he could make out the stars in a long time, he could almost find the one that denoted home. Somewhere out there in the vastness of space were fleets of peoples struggling to stay alive. Whatever happened in his or Tarina’s life was insignificant compared to that.

Quite accidently, he found himself bumping into Tiresius who was on his way up one of the towers to keep the nightly watch.

"Sorry, didn't think anyone would be out here this late," Magnus apologised in a hurry.

"It's alright, sometimes we all need to be alone to clear our heads, right? Picked a good night for it, sir," the younger man said.
Normally Magnus wasn't fond of informal conversation but he was in a forgiving mood that evening. Besides, he didn't want to get a reputation for being too strict. Still, he had little interest in going into his personal life, especially when he could barely make sense of it himself.

"It's definitely the most calm night so far. Anyway, I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"It's no trouble. You can get a better view up top. That's where I'm headed, if you want to take a peak?"

"I...well, alright. Just this once."

The climb up the tower was short though disorienting due to the lack of light. Tiresius used his omnitool to light the way up. The exercise gave Magnus the time he needed to shake off his wonderings about Tarina and her mental state. By the time they reached the top, he had almost forgotten why he needed to be up so late in the first place. The sight of the mountains, lit up by the moonlight of both moons was awe inspiring. Together with the familiar stars, it was almost too easy to ignore why they were all stuck in the middle of no where. Magnus felt like a burden had been lifted from his shoulders, as if he could breathe properly again.

"You alright, sir? The stairs are in a crude state, you might've twisted something on the way up," Tiresius looked at him out of the corner of his eye, trying to avoid the taboo of pointing out that his commander might appear physically weak.

"Oh, I'm fine. The cold's just getting to me a bit. Old battle wound flaring up, nothing to be concerned about. But thanks for being subtle about it," Magnus said. He was genuinely relieved to see that the younger soldier was trying to being tactful but worried that he might have to make up more excuses in the future.

"Yeah, I get that. We'll never get used to this climate, no matter how long we're here," Tiresius cleared his throat. "You don't think we'll have to deal with it forever do you?"

"You're a very curious sort, aren't you? Unfortunately, I don't have an answer for that."

"If I'm being rude you can tell me to shut up. I'm not used to these big operations, usually work on my own as a scout. Good thing I have other skills to make up for my lack of experience in this area."

"Which have been invaluable to getting us here. I'm sure you'll be in high demand once we start planning longterm salvage missions and the like. How did you end up with our group anyway? You're certainly not from around here."

"Ah, that. Well, I was visiting a friend on Palaven during the initial invasion. We'd been friends since we were kids, all the way through basic and until recently had served side by side. Our careers were about to go in separate directions since he was getting a promotion.. which is why he and all his family were in Cipritine.

The first Destroyer landed during the ceremony. Started firing at everything in sight the second it hit atmosphere. You'd think a building full of veterans would have reacted better but the first thing everyone did was panic. I guess you do that when you're not expecting a fight on the safest planet in the galaxy. Things spiralled out of control quickly, once we knew what was going on everyone took up arms and stormed the lower levels.

Didn't really matter where we went, those laser weapons could cut right through any material and there was hardly any delay between shots. I remember seeing lots of other ships, some smaller,
some the same size as the Destroyer, all dotting the skyline like a bunch of bugs zipping around. We didn't even get to shoot at anything, the building was falling apart around us.

I remember watching my friend go around a corner to check that the way was clear and then..he was gone. There wasn't anything left, a whole hallway of people were vaporised like they had never been there at all. There wasn't time to dwell on it, while most people were trying to get to the ground level, I pushed back towards the centre of the building where the lifts were. A stupid idea really, should have gone for the stairs. In hindsight, it turned out to be a great move.

I was able to hide out there during the rest of the attack. Felt like such a coward but what else could be done? I spent three days in that lift shaft, trying to reach a stable level of the building to crawl out on. By the time I got out, there was nothing but rubble and ash. My climbing expertise helped me out a lot. After that, I got out of the city and eventually found Dr. Tomas' field hospital.

I won't forget how hard it was to cope with being on my own after such a traumatic ordeal. My friend and his family were gone and I was cut off. Still haven't been able to get in touch with family, didn't get any messages from the relay.

Too bad my friend never got to shoot a husk, he'd have really liked that."

"His spirit might still be with you," Magnus attempted to sympathise. "In any case, there will still be plenty of things to kill. This fight is going to get a lot worse before it gets better. For now, it is time to rest. Try to stay warm, Tiresius."

"You too, sir."
Chapter 31

"So in summary, we're running out of all the supplies necessary to maintain this refuge as a sustainable operation. Maybe now you can see why I want to broaden the scope of missions conducted throughout the local region before our enemy decides to become more thorough. We must extend our reach.

Yes, there are inherent risks with these types of missions, namely the possibility of revealing our location or losing valuable personnel. But with high risk comes high reward. Unless any of you can present an alternative?" Magnus looked around the room at his fellow officers, not one would meet his eye.

They all looked terribly uncomfortable in the small closet of a room, space was rapidly running out for both their domestic and administrative needs. Several weeks had gone by, the radio signal had ceased, indicating that they could not accommodate more displaced soldiers. Everyone knew they had been running out of food, munitions, medical supplies and the like for quite some time but with the actual numbers staring them in the face the picture was looking incredibly grim. The only upside was that the winter weather was beginning to die down, albeit they were not better off because of it.

"It would help if we had word from the fleets or even the ground forces that have no doubt formed up elsewhere on Palaven," one of the older officers said for the millionth time. The lack of intel and communication was wearing their patience, they could not possibly act without proper information. Some still hoped that a second evacuation was imminent while the quiet minority supported Magnus' notion to become self-sufficient for the indefinite future.

"When you hear from them, be sure to let me know," Magnus was getting tired, the meeting had gone on much longer than he had anticipated. "Right, well at least now we know how bad it really is. Even if the fleets are made aware of our situation, they have their hands full with protecting the colonies. We're on our own, it's time we accept that. This building is all we have for defense, what can we do to make it better?"

"Well, I had a thought," Petra chimed in. "I was talking to some engineers while clearing that old lookout tower about how it might have been utilised in the past and..

"I need modern solutions here," Magnus sighed dismissively.

"And they suggested that the tower might have been a great position to hide artillery," she continued without acknowledging him. "It has a full view of not only the monastery but the surrounding peaks which conceal it. You were suggesting that we find some way to provide kinetic shielding via mass effect generators and the like but if we were to build some sort of anti-air weapon, we'd have to choose between defense and offense for that one tower.

Or we could build a second one just like it on the opposite side of the monastery, maybe more than one if we had the materials to do it. It's still run down and harmless looking from the outside, any future towers could be made to look the same. The Reapers aren't going to expect any resistance up here, they'll not think twice about two crumbling ruins."

"One could hold a generator and the other a weapon strong enough to make a Destroyer think twice," Magnus finished her thought for her. She nodded in affirmation. "Their smaller craft could be easily dissuaded and a Destroyer wouldn't be able to land within several hundred kilometres anyway. Not sure what the range on their canons are but if we could force them to funnel up
infantry units, they'd be easy to pick off from our vantage point."

"I had an engineer mention something about a prototype, anti-dreadnought class cannon that was supposedly modelled on a reverse engineered piece of tech from a Reaper vessel. Apparently they were outfitting our newer ships with the same tech prior to the invasion, someone had an inkling that the Reapers were coming," Petra added. "If you're going to send teams into the cities to acquire materials anyway then you could order them to look for relevant schematics as well."

"An excellent idea. This meeting hasn't been a total waste of time after all. I'll need some time to start drawing up squads together, we'll probably have to resort to a lottery system to rotate people in and out since very few are going to volunteer to go back into enemy territory. Keep that to yourselves for now, I'll work out the logistics. Back to business as usual for the time being," he was about to dismiss them.

A scout, one with a name he could not recall, came up then to inform him that two travellers were at the gates. It was a surprisingly low number of people to turn up at once, especially when they hadn't received anyone new in quite awhile. If they had made it all the way to the monastery then it was potentially too late to turn them away. The rest of the officers watched anxiously as they reflected on their diminishing supply reports, most of them wouldn't have been afraid to say no to two more mouths to feed.

Magnus had his work cut out for him, he was by no means the highest ranked soldier in the monastery. The refugees had unanimously agreed to follow his lead because he had been the first to establish a temporary solution to a unique problem. One mistake would be all it took for the proper chain of command to be enforced by those who had superior reputations to defend. The ensuing power vacuum would create an unnecessary amount of strife if it was allowed to happen.

Due to his biotics, he was already forced to walk a tight line in front of his subordinates. He had been wary of allowing Saidra to sit in on meetings for that very reason. She was learning her place, quickly realising that she would have to play nice with him if she wanted her people to survive. It had been agreed that the monks would limit themselves to domestic affairs and biotic training on their own time. The arrangement was only a small comfort to Magnus who wasn't accustomed to hiding anything from those who placed their trust in him.

As Magnus made his way to the atrium to see the new arrivals for himself, he sensed that the small group of officers behind him was silently judging what they suspected was his first major decision. They had already determined that the doors to the monastery were to be closed, supplies were dismally low, and there was no actual need for additional helping hands. All Magnus had to do was turn the newcomers away, to their faces and he would pass the unspoken test of his colleagues. Survival of the fittest was rarely an exercise in compassion, leadership was not for the feint of heart, these were words he had known for decades.

Mentally he was psyching himself up for the confrontation, so much so that he was almost oblivious to who actually stood between the two statues. The other person wasn't in sight though that hardly mattered once Magnus recognised the first individual. A sudden and explosive rage took hold of him as he locked eyes with the newcomer.

"Get out, you're not wanted here!" he snarled in a deafening voice. The high ceiling enhanced the harshness of his tone, sending echoes throughout the hall. Had he turned around then, he would have seen a hint of fear in his fellow soldiers. Only the bravest would dare to question him after that unprovoked display of emotion.

"Wait just a minute, let's be reasonable here. Give a guy a chance right? That's how it works isn't it, merits and deeds before personal bias. Or have you stopped following your own code?" the burly...
man with the bareface protested, his hands were held up in the air as an act of surrender. Triton Argus was a large specimen, it was nearly comical to see him feigning a weakened position.

"This man is a traitor, a deserter, his very presence brings dishonour to our doorstep," Magnus appealed to the group watching the encounter. Some nodded their heads in affirmation, others remained neutral.

"That may be but I brought someone who might be of interest to you. This is truly a wonderful coincidence, knew I recognised those markings," Argus said with a sly smile. He turned to look behind the statue and spoke to his comrade hiding within its shadow, "It's ok, you are safe here. Why don't you help clear up this misunderstanding for us."

The smaller individual hesitated then slowly made his presence known as he stood to his feet. His eyes darted between those that watched him, not meeting anyone's gaze directly. He displayed all the signs of someone gripped by paranoia. His armour was scorched and covered in scratch marks, most likely self-inflicted given their positions. The most distinguishing characteristics were his short crest and lavender tattoos, the same ones that Magnus wore.

"Andronicus!" Magnus identified him much to everyone's surprise. His brother continued to look past him despite hearing his name, focusing his attention instead on shadows cast by the torchlight. "Ando, it's me. What's wrong?" There was no response so Magnus focused on Argus instead, "What have you done to him?"

"Nothing, honest! I found him like that. And might I add, if it weren't for me he would have died back at that facility. It wasn't too dissimilar from the first facility where I lost most of my team, thanks for letting us know about it by the way. So I take it you two are related? You wouldn't throw out one of your own kind would you?"

And there it was, the angle was too obvious. If Magnus turned Argus away he'd have to send his brother with him. The clever bastard knew exactly how to manipulate people, he would create all sorts of havoc if he were invited in. Nobody else said anything, all eyes were on him.

"Get yourself cleaned up but don't get too comfortable. I'd like to talk with Andronicus alone for a bit," the words were barely out of his mouth and already Argus was making his way to the warmer main room, readily abandoning Ando for a bite to eat. There was a swagger to the way he walked, like he owned the place. The group of officers, satisfied for the moment, went back to their normal tasks, leaving Magnus alone with his younger brother.

"Magnus," Andronicus said simply, finally acknowledging his brother. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I.. what are you doing here?" Magnus countered incredulously. "Weren't you supposed to be with the fleet?"

"I was, but the comm teams on the ground were losing manpower too fast to keep things running. So I volunteered to help. One thing led to another, as the saying goes. The rest is foggy," Ando's voice was strained, each word was a struggle for him to make out. His mind seemed elsewhere.

"Why don't you go have a medic look you over. Once you're fed and feeling better we can talk again, ok? I'm glad to see you in one piece, Ando. You have no idea."

"It's good to see you too."

---

The sun was setting behind the mountains, casting long shadows over the courtyard where the last
training session of the day was wrapping up. A group of juveniles were going through their martial art routines, their rhythmic movements were mesmerising to watch. The children hated the course, seeing no value in learning melee combat techniques which they would rarely use in most combat situations. When they were older they would appreciate the discipline of which all other skills were built upon.

Soft footsteps drew Magnus away from the sight below him, he turned to see a much cleaner Andronicus approaching him. His brother had stripped away his armour and opted for a basic tunic, someone had draped him in a fur cloak to wear outdoors. Magnus himself was beginning to climatise to the wintery conditions and wore only his uniform.

"The human said she could not detect any permanent damage. First time I've met one of her kind, she seemed friendly enough," Andronicus said in a shaky voice, the cool night air was beginning to settle over them.

"She's definitely on our side," Magnus said warmly.

"I think I saw Tarina when I was inside, she was holding a baby that looked just like you. She's not at all what I expected her to be."

"What were you expecting?"

"Well, I'm not sure but I figured she'd be more like you. Quiet, confident, modest. Young on the outside with an older spirit on the inside. She's pretty and all but you could do better if you really tried," Ando's honest assessment was too accurate for Magnus' tastes. A small piece of him knew it was true, the rest was anticipating an argument with his brother. The pair had hardly ever gotten along in their youth.

"I don't need better, I have the best. Even if she doesn't realise it yet," the words fell flat the second they were out.

"Trying to make it work for your son's sake, huh? I get it."

"It's not that simple. And where do you get off giving me advice? Where's your better half lurking? I see, you're upset that I finally have all the things you wanted for yourself."

"I thought maybe we'd be past these petty squabbles by now," Andronicus stared hard at him, his green eyes lit up with anger. Maybe Magnus had been too harsh but he wasn't in a habit of taking his words back.

"This is getting us no where," Magnus agreed with a heavy sigh. "Why don't you tell me what you've been up to since the war started. How the hell did you end up with that scumbag? For that matter, how did only two of you make it this far?"

"I can only remember fragments since my team was captured. Would rather forget the bits I can recall, to be honest," Ando avoided Magnus' concerned look then, instead watching the coming and goings of people in the courtyard.

"You're creating a nasty habit of getting yourself imprisoned, Ando," he had meant it to sound like a joke but he wasn't sure if it came across that way. Andronicus waved his hand dismissively, his concentration on the current conversation had completely evaporated. "What is it?"

"I still hear whispers, from time to time on the edges of the wind. They're calling back to me. I feel so alone. How can you keep on going like things are normal when you've seen what is to come? I could see everything, all knowledge that there ever was and they could see into me. I was part of
something, I belonged some where. This, all this, is fleeting compared to their majesty,"
Andronicus spoke in a hushed, dreamlike voice that forced Magnus to lean in close to hear him. He wished he hadn't, the words were strange and foreboding.

"What happened to you?" Magnus whispered, afraid to disturb his brother unexpectedly. His mind was in a fragile state, it was clear that he had been traumatised by something or another.

"Those that we call Reapers are really gods trying to preserve us. They are our salvation through destruction," Andronicus droned on.

"Do you realise how stupid that sounds? Snap out of it Ando, you can talk to me in confidence."

"I..I'm trying. It's difficult to stay in the here and now," Ando turned to look his older brother, his lucid voice had been replaced with his usual timid tone. "Maybe if we walk and talk? It will give my mind something else to do."

"Yeah, alright. Start from the beginning this time."

"As I said, I was working with the ground teams to keep the most vital comm channels open. Every tower we were sent to repair was hidden deep within contested territory. We were supposed to sneak in with a small squad, fix the cables, and fallback to repeat the process elsewhere. None of our missions went that smoothly, however. The turnover rate was so high that I stopped trying to learn the names of my squad-mates.

I wasn't trained as a combat technician, I had no business being in dangerous situations like that. My strengths lie in networking, hacking, and cyber warfare, but that hardly matters when our backs are against the wall. The fleet needed reliable solutions, not temporary, half-assed attempts to connect with the ground forces. We had to get a foothold, to gain a little bit of ground or we'd lose out to the fatigue that came with a nonstop game of catch up. At least the fleets could talk to each other, our ground legions are hardly aware of operations in their own vicinities. Nevermind trying to talk to the colonies, they're probably a lost cause at this stage. I'm sure you're aware of how precious information can be, intel can make or break even the smallest of campaigns.

The main difficulty for us was how specifically the enemy was targeting our infrastructure. They knew how to cripple us, how to slow us down, how to cut off supply, how to lure our scouts away, where to lay the best ambushes. We had to fight tooth and talon for every metre of ground on the way to our objectives, sometimes forced to cut our numbers in half to defend points when we were already outmanned.

I've never experienced attrition on that scale before, no amount of training can prepare you for the long term physical and mental stress that comes with very small victories. The kind of victories that you can barely count as such, too short to be celebrated, long enough to give you hope that you might pull through. I don't mean to complain about it, war is never going to be easy. But it's worth pointing out that nobody was ready for this kind of drawn out engagement, it eats away at your spirit until there's nothing left.

This is hardly a war at all. There's no glory or honour, no rallying cries, no solidarity. The brutal reality is that we're fighting for survival, clinging onto what little remains of our civilisation. Our enemy wants to tear us down, to break our resolve, to watch us suffer. A nonsensical cycle of despair," Andronicus paused then, the emotion drained out of him as nihilism took root. Magnus reached to touch his shoulder in a reassuring gesture, he had never seen his brother so broken.

"If it hurts too much to relive it, then it's not important," he said softly. "We've had our differences, plenty of them, but I don't wish you to be in pain, Ando."
"We've barely talked since you left for the cabal, the least I can do is answer your questions."

"That's not entirely my fault and you know it."

"Yeah, fair point," Andronicus agreed then tried to shift the conversation away from himself, "You never did say how you discovered your biotic powers."

"Ah, that. It wasn't as interesting as you might think. I was trying to impress someone by stopping a bully who was taunting them between drill marches. We got into a scuffle and I ended up throwing him into a wall without using my hands or any weapon. Before the day was out they sent me back to Invictus and that was that. Never did find out if the other guy lived or not, I was too angry back then to care. Feels like forever ago."

"Sounds like something you'd do. You were always looking out for me, no matter how much trouble I caused. It wasn't easy growing up in your shadow but it could have been a lot worse."

"That's not the way I looked at our relationship as kids. I always thought you were my replacement, a plan B for when I let everyone down. I wasn't looking out for you, I was trying to help you take my place. You just made it really difficult because you never took responsibility for your own actions."

"I didn't think anyone noticed I existed," Ando said with exasperation, his voice cracking slightly. Neither of them had expected to have such an honest conversation. They were finally able to acknowledge where the other was coming from without any bias influencing their thoughts. "All this time we could have been working together instead of struggling alone. Now we have a chance to do things right."

"Maybe we do. I'm not entirely sure what the Reapers did to you but it doesn't seem to be all that bad."

"You don't realise what you have until you're sure you're going to lose it."

"That's true. Let's head in before it gets much colder."

---

The next couple of days were an emotional rollercoaster for the two brothers, mostly because Andronicus was beginning to exhibit symptoms of posttraumatic stress which made his behaviour incredibly difficult to deal with. Magnus was torn between his usual chores and making sure Ando was looked after. Additionally he was trying to keep a close eye on how Argus conducted himself, worrying that he may sow the seeds of discontent if he wasn't reigned in early enough. The arrival of his brother meant he had less time to spend with Tarina and Marius as well.

One afternoon he tried to rectify the latter issue by introducing Marius to his uncle. Andronicus was busying himself with some pen and paper as he tried to outline a schematic for a functioning relay that could be built with basic scrap metals. He was more productive on his better days but still found it difficult to take on more complex tasks. The QEC adaptor that Magnus had found in the early days of the invasion was being used as a paperweight.

"So what is a QEC anyway?" Magnus inquired casually as he found a spot on the floor to sit down. Once free of his father's grasp, Marius set out immediately to grab the crumpled up pieces of paper that Andronicus had discarded.

"It stands for Quantum Entanglement Communicator. Basically, it's a two-way device with a pair somewhere else in the galaxy that can transmit data instantaneously without being intercepted. Not
practical to integrate into our existing comm network because they lack in efficiency compared to the current system. Great for situations like we have now with the comm buoys constantly out,” he was about to say more but Marius was demanding his attention. "Oh hey I have something for you. I carved this cruiser out of some wood earlier today, much more fun that silly network plans.” He handed him the small model then went into a more technical explanation of the quantum mechanics behind the idea of handheld devices.

"You're starting to sound a lot like Dad," Magnus said after only understanding half of the explanation that he was given.

"Is that so surprising? Anyway I've come up with a final list of what I'll need to get this thing working. We won't know what its pair is until we activate it, so that might be interesting."

"Great, I'll pass that on to the next salvage team. And no, you're not on the list. Dr. Tomas is really concerned about your psych evaluation which means you aren't cleared for combat duty. I know you want to help but you need to take it easy."

"That's ok, I'll find things to do around here. I got a good look at those thanix cannon blueprints though I don't know how we'll get all those materials together. I'll draft up some inventory reports, keep things all neat and organised. Thanks again for putting up with me, the work helps a lot."

"It's no trouble, you'd do the same for me. How are you feeling today?"

"Pretty good despite the nightmares, I guess it's better than hearing the voices during the daytime. Take Marius will you? I want to keep this area clear while I test the power supply on these cords,” Ando passed the toddler back to his father. While in the air, Marius made swooshing noises as he played with his model cruiser.

"Careful that you don't break that," Magnus warned him. "Do you need a hand with anything?"

"Not at the moment, it's a long process testing each of these circuits out. Could use some company, if you're not too busy. The more we talk the more clear my head gets."

"Sure. You didn't finish telling me how you got here."

"Right, I left off with my team getting captured. Still don't remember any details on that encounter. Anyway, we were taken to a hastily built camp, there were still husks crawling over the place with building tools. All the prisoners were isolated from one another and kept in these tight, darkened cells. Once a day or maybe it was more often than that, was too hard to keep track of time in there, we were brought outside where there was a strange, glowing object which were forced to look at."

"I've seen something like that in a processing facility, the one Argus mentioned losing his first team at," Magnus recalled. "A light that looks into your soul and steals your secrets. That's what it felt like anyway."

"Yeah, it's exactly like that. Except the longer you look, the harder it is to see anything else. It has to be some sort of conduit that connects the Reapers to their followers. A lot of people go mad from their first exposure. Others, like me, take longer to break. There were other ways they tried to subdue us. Torture was the main instrument. Sometimes we were made to watch while they did it to others. They weren't interested in killing us, they wanted us to be like the husks without minds of our own.

What I remember clearly is the moment I gave up. Surrounded by horrors, unable to hide away from the voices, I knew it wasn't ever going to stop. I was losing hold of myself, forgetting basic
things like my name or what legions I had served in. There was no hope, the more you see into the minds of the Reapers the more you realise how absolute they are. They are both terrifying and beautiful, the heralds of perfection. There was no point in fighting, they had already won. All I could do was make myself useful to them. I began to accept this as the screams of my comrades no longer had any affect on me. The lack of emotional weakness was a gateway to true understanding. I was ready to succumb to their will.

Then a bright light illuminated the building I was held in, much brighter than anything I had ever seen before. I could hear battle cries ringing out all around me, drowning out the sounds of my suffering comrades. Gunfire and explosions woke me up from my slumber. That's when Argus and his team came to liberate the prison camp. I've asked him countless times why he came for us but he never gives a good answer, preferring to hide behind his tough guy image. Say what you will about him but he is a survivor. He'll do absolutely anything to stay alive. A lot of his guys died that day.

Once we were free of the camp, we made our way to the mountains. The other prisoners struggled to keep up, they couldn't adapt to the changing environment. They were too accustomed to the Reapers taking care of their physical needs for them. That's something else about the indoctrination process, as it progresses you lose your desire for sleep and have no need of sustenance. You become greater than your original physical form, free of all its limitations. They make you like them, sentient machines, sending their orders directly into your head. There is elegance in simplicity. No longer are you burdened with useless thoughts."

"Stay focused, Ando," Magnus interrupted. He didn't like to hear about how wonderful enslavement could be.

"Sorry, I'm still coming to terms with the disconnection. It probably sounds crazy to you but for a time I knew what perfection felt like. Anyway, I must not have been as far gone as the others. Not sure what really motivated me after that, might have been all the encouragement from Argus. It was inspiring to watch him defy every obstacle that got in his way. The more we pushed on, the easier it got to ignore the voices. The two of us had to rely on each other, there was an unshakable trust between us. I had no idea you were here though I suppose Argus did. I wish more had made it, can't even remember their faces."

"You made it, that's what counts. I don't trust him, that's for damn sure. He probably let the others die to conserve rations. The ends do not always justify the means," Magnus declared.

"These tests are done for now. Will you pass the results on? I'm still nervous around the others."

"I will. Ando? I'm sorry I couldn't be there to help you. It won't happen again, I swear."

"I trust you, I always have."
Chapter 32

Magnus was enjoying a rare quiet moment alone in his new office. The room was modest with a desk, a chair, a terminal in the corner that was supposed to be hooked up into the comm network once it was ready. There was enough room for some more furnishings but he preferred to keep it simple. Not many other refugees had their own space so there was no point in flaunting. The office was necessary to have private conversations and maintain administrative order, each day the monastery was starting to look more like a permanent home.

A pile of reports were stacked on the desk, some were written on paper and others were repurposed datapads of equal size their paper counterparts. Maps covered the walls behind him, he would have liked proper holographic ones with all the fancy zoom in features. There was a chart that outlined which squads had been deployed where as well as a list of names of those who were eligible to be placed when the current missions were concluded. Not many of the missions proved to be successful, it was considered a poor omen to have one's name on the board.

Months had gone by and things were going as well as could be expected. Despite the mission success rate, there hadn't been any close encounters with the enemy. No scouts, whether on the ground or by air, had been caught sniffing around their mountain base. Communication was still a major problem though Ando was making progress on the QEC apparatus. It was unclear what was preventing most squads from making it back, there were rumours of separatists and mercenaries interfering in certain regions, mere vultures trying to capitalise on the chaos.

The Reapers themselves had gone unusually quiet, Magnus hoped it was a result of them focusing their attention on other more aggressive resistance cells. Either that or maybe the ground forces were rallying together and actually hitting the enemy back. He had to wrestle with his own desire to join the greater fight, sitting still was beginning to wear everyone down. The waiting game was the worst, not knowing when his men needed to be ready was taking its toll on morale.

With so much time to reflect on what had happened in his life, he was growing impatient in regards to his relationship with Tarina. Nothing was ever clear with her. On the contrary, he was absolutely sure of his intentions, he adored her despite her lack of returned affection. His brother had tried to talk him down, saying he was wasting his time but that made him more stubborn on the matter.

Magnus ran his hand over the top edge of the current datapad that he was holding, completely absorbed by the contents on its screen. The data it contained had been downloaded recently during one of the more frequent extranet uplinks. For brief periods, the galaxy-wide comm buoy network would flash with sudden activity as everyone scrambled to access it. The invasion had cut everyone off, the basic technology that they took for granted was becoming increasingly rare. Most people took advantage by contacting relatives. The usual entertainment outlets provided by the extranet were equally popular.

Out of curiosity born of boredom, Magnus had stumbled across some published works attributed to Tarina, a small collection of short stories and poetry. He had been searching for philosophical readings, the sort of material that would help him get back into the habit of meditation. A random poem about the infinite space between light and darkness had caught his eye. It had been written as a school assignment when Tarina would have been about age 11. The actual words weren't as thought provoking as the overall concept behind the piece, the subject matter was hardly one that young girls would have been expected to know much about.

He thought that at last he had found the way into her enigmatic mind, if he could understand a pattern to her inner most thoughts then he might figure out how he could approach her properly. He
might be able to tell her his feelings without fear. Spending time together wasn't enough, he needed a real icebreaker, something that would reach out to her carefully guarded soul before it was too late.

Many of her stories were surprisingly normal, the things one would expect a child to write about. There was an occasional introspective work but overall each of her writings felt like it was written by someone else. Experimentation with different styles was common though many of the works had been submissions for specific criteria, whether as a contest entry or a journal entry for a creative writing course.

The anonymous submissions were the most intriguing, they had received little attention on the sites where they were posted. Upon closer inspection, Magnus deduced it was a result of overly critical reviews that Tarina left for her peers that dissuaded them from reading her material. She did excel at pushing people away, even in an environment designed to bring like minded people together.

He was impressed by her capacity to express herself in a creative medium, it was refreshing to see that she had a passive side to her personality. Before the Hierarchy had turned her into a soldier, she had had a brilliant imagination and the freedom to be an individual. If she had never picked up her first weapon, things could have turned out differently. The anger caused by her upbringing could have manifested itself in other ways. Magnus couldn't be sure if that would have solved any of her empathy problems but it couldn’t have hurt.

What he was sure of was that the discipline of training could grant her the focus she needed, if she were willing to learn it. Whenever he pushed her, she gave up right away. If he didn't push enough, she didn't improve. In the past he had been able to pass on troublesome students to teachers who specialised in other disciplines. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered taking on the burdensome task of teaching Tarina, no one was likely to tame her. There were plenty of other things to worry about.

He was reading a series of optimistic adventures about a heroine seeking redemption for her family, an obvious allegory based on Tarina's own life. The more he read, the more he wished to talk to her in a direct way about all the things that cluttered her mind. He couldn't give up, there was a normal girl deep down within that needed to know that she was a treasure, that she was his entire world.

As if on cue, Tarina opened the door and poked her head into the office. Magnus hastily buried the datapad beneath a pile of papers, there was no need for her to know that he was snooping around.

"The salvage team just came in, the one we thought was lost. We should go see what they brought with them," she said with an infectious amount of excitement. She was practically jumping with energy.

"How many made it back this time?" Magnus asked though he was really alluding to the status of one particular soldier he was hoping to get rid of. Many of the teams never made it back and those that did were a fraction of the original numbers sent out. Argus had managed to survive his first assignment, if he made it through the second then it would be time to try a new strategy.

"Almost all of them by the looks of it. Isn't that wonderful? And they've got heaps of stuff with them, come on," she urged him, not at all catching onto his disappointment with her news.

The team was several weeks late, their timing couldn't be better. Nonetheless, it was difficult for Magnus to express an equal level of excitement for their return. Argus was gloating about, showing off as he usually did. His charismatic personality was making him well-liked among the rest of the refugees, particularly the younger soldiers. The veterans didn't seem to mind him much either.
"He's like Father Christmas passing out gifts to all the good boys and girls," Tomas remarked from beside Magnus. Someone handed her a large assortment of boxes containing antibiotics and other useful medical items that she had requested. More and more boxes of materials were added to the pile, forcing her to start stacking them up on the ground.

"What's that?" Magnus asked as he tried to help her balance the load. Together they rearranged the boxes from largest to smallest while they continued to talk.

"Christmas is the biggest human holiday of the year, a time of great cheer and gift-giving. Also lots of food, can't forget that part. I'm really going to miss spending it with my family this year.

I can't believe how many boxes are here, this is more than we need."

"Better to have too much than not enough-" he was about to say more but Tarina had reappeared out of nowhere to hand Marius over to his father. He frowned, having been intent on helping Tomas instead.

The cause for the interruption made himself known by handing Tarina a thick, hardback book. She was nearly melting from excitement by that point, boasting a broad smile that almost unsettled Magnus. Luckily Argus didn't linger around for much longer, he was too busy giving out other bundles to their respective recipients in the crowd.

Magnus couldn't believe how easy it was for a stranger to win her approval. With a simple, material object no less. He had only recently discovered her love for the written word after much time spent trying to get to know her. All Argus had to do was waltz in from nowhere.

"When did you two become such good friends?" he asked her suspiciously.

Tarina said nothing, she was too immersed in her book, flipping through the pages to passages she was familiar with, "How thoughtful. This copy is in really good condition. Oh, this must be the OSD that he was talking about. It contains nearly a library's worth of material from the same authors, I'll never get bored now."

"Does this mean we can stop with the pointless training sessions?" Magnus asked with mixed relief.

"Don't be silly. Anyway I just found a good one to read to Marius while he goes down for his afternoon nap," she took the baby and nearly skipped her away across the rest of the room.

"Did you see that?" he asked Tomas once Tarina was out of sight.

"See what?" the human's voice was muffled as she tried to sort out her latest acquisitions.

"Nevermind. How's your investigation into the stim use going? I might have a good idea about how they got here."

"It's true that I began to detect their presence after Argus' first mission but that's not a great lead," she tried to warn him. "Is that why you sent him out again? You weren't exactly subtle about that."

"There are bigger problems to worry about. That guy is a menace."

"I don't disagree but you can't just go around passing judgement without a good reason," her expression softened, she was both his colleague and a friend, "For what it's worth, I've started to notice more people with stim signatures in their blood work. Stims aren't exactly illegal in Hierarchy space, they have practical medical applications. Though like any sort of abused
substance, they can lead to serious addictions. Given how low morale gets around here, especially between salvage operations, you can't discount the need for recreation. There's not much to do besides meaningless chores. The mind must be kept as sharp as the body."

The commotion of the room was beginning to grate on Magnus' nerves, the noise and energy was too much. He should have been happy that things were so upbeat and positive. He knew too well that everyone was restless, they were all waiting anxiously for news to come in from anywhere else, preferably from the fleets.

Dr. Tomas was right, they could train their bodies all they wanted but it wouldn't matter if they weren't challenged in a greater capacity. While Magnus enjoyed the discipline, it wasn't going to be enough for when the time came to fight. He missed the life he had before the war, as did everyone else. They couldn't hide forever, living off scraps, waiting for who knew what.

"Let me carry the heavy ones," Magnus said, picking them up before Tomas could say no.

On their way to the infirmary, Dr. Tomas tripped over a bundle of wires scattered along the ground and dropped everything she was carrying. Magnus helped her back to her feet after she was sure that nothing was broken. They spent the next few minutes scrabbling to clean everything up. There were the occasional awkward moment where they reached for the same object at the same time, their hands brushing against each other. Neither said anything to the other about it.

"You have to tell Ando to keep his projects out of the main traffic areas," she sighed.

"I know, he's almost done. This time the relay will transmit data as well as receive. Maybe you can send some holiday greetings to your family," he suggested warmly.

"It's not the time of year for that, though that's a sweet sentiment," she smiled. They were alone in her makeshift office. "I appreciate the help, not everyone is as tolerant as you. I've heard whispers, rumours and the like. It's not the majority but some people are not comfortable with me being here. The asari especially, which is a bit of a surprise. I'm just some gloomy human far from home. Neither a soldier, nor a monk. There's plenty of other medics now. Maybe they're right, I don't fit in here."

"Yes you do," he left no room for argument. To emphasise his words, he touched her hand deliberately, squeezing it gently between both of his much larger ones. Her cheeks became noticeably flushed as he did so. "This monastery is my legion, everyone here is part of my family including you. If anyone gives you a hard time, you send them to me, ok? I won't put up with anyone mistreating you. You're a damn good doctor, Osirian would be proud of what you're doing for us."

"Thank you, Magnus," she said in a small voice, her eyes half closed. The mentioning of Osirian's name must have choked her up a bit. Normally Magnus would have taken issue with someone casually addressing him by first name instead of rank but he was beginning to consider Tomas as more than an acquaintance. "I can take over from here, we'll catch up again later."

The conversation with Tomas had reminded him to speak to his brother. Along the way, he nearly walked right into Saidra. The two leaders had been avoiding each other for months. Neither wanted to linger for too long.

"So what did Argus the Magnificent bring you today?" he asked with as much sarcasm as he could.

"None of your business," she wrinkled her nose. "You should ease up on him. He's doing a great service to our institution, his aura illuminates these once darkened halls. While not all of his stories
are full of truth, they are the sort of tales that motivate the spirit. Where you would have us all toiling in the cold, he will provide the warmth that keeps us sane."

"If he had his way, we would all sit around in a circle drinking ourselves stupid so that the Reapers wouldn't have any trouble overtaking us," He didn't care at all what she thought, what could a passive isolationist know about war? Good preparation was the key to victory, complacency led to defeat.

"Some must fall so that others may rise," she said in an eerie voice, her eyes had gone completely black for a split second. "Be on your way, commander. I have no need of your rigidness today."

"Whatever," he said to no one. There was no point in trying to decipher anything she said.

The density of the wires along the ground and walls increased as Magnus made his way deeper into the bowels of the old fortress. Torchlight was replaced by artificial globes which produced a vibrant glow in the damp hallways built straight into the rock of the mountain. Normally the temperature got warmer the further down one went though the humidity was not supposed to be as high as it was during that particular venture because it might interfere with electrical equipment.

When he arrived at his destination, steam poured out of the room. A repugnant smell like burnt leather hung in the air, mixing with the hot moisture. Sparks were coming off the large generator, the assortment of wires connected to it were coiled around one another in a tangled mess. All the globes in the room had shorted out though the presence of live electricity could still be felt in the air.

Magnus had to rely on his omnitool to see the ground right beneath his feet, he had to cautiously step between the clear spots among the abundance of wires. If he knew what he was dealing with, he might have used his biotics to push the obstacles aside. He nearly tripped over something bulky that lay on the ground, a groaning noise complained at his intrusion.

"Ando, is that you?" What the hell happened here?" he dropped to a crouch to examine the limp form of his younger brother. He touched his cheek, the skin was scolding to the touch, he jerked his hand away immediately. His omnitool assured him that there lifesigns but Andronicus didn't seem to be conscious.

Again he reached down, this time shaking Ando by the shoulders several times. Suddenly the omnitool on his brother's wrist came to life. Andronicus stirred violently out of Magnus' grasp. Without any forethought, he reached for his boot and produced a jagged blade. Magnus' instincts took over, he lept back out of reach. Experience had taught him to the danger of waking a man with a weapon though he was completely surprised that his brother owned a physical knife in a day when most soldiers used omniblades.

"Get back, you don't belong here," Andronicus slurred as his senses awoken all at once. He slashed out with the knife to emphasise the warning.

"Put that down before you hurt yourself," Magnus said in the voice he reserved for giving orders. The steam began to sting at his eyes, there was no ventilation to move it elsewhere.

"You won't take me alive, not this time!" Ando turned the blade around so that the pointed end was facing his own neck.

Magnus wasn't close enough to reach him physically so he used his biotics to create a pull field around Andronicus' fist which managed to dislodge the weapon. The knife went skittering along the stone floor with a loud, clanging noise. Ando dropped down to search for it in earnest. By the
time Magnus was on top of him, he had managed to grab the knife. Preoccupied with pinning his brother to the ground, there wasn't an opportunity to use his biotics again. He had to duck and weave to avoid his attacks.

The pair of them struggled on the hard surface, both ignoring the dangerous electricity that surrounded them. Magnus wasn't trying to injure his opponent further but that didn't stop Andronicus from kicking and scratching with all his might. Eventually he was able to grab the knife by punching the shoulder of the arm that held it. Ando relented briefly, allowing Magnus to roll off of him to tuck the knife away. In the process of getting back up, Ando's body shook as he made contact with one of the wires. The shock intensified along with the accompanying screams of pain. Eventually Andronicus collapsed straight into Magnus' outstretched arms. Silence fell over the two brothers while they caught their breath.

"I'm sorry," Andronicus whispered, his body still quivering in his brother's embrace. He felt so small, like a child again. "I had to overload the generator to get enough power out of it. I think I blacked out when the current got too strong. This pain is a reminder of my defiance of the gods."

"Sounds like you've been listening to some of Saidra's mystical bullshit," Magnus grimaced as he helped him back to his feet. "There are no gods, Ando, just mortals like you and me. Even the Reapers can die."

"I feel all tingly now, does this mean I can use biotics too?"

"No."

"Too bad," Ando didn't seem too upset. He returned to his workbench as if nothing had happened, "That Saidra is very perceptive, you should listen to her once in awhile."

"Are you hurt?" Magnus asked. He was worried about Ando's mental state, the torture he had endured had clearly left more than physical scars behind.

"I'm fine. I should be able to get the QEC working now, the power is for the holoprojector mostly. The comm relay has been functional for the past week but I didn't want to say anything right away."

"Why not, we could have been using that in the mean time."

"Because I know how the Reapers think, they are always finding new ways to watch us. Transmissions are easy to intercept, it would paint a bullseye right on our location. The QEC is safer, even if it requires more finesse to get going."

"How long is this going to take?"

"Not long. I'll shut everything down here then we can set things up upstairs."

"Alright but you should have the medics look you over when we're done."

Later they were staring at a static-filled projection, Andronicus was frustrated beyond measure that the first test didn't work. After kicking the apparatus failed to produce better results, he went about messing with the mechanism manually. Hours went by as he worked underneath the device on his bare back since there wasn't enough room to manoeuvre otherwise. Magnus grew weary of watching him but didn't trust him to be alone with the equipment.

"It's like watching a quarian crawling around in the dirt," he mused in attempt to break up the quiet atmosphere.
"That's kind of racist. Besides they aren't all bad," Andronicus accused.

"You would say that. Let me guess, in addition to thinking the Hierarchy is old-fashioned you also believe the quarians didn't doom their entire civilisation and nearly the rest of the galaxy with their illegal development of AI."

"How could they have known that the geth would become sentient and later turn against those that created them?"

"Seems obvious to me, a lack of contingency is poor planning no matter what you're doing," Magnus sighed, his brother had a knack for thinking the grass was bluer on the other side. Ando was a dreamer whereas he was a pragmatic realist. "Next you're going to tell me the krogan didn't deserve the genophage."

"They didn't. The genophage created more problems than it solved," was his brother's predictable response.

"And the occupation of Shanxi?" Magnus pressed on, it was far too tempting to push against Ando's idealism.

"Completely unnecessary, the humans didn't even know about the Council law that they were in violation of."

"Wouldn't say that around Mom, she was pissed about the spending cuts that the navy had to make after paying reparations for the war."

"Are you done yet, if you haven't got anything interesting to say then shut up," Ando was rapidly losing his composure.

"You've always been naive, Ando, seeing the good in people, blind to their transgressions. It's hard to believe we're related at all. Anyway, it hardly matters. We're on our own in this fight, the other species will have too much else to deal with."

"We'll see," Ando said with finality. "Everything is in order here. Now we hope the pair for this QEC is still viable. Would kind of suck if all this effort led to a dead end."

"Time to fire it up. Put a shirt back on will you? What if we are meeting with a high-ranked officer, first impressions count. Actually, try to stay out of the frame if you can," Magnus said as patted down his own uniform to make sure it was as presentable as possible.

The projector wasn't sophisticated enough to show colours or minute details. What mattered most was posture and body language that demonstrated confidence. Good leaders could spot such telltale characteristics about each other within seconds. Appearances could potentially mean more than rank or reputation in the right circumstances.

The static disappeared, replaced by an ambient blue light that hung in mid-air while the connection was made. Magnus was apprehensive about what might show up on the display. What if the enemy had the other device? What if it was someone he knew? He'd kill to see Viatrix's warm, mischievous grin again.

A young male standing behind a console appeared, an ensign judging by the insignia he wore. He looked confused by the unexpected call, his fingers were madly tapping the console to make sense of it. The background was too dark to make out, there was nobody else in the room for the ensign to refer to.
"Sir, pardon the breach in protocol but this is an unactivated QEC. According to our records, this device was lost in the first week of the invasion," his eyes went big as he looked at the readout on his screen. "On Palaven. Is that where you are? Oh, sorry. Please state your rank and intent."

"I didn't mean to alarm you. My name is Sergeant-major Magnus Thorn, I'm leading one of the resistance cells on the surface, yes. I found the QEC among some supplies left behind by a comm team that never made it back to reclaim it. It has taken us a long time to get this device working, I'm not sure who the original owner was. Who am I speaking with now?"

"Ensign Darius Titus of the Valour, sir. I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on new incoming communications but we've not had much luck hearing from anyone on the homeworld. This is tremendous news. Are you in a secure location, major?"

"Yes, we've not had any incidents with the enemy for the last month."

"Ok, I'll take down your exact coordinates then call in my superior, if that's convenient for you?"

"Who is the captain of the Valour again? The ship name seems familiar.."

"You don't know? The Valour is Primarch Victus' flagship, he'll likely want to talk with you directly. One moment please."

"Major Thorn?" A soft, almost gentle voice greeted him after a long pause. "I am Primarch Victus, please tell me you bring good news."

"Well, I haven't got any bad news to burden you with," Magnus said casually. He was far more nervous than he should have been, humour was an easy mechanism to fall back on.

He recognised the man before him from the vids of the Taetrus War. General Victus had been a major player in stopping the separatist movement along with General Partinax. He couldn't have been more than five years older than Magnus, a reminder of what one could achieve in a short time if they set their mind on it. The face markings were subdued, hard to make out and identify especially with the holo's limitations.

The most distinguishing characteristics were his dark green eyes, his gaze told a multitude of personal stories. All of his ups and downs, triumphs and failures, moments of caution and moments of determination, everything about him was on display. His demeanor was not as rigid and calculated as his colleague's, there was a hint of sorrow and regret to the way he carried himself.

Despite this, Magnus could discern that whatever actions Victus had taken in the past, whether they were successful or not, were those of an honest man that would own up to what he had done. Though he was several light years away, the amount of confidence and conviction within Victus made it seem like he was in the same room. While his ascendancy to first tier had occurred by law of succession as opposed to personal merit, no one would question the system by which he had acquired his position, certainly not after how quickly much of their High Command was wiped out.

Most officers built their careers on proven formulas, Victus had gained his reputation by employing experimental tactics that no one else was willing to try. He was the epitome of what it meant to be turian, sometimes the rulebook had to be rewritten. All of Magnus' apprehension melted away when he realised that the fate of his people was in good hands.

"Don't trouble yourself with formalities in my presence, major," Victus said after returning Magnus' salute. "We've been anxious to make contact with forces on the ground for quite sometime now. Very few have checked in, of those not many remain active. What of your team? Which legion are
"Ah," he should have been anticipating that question but being temporarily starstruck had left Magnus ill prepared to answer it. There was no sense in lying about it, "I'm from the Invictus Cabal."

"Some of our cabalists have survived?" Excitement crept into the question.

"I came to Palaven of my own accord so I don't know what has happened to others like me," Magnus explained, feeling somewhat guilty for causing disappointment. "I'm currently the CO for a resistance group within the mountains southwest of Cipritine, far enough from civilisation that our location has not been spotted by the enemy yet. There's about four platoons worth of men and women here, many are families with children. We represent many different legions and specialisations, everything from scientists to marines. Trying to survive as best we can, the climate has been the biggest problem so far."

"Are there any civilians in your ranks?" It was the polite way of asking if there were any aliens that couldn't defend themselves according to Hierarchy standards.

"A couple of asari, some dissociated turians, and one human doctor. I think they could hold their own if it came down to it. We've been making ourselves self-sufficient, training, fortifying. Basically following the usual longterm defensive protocols as best as we can."

"Good, I'm sure there are other cells doing the same though we can't know for sure where or how they are operating. You can rest assured that we haven't abandoned the homeworld, the colonies have proven to be a lost cause though.

The fleet spends its time recovering what little we can and staying on the move. Occasionally we have engaged the Reapers in space with success, their numbers are more finite than on the ground. If we can pull a Destroyer away from the herd, our dreadnoughts can tear them apart. Unfortunately, that is such a rare occurrence.

Most of our energy is spent on securing supply lines, sometimes convoys vanish without any notice. Likely the result of opportunists, pirates and the like trying to take advantage of the chaos. At least, most of the time that's all it is. All we can do at the moment is keep the fleet viable."

"If that's the case, how do you intend to go on the offensive?"

"You won't believe this but we're actually negotiating an alliance with the krogan. It's going fairly well, minus a few hiccups here or there. That'll give us the extra boost we need to return to Palaven.

My advisors are constantly bickering over the exact strategy, my favourite idea so far has come from Admiral Sibyl Thorn of the Intrepid. Her strategy is the most bold and direct, whereas everyone else is too scared of failure to take any risks. It's the sort of decisive, immediate action that is required now, we can no longer wait for the perfect moment or the right set of circumstances."

"She used to tell us that if you hit the enemy hard enough the first time then they wouldn't come back for seconds," Magnus recalled. He could see Andronicus making silent cheering gestures at the mentioning of their mother.

"Oh I should have caught that, the resemblance is obvious now," Victus smiled. "I daresay she's hurt some feelings in the war room, bruised some egos that probably had it coming. I hope you can
command the loyalty of your troops as well as she can. It will take awhile to prepare for the operation but I'm going to need your help. I will pass on more information as it becomes available. In the mean time, consider yourself promoted to captain, effective immediately."

"That's overly generous, sir," Magnus was about to point out that his next rank wasn't the one he was being given.

"Your rank should reflect the role you fulfill, it will dispel any concerns or doubts that your men might have in your ability. In a conventional war, I would have more time to test your resolve and leadership style. Since I do not have that luxury, I must take a leap of faith instead. I will need you at your best, captain. Preferably better than your best. Do whatever you have to do to get ready for an offensive. We will not lose the homeworld. We can't."

"Though my tactics are more patient and restrained than my mother's, you can still expect the same level of dedication and thoroughness from me. We can hold out here as long as needed," Magnus assured him.

"How far are you willing to go to see this through? What drives you, what are you fighting for?" The questions were personal rather than professional yet Magnus didn't mind their candid nature. He knew he could trust Victus to keep his confidence.

"My family. My son is only a couple of months old, I have to protect him and his mother," he responded without any hesitation. "You are not the first to ask me that, I met General Partinax once and he asked the same. I didn't get the impression that he liked my answer."

"Partinax is of the old guard," Victus took a deep breath, talking about a colleague with someone who was little more than a stranger was often considered quite rude. "We fought together once, shoulder to shoulder in the same trench during the rebellions. He was always a bit cold but something about Taetrus changed him completely. It's as if he lost his soul out there. We definitely saw a lot of things that would shake one's belief in the Hierarchy's cause.

The separatists were brutal, their tactics were savage. I'm not sure what exactly broke him but his spirit was never the same after that war. He became ruthless and almost..synthetic in the way he approached emotions. He stopped feeling. People were just instruments to be used and nothing more. It's too bad, he was a military genius that could emerge victorious no matter what. Some may say we need that sort of thinking now, to outwit the Reapers."

"I used to follow his career, looked up to him in my younger days," Magnus sighed as he tried to take it all in.

"Never meet your heroes, captain," Victus warned him belatedly.

"Yeah. So what do you think?"

"I think that if we lose our compassion, our ability to care for one another, then we've already lost. We can never forget who we are, we can't become like the machines that are killing us, robbing us of our future. The Reapers have nothing to lose whereas we have everything.

Sacrifices should be made only as a last resort, certainly some have been made already. My son died to protect the validity of our alliance with Tuchanka, I will not see that effort go in vain. One way or another, I will avenge him.

I apologise but I need to get going, captain. Stay in touch, don't hesitate to call. We can talk as officers or as friends."
"Sir, one favour? If you get the chance, let my mother know that both of her sons are alive."

"I will absolutely do that. I am relieved that all is not lost quite yet, keep up the good fight."

"You too, stay alive out there."
"May I remind you all that you're using live ammo for this exercise, seeing as we have plenty of it. Take the necessary precautions, aim at your targets and stay focused," Magnus was debriefing a group of about twenty juveniles varying in age from five to fifteen. Given their relatively similar level of skill, it made sense to work with them all together.

He continued on when he was sure they understood the dangers of using lethal rounds, "The goal is to be consistent, not accurate. Keep your spread tight, pay attention to the rate at which you deplete your mag. I want to see each of you hard reloading, that is removing an empty clip and adding a new one, five times at the minimum.

Whoever can do this and demonstrate the most precision with their shooting will be allowed to choose which weapon we practice with next. Could be anything from pistols to sniper rifles, even got some spare shotguns lying around here. This isn't a race, take your time, make mistakes now rather than later.

You all have plenty of thermal clips at your disposal so begin whenever you're ready."

They all ran for their guns with great excitement, eager to prove they could do their five reloads with ease. Turians were competitive by nature regardless of age, the extra incentive that Magnus provided them with was almost unnecessary. The older children tried to dictate the pace to the younger ones since they were used to handling weapons. The young struggled more with their stance and grip due to their size.

Each of them needed advice from their commander who was happy to oblige them. Magnus patiently guided every child through the basics of target practice. The two-fold exercise was designed to teach them priorities, something the older kids kept forgetting. Because the Phaeston had a large clip size, it was easy to get carried away with it until the trigger locked up.

"If the clip jams, take some time to secure it before you try to bust it out. Guns aren't always going to be ready to fire the way you want them to, in a life or death situation a jam can be all the difference for survival. Know how to counter this," he warned them as he helped another kid pop open a clip casing that had initially refused to open. "Imagine one of your parents has been injured and requires covering fire while they get to safety. They were just about to reload before handing the gun to you.

Take notice of your surroundings, you might not be able to extract an overheated clip as cleanly as you'd like. It's going to be too hot to touch, hot enough to ignite anything flammable nearby. If you force it too hard, the clip could land any where. Gently wiggle it out and load the next one in. The cartridge mechanism doesn't close properly for some reason, now what? Check the alignment, slap the stock hard against the ground, wait for the ‘click’. Like this," he demonstrated the motions with his Valiant rifle.

"The situation is escalating, the enemy is closing in. You've got heaps of ammo ready to unload so use it. Concentrate the enemy, bundle them up to make the most of each shot. Take aim and blast the husks away. Congratulations, now you're a hero," he finished the scenario in a dramatic tone resulting in cheering from his students. That fired them a great deal, there were lots of audible clicks as reloading was taken more seriously amongst the thrill of shooting stationary targets.

"What if we aren't fast enough and our parents are dead?" one young boy asked during a lull in the shooting practice.
"Then you fallback, there's nothing more to do. Keep laying down suppressive fire while you look for a way out," Magnus answered neutrally, it was clear that the kid was looking more a more emotional answer.

"What if they're still alive and you're being overwhelmed? Do you leave them behind?" someone else asked.

"Depends on the situation. Always follow your instincts. Now, none of these questions relate to our current task. Pay attention you guys," Magnus dismissed the conversation and continued to go down the line to make sure everyone was making an effort to reload properly.

"If you're having trouble, try soft reloading when you get down to half to remind you of how many rounds you have left. Doing much better though your precision could use more work.

Callen, stay on your own target and leave your brother alone. Valen, stop worrying about headshots. Marron, keep both eyes open. Relax your grip, Ajax.

Atera's only six and she's out shooting all of you, come on," he continued to encourage them as the session came to an end.

"Sir?" someone interrupted Magnus, "I came to tell you that Admiral Thorn is on the QEC. Andronicus is waiting for you there, would you like me to wrap up this exercise for you?"

"Yes, thanks Tiresius. They've done well, let them have a play if they like," the words were barely out and the children were already breaking off into two teams.

"Hey Nauto you know how to play Seek-And-Destroy right?" Callen asked their new instructor.

"Remind me, the rules might have changed since I was your age," Tiresius knelt down to be the same height as Callen. The rules were similar to hide and seek though the seeker had to destroy his victim with a snowball so everyone knew who the new seeker was. Magnus had already left by the time the game started.

---

"Nice of you to join us," Sibyl's holographic image greeted her eldest son. Andronicus turned sharply to acknowledge his unannounced presence.

"You're looking well, admiral," Magnus saluted. He had not seen her in the her formal admiral uniform before, the white fabric was too bright for the projector's one colour. Regalia adorned her shoulders, the lapels were as well shined as the medals on the right side of her chest. She stood with the same poise and grace that he had been familiar with since childhood. The smile she gave after returning the salute was a rare sight.

"I can hardly believe that you two have been brought together amidst all this chaos. The spirits of our ancestors must truly be watching over you.

The hardest part was not knowing if one or both of you were still alive, I tried contacting both of your legions with little success," she gave them a suspicious look, neither of them had been following protocol too closely if they had managed to fall off the grid.

"Sorry I was late, I was in the middle of training our juvenile soldiers," Magnus tried to redirect the conversation, he didn't want to face an interrogation.

"He's really good with the kids," Ando offered not so helpfully. A worried expression bordering on
a harsh glare crossed Magnus' face. Sibyl was still unaware of Marius' existence, should she be told then he would be the one to inform her, not Andronicus.

"Well, I'm used to it from the cabal. We have more kids than adults in our ranks," he rapidly clarified.

"So, how have you and Dad been? What's the situation like out there?" Ando took the hint from his brother.

"Busy," was her short response. "Hang on, getting a ping from one of my squadron leaders. Need to take this, won't be a second," she brought up her omnitool and turned her back to the pair. They could still hear the audio that transpired between her and the subordinate.

"Your report, lieutenant, is both late and incomplete. No more excuses, your squad is grounded until you can prove that you deserve to be in command."

"Isn't that an extreme overreaction, sir?" the lieutenant bit out angrily.

"Incompetence is a grave offense, not only to me but to your fellow pilots. What if you tried to cut corners like this during a firefight? I won't have you endangering others because of your own laziness."

"But our patrols are stretched thin as it is, you need to keep us out there to relieve the rest," he continued to push. Magnus and Andronicus exchanged glances, they knew better than to argue with their mother and any wise individual would know the same.

Sibyl's voice became calm and soft, so soft that it required one to listen intently. Each word was carefully delivered, "I can demote you now if you can't handle the pressure of the responsibility that I have given you."

"I understand, sir. We can talk again at your next convenience," the subordinate said hurriedly before disappearing off the comm.

"You're only as good as the men you lead," Sibyl said to Magnus directly once she had turned off her omnitool. "Most of my time is spent harping on my crew which ought to know better by now. Unfortunately I do very little planning of glorious space battles any more. Would rather take a test of physical vigour over these drawn out mindgames any day. We're all that remains, errors cannot be tolerated," she took a deep breath then redirected her attention to Andronicus.

"Dad wanted to be here, but he has similar issues to deal with. Because the fleet is constantly on the move, our drive core requires more maintenance than usual. He hasn't slept properly since the war started, the stress is wearing him down. I actually caught him yelling at a technician the other day, almost made me proud to see him get that fired up. But he's going to reach breaking point soon, as will we all if this plan with the krogan doesn't pan out. The situation is growing desperate, if we don't go on the offensive soon we may never get another chance."

"And what is the plan, exactly?" Magnus inquired.

"Still fine-tuning some details. The short and sweet version is as follows. We'll be using the krogan as a source of really aggressive and hearty manpower to supplement our own infantry. They're cannon fodder as far as I'm concerned. A diversion of some kind will be used near the relay to draw as many Reapers away from Palaven's surface as possible. The rest of the fleet will jump in with their payloads and attempt to land while the enemy is otherwise engaged. We'll extract all of our known forces and regroup on Menae. Then we will dig in for the long haul to mop up whatever
is left. Once the homeworld is back in a defensible state, we will proceed to joining the other races in their campaign to retake their homeworlds."

"Is there anything we can do in the meantime?"

"Keep your troops strong and healthy, stay vigilant. The Reapers are going to be especially stirred up when they realise our bluff, they'll start hunting without mercy. Doesn't matter if they haven't found your location yet, they will find it."

"So we're bait then."

"Sort of. The most critical stage is the landing of our ships. Hold out until then and you'll get reinforcements. I've tried volunteering to lead the ground assault but Victus won't have it. I'll do my part from orbit, you must do yours as well Magnus. I have confidence in you, you've grown in ways that I couldn't have anticipated. Whatever held you back before seems to have gone away."

"It's more like someone in particular gave me a boost in the recent months," Magnus said after a pause, he wanted to tell her about Tarina but didn't want her to know the full story. She wouldn't approve of him mixing with a bottom tier soldier.

"Admiral Thorn?" a new voice came from outside the frame. It was Primarch Victus himself, he was wearing a full set of Phantom armour, not the typical garb of someone with his status. The armour must have held some personal significance or perhaps he wore it as a sign that he was an equal to the billions of lives that he served. "Pardon the interruption but I need you back on the Intrepid right away."

"What's going on? Is it the Reapers?" she asked with more excitement than fear.

"Hardly. We found out who has been picking off the stragglers in our convoys. A Cerberus fleet is tailing one of our ships on its way back to the fleet. Our ship will be here within the hour, we have a very small window to prepare an ambush in."

"Those damn bastards," Sibyl swore bitterly. "This is the first opportunity I've had to talk to my sons in months."

"Who are Cerberus?" Magnus asked, unfamiliar with the name.

"Human supremacists. Terrorists that harass us more often than the Reapers," Sibyl explained.

"They're vermin," Victus spat out. "And they'll die as such. I'm sorry, admiral, this is terrible timing. I've organised a fighter escort to cover your shuttle. Let's crush these insects so we can fight bigger prey."

"Magnus, Andronicus, you two look after each other. Your dad and I love you very much, we're so proud of you. I'll do everything in my power to bring you two home again. Stay alive, that's an order," Sibyl prepared to bid her boys farewell.

"Wait, Mom.." Magnus hesitated. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Can it wait?"

"Yes but in case something goes wrong.."

"Are you going to say it or not?!" her voice grew more stern as he continued to be evasive.
"It's kind of awkward," he tried to explain.

"Magnus Antonius Thorn!" she yelled at him.

Victus quietly stayed out of the dispute, though he did rest a hand on Sibyl's shoulder to urge her to calm down. Antonius had been Sibyl's surname before she married Marcus Thorn. It was customary for one partner to take the other's surname when starting a new family, often deciding which surname to adopt was the first argument most married couples had. There was nothing wrong with keeping both and some families did that when an agreement could not be reached. Magnus knew he had taken a step down an irreversible path, "I... have a son. His name is Marius. He's about two months old."

"Who is the mother?" Sibyl asked expectantly.

"Tarina Atreides, she's..." He really wish he had kept his mouth shut.

"Meridian Legion, 25th tier," Andronicus boldly lied for his brother.

"She's 18 so she hasn't advanced much yet," Magnus continued with a grain of truth, silently thanking Ando for his intervention.

"Wow, you old varren," Victus applauded him; Sibyl wasn't as thrilled.

"We will definitely be talking about this when I get back," Sibyl warned Magnus, her sharp eyes seemed to look straight through him. He couldn't tell if she was trying to hide her joy or if she was too livid to express much else. She turned to speak to Victus, "Primarch, our plan for Palaven has to work. I am going to see my grandson when this is through."

"It will work, Sibyl. In the meantime, we have a battle to get to. Marcus is expecting you," Primarch Victus tried once more to pull her away from the console. With great reluctance and a brief salute, she took her leave. "Captain Thorn, we will reconvene at our usual time. Spirits go with us all."

---

Magnus watched as his son showed off his creative prowess. They were in the nursery, surrounded by children who were either asleep or quietly entertaining themselves. He greatly enjoyed the one-on-one time with Marius, especially because he was actively learning the skills that would serve him well as a toddler. He couldn't talk but that didn't stop him from trying to communicate, different chirps and gurgles were indicative of words in his current language.

Marius was smothering everything he could get his hands on with finger paints despite Magnus' attempts to deter him. Very little of the paint had landed on the paper it was intended for. He reached up to his father's face, tracing his Invictus markings with his thumb, thankfully not smearing any wet paint in the process.

"I see what you're after," Magnus said gently as he found some dark blue in the palette. Marius laughed as the paint was applied to his face in the pattern that was recognisable to any turian that hailed from Palaven. Magnus did the vertical stroke along his nose last, "There."

Marius frowned as he traced the fresh paint, the pattern did not match his father's.

"You're from Palaven," he pointed to Marius then pointed to himself, "I'm from Invictus. Your mother is from Meridian. Some day you're going to be able to tell who is from where just by
looking at them. That's part of why we wear the markings. The other part is...a reminder of a darker past.

A long, long time ago we fought a war not against an enemy but against ourselves. Sister against brother, father against daughter. This was long before the Hierarchy existed properly. We were consumed with greed when we knew that we could conquer the stars, each colony developed its own rules and customs. It was inevitable that we would fight each other for the same resources. Honour didn't matter then, only the glory of victory. Victory meant crushing your enemy so hard that they had to submit to your way of life. And there were lots of different ways of life then.

One day, an alliance formed among some brave warlords who were willing to set aside their differences for a greater good. They knew if they could not unite the colonies that we would destroy ourselves. This was before we discovered the Citadel or the other races, back then we thought we were alone in the galaxy. Isolation took its toll, many alliances formed and crumbled. But this particular alliance, the Hierarchy, managed to prevail where all others failed.

They gained momentum with their swift victories as they continued marshalling forces that hailed from every colony. Slowly we began to realise that we were stronger together than apart. Conformity reigned our egos in, we became one people and better off for it. Since then we went on to fight many foes, the krogan, the humans, and now the Reapers. War is what we live for but that's not all we are.

We fight so that others don't have to, we are the peacekeepers of this galaxy. That's why our fleet is the biggest, why we have the most guns. Every turian looks different, sounds different, but they all have the same training. They all know what it means to put their life on the line. We follow the Hierarchy and lead through example.

These markings represent the scars of our ancestors, they remind us to never to fall as far as they did. There is no such thing as a turian civilian. No matter where you come from, you can count on the turian beside you to pull you through the fire.

Unless they are barefaced. Cowards that hide where they come from take no pride in who they are, they are blasphemers that hide many secrets. Don't trust those ones, Marius."

"That's not entirely true," Meekari said as she entered the room. She wore no markings because she followed a tradition beyond the realm of the Hierarchy.

"He's too young to understand the nuances of our custom. I meant no offense by it," he tried to assure her.

"I know but young minds absorb information faster than old ones. Anyway I'm glad I found you. I was relighting some of the torches in the lower floors and saw something strange. Someone was trying to pry the lock Tomas added to the infirmary supply closet. They must have seen me because they took off around a corner. I pursued but there are so many twists and turns in those corridors. Lost whoever it was, couldn't see much with the long shadows," she explained.

"Could you make out if they were male or female by chance?" Magnus asked, he hoped beyond measure that it had been Argus exposing himself at last.

"No, they wore a hood. I know you're investigating the disappearance of some medical stims so thought you'd like to know."

"That's really helpful, Meekari. Maybe they'll try again later in the night. Will you put Marius down for me? I'm going to give this thief a nasty surprise," he handed her his messy son. "He might need a
bit of a clean up first."

"It's no trouble, captain. Good luck down there."

He waited hour after hour throughout the night for any suspicious activity near the infirmary. The general traffic was non-existent, the quiet halls nearly lulled him to sleep many times. He actually did nod off a couple of times, waking up suddenly as a sharp breeze from a nearby door pushed past his hiding spot. The torches crackled until they burned themselves out. Six hours passed, then seven, he was about to give up since he had more important tasks to see to. After the eighth, he had fallen completely asleep. A lucid dream that he couldn't quite remember warned him of a pattering noise, the sound of talons against stone.

Carefully he glanced around a corner and tried to remind himself of all the paths to and from the corridor in question. If it came to a chase, he wouldn't let his quarry get away. A figure too small to be Argus was wearing all black. The hollow slashing noise of an omniblade was working through the locking mechanism, too crude of a tactic for a professional hacker.

Magnus had the element of surprise on his side. With the use of biotics he was, able to move quickly enough that he didn't give his unsuspecting victim a chance to hear his footfalls. He tapped the thief on the shoulder, pulled the hood back with his other hand, and stopped suddenly as he realised who it was. She spun around to face him with a cold stare.

"Tarina? Why?" he asked with shock.

Her expression was full of fear and panic. For a second, he thought she was about to say something. Instead she shoved him into the opposing wall and tried to run back the way she had came, cursing mildly as she did so. If she made it around the corner there was the possibility of three different halls that she could disappear into. He had to catch up before she got that far.

Knowing that it was safe to use his biotics in front of her, he threw a field at her midsection to pull her back towards him. Some of his training must have sunk in because she dove just as the field began to tug at her body. He threw a second, weaker field at her legs, dragging her to the ground. Her talons scratched at the uneven surface, trying to pull away while her legs remained entangled by the invisible force. The sound was terrible, they both cringed at the echo it created.

"Let me go!" she barked at him, twisting around so that she might be able to free her legs.

"Not until I know what you're up to!" he yelled back.

He crossed the short distance to where she lay on her back and bent over so that his face was right up against hers. His voice softened slightly, "You're the one stealing stims? Why do you need them? What can they do for you that I can't?"

"They're not for me, they're for a friend," she tried to explain.

"Bullshit, you don't have any friends," the anger was back, his words struck like poison. "You've been acting weird ever since you got that letter from your mom. Have you been deliberately avoiding me?"

"Why are you so angry? What harm are a couple of stims here or there? Our last days may as well be comfortable."

"They're for people who actually need them, don't pull that rhetoric on me. We're still here aren't we, the war isn't over yet."
"It's not going to last much longer if the recent news coming in is to be believed," she managed to pull herself into a sitting position. Magnus leaned against the opposing wall when he was satisfied that he wasn't going to have to chase her down again.

"I'm angry because I care about you. You're hurting yourself, don't you see that?" he answered her first question after a long pause. They stared at each other in silence, she was the first to look away.

"Maybe you shouldn't care so much," she said quietly.

"What do you want, Tarina?" he pleaded.

"I don't know, a chance to be myself instead of whatever it is you're trying to mould me into. I'm not one of your students, you can't control me," the answer surprised him a great deal. He wanted to argue, he wanted to scream that he was trying to help her.

"I've only shown you the path, it's up to you if you will walk it," he said with his typical stoicism.

"We've always been on different paths, haven't we? They criss and cross but they are different, we've never been going in the same direction," she looked down at her hands for answers. "I can't keep waiting for you to put me back together again, it's something I have to figure out for myself.

Before the war, I had hope that I could become someone of worth. I was going to atone for my father's dishonour and be somebody. Then Marius came along and I had another purpose. My career was over before it started but things were ok.

When you showed up, it all went to hell. It's all standard procedure this and that, follow the rules, justice for all. There's no room for me. You've had time to learn who you are, what you believe in. I haven't.

All I want to do now is to fight some Reapers, you know? Like any good soldier, my role is to kill the enemy. That's all the direction I need. But we're stuck here waiting and waiting.. and waiting. I'm going stir crazy, getting twitchy.

That and being cooped up with someone who is always poking and prodding at me, like I'm some sort of experiment. I'm nothing important, Sarge. Let this.. whatever it is you think we have.. let it go. Let me go."

"It's 'captain', actually. You've already made it clear that there's no 'us'. Many times," he said with a disappointed sigh. He was losing her, he couldn't say anything to change her mind. Advice was all he could offer, "You can't go around beating up all your problems, life isn't that simple. At some point you need to figure out why you're fighting. And I'm not talking about the battles out there but rather the ones within your own heart."

"More fatherly advice, why am I not surprised," she said with a cynical amount of sarcasm. "For all her faults, my mother still managed to say what I needed to hear. Why waste time? No one is guaranteed tomorrow, anything could happen. We say a lot of things we don't mean, especially in the heat of the moment. Maybe that's all we ever had and the moment is over," she looked up at him with sadness in her eyes. It was the first time he felt that she was being honest with herself.

"What do you mean?" Being told that he was nothing but a waste of time was like being shot in the chest at point blank range, how had he screwed things up so bad? He had to know beyond doubt what she was thinking, he was so used to her mind games leading him astray.

"Time to do things my way, time to live my own life," she began to get back to her feet. "Stay out of my way from now on. I will no longer burden you with my problems."
Magnus was unable to move, he was completely stunned by the sudden turn of events, "What about Marius? He is innocent to all this."

"I got by fine without a mother, he can do the same without his father," she said icily. There was nothing left to say after that.

"Next time I catch you down here, you'll regret it," he growled, meaning every word of the threat. She was disappearing from his life as quickly as she had entered it and he wanted to have last word on the matter.

Once she was gone, he sulked off to his office, eager to be alone with his thoughts. He needed to make sense of the situation. Unfortunately for him, Andronicus was waiting outside the door. He looked incredibly shaken.

"Magnus, have you got a second?" he whispered.

"No, I really don't. This is a bad time, go back to sleep."

"That's the problem, I can't sleep," Andronicus hovered behind his older brother, oblivious to the pain he was going through. "I thought we could hang out and argue about stupid things like old times."

"I've had enough arguing for one lifetime, thanks," Magnus said as he made his way to the desk, trying to find something to distract him so that he could look busy.

"What's wrong?" Andronicus finally caught on.

"I may have just had a falling out with Tarina," Magnus had to say it for it to be real. His mind could have been playing tricks, it was all too tentative. Shock had been followed by anger, disbelief was sure to be next. The room around him began to spin, he grabbed the edge of the desk tightly to keep his balance.

"Are you going to be ok?"

"Does it look like it?" he snapped with a sideways glance at Ando before closing his eyes, "Do you know what the worst of it is? She's taking Marius away. Can barely look after herself, how can she take care of him too? He's the one good thing in my life that I haven't completely f*cked up!" He shouted, his dark brown eyes lit up. He swept all the contents on top of the desk to the ground with one mighty push. "What gives her the right?!"

Andronicus was startled, he had seen his brother display emotions such as sadness before but nothing came close to the raw rage that he was unleashing right in front him. The pristine office was cluttered with debris by the time Magnus had ran out of steam. Carefully, Ando approached him, saying nothing as he put a strong arm around his shoulders.

"This whole time, I've been chasing a fool's errand," Magnus said, his voice cracking.

"You're no fool," Ando responded confidently. "Remember when were kids, when you dealt with those bullies that kept making fun of my crest? They had been taunting me all semester until you go to them. Most big brothers would have beat them up in a fist fight but not you. They never did work out who was leaving the notes in their lockers or on their omnitools, that was really clever by the way. The number of incidents dropped off remarkably that year. You really got into their heads."

"The flipside to genius is madness," Magnus said ominously.
"So you followed your heart once and it didn't work out. It's not the end of the world."

"Isn't it? I gave up everything to be here. Sacrificed a promising career, left home behind, put both Marius and Tarina's lives at great risk. All for what?"

"Plenty of people here are grateful for what you've done, you brought hope to many. Marius will be ok, he's tough like the rest of us Thorns. And don't you forget it. Keep it together, stay strong for him," Andronicus looked so much like Marcus then, the words were ones their father would have said.

"Nothing makes any sense here. I want to go home."

"There's nothing to go back to, Invictus is lost. Save your anger for the Reapers, alright?"

"Sorry, Ando. Looks like I was the one in need of support tonight."

"Get some rest, Magnus. Tomorrow is another day."

That night, Magnus didn't get much sleep. He dreamt of the same beach that he had dreamt about many times before. The last time had been a memory of his darker days when he was still a boy. The new scene played out similarly except the roles of Sibyl, Andronicus, and Marcus had been replaced by Tarina, Marius, and Magnus respectively.

He looked to the beach with affection, watching Marius build a sand castle with his mother. A second later he was knee deep in the water. He turned again and then found himself fully submerged. Having a fear of asphyxiation didn't help as he struggled to swim to the surface. He continued to sink deeper and deeper, a voice called out to him, a hand reached down. Someone said "Hold on, I'm coming for you" which he assumed was Tarina.

He woke up out of breath, hoping the previous day had also been part of the dream. The voice of the person trying to save him kept flashing through his mind. He could have sworn it was Viatrix. Guilt overtook him as he thought about her for the first time in weeks. He should have gone with her squad rather than staying behind to lead the cabal. If they had died together on the field of battle it would have been a good death.

Magnus felt utterly alone, his desire to help others was eradicated. The war no longer concerned him. The dark thoughts that had occupied his mind as a child began to take root once more.
Chapter 34

A hunting party of two dozen soldiers broken up into pairs were quietly pursuing their quarry through a dense forest. The trees were tall with blue-grey foliage that redirected most of the sunlight away from the rest of the forest floor. Animals with natural, shiny armour went about their business, ignoring their sentient intruders. Trebia was setting, casting shadows over the small biome, changing the presence of hunters and their prey to those more nocturnal in nature.

Among the high branches clung congregations of four-legged bird creatures called vizzards. During the day they were relatively unremarkable but at night their bioluminescent glands on the backs of their legs created a colourful display. Their prey were affectionately referred to as "leaf serpents", they were passive creatures with elongated bodies that wrapped themselves tightly around tree trunks and undergrowth. The serpents had armoured scales for defense but relied heavily on their ability to blend in, they could get up to a metre in length. The longer they were, the longer they had managed to evade the griffon claws of their hunters. The bioluminescent secretions were used by the vizzards to illuminate the serpents, their shiny scales reflected the light and gave away their hiding places. There were a myriad of other animals within the same forest but it was hard not to notice the random droplets of colour that dotted every visible surface.

The relationship between the hunter and the hunted was simple and straightforward. Nature didn't trouble itself with the petty issues of love and lost. There was peace in the forest, either you were alive or you were dead and that's all there was. Magnus envied the animals as he tried to find suitable signs of their passing, it almost felt wrong to enter their domain. Sentient beings had the primal need to consume sustenance as well. The hunt usually provided excitement not obtainable by any other means. He wasn't interested in the thrill, he just needed some activity that would take his mind away from other matters.

"You're exceptionally quiet tonight," Andronicus said in a hushed tone.

"Trying not to scare off dinner," Magnus shushed him. They had already filled their quota for the day, whatever they killed afterwards was for sport and live target practice.

"Usually you enjoy these outings into the middle of nowhere. Upset about a certain pair of someones?"

Magnus had been lining up a shot on a bird in the lower branches of a the nearest tree, trying to get some use out of his new thermal scope. The shot triggered prematurely, too wide to hit its mark, resulting in a flock of birds flying away with a cacophony of sound. The heatsink clamoured loudly as he slapped it back into place. He didn't turn to acknowledge his distraction of a brother, instead he reloaded and began looking for something else to aim at.

"You're supposed to be my spotter, not my gossip partner," he reminded Andronicus.

"I hate it out here, feels like we're being watched. Why'd you bring that Mantis anyway, you're kind of hopeless with it."

"Been awhile, wanted something different. Need to relearn the finer points of making the most of each shot. The Valiant is great for hip fire on the move but it lacks a certain degree of patience and feedback that is more common with other sniper rifles. The Mantis lets you know immediately whether it was a good or bad shot. The recoil is a friendly reminder that you accomplished something, like a friend cheering you on. One shot at a time, unbreakable focus, success or failure determined completely by one's preparation. Put simply, the Valiant is for when things have
already gone to hell and you need to turn the tide whereas the Mantis leaves you in full control. Plus it comes with a high dose of nostalgia," Magnus explained the difference between the two guns with the utmost affection and respect.

"I guess there is that sense of familiarity since it is the first gun most of us learn how to use properly. Though that's usually why most people move on to more interesting firearms and never look back at it," Andronicus acknowledged.

"I've never liked changed, the old ways are often the best. Mom taught me how to shoot with one of these. My most vivid memories of her include this gun. She doesn't have much of a soft side but when she's teaching you, you feel like you can do anything.

One time we went into the jungle, just the two of us. It was one of the first times I saw how cutthroat the world could be. It was one thing to know how to kill but it was another to actually do it. Not only that, but to appreciate the methods that allowed one to do it with mercy and respect.

I came face to face with several nasty beasts that day, each time Mom waved her pistol around and protected me without any hint of fear. I finally worked up the nerve to take on a predatory bird, she had shown me how to track it down and I had it cornered. There was a pack of screechers that had been ghosting our movements for much of the day, they waited for me to stop long enough for them to swoop down.

But I wasn't watching them, I was ready to make my first kill, to become a hunter like the very things that were hunting me. Mom grabbed my rifle in one swift motion, she shot at one of them, nailed it right between the eyes before it could take flight. The rest scattered with fear. I wish you could have seen it, she knew exactly what to do, didn't even have to take her time. She let me claim credit for the kill, we took it back home and cooked it up.

That's when I knew I wanted to get better at shooting, until then I found it tedious and almost boring how slow the Mantis fired. Technique without the confidence to back it up is useless, I wanted to impress Mom some day. We didn't talk much during the trip, actions spoke volumes. I learned a lot, somehow I knew would end up teaching others as she had taught me. I wish I could pass that same experience on to my own son."

"Maybe you will. Tarina hasn't exactly disappeared in the dead of night as you expected her to."

"I kind of wish she had," Magnus sighed, his stomach turned at the mention of her name.

"Did you hear that humming noise?" Andronicus asked suddenly, putting his hand up to halt his brother.

"No, you're being paranoid again," Magnus assured him. Nonetheless, he closed his eyes so that he could listen more closely.

"Shh, over there where by that large tree trunk. Get down," Ando took point and Magnus followed him to take cover at his side.

"There's nothing emitting heat nearby," Magnus said after taking a cursory glance through his scope.

"Wrong spectrum to look through. My omnitool is currently scanning for infrared signatures."

"Why, what do you think it is?"

"Not sure, but there's definitely something out there that shouldn't be. Look, did you see that
shadow over there?"

"Just a tree branch moving in the wind. Relax, Ando," Magnus said with certainty.

"I feel something, Magnus. You of all people know the value of instincts, they're not wrong."

Something stirred above them, neither could see what it was. The wildlife around them had gone eerily quiet, as if they too noticed something was amiss. Magnus was baffled by the thermal scope's lack of utility, he fell back on more traditional visual cues to guide his aim. The branches gave way as an invisible entity pushed them apart, he fired instantly. The bullet ricocheted off of a metallic surface, the forest lit up as the object exposed itself in response. A thick laser beam, red and crackling with electrical energy, left a trail of fire and smoke in its wake.

"Move, move! Flank it," Magnus yelled as he hastily ran for sturdier cover. He popped the heatsink and prepared to take another shot once he was stationary again.

Andronicus' shot barely missed the round, spherical object. There was no obvious weak spot to exploit. The sphere opened in the middle, looking very much like a giant eyeball, and revealed the nozzle of its laser gun. This time the shot swept upwards in a vertical motion. The synthetic entity, whatever it was, rotated and cast the beam horizontally, showing that the gun was incredibly articulate though slow to shoot. As far as they could tell, there were no other weapons present, the tentacle-like cables hanging from its sides were used for propulsion and sensory input.

"What in the spirits is that thing!"

"Kill it then we can find out."

The brothers alternated their positions, taking turns to shoot and confuse their opponent. Their greatest asset were the armour-piercing rounds loaded in their guns which were designed to penetrate the thick armour of most animals and medium grades of synthetic armour. They kept moving so that the laser wasted time realigning itself. The mechanical creature remained between the two of them no matter which altitude it chose.

"Shoot where the laser comes out. Now!"

"I got it, knocked it off course. Must have lost control of its lateral movement. Get ready to try that again."

"I think it's trying to run," the pair began to chase after it in earnest. "Line one up, Ando. I'm going to stagger it."

"Better hurry."

Magnus used his biotics to drag the creature backwards. Andronicus aimed for the ground beneath it and waited for the right moment. To encourage it into his sights, Magnus placed a singularity above its only escape route. The creature was trapped, a shattering of broken metal and tubing rained down over its deactivated form.

"Looks almost like geth technology."

"Not quite, there's some sort of fluid inside. These cables have organic components. Has to be related to the Reapers."

"Well, it's dead now whatever it is."
"I knew we were being followed, there has to be more of these floating around. It's super creepy, what if it's part of a much bigger Reaper? Let's get as far away from here as possible, I have a really bad feeling about this," Andronicus was genuinely freaked out by their discovery while Magnus was completely fascinated by it, taking little notice of his brother's caution.

"We should take it back with us to study it."

"No way, keep that thing away from me. Even dead gods can dream and that is a nightmare waiting to happen."

"It's probably a scout, why else would it be out here?"

"Who cares, this is a bad place to be. Please, let's go. Get everyone back before we run into more."

"I agree that we can't stay here but it's coming with us, whether you like it or not. The potential intel is too precious to ignore."

Once everyone was gathered around, an awkward silence hung over the group. For months they hadn't had to worry about the enemy. Some considered the creature to be a bad omen, others were eager to finally have a reason to pursue the Reapers. Magnus had to remind them to cull their desire to hunt bigger prey, they had the advantage of surprise on their side. That and they had orders directly from the primarch to be gathering their strength. It was tempting to gather intelligence but they didn't have the proper resources at their disposal. Besides, nobody was entirely sure of what exactly the creature's true purpose was.

"We should keep looking for more, if they are intelligent then they could be communicating our location to the rest," Argus argued. Some nodded their heads in agreement, including Tarina who stood close beside him. "Or this might be a decoy. The others could be waiting to follow us to our base."

"We're out of contact range, we have to head back to let them know what we have found," Magnus countered.

"That's what they want us to do. Why do we all have to go back, send a messenger or something."

"We don't know that there are more of these. In the absence of such information, it would be unwise to send one man on his own."

"Exactly why we should stay out here until we know more."

"We have plenty to eat but the monastery doesn't. They are counting on us to come back. We can't chase vizzards in the dark indefinitely even if that were not the case. Besides, if these things really are a threat, we would be better off fighting them from a position of defense rather that in the open," Magnus was trying to remain calm but internally he was losing his patience with Argus' constant need to test him.

"You can go on if you like old man but I'm not going with you. Who's with me? Let's take a tally of what the others want to do before jumping to conclusions."

"You've been spending too much time with the asari, this is not a democracy. I'm in charge here and I say we turn back now. If we move fast enough, we can be there in two days," Magnus was struggling to keep his anger under control.

"That's a relentless marching pace, surely don't mean to treat us like savage animals," Argus' own tone shifted, he was getting worked up as well.
"Fall in line or get left behind, your choice," Magnus said clearly. He stared at the other man, oblivious to the mood of the crowd around them. He could remember countless lectures from his mother about not tolerating insubordination, trying to recall specific turns of phrase in case he had need of them.

"You're giving my followers too much ammunition here, are you sure that's what you want?" Argus threatened, moving in close to try and intimidate his superior. "They already question your commitment to our mission, your hold is shaky at best. Act like a tyrant and you'll suffer the consequences."

"Is that a genuine threat, Argus? Because I've been dying to put you in your place," Magnus lunged at the much bigger man and threw him into the nearest tree, the prickly bark cut into the soft parts of Argus' armour. He grinned when he saw the brief look of pain on his face. What he hadn't counted on was how heavy Argus was, he was already feeling a soreness in his shoulders after pinning him down.

"Careful, you might create a martyr. You have to maintain the right appearances for the sake of the rest who can't think for themselves," Argus continued to taunt him.

"The only person you're insulting is yourself. I don't care what you do so long as you're not undermining the safety of this company. The fleets need us to be ready and all you can do is try to tear us down. No more of these shadow games. Prove your words with the appropriate actions instead of relying on empty threats."

"It's a ploy, even if they do come the war is already lost. We could live our final days in comfort but you'd rather cling to false hope. You're deceiving everyone, the game is over. Accept it."

"I've had enough of this insubordinate talk. You want to play with fire? Fine, consider yourself challenged to a duel of honour, not glory. Not to the death but rather to prove which ideology will be followed from here onwards. The defeated will be forced to swallow his pride, to recognise the merits of the victor. Do you accept?"

"What are the conditions?"

"If I win, I remain in command. If you win, you can do whatever you want, no questions asked."

"Seems fair. What about weapons?"

"None, we will fight barehanded to display our raw strength and prowess for all to see."

"I accept your terms, old man. You're going to regret doing this."

"I look forward to showing you for the coward that you are. For now, we move out."

After a heated exchange on philosophy, the duel challenge provided the best means to settle their differences. To save some face, Argus elected to carry the remains of the Reaper wreckage so that he didn't portray the selfish attitude that he was accused of.

"If we're lucky, that thing will reactivate and suck his brains out," Magnus said callously once Argus could not hear him. Andronicus looked incredibly uncomfortable about being around Reaper technology again. After a long silence, Magnus took a serious tone with him, "You agree with him, don't you?"

"In principle, yes. If Mom wasn't directly involved in this plan, I would have little faith that it could succeed," Andronicus conceded.
"I thought you'd be on my side."

"Are we taking sides now?"

"How can you not see what's going on here? I'm surrounded by stupidity. Expected better from you. But I guess I'm on my own, as usual. Why does it all have to come undone at once? Everyone has their own agenda, we're supposed to be fighting together, not against each other."

"You're being a bit over-dramatic."

"Am I? You're too scared to even look at the Reapers, Argus is plotting a coup, Tarina is destroying everything she touches. Hell, every time I see Dr. Tomas she is upset about something. I have to do what everyone else is too incompetent to do, I have to keep the threads from unravelling. It's getting to be too much."

"That no excuse for what you just did. Have you lost your mind? Argus doesn't give a damn about honour or reputation. Accidents can happen, no matter what parameters you put in place,"

Andronicus tried to bring the conversation back to their current situation, he was worried about his brother even if his loyalty was being questioned. "Your motivation is hardly altruistic, don't pretend it is otherwise."

"You don't think there's something going on between them do you?" Magnus didn't really want to know the answer but he couldn't help himself. If his brother could see through him then others could do the same. He didn't want to think about Tarina and Argus spending time together, however, the more he tried to avoid the subject the more his mind kept going back to it.

"It's none of our business if there is. Still doesn't justify your personal need for vengeance. This move could jeopardise more lives than your own."

"Spare me the lecture. Have some faith, would you? I wouldn't issue a challenge if I didn't think I could win."

"I'm not entirely sure you want to win, to be honest. You've been doing a lot of weird things lately, keeping to yourself more and more. Sending more men out to salvage than necessary, pushing everyone too hard. Discipline is one thing but you're going overboard, Magnus. If you ask me, you spend too much time cooped up in that office instead of listening to your troops."

"I didn't ask for your opinion. Anyway, I'm doing the best I can with what I have available. So are you with me or not?"

"You're family, do you even have to ask me that?"

"I wouldn't hold it against you if you changed your mind later. Just give me some fair warning if you do, there's only so much betrayal that I can handle. The road ahead is barely lit, who knows where it might lead," Magnus said ominously, his brother looked at him with worry in his eyes but said nothing.

-----

The duel was brutal, savage by some accounts. The crowd was as restless as the combatants, shifting their bets for extra rations and similar items at regular intervals. Those that were loyal to Argus remained quiet for the first half, unsure whether revealing themselves too soon was a prudent course of action. They feared retaliation if their champion lost whereas their numerous opponents were free to revel in the festivities regardless of the actual outcome.
Magnus felt the immediate effects of a lack of practice, his attempts to replace Tarina with Andronicus in his nightly spar routines had failed quite miserably. Andronicus was more brain than brawn. In addition, his list of phobias was ever growing. The hit to his self-confidence proved to be more detrimental than Magnus' need to hone his own skills. There was no one for Magnus to rely on but himself.

Argus was a huge man, twice Magnus' weight, and he knew how to use the extra mass to his advantage. He fought without any notable pattern, chaotic like Tarina's fury. Unlike her, however, his skills were more refined and deliberate, evidence of a man who had been forced to fight for his life on multiple occasions. It wasn't hard to figure out why given his disrespectful attitude for anyone that wasn't a borderline anarchist like himself.

The fight went on for hours as the pair of them probed each other's strengths and weaknesses. Their differing styles kept everyone entertained though tension began to increase once it became apparent that the two fighters were an equal match. Magnus took the slow, calculated approach of trying to make Argus believe he was winning. Multiple bluffs were seen through but he did not possess the strength to overpower Argus more directly. The lack of any rhythm to the flourish of kicks, punches, and grapples were taking a toll on him physically. He was starting to take his brother's concerns more seriously, his opponent was relentless and would not hesitate to deliver a fatal blow should the opportunity present itself.

Jab, jab, uppercut, cross both arms to block. This continued over and over with Magnus on the receiving end. He couldn't figure out why Argus had suddenly decided to try the same attack combo, it could have been a sign that he was running out of ideas. On the third try he got creative by adding a high kick to the mix. The kick found its mark, the boot-covered talons landed harshly, scraping a layer of carapace scales away from Magnus' exposed midsection, on his right flank below his ribs. He fell to one knee instantly to prevent another blow from reaching the same spot, his hand pulled away from the wound with fresh blood tripping between his already darkened talons. Argus didn't wait for him to recover, a wrestle ensued on the ground while Magnus tried to pin his attacker into a debilitating headlock. A rather powerful headbutt broke his grip, sending him reeling backwards along the flagstones.

For all intents and purposes, it appeared as if Argus had him where he wanted. Talons and spurs locked, more blood began to pool around their feet. Both were severely injured, a loud crack accompanied the punch that Magnus had just delivered into his opponent's gut. Argus rolled off of him to bunch up and protect his vulnerable stomach. Magnus followed up with more powerful punches aimed at his shoulders, he had been reserving all of his strength for that particular moment. They were tired and dehydrated, surviving through attrition would be the only way to ensure victory. Argus had no fight left in him, exhausted from his previous bursts of energy. Magnus capitalised and nearly beat the other man to the edge of his life before someone intervened.

"Stop it, you've won. That's enough," someone yelled out, the rest of the crowd agreed. Argus' face was a mess, scratches covered his body. Out of the crowd emerged a worried looking Tarina. For a split second, Magnus thought she was going to congratulate him but instead she went over to Argus' limp form and offered him assistance back to his feet. Had she been there the whole time? He couldn't recall seeing her face in the crowd though he had hoped she was present to see his glorious triumph. She didn't look at Magnus at all, he was sure she caught a smirk on Argus' face as he walked away with his arm held firmly over Tarina's shoulder. The fight had already robbed Magnus of all his stamina, the victory itself had left him feeling empty and hollow.

He blacked out, collapsing suddenly, the crowd had long disappeared already. When he came to,
Dr. Tomas was bent over him, cradling his head and wiping away the blood from his cheeks. She kept asking him to move his legs but he sounded too far away. How much blood had he lost? What did it matter. Tomas was a small woman, even by human standards, but she managed to haul Magnus to his feet. Where had Andronicus disappeared to? Shouldn't he be helping Tomas?

Slowly, painfully they made their way to the empty infirmary where Magnus was encouraged to lay on an examination bed. Tomas handed him a glass of water and told him to take little sips before she disappeared for a few minutes. When she returned, she was carrying one of his clean tunics. He watched inquisitively as she went about grabbing gauze and disinfectant, taking note of the stitching kit that she also brought over to his bedside. Why was she fussing over him, she should have let him drown in his own blood and sorrow. She didn't say too much, her hair has been pulled up into a loose bun at the back of her neck so that it would not interfere with her work of cleaning his wounds.

So many unbidden feelings swept through Magnus as he laid there, his stomach was full of lead. Andronicus had been right, he had nearly endangered everyone for no good reason. The image of Tarina coming to Argus' aide flashed through his mind again, had she been the one yelling at him to stop? It was salt in the wound, losing her had been hard enough. He felt something pull him back to the present, Tomas ws aligning the severed tissue on his lower back to prepare it for stitch work.

"I'm sorry, there's not enough localised anesthesia to go around. The thing about carapace is that it takes so long to regrow, the tissues needs to be put back together right away," she explained calmly in response to his jerky movements, "Hold still, try to think of something pleasant."

"Easy for you to say," he said between clenched teeth. The physical pain didn't bother him as much as it ought to have, it was almost cathartic.

"You guys really went at each other," she tried to keep him talking as she delicately fed the biothread through the edges of his sensitive underskin.

"Why aren't you patching him up? Pretty sure I broke some ribs among other things," he wasn't trying to gloat though it did feel good to remind himself that he had actually won.

"Well, that's unfortunate for him," she said with a hint of derision. "He doesn't trust me, none of his people do. I'm no stranger to prejudice, the signs are always very obvious. Argus is brilliant at weaving tales, manipulating others to see what he wants. Sprinkle in a little truth such as my lack of military training and tell them my position was given to me as some sort of peaceful compromise between our people rather than merit and the seeds of contempt are sown. It furthers his agenda and makes me look like a scapegoat, a symbol of everything that ought to be despised.

Needless to say, I've had very few patients lately, there are other medics that can handle the workload. Granted, none of them are qualified surgeons like me so that makes things a little problematic. I think what irritates me the most are the parents that refuse to allow a human to vaccinate their children, especially when we have plenty of inoculations available. I'm here to help, if I can't do my job then what do I do?"

I can't change their minds and no, I'm not asking you to do it either. Sorry, didn't mean to rant at length like that, guess it has been building for awhile and there's no one else to talk to."

Magnus could completely empathise with her. The duel had bought him some time, he was still likely to lose the respect of his troops if he didn't find a more permanent solution to raise morale. Argus' faction had their talons dug in deep, they would not be easily dislodged. Normally he would have been angry to hear Tomas' recounting of her frustrations, injustice always had that effect on him. But he was so numb to everything after the duel, he couldn't do anything for her nor could he
see an obvious solution for his own troubles. He was grateful for the pain that derived from the mending of his wounds, without it he would think he were asleep or perhaps dead.

"There's a surprise, not a mere separatist but also a repugnant supremacist. I should never have let him in, though it wasn't exactly my first mistake. Seems to be a reoccurring theme lately," he said it more to himself than to her.

"You had to do it, honour demanded that you did. What you couldn't have predicted was what would have transpired afterwards, of which none is your fault."

"I should have known better."

"You're not indestructible, Magnus. Neither of us is," she finished the stitching and went back to cleaning up the dried splotches of blood on his scales.

Her smooth fingers felt refreshing against his skin, the lack of friction allowed her to massage the muscles as she worked ointments into the open wounds. He was sure that she was doing him the favour as more than his doctor, some of her touches did not correlate with areas that needed treatment. She was gentle and subtle at her task, if he closed his eyes long enough he could feel the warm breezes of Invictus brushing against him.

"Why are you being so kind to me?" he whispered, afraid that he might interrupt her.

"Because that's what friends do for each other," she said simply, working her fingers along his shoulders with one hand while the other had its omintool actively scanning for any other problems.

"I've had plenty of colleagues but none that I'd call friends. Well, there was one but she's gone now. If my mother knew I was associating with humans, she'd probably kill me."

"You're a grown man, what does it matter what your mother thinks?"

"She's fifth tier, she adds great weight to our name. Each of us is responsible for upholding that reputation. But you're right, I can do whatever I like. So thank you for your efforts, though I don't think I'm deserving of them."

"I've wasted so much of my life thinking that impressing my superiors was all I had to do. Too focused on duty and honour. I was supposed to follow in my mother's footsteps. To some extent, I did. But at what cost? I'm just another cog in the machine, a broken one at that. I'll bring disappointment to my family some day with nothing to make up for it."

"I've heard that too much stress can break soldiers. Is some of the extra pressure that you put on yourself due to your being a biotic?"

"How do you know that?" he asked with surprise.

"I was doing a full scan, the neural hardware is difficult to ignore. Human doctors are trained to recognise a biotic amp when they see on so that we can deliver specialised care. I know the social stigma regarding biotics is different for you but we try to be more open-minded about such things."

"You can't tell anyone that you know about this, do you understand?" he begged her.
"I take patient confidentiality very seriously, don't worry," she assured him.

"To answer your question, I don't know. Living in the cabal gave me purpose, it freed me from the trivial matters of relationships and emotional stability. Or at least, that's what I assumed until recently. How could I be so blind and ignorant? They used to call me a strategic genius but what do I know about anything that actually matters?"

"We're social creatures, not synthetic robotics. You can't just cut off your ability to feel or understand other people," she reminded him. It was a simple truth that had evaded him for too long.

"The weird thing is that I'm not mad about Tarina rejecting me, I'm more worried about her welfare. Who can look after her better than me? My own happiness is of no consequence. What happens when she struggles, who will be there to save her? Certainly not Argus, he'd rather protect his own skin. And Marius, what's going to happen to him? I've never been so powerless," he looked down at his palms, he wanted to strangle something. Dr. Tomas placed her hands on top of his, they were tiny and pink, harmless really.

"Losing the one you love most isn't easy but at least yours is still alive," she said quietly, "I know how you feel, believe me."

"I was practically invisible to her," he sighed.

"This is getting a bit too deep," she squeezed his hands then let go. "Maybe some alcohol will help us alleviate these negative feelings."

"Is that your top medical advice, Doc?"

"It is. I've been waiting for a good excuse to drink this bottle, seems as good a time as any," she pulled out a bottle and two crystalline glasses which didn't seem to serve any medical purpose from under her desk. Magnus wondered if she took to drinking regularly, maybe there weren't many differences between their species after all.

"That better not be compliments from Argus," he warned as she approached.

"Definitely not. It was a gift from Kallium. We took refuge at a bar in the middle of a small town during a storm. The original owner must have been a collector, there were bottles from every nook and cranny of the galaxy in that cellar. I think Kal could tell I was miserably homesick. He recognised the writing on this bottle of Irish whiskey, I didn't have the heart to remind him that I was English and didn't actually like whiskey. He was such a sweetheart, I really miss him," she paused, rubbing the bottle absently for a few seconds before redirecting her attention to Magnus, "Anyway, been holding onto this for awhile, thought it might get used for a special occasion.

"Don't waste it on me."

"Nonsense, we're both in need of higher spirits. Besides I need you to stay a bit longer so I can rule out a concussion, you hit your head pretty bad after the fight. We don't have any ice, kind of ironic given how cold it is outside," she gave an impish grin then handed him one of the full glasses, "Best to down it all in one go."

"To friendship," he raised the glass to meet hers.

"May it last forever," she completed the toast.

The smell was unfamiliar to him, the syrup-like viscosity made the liquid heavy and unappealing. The taste didn't kick in until a couple of seconds after he had drank it, he was unable to discern any
individual flavours. A burning sensation crept slowly through every fibre of his being, his throat felt as if it was on fire. The alcohol awoke his senses, not in a pleasurable way but rather it felt like he had been slapped hard in the face.

"That was disgusting," he doubled over and heaved, trying to get his breath back.

"I agree," Tomas said between noisy coughs of her own. "Want another?"

"Are you sure you're not trying to poison me? Alright, but only if you have one too," he extended the glass to be refilled. The distraction was welcomed even if he could not fully enjoy the experience.

"Sure, but this stuff has more kick than I am comfortable with. Think I need to sit down for a second."

"You can join me, there's enough room," Magnus swung his legs aside to make his point then offered her a helping hand.

She accepted his invitation with a warm smile. He enjoyed the tactile contrast between her smooth skin and his rough fingers, he almost didn't want to let go. When she was comfortable, he poured the next round. There were no words spoken for the second toast, both were too busy watching the other. They waited for the foul sensation of the alcohol to subside then placed the empty glasses aside. Suddenly they were aware of their close proximity to one another.

They were practically sitting on top of each other, Magnus could make out every detail of her face. His bare chest was still exposed, a shiver went through him as he looked into Tomas' eyes. It could have been a chill or it could have been the feeling of being close to someone he was growing to admire. Dr. Tomas undid the bundle of hair at the back of her neck, confident that her work was one. They continued to look at one another, waiting for someone to say something. The pain from the duel had faded away like a distant memory. He couldn't tell if it was the alcohol or something else but he felt at peace in the human's company. She wasn't judging him. His own brother was more likely to abandon him than she was. He could feel her hand in his again, soft and petite. What was the gesture supposed to mean?

Without preamble, she leaned in as if to whisper something but instead ended up kissing him on the mouth with her prominent, plush lips. He should have been horrified by her blatant disregard for his personal space. Too shocked to pull away, he waited for her to stop of her own accord. But she pressed on, delicately at first, searching for the right angle. It was incredibly awkward though he was enamoured with the amount of attention she was giving him. One of her hands cupped his chin, brushing gently against the underside of his mandibles. He worried momentarily about hurting her with his rough edges and much sharper teeth, the kissing intensified despite these concerns.

Together they found rhythm and harmony in their movements, it worked much better when he reciprocated. His own hands moved to hold her close, one reaching for the nape of her neck to play with the loose strands of her hair. Everything about her was alien and wonderful, the feather-like hair, the roundness of her ears, her pointed nose. He couldn't get enough, thoughts of his misfortunes relating to Tarina had completely escaped his mind as he tried to indulge himself.

Dr. Tomas was playful, affectionate, and most importantly, she was there when he needed her. She had provided him comfort when he was at his lowest point, he didn't feel ashamed in her presence. Her breathing began to increase as they continued. He was sure he could hear her heartbeat as well. One of her hands was slowly rubbing the strands of his crest, she had to have known the effect it would create. Her other hand was roaming over the thicker plates of his torso, following the scales
downwards. He knew where she was going and part of him wanted to entertain the notion. The reasonable half of him couldn't allow it, a short moment of lust could result in long term repercussions that weren't worth it.

"This isn't fair," he said at last, grabbing her wrist gently and pulling her away. She looked confused, too swept up in the moment for logic to register. "I appreciate everything you've done for me but this can go no further. Neither of us in a stable state of mind right now. I will not replace one heartache with another, your friendship is more valuable to me than that. I should go."

He jumped down from the bed and went to put his tunic on. The confusing emotions from before were resurfacing, he couldn't believe what he had just been about to do. How had he slipped up so bad, how far had he fallen? The doctor's diagnosis had cut deep, he knew the signs from previous experience. He wanted desperately to make sense of it all but he had already pushed Tarina away, he couldn't lose Tomas too.

Cautiously he turned to look at her before leaving. He wasn't sure what compelled him to reach up and kiss her one final time. She didn't question his decision, rather she actually understood that he was trying to do the right thing for both of them.

"I'll be right here if you need me, you don't have to face anything alone," she whispered. He wanted to say something but words failed him so he left it at that.

His heart felt like a battleground where unknown forces were fighting for control over the rest of his body. The numbness was returning, a haze hung over every thought he tried to conjure up. He could hardly remember what had happened with Argus and Tomas. Later he would fall back on the memory of kissing Dr. Tomas to sustain him when he had nothing else to cling onto.

----

"This is terrible news," Admiral Thorn said while pacing in and out of the hologram's viewing range. Marcus Thorn watched her warily, the expression on his features mirrored her concern.

"It's not as bad as you're making it out to be, he'll recover eventually," Andronicus said dismissively.

"Time is not on our side," Marcus responded quietly.

"I don't like hearing things like this second-hand, why didn't you tell us sooner?" Sibyl paused long enough to stare at her youngest son until he looked away, "This unprofessional behaviour reflects poorly on all of us."

"Careful Sibyl, or our son may think reputation matters more than the mental well-being of his brother. Surely family is the real priority here," Marcus cautioned his wife. Sibyl had always struggled to maintain the proper balance between her career and her children, she relied heavily on Marcus' input to focus her back on the essentials.

"You're right," she said after a deep breath. "Primarch Victus said that Magnus had been missing some of their meetings. The ones he does show up for have caused him to question whether Magnus is truly ready to lead the operation. His exact words were: 'His body is there but his spirit is not.' And you're only now telling me that he hasn't seen his heir, er, son," she tried to avoid Marcus' harsh glare, "For several weeks? Whoever this woman is, it's clear that she is incredibly important to him. Losing her is having drastic, immediate consequences."

"Hasn't everyone gone through something like this before, he's hardly a unique case," Andronicus
said with annoyance, he was getting tired of everything being about his brother.

"I don't think you fully appreciate the gravity of this situation. Magnus is in command, he does not have the freedom to pursue personal vendettas," Marcus tried to explain.

"I get that but it's not like he's lost a leg or anything, he could still fight the same as he always has," Andronicus argued.

"When you were boys, you looked up to your brother with the utmost adoration. He could do no wrong in your eyes. But this blinded you to his true nature," Sibyl stopped her pacing, she looked to Marcus for reassurance before continuing on. He rubbed her back softly while she reflected on the past, "Magnus has always been prone to depression, he internalises his struggles so that nobody can see them. But I am his mother, we share a bond that is unbreakable. Ask yourself when was the last time you saw him get upset about anything."

"He did beat the shit out of a guy the other day, but that was a rare occurrence," Andronicus interjected.

"Emotion is a weakness, it costs lives," Sibyl continued. "We thought he had learned how to mitigate this problem when the cabal took him away. There was a period of three years after basic when we did not hear from him. One particular mission rattled him, it made him realise the value of having people in his life that cared about him. But he was reluctant to accept that notion, relying on others beyond a combat scenario meant he wasn't in complete control of his own destiny.

He holds people at a distance, follows and gives orders without question. I used to think that was a good attitude to have, keeping his personal and professional lives distinct and separate. However, I now question his lack of empathy as a result of me being too focused on myself when I should have been spending time nurturing him."

"Sibyl, we've been through this, you did the best you could," Marcus said softly behind her.

"You say that but the timing was all wrong, I still feel responsible. We had no idea that Magnus was a biotic. As far as he was concerned, life was too short but instead of seizing every opportunity that he was given, he did the opposite. He wanted to make the world a better place for everyone else, it was the least he could do. He thought of himself as a liability, taking personal responsibility to minimise the damage that he assumed he would create.

I'm sure I can take some of the blame here, I should never have let the doctors get close to him. Whenever I got sick, and for awhile that happened quite often, they would insist on testing and analysing him as well. So he grew up thinking he was sick when he was not. That's why he became detached and withdrawn, he didn't want others to suffer on his account.

I pushed him so hard, it was a terrible mistake. I wanted him to appreciate value of hard work, but that seems to be all that has sunk in. We often hide our emotions from public view, Magnus hides them even from himself. The idea that he is capable of falling in love brings me so much hope and joy, perhaps I didn't entirely let him down."

"So now that he no longer has that, we're somehow at risk of him going crazy? What are you trying to say, Mom?" Andronicus was a lot more concerned than he had been at the start of the conversation.

"I'm sure he has experience some of this before but it's different when there's a child involved. No doubt he is blaming himself for everything. I'm worried about his lack of self-preservation, that can have a trickle down effect for anyone he leads."
All I can discern from the type of missions the cabals undertake is that they are both physically and mentally demanding, the sort of thing Magnus thrives on. Without a challenge, he will stagnate and lapse back into bad habits. If he's not working, his mind wanders into a downward spiral. He won't ask for help, but that doesn't mean he doesn't need it.

I hate being so far away. I have already tried requesting that my ship be placed in the vanguard but it was denied, we will be coordinating with the majority of the fleets instead. When the assault begins, everyone needs to be at their best. Despite Magnus' stubbornness, you must find a way to get through to him before we arrive. You are the only one of us close enough to do anything."

"Why do I have to do everything? He's already shut me out. And don't think that I don't have my own problems to contend with," Andronicus was less than pleased, he was regretting asking for advice in the first place. He had expected his parents to tell him everything was fine, instead everything appeared far worse than he imagined it to be.

At that moment, the door opened and for a fleeting second, Andronicus thought Magnus had shown up to free him of his new burden. Unfortunately it was the small form of Dr. Tomas which emerged carrying a pile of datapads. She placed them on Magnus' desk before realising that she was intruding.

"Andronicus, what are you doing here? Have you seen Magnus recently? Actually since I have your attention, I can tell you the results of your psych evaluation. I can't clear you for combat duty though I suspect you already knew that. You're displaying the classic symptoms of PTSD. I'm sure this is the source of your recent insomnia. That's where I'd like to begin working on treatment, when you're up to it."

"Can we talk about this later? My parents are already worked up enough as it is," he said, trying to hurry out of the room.

"Oh, how rude of me," Tomas finally took notice of the holographic display. "Usually Magnus is holed up here alone, you said you haven't seen him?"

"I assumed he was visiting you," was Andronicus' response.

"He has been avoiding me since the evaluations began, which is ironic given that he ordered me to do them."

"Those orders came directly from the primarch," Sibyl clarified, she was about to say something else before she noticed the insignia on Tomas' uniform. "Everyone is to be assessed and amply prepared for longterm combat. This is the absolute worst time for Magnus to be going AWOL on us."

"It isn't like him," Tomas agreed. "I'll go find him. Stay here in case he comes back, Ando."

"Citizen, will you do me a favour?" Sibyl addressed Tomas specifically, "Remind my son that his family loves him very much. He has orders to carry out and much to do. Lives depend on him but what's most important is that takes care of himself. He has to find a reason to keep fighting. Say whatever you need to in order to pull him out of this pit of despair, please."

"I will, sir," Tomas gave her best Hierarchy salute before disappearing.

-----

Magnus watched patiently as his brother's knife tumbled end-over-end above him. The jagged edges indicated that it had been a ceremonial device at one time, a knife designed for carving
through tough leather and carapace. It was not a hunting implement but rather a murderous weapon. The metal was well-polished, he could make out his reflection in its flat surface. The dark eyes, the morbid frown, traces of cracks between his nose and cheeks. He looked like a long forgotten statue, torn apart by the elements. The blade stopped with the pointed end only millimeters away from his face, a biotic stasis field held it motionless in place. He grabbed the handle and threw it up again, repeating the motions absentely while daring the knife to strike each time.

The winds picked up but he could not feel their bite. He thought he heard the echo of footsteps climbing the stairs up to his precarious perch. Defiantly he remained on his back, continuing his dangerous game undeterred by the impending intrusion. In the distance he could make out a space battle between some fighters and a destroyer, he had been silently cheering for the destroyer to put an end to the charade. The incoming clouds obscured his view putting an end to his mild amusement.

"There you are, been looking everywhere," Dr. Tomas' sweet voice said between long gasps for air, the stairs had evidently exhausted her short legs.

The knife came down once more, the distraction cause a lapse in Magnus' focus. One edge cut deep into the palm of his outstretched hand, a refreshing reminder that he could still feel something. He wanted to examine the damage, to relish the incident, but he didn't want to draw Tomas' attention. He nudged the knife away with a biotic push, taking no notice of where it landed.

"You'll freeze to death out here," she said loudly over the howling wind.

"That's the idea," he whispered. He knew she was looking for a way to cheer him up but he wanted no part in it. She nearly tripped over the knife in the darkness while making her way over to him. Upon realising what it was, she chucked it over the edge of the balcony. Magnus was marginally disappointed to lose it.

"What's wrong and don't lie to me," her tone was severe, she was close enough that he could look into her eyes.

"A better question would be what's right. What's worth living for?"

"This is ridiculous, Magnus. You've been sulking for weeks. How much power does this girl wield over you?"

"I'm nothing, everything is meaningless. She helped me to see that. Leave me alone, Doc."

"She's wrong, you're important to a lot of people. We need you. I need you."

"That's too bad. Maybe Argus is right, we can't possibly win. We should be put out of our miseries, our time has come and gone. These are truly the end days."

"They don't have to be," she reached out to touch him but he pulled away, showing her his back instead. It was insulting gesture but he no longer cared what anyone thought of him.

"It's not the same for us, they can smell fear. They know when their leader is weak. The chain of command must be replaced, if they put Argus in my place then they are well within their rights to do so. There's nothing to be done about it," he explained in an alarmingly calm voice.

"You're just going to roll over and take it?" she was shocked by his indifference.

"What else can I do? I've taken bullets that hurt less than this, Doc. Everything is agony, it's unbearable. Knowing what could have been then losing it is far worse than never knowing in the
first place. She can do better, Marius deserves more. If this is all it takes to tear me apart, what good can I possibly do for them?"

"Are you really going to give up? What if she falls again, who will be there? This isn't you, you've risen above setbacks before."

"She gave me the will to overcome them. What's the point now? Without people to look after, I am nothing. Don't you see what a big waste of time life is?"

"Magnus, please, she'll come around if you give her the chance," she knelt beside him, shaking, afraid that he might do something rash.

"I can't wait forever. There's one last thing I can do for her that she can't refuse," he turned to look at Tomas, his bravado dissipated when he saw her expression.

"Don't be so quick to throw your life away," she was begging him, already connecting the dots.

"A man without anything else to lose is extremely dangerous. This is the best thing for everyone, before anyone else has to suffer for my mistakes."

"I can't stand to see you like this," tears were forming in the corners of her eyes.

"It will all be over soon. All I want is to fade away," his voice was barely a whisper.

"I can't allow that, I won't. You need a good doctor to make you better again, here I am," the compassion in her voice swayed him slightly.

He leaned over to put his head in her lap, no longer as confident as he had been when she arrived. The darkness was choking him, he could do nothing more to prevent it from closing in. The human rubbed the back of his neck, holding him tightly against her chest. He felt her tears fall onto his skin.

"Help me," the words slipped out as he was overcome with emotion.

She clutched at him hard like a mother holding a child. Her arms enveloped him, cradled his head, gave him shelter. He was losing his grip but Tomas was there to keep him from falling. It wouldn't change his decision, events had already been set in motion. If anything, he was saying goodbye to her in the only way that he could.
Chapter 35

The mood among the refugees at the monastery (or "survivors" as they were starting to call themselves) was getting more tense with each passing day. Morale was deteriorating rapidly as desperation began to set in. Supplies were scarce, the number of survivors that returned from gathering them was even scarcer. Tempers flared at the slightest provocation, the officers quibbled among themselves over petty issues in an attempt to re-establish a sense of order and proper hierarchy. The war's prolonged effects were taking their toll on experienced combatants and their families, leaving fear and anxiety in their wake, causing everyone's vigilance to waiver.

Information which came through the comm network continued to embellish the rather morbid picture beyond their isolated sanctuary. Every time they made contact with another resistance cell, it was systematically wiped out shortly afterwards. More of the enemy’s scout crafts were found patrolling the nearby peaks, many were responsible for the destruction of otherwise successful attempts to recover food, munitions, and basic medical supplies.

The blaring horn of Reaper destroyers filled the night skies as they went about their obliteration of less fortunate survivors, relentless in their pursuit to wipe out all life whether it be sentient or otherwise. They turians saw few of their own ships fighting back, no AA guns on the ground responded to the intruders. It was only a matter of time before the monastery itself was exposed to a direct assault though there was some debate over whether they would last long enough to see one.

If they were not careful, starvation and disease would triumph before the first shots could be fired. On more than one occasion, a resistance cell or distress beacon issued warnings of sleeper agents infiltrating their targets from within. They warned against trusting any unknown survivors, going as far as suggesting a denial of access to provisions until the stranger could prove they were not under the insidious influence of indoctrination. Suspicion and paranoia were no doubt the desired effect, the Reapers could control their enemies even when they could not find them. Not a single engagement had been fought on the turian's terms, they were losing the patience needed to play the long game.

An isolation approach was preferable but without enough resources or support, it didn't seem likely that anyone could hold out much longer. The fleets had promised over and over to relieve them of their dire predicament but gave no estimate as to when a specific operation would commence. Their status updates had been infrequent at best, having gone entirely silent once their small vanguard fleet had been dispatched through the relay.

The vanguard was supposed to be a precursor to the larger assault, it was to patrol the outskirts of the system and determine the most opportune time to strike. The lack of feedback since it's patrol began was disheartening, perhaps a sign that the fleets would not be able to return to the homeworld after all.

Another popular opinion proposed that information had come through but was not being delivered to the rest of the survivors. There was a fear that spies might exploit it or that it would add fuel to the divisive factions that were forming within the monastery.

Captain Magnus Thorn's support was dwindling, Argus' followers had become more bold and disruptive in their attempts to overthrow his officers. In most matters, Magnus left discretion up to others and did not personally intervene, spending much of his time alone and cut off from his men, commanding from afar. His reclusiveness was less than inspirational.

Argus himself begged his people to restrain themselves, advocating that they should disarm and
peacefully accept defeat. He wasn't interested in internal strife yet somehow he had managed to
arouse an angry, unruly mob, to insight them to lash out without pretense. The brig became so full
of troublemakers that more drastic and lethal measures were introduced to dissuade insubordinate
behaviour. No one disagreed with the new rules, less mouths to feed was always a positive
outcome. The intimidation tactic showed how much further Magnus' authority stretched that
Argus'. It also had the effect of calling the former's judgement into question.

Among the political unrest, the welfare of children taking refuge alongside their parents and
siblings was often forgotten. Unlike other areas of the monastery, the nursery remained crowded
and confined. The monks had been responsible for watching over the children, providing
instruction, and generally making sure they had what they needed. But they too were troubled by
recent events and needed to learn how to defend their home.

Combat training for the children was put on indefinite hold. Instead of target practice, they were
instructed in standard academia. They poured over datapads full of lectures on history, science,
mathematics, politics, nothing that mattered in their day-to-day life. The oncoming spring weather
did not lessen the blow for the kids who had very much enjoyed the freedom of playing in the
courtyard. Turians learned best by doing, not by sitting in stuffy classrooms all day. What they
really wanted was to escape, to play games, to get cuts and bruises on their knees. Not until Tarina
encouraged them to take up storytelling to pass the time was it possible for them to feel appreciated
and entertained again.

For her part, Tarina finally felt like she belonged somewhere, she had found a place among the
monks though she repeatedly declined their offers for spiritual enlightenment. She was eager to
teach as well as to comfort those most vulnerable. She knew how hard it could be for a child to
lose a loved one, far too many were being orphaned. They often blamed themselves, harbouring
lifelong resentment that would consume their every action.

Something about putting a smile on their faces managed to bring her peace, it gave her a reason to
keep going even though she had screwed up so much of her own life. While the other adults were
busy indulging their self-preservation instincts, Tarina offered charity and maternal affection.
Internally, it gave her great satisfaction to know that she had come full circle since the beginning of
the war.

"I'm so sorry for making you wait, Ms. Atreides," Meekari said when she entered the room. She
looked roughed up from her close quarters session, biotic burns had singed the edges of her tunic.
"I don't think I'm going to be very useful when the fighting starts."

"That's ok, I'll cover you," Tarina said warmly.

"Would you? Thank the Goddess, I'm so glad you're with us. The children are too, they respond
well to you, like you're one of them. Your stories have uplifted their spirits. Poor things have had
their faith shaken, it hardly seems fair. Speaking of, it's never too late for you to join the other
initiates. We could all use something to believe in during these uncertain days."

"Thanks but you know my attitude regarding religion. If it helps give you peace of mind, then
that's what works for you. The rest of us have to find our own way, I've been trying to find mine for
awhile now. But I know I'm getting close."

"If you ever want advice, you should go to Saidra. She's really good at helping people find
themselves. Some day I might have to tell you how she turned me away from a shallow existence.
Not tonight though, I'm too exhausted. Will you make sure the children go to bed at a normal
hour?"
"No problem. Good night, Meekari."

Tarina made the rounds with an overly energetic Marius in her arms, he was in no hurry to fall asleep and neither was anyone else. Screams awoke the few children who could drift off for short periods, their friends suffered from bad dreams and other night terrors. Sometimes the piercing cries came from adjoining sleeping quarters which housed their adult counterparts. Their subconscious minds conjured up a variety of horrors to taunt them, trying to make sense of the terror that came with uncertainty. Any day could be their last, any day they could lose someone important. The slightest sound reverberated through the ancient stone halls, making it difficult to truly lure the mind into a lucid state, further perpetuating a brutal cycle of insomnia for some of the residents.

"I'm scared," one child said.

"What if we get attacked when we're asleep?" said another.

"When's the last time anyone saw the commander?"

"Don't worry, he's still around planning for the big assault," Tarina lied affectionately.

Deep down she knew very well that she was the reason that Magnus was unable to function normally. She had no idea of what he did with his time, having gone to great lengths to avoid him while she sorted herself out. If she allowed herself to worry for him, she might get caught in the same trap of self-doubt. Still, the mention of his absence gnawed at her more than it ought to have.

"If you go to bed soon, then I'll come back in the morning to do a reading lesson instead of what's already scheduled. It could be the last chance for me to give a full lesson before my squad leaves, you wouldn't want to miss it," she urged them. There were a few complaints but in general the children preferred her laid back style over the rigid repetition that the monks favoured. Most at least pretended to get some sleep. "I know you're hiding in your fort, Atera. You have to play by the same rules as everyone else."

"But I don't want to," the little girl protested from the folds of blankets hanging over her side of the bed. Not all of the blankets belonged to her, Tarina wondered how she had accumulated so many unnoticed.

"Don't make me come in there."

"You can if you like but not Marius. I have a strict no-boys-allowed policy that must be enforced," Atera poked her head out to check that nobody else was trying to get in. After a slight pause, she went back into grab a crate of building blocks which she gave to Marius. She sat next to Tarina on the edge of the bed and looked deep in thought, "You like Captain Thorn very much."

It was a declaration, not a question. Tarina was caught off guard by the candid statement, "What makes you say that?"

"Because you look so sad when you're not around him. You're always watching the doorway, waiting for him to show up. And he's Marius' father, right? That has to count for something," the young turian said with wisdom beyond her years.

"You might be right though there are some things that only grown ups can understand," Tarina gave her a warning look, she didn't need to justify herself to a six year old.

Tarina watched while Marius arranged the blocks according to their size and shape, carefully laying them out before proceeding to create his own miniature rendition of the monastery. Magnus
would have been impressed with how meticulous and methodical his son conducted himself during play time. At almost six months old, Marius was already demonstrating the early signs of high intelligence that he had inherited from his father's side of the family.

Tarina couldn't imagine trying to raise an up and coming genius on her own, especially when he required everything in his life to adhere to strict routines. Marius' behaviour was so similar to his father's that it was almost uncanny. Little could be gained from keeping father and son apart, Tarina hoped their separation would remain temporary. Both of them were extremely important to her, she couldn't keep letting them down due to her own inadequacies. Every day without Magnus was making her realise the true value of family, she was running out of time to put things right.

Atera busied herself by going around the edges of the bed to secure and expand the meager borders of her blanket fortress. When she was satisfied, she went back to help Marius with his towers. He was too short to continually place the blocks where he wanted them though that hardly stopped him from trying to reach the top tier. Tarina was transfixed by how well the two children worked together, they coordinated with very little communication. They enjoyed each other's company and weren't shy of the fact. How simple life could be at their age.

A ping of jealousy swept over Tarina, she had not possessed the luxury of companionship when she had been a kid. She didn't have a loving mother or father who would watch fondly over her as she played with others. Marius and Atera had barely been introduced and yet they had already worked out the fundamentals which they shared in common, the fundamentals that allowed them to co-exist without second-guessing themselves.

Tarina couldn't help but think of Magnus, when they had first met she was sure that there was something special about him. But instead of telling him the truth, she had turned in on herself, bringing all the pain of the past to bear. She was disgusted with how selfish she had become, to how she had treated the one person who wanted to be her friend when no one else would put up with her bluster. Her own son was a better person than she had ever been.

The omnitool on her wrist lit up to remind her of an unread message that had came in earlier that day. Breaking news on the extranet had gone on about the resumption of transmissions to and from the Citadel. Not much was known about the station's communication interference other than that it had been caused by an internal source. The first reports of the story were vague, claiming that a terrorist attack had been thwarted. No actual casualty numbers had been released.

On the contrary, the speculative numbers were quite high to account for the overabundance of refugees who believed that the Citadel was the safest place in the known galaxy. The mood on the surviving worlds had already reached panicked levels, it was unlikely that the full details of the attack would ever be known. The direct consequences of the war had finally reached the Citadel, all bets were off.

The message had came from her mother. Tarina couldn't decide if she was disappointed that she had managed to survive the short-lived crisis. Her feelings were unusually mixed regarding the potential contents of the letter. One one hand, she couldn't care less and on the other she recognised that redemption was hard to come by. If she couldn't give her mother the courtesy to make amends, how could she expect Magnus to do the same for her some day? Was holding onto a grudge really worth it when any day could be her last?

Tentatively, she relented to reading the words, no harm came from the written word on its own:

"I know you don't like hearing from me so I will keep this brief. As you can tell, I'm still alive despite recent events. I did my part, I helped protect civilians while chaos erupted in the once peaceful cultural centre of our galaxy. I don't write this to illicit praise for supposedly heroic deeds,
anyone else with any sense would have done the same.

There was something that I saw during the fight that forever changed me and I have to share it with you. I saw the Spectre-agent Commander Shepard make her way through the battlefield, restoring order to the Citadel as she went. She had a fierce look of determination about her, I wish you could have seen it. She fought alongside elite squad-mates, comrades-in-arms that were more than mere soldiers. One was a turian, the other an asari, they fought with the same resolute poise that their leader fought with.

When I saw them, all guns blazing, I knew we could get through this trying time. Many doubt that we can win the war, they think all hope is lost. But it isn't true, don't listen to them. There is a chance that we can pull this off. If we put our past differences behind us, if we come together as one people. Victory is obtainable. Despite the horrible things we do to one another, or maybe in spite of them, we are worthy of survival.

What I did to you was abhorrent, I can't ask for your forgiveness. But you're all that I have now. The time for personal confrontations will be after the war so do what you must to survive. Keep fighting, Tarina. Never give up, never surrender. There will be better days ahead.

Eternal vigilance,
Kyrie Vestinus

PS: Devonas Atreides and I rarely saw eye to eye, you mustn't think that you were the cause of our falling out. I know it is impolite to speak for the dead, but you are every bit his daughter. Please do not torture yourself as he once did."

Tarina stared off blankly into space, she had forgotten how powerful a dose of optimism could be. New and old thoughts cluttered her head, she was unwilling to sort through them at such a late hour. A good night's rest was what she needed most but she didn't want to interfere with the jovial mood created by the children.

Atera had relented to allowing Marius to play within her domain. She was currently entertaining her guest by reading a story from one of her books, he was nodding off in her lap but she didn't seem to mind.

"I wonder what my sister would make of me adopting a brother for us. Do you think she'll come back from the field?" Atera asked in her usual matter-of-fact tone. She was worried but trying to pretend that she wasn't.

"I'm sure she will, if she's half as brave as you are then nothing will stop her from coming back. Word from the veterans is that you're the top marksman among all the children, is that true?"

"Yes," Atera sounded mildly offended that her skill was in question. Humbly she added, "Maybe the others just aren't very good."

"Hopefully you won't have to put your abilities to a real test any time soon. You came here with your sister, right? What of your parents?"

"I grew up on the Citadel. Mom is in the Diplomatic Corp and Dad is a Spectre," the young girl boasted, brimming with pride. The tell-tale white markings on her face mimicked the Spectre symbol which was the official colony marking for anyone born on the Citadel. The first part of her claim appeared to be valid though Tarina questioned the actual careers of her parents. Atera had gained notoriety for telling half-truths.
"I find it hard to believe that a diplomat could be married to a Spectre without it raising all sorts of complaints about a conflict of interest, that kind of story would fire up the exranet in a split second. You can be honest with me, I won't tell your secrets."

"It's true! Anyway, Mom isn't an ambassador or anything like that. She operates a top level security firm. Basically she's a really fancy kind of bodyguard that gets to meet and protect some of the most important people in the galaxy, everyone from Councillors to first contact envoys."

"How did you end up on Palaven when the war broke out?"

"Right, I was getting to that part," Atera said with an impatient sigh, as if accustomed to being interrupted by adults. "Veritas had received permission for some grant or scholarship or whatever her university calls it, she was coming here to accept it. Around the same time, Dad was deep undercover in Terminus space and Mom had a trade summit to cover. So obviously neither of them could take care of me and I got shuffled off with my big sister instead.

I didn't really want to leave the Citadel, I love the parks that surround the Presidium. You could even catch bugs sometimes, holographic ones but still. There were lots of great places to hide from the aliens, not that I mind them. This place is drab and boring in comparison.

Anyway, It was supposed to be a short trip. We were going to visit with grandparents and cousins that I hadn't met before but you know how crazy things got. Maybe we would have done those things if Veritas hadn't been so interested in meeting other scientists as soon as we got here."

"What kind of scientist is she?" Tarina asked with genuine curiosity. She had a strong appreciation for the sociopolitical disciplines.

"How should I know? Can't understand half of the big words she uses. I think it has to do with medicine or food research, maybe both. She's a lot older so we have very little in common, not much to talk about."

"But she's family so that's why you're worried, you don't want anything bad to happen her."

"Yeah. If she dies then I'll be alone. It's already weird being this far from home, away from Mom and Dad. I miss them heaps, Dad especially. He'd have long breaks between missions to spend time with me. Veritas and I might be different but she's trying her best to keep me safe. I hate that stupid lottery system, it's not very fair. Hardly anyone comes back."

"I know but we all have to do our part. This isn't how we'd normally run a base. But we make do with what we have. My turn is coming up soon. I'm more worried about what will happen to Marius than me. At any rate, he seems to like you very much."

"It'd be a lot easier to know what he likes if he could talk. When will he start speaking?"

"Whenever he's ready to, maybe he hasn't thought of anything yet."

"Well, I've talked too much," Atera stretched out her little arms and yawned, "Thanks for staying up with me."

"Alright, Atera. I'll see you in the morning then."

----

The morning session with the children went incredibly well, it gave Tarina the confidence that would help her have a long overdue conversation that she had been avoiding. Some of the kids had
gotten more out of it than others, she knew she had at least been successful in taking all of their minds off of whatever caused them pain. Some were laughing with joy while others had stopped crying for their lost parents. They had petitioned her to stay longer, to tell one more story that would transport their active imaginations away from the realities of conflict and loss.

Even turian children were owed a short period of innocence before they had to become soldiers constantly exposed to trauma of the mind, body, and spirit. Many were itching for revenge, all Tarina could do was remind them that there was more to living than seeking retribution. She was their teacher for the day but she felt as if she could learn more from them than the reverse, there was still much growing up left for her to do.

Young Atera and a few of her friends begged Tarina to promise to be their surrogate mother if the worst came to pass. Tarina was deeply humbled by the request and slightly embarrassed by their level of interest. Conveniently, she was able to decline on the grounds that her own mission with a salvage team was coming up soon. The mission was unlikely to go as smoothly as her morning lesson, she was already coming to terms with the possibility that she might become another casualty.

At some point, she had to ask Magnus to take care of Marius should it go wrong. Empowered by her young, adoring fans, she finally felt ready to say all the other things she had wanted to for the past couple of months. If she was going to deliver her potentially last words, then she may as well clear her conscience at the same time. Hadn't he always cautioned her about holding back?

Magnus had saved her more than once and in more ways than he would ever realise, he deserved to know how she really felt about him. She was worried that she had caused too much irreparable damage during the time she had set aside to figure herself out, he might not want to hear from her any more. What if he had lost patience or interest? Apprehension and nerves usually got the best of her, what if she only managed to make things worse by approaching him so late? When her mother had pulled a similar stunt, she hadn't be thrilled.

But their relationship had never been close, there was no love between Tarina and her mother. Magnus was unique, he had never given up and though he hadn't said as much, his feelings for her were abundantly clear. If those feelings were to change, she'd have herself to blame. She had to try to fix her mistakes, even if it meant tearing down every single wall to do it.

The higher the risk, the higher the reward, not that she needed it to be an outright victory. She wasn't expecting him to take her back like nothing had happened, though the more she lingered on that particular thought the harder it got to accept it. Every argument between them had been started as a result of her shortsighted assumptions.

Thoughts about how she could have done everything differently bombarded her as she made her way to Magnus' secluded office. In hindsight, the duel with Argus hadn't been about honour or reputation, combat was the one language that she understood fluently. They had been fighting for the right to court her, her actions afterwards left little room for misinterpretation. At the time, she had been too scared to admit that that she was at fault.

She tried to look at it from Magnus' point-of-view, instantly her heart sank to her boots. How could she have not seen it then? The rivalry between Argus and Magnus had been obvious but she assumed that it was a difference in ideological principles. She couldn't imagine that she'd be important enough for two men to fight over.

Tarina had loosely considered Argus to be a friend and nothing more, he listened to her in a way that Magnus couldn't. His infatuation made it difficult to acknowledge her weaknesses and shortcomings. He saw her as someone that needed mending and while she appreciated that, she
also respected the way Argus took her at face value.

Their pasts and family life, or lack of, were similar. Argus solved most of his problems with his flippant attitude or, when necessary, with his fists. That's where the common ground ended, he was more interested in himself than anyone else. His devoted followers were enamoured with his bold charisma in the same way that Magnus was attracted to Tarina.

Sometimes people needed someone else to believe in but when they were left on their own they would determine that no one could save them. Magnus had told her on multiple occasions that all of her answers lay within herself. She wondered what sort of answers he would have uncovered in her absence. Without the aid of a tinted visor, he might see her for the fraud she really was. That idea terrified her.

Shakily she raised her hand to knock on the door. She tried to find the words to express herself but it all sounded like sentimental, hippy nonsense, the sort of words used regularly in asari advertising. Everything from the heart sounded cliche, too prescriptive rather than genuine and full of meaning. She knew what she wanted to say but not how to say it.

"No more running, seize the moment," she muttered to herself. The door was open so she let herself in.

No one greeted her as she entered. The room was tidy and showed signs of being recently vacated. Late morning sunlight poured in from a solitary window. Everything looked relatively the same as the last time she had been there except for a few small changes which caught her attention. He wouldn't leave the room unlocked if he wasn't coming back. She figured she may as well look around while she waited for him to return.

In one corner was the QEC projector, silently displaying a real-time depiction of the galactic war effort. Areas that were contested were lit up as blue, lost worlds were red, unknown status was indicated in grey. The colour green was reserved for any system that hadn't yet been affected by the war. None of them were green. Grey was the most dominating colour.

They all knew things were bad, it was unnerving to see the actual statistics. Entire civilisations were fading away forever while each remaining homeworld struggled to delay their fate. Tarina was inclined to believe Argus' radical notion that they had already lost.

Half of Magnus' desk was covered in more detailed maps as well as speculative battle plans. Numbers were scrawled in the margins, probably relating to troop numbers, supplies, and calculations about their odds of success. Some maps were of Palaven, some were worlds that Tarina didn't recognise. Magnus' strategies and theorycrafting extended far into the future, proof that he hadn't written off the need to keep the resistance going. He could have been a state of denial, playing our various scenarios as a way to keep himself busy when there was nothing else to do but she liked to imagine that an experienced CO knew when to fallback and when to push on.

She noticed that there were a pile of reports from the few survivors that had returned to the monastery, curiously she flicked through them. Sitting next to the pile was a dossier listing the names of those that hadn't been sent out. Her name had been crossed out, the only one on the list to be disregarded without any additional explanation. A datapad on the other side of the desk lit up with an unread message, it was none of her business so she continued examining the room.

One corner of the room had been reserved for living space. There was just enough room for a full bedroll as well as a shelf above it that would have held personal belongings. No clothing or gear had been left within the area, not a single gun or uniform. The shelf was mostly bare aside from a handful of various objects: asari meditation beads, unburnt incense, an empty bottle of whiskey
from the planet Earth, a bottle of potent muscle relaxers that piqued Tarina's interest. Hadn't their last argument been about illegal stim use?

A picture frame showing a landscape shot of a waterfall deep within the jungles of Invictus flickered when her gaze fell on it. The image was relaxing, reassuring somehow. She picked it up to see if there were in any other images within the device. There was a very normal assortment of pictures: a family portrait with all of Thorns dressed up in their best formal attire (Andronicus in his school uniform given his age at the time) looking proud and prestigious with their family crest on a banner behind them, a silly shot of an overly cheerful Magnus and Viatrix celebrating with too many drinks after a successful mission, a recent picture of Andronicus and Marius playing together in the snow, and finally an amateur but sobering shot of the Citadel taken from space taken at the start of the war. Each of the pictures held immense sentimental value for Magnus, the lack of anything with Tarina in it made her wonder if she had gravely miscalculated her visit.

She greatly wished the room hadn't been so thoroughly cleaned, she wanted something of Magnus' to hold onto, preferably a tunic or something with a hint of his scent. Being in his room for the first time in months reminded her how much she had missed him. She was no longer sure that he intended to come back, too much of his stuff was missing.

The light from the datapad reader caught her attention again, cautiously she made her way over to read it. Upon realising who it was from, she took a seat and tried to calm her nerves once more before proceeding. The message had been left for her eyes only.

"Dear Tarina,

Before I met you, I had a fairly ordinary life. Well, as ordinary as it gets in a cabal. Suffice it to say, most of our missions were extremely dangerous endeavours. Every day was relatively the same, I followed and gave orders without much thought. It was a simple, boring life but it was comfortable, predictable, and full of purpose. The only emotion I understood thoroughly was fear. The fear of letting others down, of failing, of failure, of too much success.

Then you came along and turned it all upside down. You were beautiful, tenacious, vibrant. So full of life and energy, you made me realise how much I had missed in my stubborn pursuit for security. Emotions that I didn't even know the names of began to flood into my every being, like my heart had started to beat for the first time. I experienced the full spectrum from anxiety to sadness to elation to pure joy. Fear was among these feelings but it was a different kind, it was the fear of loss and rejection.

That day when I came looking for you and you put Marius in my arms, I'll never forget the way time stood still then. I've seen Dr. Tomas cry when she feels strongly about something, I wish we could purge ourselves as the humans do. But instead we are told to keep our private lives and emotions to ourselves. Easier said than done.

All I ever wanted was to protect you, to nurture our son and to continue the journey of life with someone who might understand me. Before you came to Invictus for your training, I was ready to give up and retire, to fade away into obscurity because I thought I had seen and done everything. I could never do that with the knowledge I have now.

I can't change your past though I would if I could. I can't make you see how important you really are though I've tried many times. What I can do for you is one thing. You have opportunities that I never had, I couldn't jeopardise that by allowing you to risk your life unnecessarily. I'm uncomfortably familiar with the reports, I know how low the survival rate is. This one time I can do something for you without you telling me that I can't.
I will be taking your place on the next squad. If I don't make it back, then you must take care of Marius as well as yourself. He needs you more than me. My time has come and gone, do not worry for me. I am a soldier of the Hierarchy, I have never been afraid to put my life on the line for a good cause. I've already thrown away my career to be here with you, trading one duty for another. You've been worth it.

My complete adoration for you has been a poorly kept secret, I apologise if I was too direct for your liking. I'm sorry that I couldn't be everything you needed. You've said a lot of things to me in our short time together, they were always honest though some were more cruel and gut wrenching than others.

I forgive you. I hope you find whatever it is you're looking for.

Give Marius all of my love and don't forget to open your heart once in awhile. Thank you for everything, truly. May the spirits guide you home.

Eternally yours,
Magnus

The letter had not been written in haste, rather it had been written by hand with a stylus instead of the usual digital input. Magnus' calligraphy was decadent, patient and deliberate, each stroke of every symbol had been carefully constructed without any errors. The detailed artfulness of the script made it difficult to react to the actual content that the words were meant to convey.

Tarina recalled her initial reaction to her mother's letter since it was the most recent comparison she could draw from, that one had left her feeling numb with a hint of optimism. In contrast, her immediate response to Magnus' letter was explosive, unquenchable frustration.

Everyone was trying so hard not to hurt her like she was too sensitive to be confronted directly. It infuriated her. Why hadn't he tried to say goodbye in person, was getting the last word in so important? But deep down she knew the answer was quite simple, she hadn't been an easy person to talk to for much of their relationship.

The futility of trying to be a better person, to make amends with one person who gave a damn about her was too much. Again she read over the bit about forgiveness, memorising the three words the way one learned a mantra. He had always been too good to her.

"I did find what I was looking for but it's too late," she whispered quietly in response to the next line. Her chest ached from the sudden realisation, both relieved and distressed by what should have been obvious all along.

She had taken his constant presence for granted. Throughout their separation, she knew he would be there if she needed him. Except that's not how things had actually turned out. It was like being caught on the battlefield without a weapon, she could not have planned for such a situation. Not only was she facing defeat but she had to face it alone. More than anything, she wanted to wake up from the current nightmare, clearly she had fallen asleep with anxious thoughts running through her head.

She slammed a fist into the desk, her talons dug deep into her palm to remind her that she was wide awake. The bareness of the room around her made more sense with the addition of the right context. She had wanted to be independent but now that she faced the prospect of losing the one she loved, she no longer cared about the stupid pride that was responsible for pushing him away. She couldn't face the world without him and in that moment realised that she needed him. The letter implied that he needed her as well but she could not be certain that was his meaning without
actually hearing it.

On top of all that, he had robbed her of the one chance to perform her duty. No one would question why he had done it. But she would be in his debt when she had been fully prepared to do her part for the greater good. His adoration had consistently interfered with her social development. If he really didn't make it back, people would begin to think Tarina wasn't capable of fighting her own battles or interested in fighting anyone else's. She hardly needed more reasons to be livid at him, his self-sacrifice would do more harm than he had intended.

"No, no, damn it, no!" she yelled, throwing the datapad across the room in her rage.

It was grossly unfair, she had come to reveal the depths of her soul. Instead, she had exposed herself to more heartache and the same level of pain that she had suffered through after her father's death. Anyone she ever cared about faded away, she was hopeless without them. She could already predict that Marius would do the same when he was old enough to be rid of her. She felt empty and hollow, she could not lose Magnus.

Desperation took hold of her, she would have to go to him. At the very least, he should know the truth before something fatal occurred. She could settle for that, maybe she had a chance to catch up with the squad if she set out right away. Her mind and heart fought over the idea, the heart won out so she bolted for the door with renewed vigour in her step.

At full speed she ran down the adjoining hallway, pure adrenaline made her oblivious to anyone unfortunate enough to be in her path. She rounded a corner and ran straight into Lieutenant Petra, Magnus' XO, who happened to be wearing full armour and a very displeased expression.

"Didn't see you there," Tarina said with a grunt as she picked herself back up. Petra made no effort to assist her.

"That's because you never see past your own holster, Atreides," the older woman scowled. "What's the meaning of this reckless behaviour?"

"I'm looking for Captain Thorn. He left recently with a squad that I was supposed to be part of," she explained hastily.

"They left early in the morning, you won't catch them now," Petra said coolly.

"Why would they do that, we weren't scheduled to move out for another week!"

"Some of the last squad made it back in the middle of the night. They told us that the rest of their team was in trouble and needed immediate reinforcements. Patrols are getting more numerous and aggressive, they couldn't evade all of them with their current numbers. Apparently they had a good haul to bring in but what good is it if they can't deliver it?

Thorn consulted with me and a few others, we agreed that it was best to send a team out right away. In addition to those reasons, we're conducting one of our first Thanix weapon tests today and we can't afford any distractions or attacks while we work out the most efficient mechanisms. It made sense for the captain to be involved directly to throw any enemy units in the area off the scent.

Without those supplies, we won't make it much longer. We barely have enough of what we need for this test but we can't risk trying the weapons out in a real combat scenario without knowing everything about them."

"This isn't fair!" Tarina protested, barely listening to the officer's practical assessment.
"That's not for you to decide," Petra pointed out. She was about to say more but one of her engineers interrupted.

"Sir, we're having trouble aligning the power matrix. The calculations are going to take too long if you want to start firing it up soon. We could try the Vakarian calibrations."

"Those are far too convoluted for our purposes." Petra argued back.

Tarina didn't stick around to hear more, she was practically disgusted with how little Petra seemed to care about her predicament. Her personal crisis was completely irrelevant to anyone beyond herself. She could have gone to Meekari for a comforting chat but she was too bewildered to know where to begin explaining the situation. She resigned herself to wandering aimlessly down the maze-like corridors, hoping for something to make sense again.

She was alone once more, it always seemed to happen that way. The halls were damp and cool, devoid of any traffic. She wanted to get lost, to have something else to work through other than the emotional turmoil that came with the sudden departure of the man she admired most. Her pace slowed, the lights became more sparse, she couldn't tell the difference between one intersection or another. Marius was safe enough in the nursery and she had no other responsibilities, what more was there to worry about?

"Tarina," a soft voice said behind her. She knew who it was by the gentleness of his voice. Despite that knowledge, she closed her eyes and pretended it was someone else. She had no patience for his games, especially when everything was collapsing around her.

"Go away, I want to be alone," she barked out without meeting his eyes. Those passive, blue eyes that seemed innocent and disarming.

"Is that what you really want? You're good at avoiding people but that doesn't mean you're entirely happy. You look like you need someone to talk to."

"Well, I don't. How did you find me anyway?"

"Believe it or not, I was actually looking for you. Heard about recent events, figured you could use a friend. It's none of my business but-"

"Then don't make it your business. This isn't a good time, Argus."

"We could skip the whole talking bit if you'd prefer."

"I'm not going to warn you again," Tarina bristled, still full of anger and bile.

"Or what? What will you do?" he taunted her. Seriousness was creeping back into his mannerisms, the calming facade fell apart as she suspected it would.

She didn't hesitate to swing a punch at him, aiming squarely for his jaw. He pulled back at the last second, resulting in little more than a glancing blow. Instinctively he pushed back with both hands, much of the force pressing into her injured shoulder. She cried out more with surprise than pain since he had managed to swiftly pin her to the wall in the same motion. Up close, his features were harsh and severe and she knew she had bitten off more than she could chew.

"It's more fun when they make it challenging," he sneered in her face.

Tarina lashed out fast, she had to go on offensive quickly if she wanted to get the upper hand. She dug her talons into his cheek, just below his left eye, gouging out a substantial chunk of carapace
and skin. The slash marks rapidly filled with dark blood, they were deep enough to leave permanent scars. Argus pulled back to shield himself from her second strike which was exactly what she wanted him to do.

They struggled against each other in earnest. Tarina was driven by fear and confusion, Argus by his desire for retaliation against his wounded vanity. Neither held back. She was agile but not strong enough to keep him off of her for long. He kept his approach defensive, trying to wear her down through attrition rather than with brute tactics, something he had likely picked up on from his duel with Magnus.

Tarina was able to hold her own for a brief time. As she fought back, she thought of Magnus and her son, she thought of her mother and the loss of her father, all the things that motivated her. Each blow was delivered purposely with an unbreakable focus, everything came pouring out of her. The longer it went on, the more aggressive Argus got as he tried to one up her.

Eventually they ended up on the ground, Argus atop a writhing Tarina. He had her arms locked behind her back, he glared as he waited for her surrender. There was nothing left for her to do but to yield. He leaned in close once she indicated she wanted to say something but she was bluffing and headbutted him for his trouble. He roared out and raised a fist to punish her for the cunning deception.

Something or perhaps someone came hurdling into the fray before he could react. Argus was picked up and slammed unexpectedly against the nearest wall. His body slumped into a heap, lifeless and quiet. Andronicus crouched over where he had been, panting from the effort of moving him. Tarina looked between their two faces, dazed and disoriented by what had just happened. Andronicus was unreadable as usual, Argus looked vacant and broken.

"Is he dead?" Tarina asked in a shaky voice.

"No," Andronicus confirmed after checking for a pulse in Argus' neck. "He's going to have a very long nap though."

"What a relief," she hardly needed more complications in her life to deal with. Tarina accepted Andronicus' proffered hand. She wanted to breakdown, the fight had been too intense and alarming. If Andronicus hadn't arrived, she could have been in serious danger. "Please, you can't tell Magnus about this. If he even makes it back.."

"I wouldn't dare worry him more than he already has been because of you," Andronicus assured her. His words came out scathingly, she didn't blame him. He softened slightly, "Are you hurt?"

"A few cuts and bruises but nothing I'd want to see the doc about. I wouldn't want to have to face an interrogation about where the injuries came from. Thanks for the rescue, I mean it." After a long pause, she sighed, "I've really screwed things up this time. How can I put it all right again?"

"You could start by telling my brother how you actually feel about him. He's been left in the dark for too long, Tarina. Do you love him or not?"

"I do and I was going to tell him today, I swear it," she said with exasperation.

"I believe you. Anyway, I'm supposed to look after you and keep you out of trouble while he's away. Is that going to be ok?"

"Why would you want to? I know how much you disapprove of me. You've never hid your opinion."
"That's true but I care about my brother and he cares about you. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices for the ones you love."

His words bit her hard, she knew he was right. Tired and drained from both physical and emotional trauma, she leaned against him for support. He was awkward about it initially, loosely putting one arm around her good shoulder. He didn't feel or smell the same as Magnus but that didn't matter. He consoled her despite his reservations. Maybe she could tell him all the things that she had wanted to say to Magnus, in case she didn't get to tell him herself.

They walked back upstairs, leaving Argus to enjoy his headache inducing slumber. Tarina wasn't entirely comfortable around Andronicus but he had proven to be heroic and loaded with good intentions. She wanted to talk to him, get to know him better. If he was going to be adamant about guarding her then there needed to be some mutual understanding.

The thought was interrupted as a high pitch scream greeted them once they arrived back at ground level. The sound had come from the direction of the nursery, where Marius had spent most of the day. Tarina cursed herself for being careless. She and Andronicus ran together to investigate the commotion.

"I'll go get Saidra, Petra's team will be too distracted to help," Andronicus said with a cool head. It was the exact same reaction that Magnus would have had.

Tarina hardly noticed him leaving her side, she was too scared about what sort of danger had befallen her son. She ran faster than she had after reading Magnus' letter. She couldn't lose them both in the same day.

The room was a mess with various bits of furniture strewn about, much of it either broken or rendered out of place. In the middle of the floor was the sprawled form of Meekari laying on her side, a small pool of coagulating blood had formed around her neck. Tarina could not tell at a glance if she was still alive. Standing over her victim was a crazed, possessed-looking Veritas Hellis, Atera's older sister and guardian as well as one of the three returning survivors that Petra had mentioned earlier.

Opposite of her, trapped helplessly against a corner, was a group of about eight frightened children. The older ones were shielding the younger ones by encircling them, Tarina could not catch a glimpse of Marius in the small crowd. Standing apart from the rest was a defiant Atera Hellis. At a little less than a metre tall, she was trying to coax her sister to let the others go.

Veritas did not brandish any weapons, the pistol on her hip had not been drawn. The swirling effect of biotic energy emanating from her hands was threatening enough. Tarina knew from experience that visible biotic fields were potent and deadly, she could not recognise which particular effect Veritas was utilising but it was a certainly a bad sign.

A day ago, the young scientist hadn't been biotic at all though solving that mystery was not nearly as important as finding a helpless Marius. The only way Tarina could get closer was to reveal herself, she would need to capitalise on the element of surprise while it still benefited her. Reluctantly, she watched the scene play out before her, waiting for the right moment to intervene.

"This has nothing to do with them, Veri. Why can't they leave?" Atera argued.

"Because you haven't agreed to come with me yet, I can't allow them to go until you do that," Veritas spoke in a voice that made her sound far away.

"They're just kids, they won't hurt anything!" Atera was getting angry, balling her fists up.
Tarina made her move, she launched herself at Veritas' back side. A highly fortified barrier shrugged off the impact but the distraction did cause Veritas to turn around. Instantly Veritas leapt straight up, she let go of the energy that had been gathering in her hands. An invisible wave pummelled Tarina into the nearest wall, a second and third wave restricted her movement. The attack came fast and sudden, it was just the opening the children needed to make a run for it.

By the time Tarina regained her footing, only Atera and Marius remained. She wanted to grab her son and run out with the others. Veritas lashed out at her again, this time using a stasis field to immobilise Tarina.

Satisfied that the interruption was over, she returned her attention to Atera who was trying to close the gap to Marius' vulnerable position. She pulled Atera back with another a field. When she was back within her grasp, she grabbed her sister physically by the throat.

In one swift motion, Atera was thrust up into the air. During the commotion, Atera had managed to grab the pistol from her sister's holster before it was too far out of reach. The gun was raised and pointed steadfastly at point-blank range, aimed directly at Veritas' face. Tension mounted, neither of the sisters said anything during their stalemate.

"You're not my sister, I'm not afraid of you," Atera said as she rubbed the trigger with her thumb.

"Atera, stop!" Tarina cried out, still unable to move. There was no doubt in her mind that Atera would shoot.

"We could have done this the easy way, Atera. I could have gotten you out of here before it was too late. We can start over if you give me the chance," Veritas pleaded, her eyes soft. She appeared normal, despite the biotic upgrades.

"Let her go," came Andronicus' stern voice. He had arrived with Saidra on his heels, his own sidearm was pointed at the back of Veritas' head. "If any bit of the real Veritas is left in you, you will not hurt your own kin."

"I can't, they won't let me," Veritas struggled, her grip remained ironclad against Atera. "All is lost."

"I'll do it, she's mine to kill," Atera said with bravado beyond her years. "If anyone is going to do it, it has to be me."

"No it doesn't!" Tarina argued. "Even if the enemy has control of her, she's all you have left. That's what they want, they want to isolate you so they can tear you down. Without loved ones, we are not worth saving. We will destroy ourselves, sparing the Reapers the trouble of conquering us. You can't let that happen."

"Stand down, Veritas," Andronicus said quietly. "Fight them off, you don't have to be their weapon."

Slowly, Veritas lowered Atera back to the ground. Atera immediately rushed over to Marius, picking the small boy up and putting herself between him and Veritas. Her back was turned, her weapon had been thrown aside. Tarina made her way over to the pair of them, touched by Atera's heroism.

Veritas could make no move against them since Saidra had isolated her from the group with her own biotic powers. The two of them battled against each other for a short while until Saidra managed to use her own stasis field.
Once that was done, Saidra had no more interest in the situation. She was too startled by Meekari’s injuries, too panicked and distraught to do anything rational. Meekari’s head was cradled in her arms, after a couple of moments her eyes opened and Saidra kissed her forehead profusely. No one else watched the pair of lovers, their eyes were all on Veritas.

"What do we do now?" Tarina asked once everything had calmed down, she had both of the children in her lap.

"I don't know," Andronicus said honestly. "She's certainly indoctrinated but to what level I can't discern. Put her in the brig for now, it's what Magnus would do with her. He can decide what to do next."

"Where has he gone? We can't function without his leadership," Saidra said. Meekari was leaning heavily against her.

"Left this morning with a squad," Tarina said quietly. She was surprised that Saidra hadn't been informed, there was small comfort in that.

"How many other potential indoctrinated agents might we have?" Saidra asked with frustration. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Keep preparing for the arrival of the fleets. Stay the course. Whatever we do though, we can't give into paranoia. This was a one-off incident, I'm sure of it," Andronicus assured her.

"Right, well that's me done for now. I'm going to get some rest. Come on, Atera, you can stay with us for awhile," Tarina had had her fill of adventure for one day, Atera had as well.

"I'll go with you," Andronicus said. "May as well take Magnus' quarters, you'll be safest there. Plus there's enough room for the three of you."

Tarina had mixed feelings about that but she couldn't argue against his logic.

---

"They're back! All of them!" a loud voice cried out in the hall.

Scepticism born from living off scraps over the previous two weeks tempered the excitement that the announcement should have aroused. Supplies from beyond the monastery had ran out completely, a low protein diet of locally grown vegetables was all that remained. Their source of meat had disappeared with the migrations of wildlife to more fertile valleys, not that over hunting hadn't played a crucial role in forcing their prey elsewhere.

The genuine fear of disease brought on with malnutrition that had worried the survivors in earlier months was proving to be well-founded. No one was fit for combat duty, it was folly to hope for a dramatic reversal of fortune. If the crier was correct then it might mean they would have to share what little they had with soldiers who would have been better off dying elsewhere.

The voice called out again, an apprehensive though slightly reluctant group began to clear a path for their returning brethren. Tarina watched them warily with Marius on one side of her and Atera on the other. Marius had as much to complain about as anyone else but Atera managed to keep him occupied and sufficiently distracted, a strong friendship was developing between the two.

One by one, the entire company that Magnus had led into the valley began to emerge through the doorway. Their arms and backs were laden with bounty of their efforts, the supplies were an encouraging sign that immediately dissipate the tension associated with their arrival. Even the
company that had gone out before them, the same group that Atera's sister had been with, had managed to make it back in one piece.

Tarina's anxiety grew as she looked for a familiar face, she could not see their illustrious leader among them. How cruel it would have been for everyone to return without him. She waited and waited, panic growing exponentially with each second. He should have been at the front of the procession, it wasn't like him to fall behind. The tail end of the group was full of injured persons that could not walk without the assistance of their comrades and still there was no sign of Magnus.

Forcefully, Tarina made her way to the back, pushing aside anyone in her way, "Where is Captain Thorn? Where's my.." she paused, almost uttering 'husband' by accident, ".Where's Magnus?" Marius clutched at his mother's neck, sensing her fear. Atera for her part had remained with Andronicus who was helping direct the traffic.

Finally Tarina caught sight of someone being hauled on a stretcher between two men. Her heart stopped, she recognised him instantly. His armour had been stripped, his eyes were closed. He lay as still and lifeless as a statue, she was almost convinced that he was dead until she saw a deep, shallow breath. Thick blankets had been draped over him, deep blood stains seeped through the section covering his legs and feet. Seeing him in such a state paralysed her, he was barely holding on.

"What happened? What's wrong with him?" she asked one of the men carrying him in a shaky voice.

"Get out the way, he needs immediate medical attention," the man barked at her.

"I can see the obvious!" she snapped back at him, ignoring his commands while she tried to get closer.

"He took a frag grenade to the leg," the other man offered more helpfully. It didn't explain why he was out cold unless he had suffered immense blood loss as a result of his injuries. That thought was enough to make Tarina believe that he was indeed facing a fatal situation.

"Where's the chief medical officer?"

"In the infirmary, already prepping for surgery. Hurry!"

A number of patients had already been sent ahead for treatment but none of them were in as bad of a condition as Magnus. Tarina followed the pair of men closely, they ignored her presence as well as everyone else in the surgery. Even Dr. Tomas failed to spot her at first.

Tarina’s gaze remained transfixed on Magnus as he was moved about, his face was unnaturally pale and she was sure that it would have been cold to the touch. He didn't have much time left. Never had she felt so helpless.

"Keep fighting, Sarge. You can't go out like this," she whispered quietly. Marius heard her and started to cry while struggling in her tight grip. All he knew was that something was wrong with his father and his mother was upset beyond measure.

"I need a comprehensive status report. Now!" Dr. Tomas demanded as she personally checked for Magnus' vitals.

"Shrapnel wound in the left leg," the first, more simple of the two men said again.

"And?" Tomas prompted him.
She didn't stop what she was doing to hear more, gently she lay a hand against Magnus' forehead to check his temperature. Almost immediately she was forced to pull it away, the iciness having pierced her skin. A worried expression crossed her face, she leaned downed in a rather intimate fashion to place her cheek where her hand had been, raising her omnitool as she did so to calculate the exact thermal reading.

Tarina seethed with momentary jealousy, annoyed that the other woman could get so close to him. She knew the pair were friends but she was suddenly nervous about how much closer they might have gotten during her absence.

"It rained the whole way back, he had a fever and a slight cold a few days ago. Might be advanced hyperthermia," one of the returning soldiers suggested.

"There's definitely some sort of infection in his system. Nurse, undo those soiled bandages so I can get a better look at what we're dealing with here. Everyone else, clear out. I'll get to other patients later, the commander is top priority. We need to get every single piece of metal out of there, this will be a very time consuming process," Tomas gave her orders and everyone jumped to. Everyone except Tarina who was waiting apprehensively for someone to update her on the situation. "What are you doing here, Tarina?"

"Is he going to be ok?"

"I can't say with any certainty yet. His leg is a mess, there's an unknown virus in his system, too much blood has been lost already. The prognosis is bad, really bad. If they could have staunch the bleeding better.. damn it. Just give me some time, this is what I do best. Magnus is important, I won't let a few battle wounds take him from us. You hear that, Magnus? Stay with us!"

"Can I at least stay and watch you work, please?"

"Alright, fine. But this area needs to remain clean, sterile, and quiet," Tomas looked up at a fussy Marius, "Why don't you put him down for a bit? This kind of work requires intense concentration and skill, one mistake and its all over."

Tomas set about her delicate task, slowly and carefully cutting through muscle and ligament tissue with her tools, dropping bits and pieces of shrapnel in a small pan nearby. Tarina stood behind Magnus with her hands resting firmly on his shoulders, looking down at him so that she would be the first person he saw if he regained consciousness. Occasionally the doctor looked up at her with a reassuring glance.

The silent procedure left Tarina feeling guilty for causing such distress against the man she loved. If he had chosen to confide in Tomas instead of her, then he would have been better off for it. The human was affectionate and reliable, something Tarina knew she wasn't.

-----

"Don't wander off, Tarina. Stay close or you'll get lost."

But that was exactly what Tarina wanted to do, she had no interest in her father's instructions and less interest than that in actually meeting her mother who was coming from off world to visit them. She was more preoccupied with perusing the wares of the various shops that lined each side of the crowded starport's walls. Using her casual browsing as cover, she was actually looking for the right opportunity to get separated from her father. Despite his concerns, he was more nervous about reuniting with Tarina's mother than in ensuring the safety of his daughter and it wasn't long before they wandered off in different directions.
A toy store full of handheld robotic machinations caught the child's undivided attention. The figures were highly collectable, holographic displays danced between them outlining their unique features and load outs for the game they were designed to be played with. Tarina pressed her face as close to the glass window as she could to get a better look.

Without pretext, a loud siren began to wail outside the terminal building. It rang out with the telltale notes that denoted an imminent invasion, delivering a warning to persons in the area to take refugee post haste. Panicked travellers stampeded for the exits leaving Tarina on her own, nobody had time to assist an estranged child.

"Dad!" she called out, wishing she hadn't been so intent on getting so far away from him. No response came.

The ceiling above crumbled and buckled under the pressure of whatever was happening on the upper story, raining dust all over the emptied corridor. Bodies and debris piled up, the deafening siren drowned out any other noise.

"Tarina, over here!" Devonas Atreides yelled out from seemingly no where. He was too far away. Laser fire began to pour through the holes in the roof, chaos and destruction ensued. Tarina tried to follow the sound of his voice but there were too many obstacles for her small legs.

"Dad? Dad!" she continued to shout.

She couldn't see through the ash that was filling the vacant corridors, the bodies were hidden quickly underneath a coat of grey. Around every corner she expected to find him, his pensive green eyes would show condemnation but also relief to see her again.

Someone touched her forearm, she spun around to look up at the stranger. But the person looking at her was below, looking up at her instead with a pair of warm, brown, and somehow familiar eyes.

"Magnus?" she whispered his name, not sure of how she knew it.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you but it didn't seem like you were having a very good dream," he said gently.

His grip on her remained though it was more faint and weak than it should have been. His breathing was raspy, he coughed heavily in between laboured breaths. The sound of his discomfort brought Tarina back to reality. Though greatly infirmed, he still managed to worry more about her than himself. How typical, she thought to herself.

"How long have I been out?" he asked.

"About two days," She touched his hand and interlocked her fingers with his, grateful that he was alert.

"And how long have you been curled up in that uncomfortable chair, waiting on me?"

"About two days," she repeated.

"Oh, Tarina," he frowned. "Why? Surely you have better things to do."

"Why is everyone so surprised by me wanting to be by your side?" she asked bitterly. "If you want me to go, just say so."
"That isn't what I meant. Stay, please. I'm sure we have much to catch up on."

"How are you feeling?" she asked after a long pause. Carefully she stood over him, resting one hand against his chest while the other remained in his. Colour had returned to his face though his fever hadn't broken entirely.

"Like I was ran over by a tank," he said honestly, trying to give a half smile after coughing again. He squeezed her hand to let her know that he was exaggerating.

"You didn't expect to make it back," she stated. It was her greatest fear, she needed confirmation that he hadn't wandered off on a suicide mission on her behalf.

"Not like this," He cleverly dodged the accusation, knowing full well what she was seeking.

"Did you mean what you said about forgiving me?" she shifted tact, looking deep into his eyes for a more honest answer.

"Absolutely," he reached up to touch her cheek, rubbing his thumb along the bit of her fringe that stuck out from the side. She closed her eyes, savouring in his gentleness. "Why? What's wrong? What have you done now?"

"Nothing, I'm just not ready to lose you yet," she admitted.

"Then that makes two of us," he gave her a hard look.

He looked like he wanted to say more on the subject of their separation, too much had gone unanswered. But there was no need to do so, a lot could be said without words. Nonetheless, he found a way to shower her with the utmost praise, "Tarina, you are the physical embodiment of my fighting spirit, nothing will change that."

"If that's true, then why did you go out there in the first place? I could have gone and left Marius with you."

"If I had to do it over, I'd make the same choice once more. It worked out in the end, right?"

"You got lucky," she argued, annoyed that he was so quick to jump to self-sacrifice whenever it suited him.

"What I find intriguing is that the last time I had a near fatal encounter you weren't nearly this upset about it," he reminded her of the battle on the strange alien ship from months back.

"That was different. It was scary to realise for the first time that our fates were intertwined. All I wanted was to be independent and self-sufficient, to make something of myself. This time I know that's impossible without something important."

"And what's that?"

Tarina took a deep breath, she steeled herself for the words that should have came out long ago, "I love you, Sarge."

Magnus was briefly taken aback, utterly surprised. He laughed with relief, unable to restrain his humour, "I must have severely bumped my head before coming here. Could you say that again, maybe a bit louder? Lost some hearing too, I'm sure you understand."

"Don't give me a hard time when I'm trying to be nice," Tarina grimaced mockingly, playfully
punching his shoulder. A great burden had been lifted.

"I must have fallen asleep, this has to be a dream," he continued with a wide grin, cradling her chin with the tips of his talons. "You've never been this nice to me before."

"Maybe you'll have to start getting used to it."

"I'd like that, very much," his tone shifted to serious and affectionate, "And you need to learn how to relax, Tarina. There will be plenty of battles, we must enjoy the moments in between."

"If you hadn't noticed, I'm a very slow learner," she leaned in close, angling to give him a kiss on the forehead.

"That's a notion I can disprove," he said astutely, allowing her to get closer.

"How?"

In response, he indulged her in a way she was not anticipating. Instead of the traditional kiss, he pulled her mouth close to his. It was awkward at first, finding the appropriate angle that suited both of them. But she allowed him to kiss her as the humans did in the vids, it was far more personal, more passionate and memorable than any other kiss she had ever experienced.

Afterwards they rubbed foreheads and looked longingly at one another, neither had anything else to say. Everything worth mentioning was out in the open, the two of them were committed to the future that they would continue to witness together. A few more light touches cemented their union.

"I'm never going to let you down again, I swear," Tarina said, her arms wrapped around his cowl, her cheek resting against his shoulder. He had one arm wrapped tightly around the small of her back, holding her as he had done many times previously.

"You don't have to make any promises."

"Yes, I do. The Festival of the Ancestors is coming up. It's an auspicious time of year for conducting ceremonies. That is, if you wanted to.."

"I'd rather wait until after the war," he assured her, having already contemplated the discussion that they were having.

"What if one of us doesn't make it?"

"Then all the more reason to make the most of what time we have left," he said with a small kiss to her forehead.

Feeling the safest and happiest she had ever been, Tarina drifted back to sleep alongside Magnus. Everything was finally right with the world.
Chapter 36

Magnus stood alone in a darkened study with only the ambient light from a holoprojector to keep him company. He was surrounded by floating, holographic images depicting the men and women of Primarch Victus' war council, some he recognised but most he didn't. Whoever was speaking had their image enlarged while the rest waited silently for their turn to give updates and opinions. The day of reckoning was nearly upon them, the first phase of the operation was waiting for their meeting to end so that it could continue final preparations for the assault.

Several months of planning had been packed into a rather short visual demonstration which Admiral Sibyl Thorn, considered to be the chief architect of the plan, had walked them patiently through multiple times, answering questions and alleviating concerns as she did so. The first phase comprised of Victus' flagship Valour being "stranded" in the Trebia System as a result of engine failure, a clever ruse that would lure the enemy away long enough for the the rest of the fleets to jump in at the relay to begin their orbital deployments.

The Valour was to be assisted by the dreadnoughts Endurance and Reliant though the Admiral expressed many times her desire to add her ship to the rescue fleet. Victus calmly reminded her that she was responsible for overseeing the entire orbital side of the operation and could not risk losing the Intrepid should something go wrong. Her ships would be relieving pressure on the ground, delivering their transports full of turian and krogan soldiers, and ultimately taking the homeworld back. New marshalling grounds would be assembled on Menae once they were sure the system was under their control.

Of all the officers summoned to the debriefing, Magnus held the lowest rank but because of his familial ties he was given more respect than he personally thought he deserved. It was humbling, the primarch thought highly of his capabilities and boasted of his accomplishments, going so far as to publically acknowledge him as the commanding officer of the Invictus Cabal. In times past, such information would not have been so freely shared.

While they had other teams on the ground, very few of them could react in real-time as the unit Magnus was in command of. He just hoped they hadn't been given the false impression that he was leading an entire team of powerful biotics. A ragtag group from various backgrounds could still hold their own if required and it seemed that was exactly what their orders were going to be.

The meeting had droned on for hours, much too long for someone with an injured leg to keep up with. Magnus had opted for not showing his dependence on a walking aide, he was already self-conscious enough given the famous faces in the council. Instead he relied heavily on his biotic focus to maintain his balance, hiding his hands behind his back whenever he needed to readjust the invisible field at his feet. Everyone took their time in sounding important, they all wanted to be on the record when history looked back at their success.

"May I remind you all of what we're fighting for, most of us have been in space waiting for the right moment to strike but we haven't had things nearly as rough as those that stayed behind back home," Victus was beginning to wrap things up. "This isn't just about making a statement or proving that we can win. Good people have suffered because they were taken unaware by this invasion through no fault of their own. Many of those good people are gone now, turned into our enemies. Those that remain are holding strong, like Captain Thorn and his team.

When our fleets reveal themselves, the enemy will not hesitate to retaliate. They want to crush us and it won't take them long to realise that we have baited them into an offensive. We'll be stirring up a varren's lair down there, survivors on the ground will be targeted against if they haven't been
already. Speed is of the essence, we have to get our people out of danger. They've waited too long for our help. We can't let them down when we are this close. There can be no hesitation or delays, we must keep pushing until Palaven is ours again.

Once this meeting is concluded, the Valour will go dark as we get into position. We only get one shot to make this work but I will not leave you with doubts in your minds. If any of our allies or partners that cannot directly partake in the battle have anything useful to contribute, now would be a good time to mention it.”

The sights and smells of various rituals around the monastery threatened to distract Magnus from the very serious task of paying attention. The Festival of the Ancestors was a joyous time of year when the spirits of the dead congregated together to take a brief break from their ongoing treacherous journey between worlds. Living souls were meant to entertain and encourage the spirits to find their way again, regardless of their individual religious or cultural leanings. The asari monks acknowledged this and did not interfere with the occasion.

Specific ceremonial practices varied but were mostly centred around telling stories, traditional dances, offerings, and formal acknowledgments of unions such as pacts or promises that would be ironclad due to the observing ancestors. It was particularly good timing that year as the high morale boost would be welcomed in the coming days. For one night, everyone could forget about the war and make peace with their loved ones. Magnus was disappointed that he wasn't mobile enough to do too much, though he had heard that his heroic deeds at saving his men from a grenade blast using a strange, indescribable "magic" was making the rounds.

Only a handful of officers remained to discuss the potential for reinforcement and long term goals with the primarch, the rest had disappeared to address their respective subordinates to get phase two underway. One was a well-dressed, older gentleman with a rich accent and facial features that weren't too dissimilar from Magnus'. It was extremely uncommon for turians to be successful in the corporate sector. As a species, they preferred direct action over unscrupulous trade dealings, but this particular one had managed to make a name for himself as an influential businessman after retiring from the military.

"Unfortunately, Noveria cannot provide much in the terms of manpower or raw firepower for this fight," Head Administrator Lorik Qui'in, leader of the research planet Noveria said once he was acknowledged. Hastily he clarified, "However, I have dug up some untested prototypes that might be of some assistance in the future.

As you can imagine, research and development have dried up since the attempted coup on the Citadel. There's little profit to be made from an impending apocalypse. A lot of unfinished work has been left behind by scientists more interested in saving their own lives than those of anyone else. Self-preservation is a dull sword, as the humans say.

I can't vouch for the safety of any of this experimental equipment, but something has to be better than nothing. In addition, seeing as my guards have little to do here, they will be sent out to man a fleet to ensure the security of our supply lines throughout the galaxy.

If I find anything else of value, you'll be the first to reap the benefits. So to speak."

"Speaking of the Citadel, what are the chances that the asari or salarians will be able to provide reinforcements? Surely they realise that the sooner we get our own affairs in order, the sooner we can sort theirs out," Victus turned his attention to Councillor Sparatus who wasn't wearing his usual stuffy councillor robes but rather a suit of highly upgraded combat armour.

"If only they had your wisdom, sir," Sparatus sighed, running a nervous hand over the back of his
"If the humans hadn't lost most of their fleets at Arcturus, we'd be in a much better position right now. It's a great irony, the aggressive younger species would have been more reliable than the older, docile ones. The others will be of no use to us, we are on our own once again.

The salarians are dealing with an erupting civil war on Sur'Kesh, completely oblivious to the larger threat. The asari, I can't put my talon on what is distracting Councillor Tevos lately but something has caused her to withdraw from any meaningful discussions. She's hiding something, I just know it. The Alliance hasn't nominated a new human councillor yet.

I wish I had gotten to that no-good bastard Udina before Shepard, he undid all of our hard work with his stupid lust for power. We're still picking up the pieces, as if trying to maintain order wasn't impossible enough. No progress can be made while everyone retreats to their own kind for the illusion of comfort. Even if we had listened to the warnings, I doubt things would be much different. I'd rather be fighting on the front lines where things actually matter."

Politics is for those not brave enough to take up arms, it makes you see the bad in everyone. Maybe we should consider leaving the Council once all is said and done. Let them figure things out for themselves while we take care of our own. If you can't beat them..

"Please don't give into despair, Councillor, we need you there to represent the entire Hierarchy. For the moment, we must strive to work in solidarity with the others. Lead through example. When they falter, they must see that you are still standing tall, willing to hold your ground. Even if it seems meaningless, actions that we take now will be reflected later. But these are problems that can solved another time," Victus reassured Sparatus who reciprocated with a salute before disappearing. Another turian, one Magnus vaguely recalled meeting, was addressed directly, "What are the odds that I can get a status report on the Normandy's current whereabouts?"

"Not very high, sir. You know I can't provide that kind of information over open comms, we still haven't figured out how the Reapers are tracking our movements. Doesn't matter where we go, they're sure to follow. Currently we're looking into a quarian distress call from within the Veil. With any luck, we'll have Reaper patrols chasing us to the opposite end of the galaxy. That'll be a few less for you to worry about. The commander sends her regards. Take down a couple of destroyers for us will you?"

"Will do. Tell her we'll be ready when the Alliance calls on us to head to Earth. In the mean time, don't do anything too crazy out there, Vakarian. We still have a long fight ahead of us.

Now I think that's everything. My men are anxious to get going so I'll have to leave things there. Any further discussion should be directed to the Intrepid from here onwards. Good luck everyone, may the spirits guide your hand," Victus gave one final salute before disappearing from the display. The last remaining image belonged to Sibyl Thorn.

"Magnus," she said softly with a touch of worry creeping into her voice, "Things will be too intense in the beginning for me to talk to you. When it starts to calm down a bit, I want you, Andronicus, and Marius on my ship. There's no reason for our family to remain split up any more. I want everyone where I can find them."

"What about Tarina, she's practically family," Magnus reminded her.

"Sure, she can come to. I'll find room somehow. Once we get rid of the krogan that have been clogging up every vacant space on this vessel, then we can go back to operating as normal.

I'm sorry it has taken this long to put everything into place. Given the sanctions on Tuchanka, it has been difficult to find enough ships to carry our unlikely allies, equipping them has been equally
challenging. The orbital deployment is going to be an around the clock endeavour of loading and unloading transport carriers, I'm not really looking forward to it. Going to spend more time shifting manpower than firing the rail gun.

I'll do what I can to raise the priority of your extraction but you could be forced to hold out for weeks or months depending on how it all goes. Look after your brother and avoid any heroics, we'll be together soon. And if not, don't let them take you alive. Give them everything you've got. Thorn out."

The final holographic image phased out of the thin air, leaving Magnus completely shrouded in darkness. He wasn't worried about his mother, he knew she'd excel in a highly volatile situation. What he was more worried about was his own ability to lead on a bad leg. It wouldn't be a practical issue if he stuck to long range fighting but it was still a valid concern, a visible weakness wasn't going to inspire his men to perform better.

"Does she ever smile?" Tarina's familiar voice came from the shadows behind him.

"Very rarely," Magnus admitted. His eyes were still adjusting to the lack of illumination, unable to see her properly.

"She's not going to give me a second glance."

"We can worry about that later."

Magnus turned slowly to face Tarina properly but in doing so he triggered the built up pressure that had accumulated in his sore leg. His mind was tired from harnessing the biotic energy needed to keep himself oriented for a prolonged period. His body had had enough. He took one step forward and instantly regretted it.

Like a dam releasing a torrent, the pain rushed over him. Doubling over to catch his breath, he tried searching for the gnarled walking stick that Andronicus had found on one of his recent outings. His knees buckled but didn't hit the ground, Tarina had closed the small gap between them. She propped him up with her sturdy arms laced under his. Her strength was remarkable.

"I'd be lost without you," he said under his breath.

He didn't enjoy relying on anyone for his basic physical needs, least of all her. But he wasn't about to complain about the assistance she offered, she had hardly left his side since he had returned to the monastery. It was what the two of them needed most, lots of quality time together. They weren't likely to see any down time in the near future.

"It's all those medals weighing you down," she joked, referring to his formal attire. She hefted him back to a stable, upright position. "You've nearly caught up to your mother."

"It's not a competition. Besides, I had to wear my best. People remember what you look like more often than what you actually say or do," he explained. He finally found the blighted crutch resting against a wall, biotically pulling it so that he could relieve Tarina of her burden. She didn't go too far, still hovering over him just in case. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Missed most of it, got caught up talking with Andronicus and Dr. Tomas when I dropped off Marius. Is it me or are the two of them spending a lot of time together? Hardly see one without the other most days," Tarina said, normally not one to care about gossiping.

"If there's something going on between those two then neither has made me privy to it," Magnus said with a soft laugh. His little brother was all grown up, he couldn't think of anyone better suited
to put up with his strange antics. The thought showed how far he had come in his own admiration for the doctor and her species, maybe he had done some growing up too. "I think he's getting a lot better, he's mingling with people and coming up with ideas again. He had a team out this week digging tunnels and setting up ambush points for the upcoming battle, took complete initiative. The doc is doing him good, as is looking after Marius on a regular basis. He's almost back to normal. I thought being stuck here with us in the middle of no where would worsen his condition but it has had the opposite effect."

"I get the feeling that everyone in your family is quick to bounce back when things get bad," Tarina sad with a hint of wonder in her voice. It was clear that she didn't yet consider herself to be a part of that family despite whatever Magnus said to the contrary.

"You have to. You can't just wait for things to get better on their own," Magnus pointed out. They both leaned against the desk for a moment while Tarina let his words sink in. Things that were obvious to him seemed like epiphanies to her. He knew she'd understand when she had more experience to draw from in the future but it was hard sometimes to watch her struggle with concepts that he had taken for granted.

He undid the buttons along the elaborate jacket, eager to put the uniform back into storage. It was a symbolic gesture that demonstrated there was work to be done, the uniform would be put on again when the job was finished. Tarina helped him with one hand carefully cradling the assortment of medals that clung to the right side. Her own uniform lacked any such ornamentation.

"So how did you gather a large collection of medals and commendations? It's not typical for someone of your rank to be this highly decorated," Tarina said with mild astonishment as she tried to identify his honours.

"Cabal missions are extremely dangerous, they require us to go beyond normal expectations if we are to survive," Magnus explained. "I've lived through more than my fair share of them. A couple of these are based on pure luck, being in the right place at the right time. Others were earned because I helped squad-mates achieve even higher honours.

Take this one for example. My first commendation came as a result of getting through a horrendous ordeal along with Lieutenant Viatrix and two others. It was her first mission in command, she was fresh from officer training and eager to make a name for herself. I'll spare you the gritty details but it was supposed to be a simple infiltration mission that got progressively more complicated as it went on.

We were stranded on a refinery station run by Eclipse mercs though we didn't initially know that they were using it as a base. Had to fight our way through the entire station, taking out every single hostile along the way since our cover was blown. They were clever and it took several days to bypass their traps. Viatrix has always been a brash, daredevil sort of personality and that time was no different. Her boldness ultimately worked to our advantage but I wouldn't ever want to use those tactics again.

At one point, our section was cut off by blastdoors because the next section between us and central control had an open airlock. We should have been trapped. Viatrix didn't hesitate to go EV without a suit to manually close the mechanism from the outside. She was crazy, your kind of crazy actually. After that we cleaned up and found more valuable intel in the computer systems than we expected.

I have to wonder if Viatrix lied on the mission report, she broke all sorts of rules and took a lot of unnecessary risks. But she got us out of there in one piece. Next thing I knew they were pinning
medals on us and handing out promotions. We became friends after that, with our similar skill sets it was natural.

You won't like hearing it but you remind me a lot of Viatrix when she was your age. She started from nothing, didn't care much for established authority, and wasn't afraid to tell anyone what she thought.

The Primarch didn't refer to me as acting CO, that's as good as confirmation as any that she's gone. Anyway, I shouldn't dwell on the past. We have a battle to get ready for."

Tarina didn't have any further interest in hearing about other female friends that Magnus might have had. She was grateful for the shift in conversation, "Are you going to need help preparing for your speech tonight?"

"Oh yes, I'm going to need lots of help," he said with a sly grin. One hand was resting firmly on the small of her back while the other was draped over one of hers, "I've already written it out but I'll need some decent rest beforehand. Maybe some additional inspiration would be in order? Just to, you know, get the mood right. A good rallying speech requires an overabundance of confidence and.. passion."

"Then I think it's time we put you to bed, Sarge," she said suggestively before leaning in to kiss his neck.

After an invigorating session with Tarina, Magnus was able to give the speech that he wanted:

"This isn’t the usual way of doings but nothing so far has been normal about this fight. I know you’d rather be out there on the front lines doing your part rather than cooped up here biding your time. Our time is coming so be ready.

You deserve to know what we’re up against, the odds couldn’t be worse. These men and women beside you are more than fellow soldiers, they are your family. Sure we have differences of opinion from time to time but what family doesn’t? It has always been our duty to follow orders, do as we’re told. More than that, we must defend those that we love.

This world is our home, it has birthed the legends of the past. We are fighting to preserve that legacy, to show that we are worthy of survival. The days ahead will be difficult and unsettling, loved ones will perish. We can’t be afraid to lose what matters most. Honour the fallen and vengeance will be yours.

The fleets are relying on us to get the job done, we must hold out. If it all goes wrong then may you bring glory to your ancestors. And if victory does not elude us, then we will march on to save the rest of the galaxy. So cherish this moment, right now, for there is no respite beyond this point.

For Palaven, for the Hierarchy!"

---

"I've lost visual contact with Hellis," Tiresius' panting voice came over the radio.

He had been ghosting Veritas Hellis' movements since she had been inconspicuously "freed" from the brig. The afternoon had been carefully spent weaving in and out of a lush forest covered by a low-hanging mist. They were the perfect conditions for hiding, a blessing and a curse for the experienced tracker. Overhead, enemy scout ships zipped past, their numbers increasing as the day wore on.
Nobody quite knew where Hellis would go, the hope was that she'd go straight back to her new masters with information on the monastery's whereabouts. Nauto Tiresius was responsible for ensuring that she reached her destination as well as assessing how bad the threat really was. If it came down to it, he was supposed to single-handedly bait the enemy back up the mountainside along a predetermined route littered with traps, ambush sites, and several choke points designed to whittle their numbers down. It was a tall order for one man but he had insisted on going alone in case he was overwhelmed.

"We got up to the ravine, but she didn't climb up the narrows. She literally went straight up like some kind of geth hopper, clinging to sheer cliff face without any equipment and scrambling over the ledge in a matter of seconds. No organic being should have stamina levels that high. I couldn't believe it, it's going to take me a lot longer to catch up."

"She's more far gone than we anticipated. Damn it, can you still figure out where she went?" Magnus replied.

"Yeah, she couldn't have gotten too far. I've mapped every square metre of this area, her shortcut won't get her over the glacial remains any faster. Wish the weather would clear up, going to be some storms tonight."

"Careful that you keep your distance, Tiresius. She's not a timid scientist any more. If she catches onto you, nothing is going to stop her biotics from tearing you apart," Magnus cautioned him. He wasn't entirely comfortable with sending a non-biotic after someone who was off the scales in terms of power.

"I know, sir. Will check in again when I regain contact. Beginning the ascent now. Tiresius out."

"Is this really a good idea, trusting an indoctrinated agent to do our bidding? If, well when, Atera finds out what you've done, you're going to have a lot to answer for," Tarina warned Magnus for the millionth time since sending Tiresius out on his mission. The pair of them were mostly alone, the occasional officer coming by to confirm that their men had been inspected fully, engineers commenting on how far the Thanix cannon would reach, quartermasters assuring the commander that they were well-stocked. No one was asking any questions, they knew what was expected of them.

"Not the best idea I've ever had but that's why Tiresius is out there as a backup. If she doesn't deliver the goods then at least we'll have some eyes on the enemy. He's the best scout we have, he won't get caught. Atera will understand, this is a better alternative then slowly watching Veritas degenerate into an incurable state of madness. We may as well get some use out of her," Magnus said in a calculated tone.

He was eyeing maps and reports, mentally checking off each item of business that would give them the best odds for survival. His experience as a prominent strategist told him that the best laid plans were often the worst, he could only accommodate for the variables that were both knowable and controllable. The logical side of him revelled in the puzzle-solving process, locking out his emotional side from thinking about ethical implications.

Besides being busy with more pragmatic matters, Magnus was confident in Atera's ability to assert herself. She had demonstrated that she possessed good instincts and quick decision making abilities. He had already decided to take her under his wing if it came down to it.

"Still doesn't feel right," Tarina was less than convinced by his response. Her opinion was cut off by a sudden outburst on the comms.
"Spirits!" Tiresius yelped.

"What's wrong?" Magnus demanded.

"You're going to have to see this for yourself, sending some live video feed from my current position. The entire valley is teeming with enemy units, can't see the ground anywhere. Or any foliage, must have destroyed everything to make room for their landing platforms. Looks like mostly Marauders judging by the weaponry but there’s a handful of batarian and human husks as well. Not sure what those bug looking things are, rachni maybe? At a rough guess, there’s at least three legions-worth with more landing on the hills opposite. They have to know we're here."

The video played out on Magnus' omnitool, both he and Tarina fell silent as the terrible display panned over monstrous half-organic, half-synthetic machinations and their abhorrent footsoldiers. They had seen plenty of Reapers since the start of the war but too see such a high concentration positioned only a couple of kilometres away had an immediate impact on their resolve. Luckily nobody else was around to see the truth of what they were up against.

Magnus was determined to keep most of the fighting in the field, away from the monastery's tough exterior. The monastery could take a fair amount of punishment but it was more likely to turn into a massive death trap with no way out. Their supply numbers would give them three weeks of breathing room. By his estimates, half of a single legion was going to be a struggle.

"What can we possibly do against that many?" Tarina asked with a sharp intake of breath.

"Same thing we were planning to do originally. Lure them to us once our field squads are in position. Keep them occupied at sniping range. They won't be getting any vehicles up here, terrestrial or aerial. Infantry will be easy while we hold the high ground."

"Yeah but they don't need to eat or sleep. They can easily replenish their numbers. Attrition will get us in the end," she pointed out.

"The odds were stacked against on Invictus and yet we prevailed."

"They were throwing sticks and stones at us then!"

"This is the same principle, they just got a lot more sticks and stones this time around. We don't have a choice. If this is to become our last stand, then so be it. There is no greater glory to be had."

"They've taken the bait," Tiresius interrupted them. "Hellis disappeared but they're beginning to organise into marching parties, recalling patrols on their perimetre, and forming what I think is their equivalent of a rally. The first wave is mobilising in our direction."

"Make sure they keep going the way we want them to. Argus' team is already at the primary ambush point. You're to report back here right away, Tiresius. Things are about to get nasty and your life is far more valuable than those who volunteered to go in first. They've got nothing left to lose and if the drunked boasting is to believed, Argus can wrestle a whole destroyer on his own."

"Acknowledged, sir. Wouldn’t want to be out here too long anyway."

---

"Look at all those falling stars," Tarina said in awe, her head tilted back to watch the clearing twilight sky.

Recent storms had passed through, the smell of rain remained in the air. She stood beside Magnus
on a small balcony overlooking the monastery's front gate. The distant sound of ricocheting bullets and laser accurate-weaponry echoed in a ghostly way, visually they could see the forest on fire and nothing else. Memories of the rapid destruction that took place in Cipritine came back. There were nearly as many ships overhead as there had been back then, the closest ones were enemy troop transports buzzing around the harrowing silhouette of a Sovereign-class destroyer. Further into the sky, soaring high above the Reaper vessels were the blazing streaks of light which marked the arrival of the Hierarchy's calvary.

"It's a beautiful sight when an entire fleet hits the atmosphere at the same time. Absolutely stunning, almost takes your breath away," Magnus agreed, leaning heavily against his rifle for support. No need to waste energy before the fight truly began.

"When this is over, what are you looking forward to most?" she asked.

"I'd like to visit the Citadel, it's been a lifelong dream to to walk around the Presidium at least once. See where all the big decisions are made. We could turn it into a family vacation. Marius would like the change of scenery and we could help Atera find her missing parents."

"I could confront my mother face-to-face. Nothing that happens here will ever scare me as much as that," Tarina sounded like she had put a lot of thought into it which was mildly surprising.

"Are you scared?" Magnus asked her honestly.

"Not as much as I was on Invictus. There's more at stake now. I'm not fighting for myself any more," she looked over at him, offering a steady arm for him to balance against. He could hear her heart racing through the thick confines of her armour, she wasn't telling the full truth about her fear. "Marius is everything. If one of us falls, the other must be there for him. Forget honour and glory. What we do here is for our son."

"Agreed," Magnus took a few minutes to decide on what to say next. His mind was preparing for the fight, trying to clear away the thoughts that prevented him from focusing on the task at hand. The fires were getting closer, Tarina rested her head against his chest. They had made so many promises, he was trying to remember them all. Ultimately she was right, they couldn't take any risks that endangered Marius. "This could be our last chance to speak before everything goes to hell."

"Keep it brief. I'm not big on sentimentality," she said, nuzzling him a bit. Standing close together seemed to convey everything well enough so he said nothing.

---

Elsewhere in the tower harbouring the kinetic shield generator, Dr. Tomas and her team were setting up the new hospital facilities. A skeletal crew led by Lieutenant Petra was stationed to guard them, it was all they could afford to protect the point. Magnus and his primary squad would be across the way in the other tower which was the operation centre for the Thanix cannon. Ideally the Reapers wouldn't notice there was a shield over the structure until they got too close. It wouldn't do much to prevent a direct Thanix blast from a destroyer but they were well insulated from stray aerial fire.

The children and those not cleared for combat duty were situated on the middle levels. Only those with missing limbs or acute cases were exempt, not that there were many of them. Children under ten were to remain under Meekari's watchful gaze, they weren't thrilled about the arrangement. Atera managed to marshall her fellow civilians into filling the gaps within Petra's squad. They weren't given any additional ammo but each of them had a gun with one full magazine at their
“Is this everything?” Andronicus asked the doctor. He had been sent to run cable lines between the two towers and to make sure that Marius was being looked after. He couldn’t pass up the chance to have a short chat with Tomas along the way.

“Yes, we have ample supplies. Plenty of painkillers and antibiotics have been dispensed to those in need already. The medigel is being kept in reserve for emergencies. Where will you be when the action starts?”

“I’ll be all over the place, running comms between units and keeping Magnus updated. You look distracted, something on your mind, Sera?” he asked worriedly.

“On Eden Prime, I was given the so-called privilege of observing Nihlus Kryik’s autopsy. You should have seen how bad the wound was, they could barely make out which tissue was which. Shot at point-blank range to the back of the neck by someone considered to be a friend and colleague. It makes you think a bit. The Reapers are clearly evil and have to be stopped but are we really much better?”

“I’m sure Saren was partially indoctrinated by then, hardly one of us any more. But I get your point. We’re also capable of good deeds. Even if this is the end, we’ll go out on the moral high ground, guarantee it,” he gently squeezed her shoulder for extra assurance.

“Thanks, I needed to hear that. I know this isn’t the moment for a philosophical quandary. Be careful, Ando,” she smiled and kissed his cheek. He gave her a questioning glance, “For luck.”

“If you get nervous about anything I’ll drop what I’m doing to check on you. No questions asked,” he gave her a cheeky salute before departing.

---

Tarina and Magnus watched as the remnants of the field team came into view, Argus' lumbering form at the forefront of the retreat. The intimate mood was effectively spoiled when everyone on the radio began asking about their next series of orders. Andronicus was on the comms telling them to be patient while he passed on reports to the fleet. The men were restless, they had been waiting for nearly six hours to take their first shots.

"I didn't ask for them to fallback," Magnus sighed so only Tarina could hear. "Nor did I ask for your presence, Saidra."

"I was trying not to interrupt," the quiet asari said upon approach. "My squad is in charge of arming explosives throughout the interior, in case we need to blow this ancient building to pieces. Since we're going to be in the thick of the ground fighting, I thought we might enlist the aide of someone who knows a thing or two about close-quarters fighting."

"Me?" Tarina asked excitedly.

"Yes, and you have a good grasp of biotics. We don't know what we're going to find down there but we could use your expertise. I've seen you spar, you're tenacious and smart. My biotics haven't seen combat in several decades, I've even left Meekari out because of her lack of skill. It pains me to be separated from her but she can do good elsewhere by watching over the vulnerable."

"No way. You won't risk your partner's life but you'll not think twice to put Tarina in harm's way? That's utterly selfish," Magnus protested angrily, forgetting the pain in his leg as he strode over to get in the asari's face.
"Be reasonable-" Saidra began.

"It's ok, she's right that I'd be more useful on the ground than up here with the snipers. You know how tough I am, Sarge. Who else are you going to rely on? Argus and his team are in complete disarray, they'll need a proper leader. We'll stick to guarding the asari while they plant the charges then be back before you know it," Tarina pleaded. She was anxious to get into the fight rather than watching it from above.

"You don't have to do this."

"I can't wait for things to get better on their own, right? This is my fight too. You'll have a lot to deal with, I'd just get bored here," she continued to argue. He knew there was no dissuading her once her mind was made up.

"Alright, but no heroics," he relented. She reached over to touch his cheek in thanks. They briefly pressed their foreheads together while he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist. He squeezed her so tight that his armour left scrape marks against hers. They said goodbye without actually saying it.

"You're embarrassing me, Sarge," she laughed slightly, a rare sound for her. He didn't let go.

"I think it's sweet," Saidra offered.

"Come back, you hear?" he said in the voice he reserved for giving orders.

"I will. See you on the other side."
Chapter 37

The morning sky that greeted the sleepless soldiers was alight with activity, both hostile and friendly, from every possible vantage point. Fighter squadrons escorted their payloads to their designated rendezvous sites, bombers eliminated anti-air guns tucked away in secret locations, nimble Reaper scouts struggled to contend with their more heavily-armed turian counterparts. A constant stream of bright lights and deafening sound played out overhead.

The unique crescent shape of turian fighters skimmed the skyline, their sleek hulls making them appear to go faster than they actually were. Sunlight danced around them, encircling each craft with a shimmering halo. Reinforcements were in-bound, the ground forces could see them with their own eyes.

For a short moment, they could cheer on the fleet's return, temporarily ignoring the arduous task that lay ahead. Mustering a good, old-fashioned siege defense didn't seem nearly as glamorous as exchanging laser fire with the enemy high above the clouds.

Pounding tremors marked the presence of a solitary destroyer, throwing the men off their feet. Its harrowing silhouette blotted out the aerial fight, an intimidating threat which dispelled any further romantic notions about war. The Reaper's blaring horn rang out along with its deadly laser. It was trying to carve out a spot for its massive chassis to settle down among the steep peaks, leaving permanent marks against the once peaceful landscape.

At last, the battle had arrived.

The snipers had plenty to shoot at, both inside their stronghold and out. Turrets lit up on far away targets and runners kept the ammo flowing. There was little conversation on the upper levels, each soldier had to concentrate on the perimeter, making sure that there no surprises. On the ground, small squads hid behind scraps of cover, waiting to set up crossfires and clean house. The overall goal was containment, keeping the enemy at bay in the open courtyard, far away from the towers, turrets, and sniper support.

Tarina and half a dozen asari monks were down in the thick of it, floating between groups of bogged down soldiers making sure they had covering fire when needed and helping them expand secured points. Barricades were hastily erected wherever they went, arranged in such a way as to keep the enemy funneled towards the main killing field. Snipers did the bulk of the heavy lifting, the ground teams were meant to split up the enemy and confuse them.

Small remnants of the field squads came barreling through one of the control points just behind a group of human husks, almost getting shot in the process. The routed soldiers had taken so long to show themselves that no one expected them to return. Tarina’s squad had heard that Nauto Tiresius was missing which is why they had graciously allowed the new arrivals to push them out of a safe spot, in case he might be among them.

"You're a fucking idiot, Argus! What in the name of the spirits are you doing back here?" Tarina barked at their leader.

Shots rang out, ricocheting off the barricade that had been put back into place at the last second. Saidra threw her arms out and cast a biotic barrier around the large group. Argus' men were hiding their faces behind their helmets, ashamed for following him but relieved that they were still alive.

"We were overwhelmed," Argus replied innocently.
"You're supposed to be holding the line while we get ready."

"If you are waiting for the Reapers to stick to a predetermined schedule then you're going to be sorely disappointed," he said before leaning over to let off a few shots of his own. The moaning noises of formerly living husks subsided.

"Damn it, why is it so hard for you to do the right thing? I can't work out your angle, Triton," she used his first name not because she wanted to be familiar but because she was actually interested in hearing what he had to say.

"You had your chance to understand but you chose to go with Mr. Rulebook instead. Your loss, kid," he shrugged. The asari moved over to the other side of their corner, shakily holding our their Tempest SMGs while they waited for the next wave. One of the turians that came back with Argus showed them how to hold them more steadily. "We're here now so are you going to let us fight with you or what? How about you stop playing commander's pet and show us what you're really made of."

"I'll show you the butt end of my gun if you try running from a fight again," she raised her elbow as if to make good on the promise and he flinched, causing his men to roar with laughter. Absently, he rubbed the scar on his cheek. "Hold this point, I'm going to check on some of the other squads. Simple enough for you?"

"Yeah, whatever," he said dismissively, positioning his team around the foyer so that everyone had their own reliable cover.

"Tarina, how are things going down there?" Magnus checked in on the comm. Her anger dissipated upon hearing his voice.

"Fine, we're ok. Argus made it back but I put him to work."

"Good girl. Got a cohort of marauders coming through the tunnels now, they're bottled up so shouldn't be too difficult. When it gets too hot you can pull out any time you want, we have a good view up here," he reminded her.

"Thanks for the update," she said honestly. She had a suspicion that he was going to be checking in frequently, an extra concern she could do without.

The marauders were no trouble but each skirmish was adding up, there was little rest to be had after a firefight was resolved. Fatigue and minor casualties were taking their toll. The ground team had to aggressively defend what little was theirs. The already nervous asari wanted to get on with their original task. Tempers were beginning to flare over minor issues. Tarina was simply tired of sitting in the same spot for several hours.

"Will you tell your overbearing boyfriend to keep his armour on?!" Argus snapped over Tarina's private frequency. "We're doing the best we can. None of my team has been relieved though I know other squads are getting rotated out. If we stay here any longer, we're going to run out of bullets."

Tarina was wedged between two pillars across the hall, he didn't have to use the radio to speak to her which she found highly irritating. Hurriedly she laid into a couple of husks that had grabbed one of the monks from a gap in the nearest barricade. Her AT-12 Raider banged loudly as it snipped their heads clean off of their bodies.

Before she could respond, a grenade rolled down the hallway. Saidra used a singularity to suck up the offending batarian husk along with its explosive, raining its fleshy remains down outside of
"What's he saying now?" Magnus yelled in her radio, clearly Argus had figured out how to block his direct line to the commander.

"I haven't got time to deal with this!" Tarina shouted back at both of them. "And please, stop checking in every five minutes, I'll tell you if I need anything."

"The next wave is taking awhile, maybe now we can spread and put those charges in place," Saidra said calmly. Everyone agreed that they had to take advantage of the small window of opportunity.

"Alright, change of plans. Argus, your guys are going to protect the asari on this level. Grab some ammo if you want and keep the husks busy while they setup. I'll take three biotics with me down to the lower levels, we'll regroup when that's all done. Split your team up Saidra and let's get moving," Tarina took charge of the situation.

Slowly the two teams backed away from the hotzone, shooting anything that moved. Tarina's squad was much smaller than Argus' but she didn't know what else to do with his men. The asari followed her orders without question, Argus' squad wasn't likely to keep listening to him given how openly they had aired their frustrations. With any luck, there would be too many other distractions for the Reapers to notice either of the demolition teams.

---

The lower levels were unnervingly quiet compared to the chaos top side. Tarina was glad to be following the asari, they knew where every hidden entrance led. The monks wore homemade jumpsuits that kept their movements quiet, sacrificing protection for mobility. Unsure of what lay ahead, they opted to move in the dark with dim balls of biotic energy held in their free hands. The group made sure to avoid the wider paths that connected with the freshly dug tunnel network, it was important that they kept their profile low.

A strange hissing sound came from around the corner, possibly a broken pipe letting out steam. As they got closer, it sounded more like a raspy voice followed by an unsettling scratching noise, something close to the ground was slithering towards them. Tarina silently halted the party, pushing ahead of Saidra who had taken point.

She motioned for the asari to stay back while she scouted around the next bend. The metallic smell of fresh blood greeted her but she took no chances. Raising her shotgun, she took a deep breath then rounded the corner with her weapon poised and ready to take out whatever new horror awaited her.

Crawling along the ground on all fours was the disfigured form of Tiresius. Several small bugs swarmed over his body making it difficult to identify the severity of his injuries. Tarina bent over him and shooed the bugs by waving her gun over them. They skittered harmlessly away, their clicking noises causing her to shiver uncontrollably. The galaxy was full of wondrous organisms but bugs were always inherently gross and creepy.

With a better view she could make out the damage. Tiresius' arms were charred, gouge marks laden his chest piece, blood was spilling out from his legs. She had never seen something so terrible, he was barely holding it together.

"Tiresius? Can you hear me?" she called out. No response. Gently she raised his body into a sitting position. "Nauto?"
"Tarina? I can't see anything," he coughed.

"Yes, it's me. Thank the spirits you're still alive," she said. Tarina raised her omnitool so that he had some light, he squinted several times while he got used to it. One of the asari handed her a pack of medigel to spread on his arms. "What happened to you?"

"Rachni down here. Don't know where they came from. Were already inside when I came back. Didn't go through our tunnels. Must have missed them moving in. Shouldn't go this way," he explained in short bursts, wheezing between sentences.

"He's going to slow us down," Saidra cautioned.

"We can't leave him. One of us could take him back.." one of the monks, Rexana, tried to find a compromise.

"We'll be fighting rachni capable of burning straight through armour, we can't risk being a man, er, woman, down now," Tarina said decisively. "I'll carry him, help me unbuckle his gear. If you all can go without heavy armour then so can he."

"I won't forget this, Atreides," Tiresius looked up at her with gratitude in his eyes. "I'm not sure how much longer I can go on though."

"You can thank me when this is over, just hang in there."

"It's been more than five minutes this time, what's your status now?" Magnus chimed in over the comm.

"We found Tiresius but he's in bad shape. Really bad. Moving to the first charge point, might have a slight bug problem. Nothing to worry about."

"What?" he asked incredulously, the sound of his Valiant echoed over the radio.

"Sorry, sir, you're breaking up," Tarina fibbed before disabling his frequency.

"Here they come, barriers up!" Saidra warned the squad.

Tarina tried to recall what little she had learned about the rachni from school. They had once been an advanced, space-faring civilisation before the krogan had supposedly eradicated them. Like most bugs, their bodies were segmented into three distinct sections: head, thorax, and abdomen. Almost every picture of them looked terrifying but there was a high degree of intelligence and regalness to their behaviour that separated them from mere animals.

Three deadly creatures came into view, their magnificent qualities were not readily apparent. The hallway was not broad enough to allow the monstrous bugs to walk side-by-side, rather two were forced to crawl along opposing walls while one moved more rapidly on the ground. Stalk-like structures atop their heads shot out a fiery substance at their would-be victims, an acrid smell accompanied the bursts. Since they lacked any sort of opposable limbs, their strange eye-stalks served as organic weaponry, complete with pinpoint precision and a range that allowed the rachni husks to shoot from relative safety.

Little cover left the squad exposed, the asari barriers melted quickly under the intense pressure of the acidic chemicals. Millions of smaller swarmers like the ones that had tried to devour Tiresius came spewing out from underneath their larger counterparts. Egg sacks hung from the thorax section of each bug, likely containing more of the minor nuisances.
"We're almost where we need to be," Tarina shouted loudly though her squad-mates were closely huddled around her. "If we can get to that side-room behind them, then one of us can start setting up while the rest defend. We're taking too long as it is, the other team can't wait forever on us."

"This can't be all of them," Tiresius cautioned.

"Laine, go ahead and prepare to charge in. Rexana, light them up. I'll throw a barrier out to contain what's left. Now!" Saidra issued her orders to her sisters, they nodded and did as they were told.

Rexana threw her arms out wide, unleashing a bright beam of light which struck the rachni in the middle of its body. The rachni began to shake and convulse, producing more swarvers from its erupting sacks but halting its own advance. Traces of blue light began to shine through the creature's grotesque carapace, showing off its inner mechanisms. Tarina couldn't tell if she was looking at machine wiring or a nervous system, perhaps a mixture of both. The light got brighter and brighter from within, vaporising the newly hatched swarvers as it spread.

"Is that a warp effect?" Tarina asked tentatively.

"No, dark channel," Saidra explained. "Similar in principle. It doesn't require direct line of sight to cast. The effect itself is weak, it's used as a controlling power. Once the victim is consumed, the field will bounce to the next living organism and repeat the process. This will continue over and over until the field can no longer sustain itself."

"Sounds risky, can it be controlled? It won't try to take one of us out will it?"

"It's not a commonly known power and accidents can happen, yes. Stay back until the explosion."

"What exp-"

Laine blinked out of existence, she had been standing between Saidra and Rexana. When the asari reappeared, a loud banging noise reverberated throughout the tight corridor. Bits of carapace, antennae, chitin limbs, and lots of dead swarvers went flying outwards from where she had landed. Her jumpsuit was stained heavily by acid and other indescribable liquids.

As promised, Saidra placed a visible, domed barrier over Laine and what was left of her opponents. Two rachni remained though they were substantially debilitated by Laine's charge attack. Tarina took care of them with her shotgun, temporarily leaving Tiresius behind so that she could get close.

"You said there were more?" Tarina asked when she returned to check on Tiresius. "How did you survive on your own?"

"One part was luck and one part involved playing dead," he said calmly. "Whatever these things are, they aren't very smart. They can't rapidly adapt to changing circumstances. We might be able to use that to our advantage."

"Rachni. Why did it have to be rachni?" Laine complained. She was trying in vain to clean off her suit.

"They can't be true rachni," Rexana said thoughtfully, wrinkling her nose in disgust at Laine. "They have to be some sort of Reaper version of them. My father was a krogan, he used to tell bedtime stories about his battles with the rachni during the war. Highly detailed, gorey stories that mostly resulted in me not sleeping at all."

The entire squad was shaking from their close encounter with an enemy that was sure to give them nightmares for quite some time. Tarina leaned against the door frame with her weapon cocked,
Laine was busy taking components out of her pack while Rexana paced back and forth. Tiresius watched quietly, still unable to move of his own volition. Saidra was looking the most composed of the squad.

"We should set this charge before more show up," Saidra suggested.

"I'll do it," Laine said, piecing together the equipment she was going to need. "Keep an eye on that door."

"How are you feeling?" Tarina asked Tiresius, she knew she had to keep him engaged and alert some how.

"Not great. My insides are going all funny from the acid, guess the effects can linger for awhile after initial contact. I'm sure that human doctor would enjoy studying the results."

"Don't be so cynical, we'll get you patched up soon."

"Can you at least give me my rifle back?"

"Sure, though it's not going to be very useful at close range."

"Better than nothing."

"Did you hear something coming from the wall?" Tarina jumped suddenly.

"Old piping, stop freaking everyone out," Saidra scolded her though her eyes had gone big with fear.

"Never liked it down here," Rexana whispered, eyeing the ceiling warily with her Tempest raised.

"Almost done," Laine updated the squad.

"Why couldn't we have placed these charges earlier?" Tarina asked, the wait was dull and every strange noise was causing the squad to panic.

"Because the recipe called for ingredients that are sensitive to moisture, we had to wait for the rain to pass," Saidra explained.

"Seems a bit archaic."

"Meekari designed the charges, she didn't have much to work with on such short notice."

"My son's caretaker is some kind of bomb expert?" Tarina said with mild surprise.

"He's safe, I can promise you that. Meekari keeps a lot of secrets but she would never endanger an innocent," Saidra's tone shifted. "Anyway, if we're lucky, we won't have to detonate these."

"Lot of effort for a contingency plan," Tarina remarked, ignoring the sadness in Saidra's voice. The asari referred to the monastery as a temple of peace, it was their home but it wasn't her home and she couldn't wait to be far away from its confining presence.

"If you have complaints take them up with your beloved commander, the plan was his idea. Besides, you volunteered to help," Saidra was good at reminding people of their place.

"I didn't think it would take this long," Tarina muttered.
Tarina was excited by the mentioning of Magnus. He had thought of everything, of course he had. The idea of blowing everything up in a last stand effort to inflict some damage on the enemy was one that only a detached leader could make. None of the choices he made were easy, she respected that but worried for his emotional well-being.

Suddenly she missed hearing his nagging voice on the comm, even if it was distracting. Her lust for adventure and danger had been selfish, she was already regretting her decision to lead the asari. What if she had to make a tough choice, could she set her feelings aside to choose who would die and how? The reality of Magnus' position and the loneliness that went along with it made a lot more sense to her when she could see the potential consequences. Luckily there was nothing to shoot at while the first charge was set though she might have preferred violence over contemplation.

The next two charges were set without incident as well. Tarina couldn't shake the gnawing sensation that they were being followed. Saidra was busy looking through schematics, trying to find the shortest path back to ground level. Laine and Rexana were failing miserably at trying to calm each other's nerves.

Reports from the other team painted a disturbing picture of what sort of mess they would be returning to. Three of Argus' team were dead, the asari were alive but compromised in various ways which prevented them from finishing the job. Argus was losing what little patience he had. From the sound of things, his team had failed to listen to his orders because they saw no reason to trust his judgement.

"Argus' team shouldn't be under so much pressure. Where are the other ground squads?" Tarina asked rhetorically. Nobody answered.

Sitting still, worrying about someone else's problems wasn't Tarina's style. She wanted to be sure that the rachni weren't setting up an ambush so she took upon herself to scout ahead.

"Where are you going?" Tiresius asked.

"I'll be right back, sit tight for a few," Tarina said over her shoulder. "We have to find these rachni things before they catch our snipers unaware."

"You're looking out for the commander, I understand," Tiresius said knowingly. "But why go off on your own?"

"I know they're up to something, all my experience with the Reapers points to them operating under a hivemind. They're smarter than they're letting on, it's been too quiet since the last encounter. The asari aren't built for this kind of work, they just want to get out of here and who can blame them? I won't go too far."

Tarina disappeared from his view, she followed the wall closely, listening for any indication of rachni movements. She couldn't pinpoint exactly why the wall had garnered her attention, it just felt like where they would have gone into hiding. A scurrying noise confirmed her suspicion, she leaned in close to press her cheek against the cold stones. Another noise tore her away from her investigation. The loud, deafening sound of a Mantis shot rang out.

"Tiresius!" she tried to yell but no sound came.

Hurriedly she ran towards her wounded comrade. Something large blocked her path, she unloaded two rounds into whatever it was before realising it was a corpse. The rachni had arrived via the ceiling, a gaping hole showed where it had waited to surprise its victim. But its victim, Tiresius,
was no where to be seen. His gun and a trail of blood were the only signs that he had been there. Scratch marks on the ground replaced the blood trail which lead down another hallway that appeared to be a dead end.

"Why wasn't anyone here to help him?" Tarina lashed out at the asari when they had caught up.

"He was your responsibility," Saidra stated evenly.

"We have to find these things. Look at the wall there, I think we just found where they've been burrowing in," Tarina lifted the brightness level on her omnitool and pointed at another hole. It looked as if the rachni had access to the entire lower level via their own tunnels.

"Could be a nest," Rexana said in a shaky voice, none of the asari were eager to go inside. Tarina didn't share their reluctance.

"He could still be alive," she said, boldly making her way through the freshly churned earth. Unnatural webbing and terrible smells greeted her as she continued digging through the low tunnels. Eventually she heard the footsteps of the asari behind her, they were too scared to go anywhere without her guidance.

They found an open chamber full of cocoons. The material used to encase them had hardened, it took some intense cutting work with the omniblade to get a good look at what lay inside. Men and women from the front lines, the field teams that had fought earlier in the afternoon, were trapped within. Their deaths came as a result of a lack of blood loss, hollowed-out meals for their monstrous captors. Tarina had a brief flashback to Invictus, the Reapers were far more incomprehensible than a tribe of cannibals that time had forgotten.

"Here he is," Laine announced,

A half covered corpse lay in webbing that was still solidifying. Tiresius' stillness stole Tarina's hope away. His previous injuries were probably to blame for his inability to cope with the introduction of another physical trauma.

"Damn it," Tarina sighed. Carefully she cut through the remaining webbing to free his arms. When that was done, she placed his gun upon his chest and folded his arms over it. She said a short prayer and promised to avenge him. "Burn this place, it's the only way to be sure. These other spirits can be put to rest later."

They tracked down what rachni they could find and set up gas canisters as they went. Once they reached the maintenance hatch that Saidra had wanted to use originally, they began a careful ascent with Laine setting fire to the nearest cannister. A chain reaction rocked the lower levels while they continued their climb. Rexana was the first to emerge from the hatchway.

"Ah, thank you," Rexana said to someone offering her a hand up. Freed of the tight space, she could see her rescuer in greater detail. She shrieked, "Hey let go of me!"

"Rexana!" Saidra called after her.

She was able to see further than the rest of the squad. Laine and Tarina tried to quiet her down but it was too late, more enemies appeared to try and pull their victims free of their trap. No guns were fired, they wanted the asari intact. Saidra responded by turning her SMG loose on their faces, they didn't stand a chance in close proximity. She waited for several long, pregnant pauses for any more enemies to appear then made an effort to climb out of the hatch to find her sister.

"Stop, Saidra. We don't know what we're walking into out there," Laine said in a strained voice,
clutching onto Saidra's legs so that she couldn't move. She tried pulling the other asari down.

"They're dragging her away. Goddess, she's been knocked out cold," Saidra cried out, writhing in Laine's grip. "We have to go after them."

"No, we don't," Tarina said firmly from below them. "Argus needs us. Is one asari life worth the lives of at least three others?"

Saidra said nothing, she waited until Tarina decided it was appropriate for them to move again. Once they were sure the room was vacant, they pushed the two dead bodies aside and prepared to mobilise for Argus' location.

"You look like shit, don't smell much better," Argus announced when he caught sight of the squad. The three of them were covered head to toe in various types of rachni gore.

"Nice to see you too," Tarina quipped back.

"I'm glad to see you," he sounded like he meant it, there may have been the hint of a smile. "No one here will listen to me, my squad is down to two including myself. Oh and the three useless asari that can't hit the broad side of a cruiser. They're out of ammo, I'm not. We've been holed up in this spot for awhile now, asari are too injured to move. The charge still needs to be set, not my area of expertise so hope one of your girls can do it. The ground teams must have abandoned us, haven't seen any sign of reinforcements."

"So we're all that's left down here?" Tarina asked, tiredness sneaking up on her.

She watched as one of Argus' team, an asari named Elise, tended to the wounded. Saidra brought over her own medkit and set to work, Laine was looking over a hastily placed detonator for any damage. They were all suffering from fatigue and exhaustion. Gunfire rang out from the upper levels but there was no action to be had in their immediate vicinity which suited Tarina just fine.

"Looks that way, get the occasional patrol but that's about it," he answered her, keeping his eyes levelled at a nearby entryway.

"Ok, we can figure this out. Let me see what Magnus want us to do," she said, thinking ahead to what might be required after the charge was done.

"Like I care. I'm only here because we got pinned in, orders be damned," he said dismissively, raising his gun to plant two clean headshots into two unsuspecting marauders that had gotten too close. "Didn't you have one more asari with you?"

"She was captured a short while ago. Don't worry about it, Laine is more than capable of handling the demolition kit," Tarina assured him. They were back to boring waiting game but Tarina was in no hurry to wander off again. Instead, she fiddled with her radio and tried to find a bit of privacy.

"Magnus, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Tarina you've been silent for over an hour. Do you have any idea how worried I've been What's going on down there?" he sounded impatient, almost angry at how quick she had been to shut him out.

"I'm sorry, I needed to stay focused. You were right, I should have stayed with you," Tarina paused. "Tiresius is dead, it's my fault. I only left him alone for a second..

"I highly doubt that's the truth, you can't blame yourself. He knew the risks, we all do," he cut her off with a soft voice, his tone had shifted dramatically from irate to supportive. It was exactly what
she needed to hear. "You wouldn't happen to have see any sign of the ground teams? We have lost contact with everyone but Argus' team."

"Nothing, haven't seen any bodies but that's not saying much. Do you want us to look for them?"

"No, it's alright. They might have been captured. Finish what you're doing and fallback before we discover any more surprises. We're holding well, got a great view and plenty of targets," Magnus said casually.

He made it sound like it was just another normal day, like nothing was wrong. Tarina wanted to laugh, to relax with Marius in her arms as they watched Magnus take out his targets. She wasn't sure if she was getting delirious or if her brush with danger had made her shift her priorities.

"Believe me, I want to be there too. We'll move slowly, got several injured to carry."

"Then get a move on sooner rather than later," he lowered his voice, "If you have to leave them behind then so be it. You'll be safer here. We're turning the tide slowly but there's still a long way to go. I'm trying to deal with a hundred and one different things, I could use your help."

"I understand. Sir?"

"Yeah?"

"It's good to hear your voice again."

"I'm glad to hear you too, you belong here at my side."

"I know. How's Marius doing?"

"Ando just checked in, said he was asleep. Can you believe that? We're out here risking our lives while our baby boy gets a few winks. It's probably for the best, he doesn't need to see what we're seeing, not yet," Magnus laughed, he was about to say more before something unusual interrupted him.

A bone-curdling scream pierced the night sky, everyone stopped what they were doing. "What the hell was that?"

"I don't think I want to know," Tarina said. The team around her looked around in every direction for the source. Nothing of note turned up. Before they could relax, footsteps of new enemies came rushing towards them.

"Hurry up, we're about to have company!" Argus yelled out.

"We have to get moving. Now! Forget about the charge," Tarina ordered. Weapons were drawn, they didn't need any extra encouragement.

The three injured individuals were quickly surrounded by their more able-bodied counterparts. Argus took point, clearing a path while working his way towards the courtyard. It made sense to move along the most direct route to the tower which contained the medical facilities. Plenty of marauders had a good vantage point, their Phaestons lit up in great numbers. There was still no sign of what had caused the scream and nobody was eager to find its source.

"There's too many, they'll surround us," Argus warned, not slowing down despite his assessment.

"Keep pushing, there has to be some cover out there," Tarina urged him, they were committing to
their course far quicker than she would have liked. Fear had a way of motivating anyone, injured or not.

"Not as much as we're going to need." He wasn't wrong, they had to cross a completely open killing field to get to their destination.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Tarina said under her breath so nobody else could hear her.

"Get the snipers to direct their fire, that'll keep things level for a few minutes," Argus suggested. He stopped briefly to help one of the asari that was struggling to keep up.

"Already repositioning," Magnus confirmed on the comm. Cover fire converged on their location, providing them a few precious seconds to begin their approach.

An explosion went off in the distance, the ground lurched hard in response to the shockwave. The distraction gave them a couple more seconds to elude their opponents.

"Thanix cannon found it's mark, Destroyer down," Magnus declared. Before he could celebrate the minor victory, a new problem arised. "What the hell is that?"

A large asari husk materialised in the centre of their path. She was a terrifying creature with long, thin limbs and a visible biotic barrier shimmering around her entire grotesque form. The scream came again, this time accompanied by a horrendous display. Her arms opened wide, a massive biotic attack obliterated everything that was in close proximity including all Reaper units and any structural elements that held up the upper levels. The asari husk alleviated some of the pressure on the squad crossing the courtyard though they clearly faced a far greater challenge than they would have otherwise.

"Oh Rexana, what have they done to you?" Saidra shuddered in horror, pointing at the abomination. Her eyes watered up with sadness, recognising a familiar face behind the corrupted, menacing visage. "She's a husk, a powerful biotic unlike any I have ever seen. We can't let her get close to us."

"A fate worse than death," Laine whispered.

Shots continued to pour in from Magnus’ position, they didn't do anything to deter the husk. On the contrary, her barrier was so strong that it possessed the ability to reflect the missiles. Chunks of debris were strewn about every which way, men cried out as they were hit with their own bullets. The husk barely had to lift her hands to cause destruction.

"Get out of there now!" Magnus yelled frantically, directing the order more towards Tarina than anyone else.

Tarina was torn, they were almost to the tower. If they continued on, the asari would cut them off. The best scenario was that they could evade her, the worst was that she'd follow them straight to their most vulnerable. Either way, there wasn't a chance that they could make their final push without her interference.

"Argus, you have to get these people to the tower. Maybe the shield will protect you guys long enough for this thing to be taken out, I don't know but you have to get there. We're sitting targets out here. Whatever this husk is, she's bad news. I can't let her follow you, Marius is in that tower."

"What are you suggesting, Tarina? Not another one of your stupid ideas right?" Argus looked worried, he had always had a soft spot for her.
"I'm going to lure her away, divide and conquer, yeah?"

"No, you're not. I can't do this without you."

"Unless you want to be the bait then shut up," she spat out, her face was screwed up with determination. "Here, take my pistol. You're getting low. I've got spare clips. Whatever you do, don't stop moving. Go, now while her back is turned."

"Tarina, please," he tried to argue but someone pulled on his arm.

He knew what had to be done. He gave her a proper salute then told the rest what of his squad what needed doing. Tarina didn't say anything, she ran back through the building to get the husk's attention while Argus went the other way around.

"Come here you big ugly bitch, come get some of this!" Tarina taunted the husk, shooting her Raider at its unnaturally long toes.

The husk was more than happy to cooperate, lunging out with its sickly arms as it chased after its elusive prey. Momentarily forgetting its deadly biotic attacks, it instead stuck to melee range and tried to grab a rather slippery Tarina. Much to her annoyance, the husk also had the ability teleport through walls, making it difficult to plan where she might reappear at any given moment.

Otherwise, Tarina could duck and weave out of its grasp with ease, falling back heavily on her training sessions where she learned how to keep her opponent guessing. She couldn't keep the effort up indefinitely and the further she went inside, the less help she received from the snipers that were trying to chip away at the husk's barrier.

Tarina knew she had bitten off more than she could chew. Thoughts of Marius played out over and over, motivating her to continue her gamble. Adrenaline and instinct kicked in along with Magnus' increasingly panicked shouts. She tried to ignore him, there was no room for error. Everyone else had lost sight of her personal battle but not Magnus, he was tracking the Reaper through his scope and moving accordingly.

Finally Tarina had ran out of places to hide, she was in a corner that would no doubt be breached by the husk. Silently she told herself it was worth it, she would go out fighting. There was no greater glory than to be killed in combat against a greater opponent. Her sacrifice would buy Marius and Magnus the privilege to live another day.

Slowly the asari husk ambled towards her. Tarina dumped her entire magazine into its exposed belly to no avail. The methodical action of shooting, reloading, shooting, reloading created a calming rhythm. Maybe she would get lucky and take the husk down with her.

"I don't care who you were, you'll die like the monster you are," Tarina boasted, getting just one more last word in.

The husk didn't scream or make any audible noise in response, it kept moving patiently towards her, knowing that it had won. The shots from the Raider stopped, the thermal clip was spent. Tarina tried to reach for another but it was too late. She yelled out a battle cry from her home colony of Meridian, resigning herself to beating the husk with her bare hands.

Still the husk remained silent and cool, relishing in the act that it was committing. With one hand it reached out to encase Tarina's torso, revealing an evil grin as Tarina tried to pry her way out. This time it screamed, right in her face, baring its mechanical features. Tarina's arms and legs were unable to gain any purchase. The grip tightened but her armour prevented her from being crushed.
She shouted right back at the husk. Two shots flew past her shoulder, punching through the barrier. Shattered, the biotic field dissipated. The effect was stunning. It was the last thing Tarina saw.
Chapter 38

A third and final bullet was delivered cleanly into the back of Tarina's neck. All three rounds came from a Valiant rifle in need of a fresh clip.

Magnus watched the events unfold without seeing them. He could hear without listening, someone was trying to get his attention. They tapped him on the shoulder, he didn't feel anything. Everything stopped.

He tried the trigger again, he had to keep shooting until the threat was neutralised but nothing was happening. The husk moved out of his scope's range, he didn't bother to readjust. He stared at the spot where Tarina's body rested among the rubble, thrown away and discarded like a broken toy while the husk looked for something else to play with.

"Magnus, did you hear me? The fleet has a rendezvous point about week's march from here, their team could arrive in a few days if the conditions remain favourable. Isn't that good news?" Andronicus said excitedly.

Magnus didn't turn to look at him, he didn't want to take his eyes off of Tarina's corpse in case doing so might cause her to truly disappear, "She's gone."

"Who?" Andronicus asked, sounding deflated that his news wasn't being highly regarded.

Magnus made no effort to answer. Andronicus looked over the balcony, following the Valiant's trajectory and saw for himself. He didn't need his brother to verbalise that he was the one responsible, some things were understood without speaking about them.

He looked back at Magnus with concern, meeting his vacant eyes. The man before him was hollow and empty, like a man without a soul. Andronicus had seen him in pain before but nothing compared to the total numbness that he expressed then.

"I didn't get to tell her I loved her. I never used those words."

"She knew. She told me when she thought you weren't coming back."

"What will Marius think?"

"One problem at a time, brother," Andronicus tried to smile. Magnus was shivering, he stubbornly refused to leave his perch. "You're in shock. It'll pass but you're not fit to remain in command. Put Petra in charge, say you need a break. Which you do, by the way.

Whatever you do, don't shut yourself down yet. The fight isn't over, Petra can handle the technical stuff but the strategies are yours. We're still going to need you.

Warm up, grab some sleep, then go straight back into the motions. You can let the grief take over later."

Andronicus took it upon himself to talk to Lieutenant Petra, he didn't give her any specifics but she agreed to his request. There wasn't a moment's pause, Andronicus had other orders and duties to perform besides watching over his brother. The Reaper creature was on the loose and if left to its own devices would make its way to the upper levels. Petra had the snipers continue their barrage, someone had to try to finish it off before it closed in.
Magnus wouldn't say or react to anything, he didn't move or make any effort whatsoever to partake in the battle. His gun was still empty as was everything else to his mind. He tried to remember the conversation he had with Tarina at the Reaper conversion facility, there was no doubt in his mind that he had done the right thing. She would have done the same if their roles were reversed. Logic and emotions rarely worked in concert together.

"We're losing our window of opportunity, the husk will regenerate its barrier if we don't get her soon," Saidra was saying on the radio. "It's down at the moment, I think I can get close." There was silence then her panting voice returned, "I landed a reave effect on her but she teleported. Think she is headed towards you guys. She'll devastate our forces unless we kill her now."

Half of Magnus' squad ran back towards where he stood, trying to put some distance between themselves and their enemy.

"She's primed, one detonation will wipe her out!" Saidra yelled. He knew she was talking to him.

He couldn't take full credit for Tarina's death nor could he waste time feeling sorry for himself when the lives of his men were at great risk. If the Reapers had had their way, they would have dragged Tarina off to be turned into a monster. She might have ended up killing him. The very idea of corruption on that scale infuriated him, it wasn't right. It was exactly why the Reapers had to be destroyed.

Magnus rose to his feet, gathering every ounce of biotic energy from within. He used both hands to bring the dark energy into its purest form. A ball of blue light surrounded him, shielding him from the creature's puny warp fields. He continued casting far beyond his limits, feeling his feet leaving the ground as his attack continued to charge. The banshee was in his sights, he slammed his hands together and like the thunder prelude of a violent storm, the energy crackled and manifested itself.

The Reaper was hit so hard that it disappeared into a million different pieces, flying back towards the courtyard where its demise could do most minimilastic damage. Magnus stayed in the air, a metre or so off the ground until his amp could no longer produce the warp effect. Never had he unleashed a single attack to that magnitude. He landed squarely on his bad knee when it was over, too overwhelmed with rage to notice.

When he opened his eyes, everyone was staring at him with astonished expressions. Even Andronicus couldn't explain what had just happened. Their stunned silence quickly turned to fear and questions, how could they trust a man who had kept secrets from them? Lieutenant Petra came to Magnus' rescue of sorts by urging everyone to resume operations on the lower levels, she didn't offer him any other assistance. They all left Magnus alone, whispering about what they had seen. Andronicus was one of the last to leave.

Argus nearly ran into them on his way in, giving Andronicus a wide berth as soon as he recognised him. Magnus didn't see him, he was busy getting back to his feet and looking for something else to take his anger out on.

"I was about to head out with everyone else but there's something I need to give you first," Argus said before he could be told off. He produced Tarina's pistol and held it out to Magnus, "I probably won't run into her for awhile. You should be the one to return this. She'd like it more if it came from you anyway."

Magnus hesitated then took the gun in his own hands. She didn't use her Carnifex much, the last time he had seen her wielding it was when she saved his life. He looked up at the nasty scar on Argus’ cheek, wondering how long it had been there. “Tarina’s dead."
"What? When? I just saw her," Argus was far more upset by the news than Magnus anticipated. "Well, keep the gun anyway. It belongs to you now."

"Are we finished here?" Magnus asked impatiently.

"No, actually," Argus said after thinking for a minute. "I've got a few words for you, been needing to clear the air."

"Now is really not a great time.."

"Hear me out. This isn't going to make us friends or anything but you should know about how close I was to Tarina. We were friends, she listened to me. It was different than her relationship with you, it didn't go very deep or anything. She didn't want it to complicate things, didn't want to send the wrong signals to Marius. But she was still important to me, you know?

You're not the only person that cared about her. There was just something that made her different, she was always brave, dependable, attentive. I wanted to make things up to her some day and maybe to you too. I can't bring her back but I have an idea of what you're going through right now.

It's obvious now why she chose you. Me, I'm all talk. You've got the walk to go along with it, seen it a lot today. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I didn't mean to get in the way or to be such an ass. If we survive this fight, my conscious might rest easier knowing that I said sorry."

"I don't know what to say," Magnus said, bewildered with Argus' about-face attitude.

"Me neither. I'm better at shooting things and staying alive, this talking stuff is beyond me. Guess I should get back to it."

"Thanks, Argus. Spirits go with you," Magnus watched him leave then let out a huge sigh of relief.

He had been ready to take out his frustration against the nearest wall. Tarina's pistol felt heavy in his hands, he turned it over a couple of times. Argus' small gift of compassion had added a new confusing ingredient to the potent cocktail of emotions stirring within Magnus like a tempest, like a brewing maelstrom of loathing and anguish. He was dizzy from trying to make sense of what he was feeling at any particular second.

Magnus continued to cradle the pistol in his hand with great affection. He sat down on the ground with his arms folded around his knees, burying his face upon them to hide his shame. Rain drops fell against his armour's shield, sizzling slightly when they struck it. He hoped Tarina's spirit was watching then so that she might accept his apology. Alone once more, he had only himself to blame.

---

The next morning the bodies of the dead were gathered together for their final rites. There weren't many of them, not everyone was given the closure they deserved after a tumultuous day of hard fighting. According to tradition, they would build one pyre per night to send the spirits of the departed onto their next journey. Each day served as a period of mourning for the living, it also helped any waiving spirits find their way home.

Magnus was engaged in a morbid conversation with Lieutenant Petra. They were going over their progress after the cleanup operation had ceased. Strong evidence had came to light suggesting that many of the missing bodies had indeed been turned into Reaper minions. There was no way of knowing if they had killed or been killed by their own comrades.
Dr. Tomas burst in to interrupt them, "I saw Tarina's body. She wasn't killed by a Reaper, it was friendly fire. I can prove it."

Petra was about to condemn the doctor for her rude behaviour but she was far too frantic and unconsolable to ignore.

"Maybe it was a stray bullet, an accident. Nonetheless, you should find who is responsible and bring them to justice. I'm sorry, Magnus," she continued.

"I know," he said simply, looking past her. Petra's demeanour shifted, as did everyone else's who was watching the human's unwarranted emotional outburst. The sound of creaking armour heightened the tension in the room.

"How could you know? Someone needs to pay for this tragedy!"

"Sera, I need you for a second," Andronicus appeared at her side, steering her by the elbow out of the room. She protested, tears were streaming down her face but she was not strong enough to resist him.

"What are you doing?"

Magnus watched silently as they left, cool and unshaken.

"Listen to me," Andronicus said sternly when they were out of listening range of the others. His face was close to Tomas', he rubbed her shoulders to coax her into calming down. When her sniffling had desisted, he continued, "Magnus did it, he killed Tarina."

"What? How?" Tomas' grey eyes were huge, she looked ready to begin crying all over again.

"He's not showing his personal struggle in front of his men because he can't. There's already a lot of rumours going around, they don't trust him any more. I know it doesn't make sense to you but this is our way, we handle our emotions differently. If you get too close right now, he'll come undone. He'd lose everything," he tried to explain to her.

"I didn't think about it like that," she said quietly. "But he shouldn't be alone in this."

"This is a battle we can't fight for him," Andronicus said pointedly.

"Why did he do it, was there no other way?"

"Honour. He had to keep a promise."

"It's not fair," she sobbed into Andronicus shoulder. He tried to comfort her, relieved that he wasn't the only one feeling helpless. "It's like he's being punished even though he didn't do anything wrong. Things were going so well for them. And she is too young. I don't think I could cope that well if something happened to you."

"Sh, you don't have to worry about that. Let's go see how Marius is doing, give Magnus his space for now."

---

Several days later, Magnus was carefully picking his way through the monastery's remains with Marius sitting comfortably in his arms. He was looking for Tarina's AT-12 Raider so that she could be sent off properly with her preferred weapon into the spirit world. An extraction team had arrived
earlier in the day but he had no interest in meeting them. He needed to think, to consider his next move. The mental exercise was nearly as agonising as watching Tarina meet her end.

Marius was enjoying the outing, still unaware of why his mother hadn't returned. Magnus experienced the opposite reaction, he was trying to make the toughest choice of his entire life. Walking among the rubble and bodies made it more difficult to ignore what was staring him in the face.

He had to make Tarina's sacrifice mean something but he also needed to look after Marius. Most importantly, he had to work out was best for himself. Tarina had showed him a different kind of life but he couldn't live it without her. There were other commitments to think about as well. He was chasing himself into circles.

Shining metal glinted in the sunlight, giving him a hint of hope. When Magnus removed the dust covering the object, he was disappointed that it wasn't what he thought it was. He got back to his feet, his heart heavy from digging through several false hopes.

Tarina had been too young for her fate, he shouldn't be saying goodbye to her in the first place. The asari praised her as a hero, claiming that she was their salvation through a trying ordeal. They practically worshipped her for what she had done for them. But Magnus didn't need her to be some kind of messiah, he just wanted to hold her in his arms and never let go again.

Marius was starting to gather that something was amiss. He thought they were going to see Tarina alive and well but they had been out for hours without any sign of her. He began to fuss, the realisation that she wasn't coming back beginning to cross his mind.

Magnus handed him his mother's unloaded Carnfiex to placate him but Marius wasn't interested. He dropped it on the ground, offended by the gesture. He clutched at his father's shoulder with both hands, forcing Magnus to give him all his attention.

"I'm so sorry, Marius," Magnus whispered. He retrieved the unwanted offering without getting upset at Marius for letting it go. He consoled his son until his cries turned into a curious exclamation. "What is it now?"

Magnus turned slowly to see who had approached them. He wasn't expecting to come face-to-face with Primarch Victus. The primarch was wearing old, beaten up armour, Phantom grade in classic red and black. It wasn't the sort of gear that he indicated he was looking for attention.

"I'm not interrupting you, am I?" he asked.

"No, sir. What are you doing out here?" Magnus asked incredulously. Marius prevented him from standing to attention but Victus didn't seem to mind.

"Fulfilling two obligations at the same time. One to your mother, she's doing well, still too busy to see you herself. And one more personal in nature."

There was no honour guard, no entourage of any kind. Magnus was flattered that he'd been singled out.

"This must be your son. I remember when Tarquin was that age. Those were the proudest moments of my life, watching him grow up," Victus said, gripped by nostalgia. Marius took an interest in his presence. "May I hold him?"

"It would be an honour," Magnus said with surprise, Marius seemed happier for it.
"What are you looking for out here?" Victus asked.

"A weapon that belonged to someone important," Magnus kept it ambiguous, he didn't want sympathy.

"And?" Victus pressed for the real answer.

"I'm trying to decide what is best for Marius, going forward."

"Ah," Victus looked lost in thought. The three of them continued to walk together for a time, "The hardest decision I had to make was mostly made for me. I had to turn my back on everything that was important to me in order to save it. I've come back here to see the destruction with my own eyes, to see the consequences of my actions.

The fighting didn't stop, only my part in it was removed. I'm not sure if this help you any."

"It does put things into perspective," Magnus admitted.

"Do you have any regrets? Who did you lose?" The primarch was keen to get to know the man that was responsible for the monastery's victory.

"A few. The mother of my child, the love of my life."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"There is something. Tarina wanted to restore honour to her family's name but her time was cut short. Too short. It's a difficult process to go through in life, nearly impossible to accomplish in death. I think her spirit would appreciate some closure."

"I'll have her status upgraded within the day, Magnus. Don't worry. And what about you, what do you need?" Victus paused to look at him intently, resting a hand on his shoulder to show that he was sincere.

"I'm still working that out. Several battles lie ahead, we can't win them all," Magnus said honestly, his logic was undeniable.

"No, we can't. But that's my concern, not yours," Victus reminded him.

"Isn't it dangerous for you to be here?"

"We're all expendable," Victus said calmly, so sure of himself. The words stung at Magnus slightly, he couldn't agree with them. To soften the blow he added, "What's that over there?"

Magnus reached down to pick the gun up. The shotgun was all the closure he was going to get. In that moment, his mind rapidly came to the conclusion of its silent debate. He tried to figure out what he'd say to Tarina's spirit later, to justify what had to be done.

"Love begins where duty ends," Victus said quietly, as if he could see into Magnus mind.

"Duty begins where love ends," Magnus finished the common expression. His mind was made up, his heart had lost the internal battle. He knew what path he would have to take next.

Later that evening, Magnus mustered the courage to confront Tarina's spirit. He placed the weapon in her arms and tried to find the words to say goodbye.

"I would give up anything to trade places with you. You had your whole life left to live.
I know what I have to do, I wish you were here to talk me out of it. I thought coming here when convinced me to do differently but seeing your body for the final time has made me more sure.

When our spirits are rejoined, please forgive me. Your memory will never fade away, Tarina. I will always love you."

---

"Hey Mags, why are we meeting so far from the camps?" Andronicus asked. The two of them were meeting in the middle of no where on Menae, waiting for reassignment.

"You have never called me that before. And don't do it again," Magnus warned him.

"Felt appropriate since you've been calling me Ando for ages. Until recently you haven't treated me like an equal."

"To answer your question, I don't do well with crowds," Magnus ignored the point Andronicus was alluding to. "Still learning how to be a part of normal society outside the cabal. The monastery was an abnormality, a situation I was fortunate to be in control of. Here I have to keep secrets, everyone is formulating opinions and passing judgement. Just one among thousands.

While the change of scenery is nice, the constant noise and commotion is stifling. I got away to clear my head. Out here I can look up and see where we came from. The fires still burn on Palaven, what have we really accomplished?"

"Why do you have to hold yourself some impossibly high standard? You're not better than the rest of us," Andronicus sounded flustered. They had come so far together but his brother continued to keep him at arm's length.

"Certainly not," Magnus said with sorrow in his voice.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to come out like that. What did you need to talk to me about?"

"There's a personal matter I need to settle. Dr. Tomas has been difficult to get a hold of, thought maybe you could track her down. Needed to say some things to you anyway."

"She's been busy since getting herself assigned to the Intrepid."

"How's Mom handling that?" For the moment, Magnus was grateful that the conversation was headed in another direction.

"Things didn't start off well but I think she's warming up to Sera after recent events."

"What events?"

"She hasn't told you? Probably didn't want to give you something else to worry about. Mom was shot by one of her men the other day, an attempted mutiny that was thwarted by the good doctor's quick thinking. Got her first kill and saved an admiral in the same day. So proud of her."

Why should his mother try to protect him by hiding such things? Magnus was astonished by the news. Andronicus didn't seem too upset, in fact he was quite happy to speak of the details. Most likely he just enjoyed talking about Tomas. He went on about the story of a disgruntled fighter pilot that had snapped one day when Sibyl had pushed him too far.
Magnus only half-listened, he was trying to formulate his proposition to be more palpable. Andronicus wasn't going to approve of it. Marius stirred in his arms, Magnus could feel his small heart beating against his own chest. He was making a habit of pissing off the ones he loved, it was going to be a lot easier than he expected to leave them behind.

"Walk with me, will you?" Magnus said when his brother finished his tale. He offered him Marius and tried to find the right moment to say what needed saying.

"When are we going to join the Intrepid? It's not just Tomas that I care about, we should get back into the fight soon," Andronicus inquired.

"I'm not going with you," Magnus said flatly.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going to go where they need me most. Turian biotics are hard to come by now, I can put my skills to better use on Earth. There's no place for me here," Quickly he got to Andronicus' next question, "The Intrepid will be gathering its strength for a bigger fight, I don't have the time to wait around. I'm entrusting Marius' guardianship to you. I might not make it back."

Andronicus was taken aback, he looked to Marius then back to Magnus. He was too caught unaware to react immediately. After a long silence, he tried to dissuade Magnus in the only way he knew how to get through to him, "When we were kids, you nearly died in my arms. I didn't know why but I knew you weren't fond of me. I saved you anyway. What do I have to do to save you this time?"

"Give Marius a good life, raise him as you see fit. I trust your judgement, there's no one I trust more. You and Tomas are getting serious about each other, you won't be able to have children of your own."

"That's not why you're doing this. You're running away," Andronicus said accusingly.

"It's not that simple. The decision has been made. I have to do this, I have to make sure there will be a future for him," Magnus said adamantly.

"What am I supposed to say when he is old enough to start asking questions about you?"

"I've put everything I could think of on two OSDs, the first he can look at whenever and the second when he comes of age.

Additionally, there is something else I need to pass on. Dad gave me this armour, it has been in our family for several hundred years. If something happens to me then it might perish forever. Besides, I'm going to be wearing heavier gear with the N7s, they're the most elite special forces unit in the System Alliance.

I want you to have it, modify it however you want or just hold onto it until Marius can make use of it. When he's ready, you can keep the tradition alive."

"Is this really happening?" Andronicus asked.

They were getting closer to another camp. Magnus continued to carry the bag of armour until they were within range of the floodlights. Pausing on the outskirts of a small recruitment outpost, he took a deep breath. Vehicles and personnel moved about, they wore the System Alliance logo on their jumpsuits.
"You're going to be a great father, better than I ever could be," Magnus turned to look at his son. "This is it, can I have one last word with my son?"

"He's all yours."

"This is a lot harder than I imagined," Magnus lowered himself so that he was looking upwards at Marius. "The last thing your mother said to me before everything went horribly wrong was 'Marius is everything.' You're going to spend most of your life hating me, thinking I turned my back to abandon you for an easier path.

Everything I do from this point forward is for you, Marius. I love you, you are the joy of my life and if your mother was still here she would say the same. I will avenge her, this war will be won. I can't impart any great wisdom onto you now but if I am successful then maybe we will meet again under better circumstances. Listen to your uncle, he'll take good care of you. Stay strong, Marius," he returned to his standing position to address Andronicus, "Ando, make sure that he keeps Tarina's family name. It's really important that he doesn't forget her. He might not want to remember me."

"For once you were happy, there's no shame in getting what you want. You don't have to throw it away, you don't have to do this," Andronicus pleaded for the final time.

"Yes I do, this is a war unlike any other and it will take extraordinary effort to get to the end, once and for all. Don't give up, Andronicus."

Magnus left the pair of them to talk to a recruiter, an elderly human set up near one of the shuttles being prepped for transit. Andronicus couldn't make out what they were saying, he clutched Marius in his free arm and waited for Magnus to turn around. But he didn't, instead he prepared to step on board the shuttle.

Marius tried to throw himself out of Ando's grip, crying and screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Is that your kid? You going to say goodbye?" the human said to Magnus.

"I already have. The sooner we leave, the better." Magnus tried not to look, his heart was breaking with each wave of Marius' tantrum.

"Daddy!" Marius managed to say. He repeated his first word over and over. Magnus didn't know what else to do, he took one glance over his shoulder then went up the ramp. Even inside he could still hear little Marius calling out to him. He would be haunted by that moment for the rest of his life.
Epilogue

It was another typical day at N7 Headquarters, located just outside Rio de Janeiro, Earth, Sol System.

The galaxy's most stalwart defenders were reduced to playing board games during the criminally short turnover periods between grueling combat deployments. Magnus had done missions with the vast majority of them but there were a select few that he spent most of his time with. He was hesitant to refer to anyone as a friend in case they might die or become permanently damaged. One of the hardest adjustments had been getting used to “friendly” geth that freely roamed around like any other organic being.

The way it made sense to Magnus was that the geth wished to have the same rights as any other sentient being, the right to make mistakes and to learn from them, to grow, to evolve as naturally as possible. The Old Machines, the Reapers, were an end rather than a beginning. The geth were essentially adolescents trying to work out who they were and where they wanted to go.

All life stood atop the precipice overlooking the abyss, cooperation between synthetics and organics would be necessary for their individual survival. Through such cooperation would come understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. The crisis with the Reapers had brought them all together.

Magnus’ cynicism made him wonder how long the honeymoon period might last after the war. Could man and machine truly live in harmony? Or would one type of life create Reapers anew to destroy the other, forever perpetuating the cycle? He didn’t have the answers but he trusted his geth squad-mates to pull him through tough situations as he would do for them. Having less geth to shoot at was probably a good thing overall.

He watched a small group of individuals congregating on the floor below. A human, a geth, and a drell that he had come to respect more than anyone else. The human came from the land of Australia which Magnus assumed was a harsh and unforgiving place to produce such hardened soldiers. He was tinkering on the geth’s arm, likely complaining about the lack of an adequate extranet connection to upload his desired hardware upgrades in a timely fashion. The drell was sitting close by with a bowl of salad, offering advice to the human and joking with the geth to keep him busy while the repair work was being conducted. Sparks flew out, curses came from the human. The geth actually looked amused by the attention. The three of them were usually very quiet but together they created a jovial atmosphere.

In the field, they were deadly accurate shots, providing a great mixture of skill sets for Magnus to operate with. The drell came from a world of academia, Magnus had spent many long hours discussing philosophy with him on bumpy shuttle rides. Their biotics complemented one another very well. The geth was harder for him to understand but his attempts at humour were an encouraging sign. The human was the most reserved but also the most reliable to have by your side in a fight. Magnus couldn’t imagine going into battle without any one of them.

Somewhere behind him, Magnus could hear the voice of Major Johnson, his immediate supervisor, talking to someone he didn't recognise. The other voice was turian, judging by the way it echoed in the stairwell, both were approaching his location. Quickly, he mentally ran through the excuses he was trying to come up with to convince the elder human to accept his request for a short leave of absence.

He didn't want to sound like he was in need of time away from combat. Rather, he could do with
some time away on his own to reassess his priorities. Mental fatigue could wear a man down faster than physical wounds. It was only a matter of time before he'd make a costly mistake in the field.

"Major," Magnus turned to greet the man with the clumsy, human salute that the System Alliance preferred.

"Ah, Thorn, wanted to introduce you to our newest recruit. Think she'll fit in well with your team, her name's-

"Lieutenant-commander Liana Julius Viatrix. Yes, we know each other quite well," Magnus said before the man could finish.

"It's colonel now, but who's keeping track any more?" Viatrix responded with a half-smile.

"I thought you were dead," Magnus uttered without meaning to. It was hard to believe that she was really there.

"Me too," she sounded guilty for thinking it, the smile never leaving her face. "I'm surprised you remember my mother's surname."

"How could I forget? The Julius family is infamous for its generals and great-thinkers, you should be proud to bear that name."

"I didn't know my biological family as well as you did yours," she reminded him and he instantly felt bad for dredging up her past. "The cabal was my family. Its gone now. We're part of a dieing breed, you and I."

Major Johnson shifted uncomfortably in his boots, coughing slightly to let them know he was still present, "You two look like you have some catching up to do. I'll try to give you a few minutes of privacy, as much as you're likely to get around here," he waved his arms at the small crowd eavesdropping on them, "Come on you dawdlers, let's shoot some targets and leave these guys alone for a spell, yeah?"

"You don't have to do that, sir," Magnus tried to say.

"Consider your request granted early, Thorn. You've earned it," the human saluted and sauntered off with a handful of bored soldiers.

Magnus took a good look at the woman in front of him, still not convinced that she wasn't a visiting spirit or that he hadn't fallen asleep and dreamt her into being. Her jump suit looked heavily worn in, as if she hadn't had time to change out of it for several days. Everything else about her was as he'd expect, even her inexhaustibly high energy. Her eyes caught his attention the most, they were the same colour as Tarina's and for a split-second he forgot where he was.

She seemed to be assessing him in a similar fashion. Slowly she approached, touching his cheek. Then she embraced him so suddenly that he nearly fell over.

"Careful of the leg," he cautioned her. He didn't make any effort to let her go, waiting for her to make the next move.

"I'm so happy to see a familiar face," she said quietly, pulling away slightly. "What's that expression, I'm a fish out of water?"

I've been working with the Alliance in a freelance capacity off and on for the past couple of months. None of them were biotics but they didn't care if I was, which was ok and all. But other
turians are different matter, as I'm sure you've noticed. I was kind of worried about mixing with different races, I'm tired of being used for the purposes of others."

"I thought your career in the Hierarchy was everything to you."

"It was when I didn't know any better. I've seen a lot more of the galaxy recently than I have in my entire life. The asari, the humans, none of them treat biotics differently than anyone else. Our own people think of us as tools and little more. I lost dozens of squad-mates on Palaven and I read about countless other cabalists that were slaughtered early on.

Those of us that made it through the first waves were reassigned as squad-leaders on capture operations. They were splitting us up and forcing us to work alongside non-biotics. We never took anything that we could hold, not with the resources we were given. But they kept sending us in anyway. Later, it turned out we were buying time for other units to advance into enemy territory.

I'm not complaining, I followed my orders just like everyone else. They should have been assimilating the cabals into the rest of the legions a lot earlier. There's still so much suspicion with everything we do, lot of misconceptions."

"Nobody here is going to ask anything personal about your unless you offer it up. We're all volunteers, a lot of people end up fighting with us because they have nothing else to lose. Plus, there are plenty of other biotics. You'll fit right in," Magnus tried to assure her.

"I hope so, it'll take a bit for me to adjust to life on Earth. The gravity isn't too bad but the lower radiation levels are going to take some getting used to. I'd like to talk more, hear what you've been up to and share a few stories of my own, if you're interested. But first I could really use some freshening up, been a long journey of eluding patrols to get here."

"Yeah sure, they probably haven't assigned you a bunk yet. You can take mine, not like I ever get any sleep these days," he offered. He was grateful that she didn't ask for details, too many possibilities kept him from finding the inner peace needed to relax and drift off.

"Sounds good, how about I meet you there after a good rinse?" she said suggestively.

"Yes, sir."

He wasn't about to let that particular opportunity pass him by again.

---

"Tarina?" Magnus asked groggily, awaking from a short nap. His blurred vision sharpened, allowing him to take in the details of the face looking down at him. Her eyes were similar but the face markings were all wrong, amber lines encircling the eyes instead of the intricate crimson patterns along the cheeks and forehead, "Ugh, how embarrassing."

"It's ok. I've gathered that this girl was really important to you," Viatrix said gently, moving from her curled up position beside him to rest her chin against his bare chest.

"She was, she still is," he said, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "Not a day goes by that I don’t think about her. Maybe she sent you to watch over me. Your timing couldn’t be much better."

They had spent several hours talking about their individual experiences since the war started. He probably had spoken too highly of his relationship with Tarina but it had felt so good to have someone to share it with. Viatrix was a friend, it was remarkably easy to talk without fear of upsetting her. Occasionally she offered advice but mostly she listened intently, letting him know
that she still valued him highly.

"You were going to show me some pictures of your son before you nodded off," she prodded him, trying to divert his attention to something happier.

"Oh, right. Sorry about that," he lifted up his free arm to find the images within the omintool's archives. She held onto his arm as she flicked through them, astonished by how similar Marius looked to his father. Magnus tried not to look, he was already dealing with a crisis of faith, beginning to regret his decision to join the N7s. He longed to be someone that Marius would look up to some day. "Did I get to the part where I visited the Citadel at long last?"

"How was it?" she said, still enamoured with the cute baby pictures.

"Miserable. I went to tell Tarina's mother about her passing. Spoiled the entire experience."

Viatrix stopped what she was doing to look him hard in the face, "All this time you were looking after her, who was looking after you?"

The question left him breathless, he had never considered that he needed looking after. "I can take care of myself."

"You shouldn't have to," she said in a stern tone, as if lecturing a subordinate.

"These last couple of missions have been successes because of luck, not skill. I'm amazed that I've lasted this long. After awhile you kind of lose sight of what keeps you going, you go through the motions but your heart isn't in it any more," he turned to lay on his side, to hold her as he spoke, "I still question whether we can win this. That it might have been better to live my last couple of days watching over Marius instead of potentially dying thousands of lightyears away from home."

"We're soldiers, you're doing what you do best, Magnus."

"I know that but...for awhile I wanted more. I could have had it too," he sighed.

"And now I'm here to keep you out of trouble. We'll get through the rest of the fight together," she squeezed his hand then motioned for him to move out of the way while she pulled on the lower half of her suit.

"Thanks, Liana."

He was relieved to have someone that he could speak honestly with. She had always been the one that had gotten away. In hindsight, what separated Tarina and Viatrix was that the latter knew what she wanted, she had had the chance to make her own choices and mistakes. He thought again of Marius, the potential that he might grow up in a world of fear and destruction, without the ability to grow into a capable adult knowing what it meant to be loved and wanted by those around him, to become what his mother had been was what motivated him to continue the fight.

Viatrix had just made it more clear and straightforward, she was an example of what Marius could develop into. She was someone who understood where Magnus had come from, where he was going, what he was capable of and who he was deep down. Tarina would be the one he should have had but Viatrix was the friend he needed most.

He watched in stunned silence as she continued to shuffle through her bag in search of civilian clothing. Neither of them was especially tired after sharing each other's company. Magnus was impressed by how pleasurable the experience had been on a platonic level, there were no agendas or secret mind games to sift through.
When he rolled out of the tight bunk, he got the occasional thumbs up and knowing glances from other men and women going about their business in the barracks. Privacy was a precious commodity and no one was going to begrudge him for how he spent it. Everyone else was in various states of dress, only the asari and human females went to great lengths to cover up their modesty.

"Ah, here we go. I'll have to requisition a proper uniform later, this jumpsuit is holding together by a thread. Did you still want to go for that walk? I'd like to get a proper look at my new surroundings," Viatrix said long after Magnus was fully dressed.

"Sol will be rising within the hour, you're going to love the view," he took her by the hand and together they walked towards the beach.

Once outside, away from prying eyes, they removed their boots and carried them, revelling in the warm morning sand. A pair of footprints led towards the pier in the opposite direction, one were the webbed feet of a drell while the other were the mechanical imprints of a heavy geth chassis. Magnus could work out who they belonged to with ease, he purposely left their owners to their own devices. He was more interested in showing Viatrix around and enjoying true companionship for the first time since leaving Menae.

"What's with the giant white statue overlooking the city?" Viatrix asked

"A religious symbol, one of the gods worshipped by the humans," Magnus answered.

"Looks like a target to me."

"I thought the same until I spent more time around the locals. To them, the statue is a symbol of endurance, a testament to their courage. I've defended this city countless times from bombardment, that thing is still standing strong."

"What would any of us be without hope," Viatrix concluded.

"Exactly. We're not so different," Magnus agreed.

They watched as the tide came in from the Atlantic, the wind off the sea was warm and fragrant. Several kilometres out they could make out the structure of a dam, a giant power source that kept the city of Rio in a defendable state unlike many other cities on the planet. Further in the distance they could see various relics falling through the atmosphere, remnants of ongoing battles that never seemed to stop.

The horizon began to glow as the sun rose, shimmering above the waves in all its awe-inspiring opulence. Tall city buildings were illuminated by the morning light, showing off how densely packed they were among the cliffs that offered their natural protection. All of the attacks on the city had came from above, there were too many places to hide among the mountains. The ocean provided its own avenue for escape.

Viatrix stood close beside Magnus, resting her head against his shoulder. He had one arm wrapped around her waist. The view was the same as it would have been on any other civilised planet in the Milky Way, bringing them a small amount of comfort. Magnus felt like he had stood on that beach with Viatrix before, in another life.

"We're getting too old for this," he said simply.

"Maybe but we can't stop moving now. The second you stop, you're dead," she squeezed his hand then continued in a thoughtful tone, "A mother protecting her child, a father seeking revenge.
These are things the Reapers can't comprehend."

"But can we win? Are we even meant to?"

"All that we are is something the Reapers will never understand. That's why they fear us, that's why we're going to win. A great fleet is coming for us, one greater than the galaxy has ever seen. Everything is going to change."

Together they watched the dawn of a new day, their hope renewed and ready to be tested. Magnus thought of Marius and Tarina, Andronicus and the rest of his family, everyone he had ever cared about along with all the people lost on Invictus and Palaven, he couldn't give up on any of them.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!